

In the eye of the storm: An analysis of international conflict in South Sudan's Jonglei

State Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) Rachel Gordon March 2014 The violent political crisis that has engulfed South Sudan since mid-December 2013 has awakened the world to the fundamental lack of stability in the world's newest country. However, the situation is, unfortunately, neither new nor specific to the political contestations that have so suddenly turned violent across the nation in recent months. This analysis was written prior to the political crisis and subsequent outbreak of violence, and does not attempt to incorporate or explain those very complex events, the resolution and consequences of which are yet to be determined. It aims instead to shed light on the conflict dynamics of one of the country's poorest and least-analysed states – Jonglei – through the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and independence period, leading up to the present crisis.

South Sudan is a post-war country that remained embroiled in conflict after the formal agreements on peace and independence took effect, struggling to meet the high expectations of its own citizens as well as those of external supporters hoping to quickly overcome decades of crisis and establish a functioning state. In order to meet those expectations, the South Sudanese government requires the ability to respond effectively to ongoing conflict within its borders and mitigate the drivers of those conflicts such that there are better options available to would-be fighters than to perpetuate the cycles of violence that continue to decimate life and livelihoods across large swathes of the country. Unfortunately, it clearly still lacks this capacity.

This report explores conflict in Jonglei state in eastern South Sudan. Drawing on a desk review of hundreds of documents on conflict, development, state building, humanitarian aid, ethnic relations, politics and other topics, as well as fieldwork in Jonglei in early 2013, it seeks to build a deeper understanding of the conflict in Jonglei for the purpose of informing other research being carried out over the next several years as part of the UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) South Sudan programme. It may also be a useful resource to anyone seeking a clearer understanding of the complex web of actors, relationships, dynamics and drivers of conflict in Jonglei. (...)

One of many challenges to making sense of conflict in Jonglei is that it is often described as being simply ethnic or 'tribal', but such descriptors capture only part – if any – of the forces at work. The dynamics and purposes of cattle raiding vary according to group norms not only within ethnic groups but also within subgroups such as clans and age-sets, and have also shifted markedly over time as traditional authorities have lost influence and as militarised mindsets, tactics and weaponry rooted in the war have continued to pervade 'peace' time. As a result, extreme and indiscriminate violence has become more commonplace, and made 'traditional' raiding attacks more difficult to differentiate from other types of social and political conflict. (...)

Tens of thousands of international advisors, UN military and civilian personnel, non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, diplomatic and donor agency staff and private contractors, as well as billions of dollars in pledged aid, have poured into South Sudan since the

end of the war in 2005. Their broad focus is on supporting South Sudan's transformation into a peaceful and effective state, based largely on state-building theory that equates state visibility and service delivery with effective governance and state legitimacy. They are not, however, neutral actors. Each brings its own set of approaches, relationships, motivations and historical understandings to its dealings with GoSS, local leaders and communities.

The UN alone has over 10,000 personnel in South Sudan and a broad mandate that includes the potential use of force to protect civilians, but it faces its own capacity and security challenges that have precluded effective and sustainable conflict intervention. Other types of external actors with other motivations, such as the Government of Sudan (GoS), have been actively involved in conflict through border disputes and supplying arms and resources to rebels. These very different kinds of external forces all shape South Sudan's political, social and conflict dynamics in various ways, although their physical presence in most of Jonglei has generally been minimal.

It is against this backdrop that the young state is charged with providing effective security for its population, ending armed conflict within its borders and creating the peace and stability that citizens and other stakeholders demand. The political crisis of late 2013 makes it only more pressing that all possible efforts and resources be put toward realising this vision. While popular narratives reduce Jonglei's internal conflict to lack of services, competition for resources or 'tribal' animosities, there is no simple or definitive explanation, or any clear roadmap for 'rebuilding' a peace that, in reality, most South Sudanese have never known. Those invested in such a goal must also invest in understanding the complexity of the situation underlying it, if any true progress is to be made. We hope this analysis makes some small contribution.

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