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Return to War in Sudan's Nuba Mountains

Summary

- The response to the renewed war in Sudan's Nuba Mountains has been driven largely by a human rights and humanitarian crisis.
- The crisis will continue indefinitely without a political agreement that acknowledges the Nuba rebellion is self-sustaining and reflects a wider malaise within the new Republic of Sudan.
- With Sudan facing financial collapse, economic normalization must be part of negotiations with Khartoum to end the war in the Nuba Mountains and promote democratization throughout Sudan.

Introduction

"Unless there is an immediate stop to the fighting, and humanitarian organizations are granted immediate and unhindered independent access throughout South Kordofan, people in many parts of the State face potentially catastrophic levels of malnutrition and mortality."¹

Catastrophe already faces the people of Sudan's Southern Kordofan state.² After the "egregious" human rights abuses that marked the first weeks of the fighting,³ a humanitarian crisis is now unfolding—unseen and largely unreported as a result of the government of Sudan's refusal to grant access to independent observers and aid agencies. The best assessment, by experienced local relief workers, is that at least 230,000 Nuba among the 1.2 million war-affected people in the state are displaced without food. Of these, only 140,000 have received any relief—a one-week ration from local stocks that are now exhausted—since fighting began in June after the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) attempted to disarm the Nuba fighters of the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N).

Understandably, the strategic response to the collapse of the 2002 Bürgenstock ceasefire agreement, the first concrete step toward the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), has been driven largely by this human rights and humanitarian crisis. But the fundamental problem in Southern Kordofan is political. As such, it will be resolved only by a political agreement that acknowledges not only that the Nuba rebellion is a civil war in its own right, but that it is symptomatic of a deep malaise in Sudan which has not been resolved by the secession of South Sudan.

Nuba, not Juba

The government's war in the Nuba Mountains, the larger part of Southern Kordofan, raged for 15 years (1987-2002). It took tens of thousands of lives and brought Nuba society to the brink of

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destruction through a campaign of killing, forced relocations and rape designed “to eliminate the Nuba identity.”⁴ The Nuba supported the “New Sudan” espoused by SPLA leader John Garang, and Nuba soldiers fought in southern Sudan, Blue Nile, Darfur and eastern Sudan as an integral part of the SPLA. But theirs was a deeply rooted, indigenously mobilized rebellion prompted in large part by the suppression of indigenous cultures, languages and religious observances. A new awareness of Nuba history and culture instilled by the charismatic Nuba commander Yousif Kuwa, until his death in 2001, led ordinary Nuba to demand “the right to be Nuba” and vote against surrender in 1992 despite a scorched-earth offensive and mountain-wide famine.

Today the tables are reversed. The Nuba SPLA is far more numerous, well-trained and well-armed, including with heavy weapons captured from SAF. It enjoys unprecedented support among Nuba who believe that “Khartoum is determined this time to wipe out the Nuba race, having succeeded in getting rid of the southerners.”⁵ The government’s forces are damaged and demoralized, hit by a wave of defections of Nuba soldiers that contributed to the loss of 55 of 60 positions in the first five days of combat.⁶ The government itself is teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

The Nuba leader, Abdel Aziz al Hilu, argues, convincingly, that “this is the not Sudan army I know—and we are not the SPLA we were. In 1987, we attacked a 10-man police post with a [100-man] company and fought all day to defeat them; on July 1 this year, we routed two SAF brigades in 35 minutes.”⁷ Senior SAF commanders privately admit that the SPLA-N has given them a beating.

The CPA shortchanged the Nuba, denying them the same formula of self-determination that southerners won, as if their rebellion was a sideshow to the north-south war. Most particularly, the agreement failed to settle the issue of the 30,000 Nuba enrolled in the SPLA (approximately 9,000 in the Ninth Division in Southern Kordofan and more than 20,000 elsewhere, including in critical positions in mechanized and air defense brigades in the main SPLA forces in the south). After the CPA, the future of the SPLA in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, twinned in the CPA, was subsumed in the north-south talks, where the “two areas” were accorded little importance and the fighters’ future was bargained away by an SPLM negotiating team that did not include a single representative of either state.

More than six years later, the renewed Nuba rebellion is still being seen as a sideshow rather than an authentic indigenous rebellion within Sudan. Khartoum has accused al Hilu of waging a proxy war on behalf of South Sudan,⁸ claiming that SPLA General Headquarters in Juba is orchestrating a conspiracy for regime change in Khartoum. International partners continue to underestimate the ability of the SPLM/A Nuba leadership to act independently and sustain a major war, with or without external support.

Diplomatic efforts by the U.S. and others have focused on pressing the government of South Sudan to stop its support. This support exists, but its significance should not be exaggerated. The Nuba are capable of fighting alone. From 1991–95, they fought much greater odds, cut off from resupply. Recent months have shown that they can go on the offensive, capturing territory far beyond that held in the last war. It is uncertain whether they can take the war beyond Southern Kordofan. But their ability to deny the central government control of the state, and to mount a significant and enduring challenge to it, is beyond question. The legitimacy of the May elections in Southern Kordofan is now only of historic interest.

Positioning for a Showdown

Conditions for civilians in the Nuba Mountains, Nuba and Arab, will get worse before they get better. Both sides believe there is an advantage in continued military action—the Nuba SPLA because of what it perceives as a process of disintegration in the government’s forces and finances;

the SAF to recover ground, or at a minimum restore some pride, when the rains stop in November and troops and tanks can advance into rural areas.

Today the General Headquarters of SAF, not the National Congress Party (NCP), is calling the tune in Sudan. The NCP's civilian leadership has been marginalized by the generals, who, having agreed to withdraw undefeated from the south, feel the political class risks a compromise too far. That includes tolerating endless, unproductive talks with Darfur's fractious armed movements. On May 5, five days after 11 soldiers died in an SPLA ambush in Abyei, the heads of the army and military intelligence presented President Omar al-Bashir with a demand: "Authorize us to take any necessary action without prior consultation."⁹ Although the ultimatum was explicitly addressed to the international community, felt to be prevaricating over Abyei, it was also implicitly an ultimatum to the civilian leadership, including the president. Two weeks later, SAF moved into Abyei with a speed and effectiveness that indicate a pre-planned operation. Four days after that, the chief of general staff, Lt. Gen. Ismat Abdel Rahman al Zain, wrote to his counterpart in Juba informing him that all SPLA forces north of the north-south boundary would be relocated or disarmed by June 1.

When presidential assistant Nafie Ali Nafie, the most senior civilian hardliner in the regime, signed a framework agreement with the SPLM-N in Addis Ababa on June 28, he was overruled by the SAF Command. The implications of SAF's de facto takeover, its power, confidence and autonomy, have yet to be fully acknowledged. But with the end of the rains, the generals are confident that SAF will be able to redress the military balance. Until then, they say privately, there will be no negotiation.

In the SPLA, south and north, many see this as the historic moment to deal a fatal blow to the NCP/SAF government. They perceive the regime as weaker than ever before, and the SPLM, north and south, as strengthened in standing and resources. By striking now, they argue, there is a chance of swift regime change. They think that the risks of sparking a north-south war, and of making both countries ungovernable, are worth running.

Prospects for a Settlement

With positions hardening, the conflict is not, in mediation parlance, "ripe for resolution." But the risks of doing nothing are enormous. That risk is most immediate for Nuba civilians who fear a counter-insurgency campaign similar to the one seen in Darfur, especially if the SPLM-N seeks to re-ignite conflicts in Darfur and eastern Sudan. Such an intensification of the war would risk escalating into a wider north-south war, and hardening international positions against Sudan.

With the government of Sudan facing a crippling financial crisis as a result of a 75 percent drop in oil revenues after partition in July, there is enormous international leverage over Khartoum on economic issues. The decision to risk war in Southern Kordofan by disarming the Nuba SPLA was a decision taken at the national level, against the advice of senior NCP figures in the state and some army commanders. The international community must therefore put pressure on the national government to negotiate, and on the leadership of SAF to seek a process of reform and rebuilding, with international partnership, to reduce risk in conflict areas.

The economic normalization of Sudan, including a plan for the relief of its \$38 billion debt, must be part of negotiations with Khartoum to end the war in the Nuba Mountains and promote democratization throughout Sudan. Donors should make funding for all development and recovery contingent on tangible results in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. With the SPLM-N now declared illegal, the UN can no longer engage with communities in areas the SPLM-N controls. Is it acceptable for recovery or development work—humanitarian aid excluded—to be limited to government-controlled areas?

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief looks at what is driving the fighting in Sudan's Nuba Mountains. Journalist Julie Flint has written extensively on Sudan, reporting on the Nuba Mountains since 1992. This piece is based on her most recent visit, in September.

What al Hilu seeks, as a first option, is fully consonant with the CPA: a democratic, equitable, multi-ethnic state to be negotiated in a national constitutional conference at which all political parties, including the NCP, would be represented. The NCP would prefer a partial solution based on the particularities of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. That solution would likely be supported by internationals who are still focused on north-south issues, including Abyei, and reluctant to alienate Khartoum by challenging it on the big issues of democratization and governance.

This would be a mistake. The rank and file of the Nuba SPLA seeks rapid progress toward transformation of politics at the center. Failing that, we can expect new emphasis on the fall-back agenda—the right of self-determination. This would not generate international backing. But the Nuba, feeling betrayed by previous international-mediated agreements, might not be in a mood to take heed. The war in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile needs to be mediated before the parties' positions become even more polarized and any reasonable settlement slips away.

Endnotes

1. "Statement on South Kordofan, Sudan—Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Valerie Amos," *Relief Web*, August 30, 2011.
2. "Sudan" refers to the north, as distinguished from the newly formed "South Sudan."
3. UNMIS Report on "The Human Rights Situation During the Violence in Southern Kordofan State," *Khartoum*, June 2011.
4. Author interview with 1st Lt. Khaled Abdul Karim Saleh, former head of security, Office of the Governor of Kordofan, Bern, Switzerland, June 13, 1995.
5. E-mail from Suleiman Rahhal, director of the Nuba Survival Foundation and until recently a fierce critic of the Nuba SPLA and al Hilu, October 2, 2011.
6. Personal communication from a member of the African Union mediation team
7. Author interview, Juba, September 5, 2011. Al Hilu claimed his forces captured one tank, 19 mounted Land Cruisers, four mounted trucks, one 122 mm howitzer, 39 mortars, three grenade launchers shells and ammunition.
8. "Bashir, Aggar meeting fails to break stalemate over South Kordofan," *Sudan Tribune*, August 22, 2011.
9. Personal communication from a member of the African Union mediation team.



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