

Worsening conflict between Sudan and South Sudan

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The fiercest fighting since South Sudan seceded from Sudan last July has erupted over the demarcation of borders, the sharing of the oil revenues, citizenship rights and security arrangements—issues left unresolved at the time of secession.

Armed clashes have continued for weeks between the National Congress Party (NCP) government in Khartoum, Sudan and the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) government in Juba, South Sudan.

With the border states of Southern Kordofan and Abyei being the few oil producing areas likely to remain in Sudan, it was inevitable that they would be bitterly contested.

While both sides appear to have pulled back from all-out war, the ceasefire is at best fragile.

The mounting tensions between the NCP and SPLM, long used by the major powers as their proxies in a struggle to control the country's rich oil, mineral and water resources, threaten a far wider conflagration.

The United States is preparing a tragedy by pitching South Sudan against its much larger neighbour. Though figures are disputed like everything else, the population of South Sudan is between one-fifth and a third that of Sudan. Now Washington is cynically utilising this disparity in order to whip up public sympathy for its proxy in a worsening conflict.

The US backed the secession of the SPLM to form South Sudan as a means of furthering access by US-based energy conglomerates to the oil fields in the south that are largely controlled by China, Pakistan, Malaysia and France. China and Russia have backed Sudan's NCP.

Landlocked South Sudan has 75 percent of the oil

resources. But it is dependent upon pipelines through its northern neighbour to export its oil, which mostly goes to China. It cut off its 300,000 b/d in protest at Sudan's high transit fees. Oil production and trade, upon which both desperately poor countries depend, have halted, causing widespread hardship.

Earlier this month, following weeks of armed clashes during which Juba says that Sudan bombed its oil fields, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), South Sudan's armed forces, invaded deep into Sudan and took control of Heglig, a major oil producing region that provides most of Sudan's income. South Sudan claims Heglig as its own, although according to a 2009 international ruling it is in Southern Kordofan, Sudan.

On Friday, after fierce fighting and hostile rhetoric on both sides, the SPLA announced it was withdrawing from Heglig in response to international pressure. Khartoum disputed this claim, saying that it retook control by force. Sudanese General Kamal Abdul Maaruf said that his troops had killed 1,200 South Sudanese soldiers.

According to the *Guardian*, Heglig was largely destroyed by the South Sudanese. Juba, for its part, claims that the oil facilities were bombed by Sudan.

On Saturday, a Catholic church in Sudan frequented by South Sudanese was attacked and burned. The next day there were further clashes in Southern Kordofan and around Heglig between rebel militias used by both countries as their proxies.

The SPLM-North, which supported the south during the civil war that lasted 21 years and killed nearly 2 million people, found itself on the wrong side of the border after secession. It controls much of the Nuba Mountains in Southern Kordofan and has launched raids into Blue Nile State. There are northern rebels in

Unity and Upper Nile states of South Sudan.

South Sudan also appears to have formed an alliance with some of the Darfuri rebel troops involved in another long running conflict with Khartoum.

On Monday, there were reports that Sudanese MiG 29s had bombed civilians in Bentiu town and other counties in Unity State, killing at least 16 people and wounding 34, claims which Sudan has rejected. South Sudan called it “a declaration of war”.

Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese president, went to Heglig in a show of strength. He told his troops, “We will not negotiate with the South’s government because they don’t understand anything but the language of the gun and ammunition.”

Earlier he had spoken of “occupying” Juba and toppling the South Sudanese government, which he said was seeking the overthrow of the Khartoum government. Bashir refused to allow South Sudan to use Sudan’s pipelines to export oil.

South Sudan said that it had been sending military reinforcements to the border in readiness for any further provocation from Khartoum.

While posturing as even-handed, the Obama administration made clear its support for South Sudan. It condemned Sudan’s military incursion into South Sudan, called for the immediate cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of all Sudanese armed militia from South Sudan and the resumption of negotiations under the auspices of the African Union’s High Level Implementation Panel (AU-HIP). Khartoum pulled out of the talks last month as the conflict escalated.

A White House statement said, “Sudan must immediately halt the aerial and artillery bombardment in South Sudan by its armed forces” and added that South Sudan and Republic of Sudan must end all military support for rebels groups within the other country.

On Tuesday, the African Union (AU) called on the two countries to withdraw their forces unconditionally from the disputed areas and settle their disputes over oil, citizenship and boundary issues within three months or face binding international arbitration.

The United Nations Security Council condemned Sudan’s attack on Bentiu, called for an immediate end to fighting between the two countries and said the AU’s “roadmap” was a “constructive contribution”. This suggests that the AU was being lined up to fulfill a

similar role to the Arab League in relation to Libya and Syria, in providing a cover for yet another military-backed intervention on behalf of the US.

As with Syria, the Security Council is divided, with China and Russia pushing for a solution favourable to Sudan, and the US, Britain and France pushing for a solution favourable to South Sudan, a situation likely to lead to a build up of arms on both sides.

Washington blacklisted Sudan in 1993 as a “state sponsor of terrorism”, imposing an embargo on arms exports to the country. It supplied the SPLM’s forces in the south with about \$100 million-a-year in weaponry and other assistance to fight Khartoum, continuing to send in arms even after the 2005 US-brokered agreement that ended the civil war and paved the way for a referendum on secession.

Sudan’s *Al-Intibaha* newspaper says that Israel may be supplying weapons to South Sudan. Last July, Amnesty International accused China, Russia, and the US of stoking the conflict in the region by providing weapons or military training to their proxies.

It is unlikely that the SPLA would have mounted such an offensive against Khartoum without support from Washington. This is possibly in return for providing a home for AFRICOM, the US military command for Africa, a move unlikely to win support from the African Union and many African countries which have thus far refused to provide a base.

Last year, the Obama administration pointedly did not remove Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, despite acknowledging that Khartoum has cooperated fully with Washington in the war on terror. Neither did it lift US trade sanctions against Khartoum.

China, which South Sudan’s President Salva Kiir visited this week, is to send its Africa envoy to Khartoum and Juba.



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