

Attempt at ceasefire as military buildup continues in South Sudan

Jean Shaoul

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The factional infighting within the ruling elite in South Sudan for power and control over the impoverished country's oil and mineral wealth threatens to mutate into an ethnic and tribal civil war, triggering a humanitarian crisis and broader regional implications.

East Africa's leaders from the eight-member Inter-government Authority on Development (IGAD) announced yesterday that the government of President Salva Kiir had agreed to an "immediate cessation of hostilities" and called on the forces led by former Vice President Riek Machar to do the same. As a sweetener the IGAD leaders said that Kiir had also agreed to free allies of Machar accused of plotting a coup.

The previous day, the leaders of two of South Sudan's neighbours, Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn and Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, both US regional allies, had indicated their and Washington's support for Kiir, saying, "Leaders also underlined that the unconstitutional means to remove a democratically elected government should be condemned."

Kiir and Machar, from rival factions within the ruling South Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its army, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), are busy meanwhile strengthening their military control on the ground first.

The European Union is to send an envoy, Alex Rondos, to Juba to push for a negotiated solution. China is a major investor in South Sudan's oil industry and imports about half of South Sudan's total oil production. Beijing said its special envoy to Africa would also travel to Juba "soon".

Against this diplomatic background, the United Nations Security Council has agreed to send an additional 5,500 police and military personnel, as well as attack helicopters and transport planes, to join its 7,500-strong multilateral operation in the country in the next 48 hours. The US has already dispatched forces to Sudan, ostensibly to secure the safe exit of its citizens from the country. It has sent

additional Marines to its Camp Lemmonier base, home to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM) in Djibouti, which would enable a rapid-response force to be despatched to South Sudan at short notice.

Fighting in South Sudan began last week, following what Kiir, from the dominant Dinka tribe, claimed was an attempted coup by Machar, from the Nuer, and the arrest of 10 of Machar's political allies.

While Kiir's jails are full of his opponents from all ethnic groups, he has sought to portray the opposition to his increasingly corrupt and authoritarian rule as a rebellion by the Nuer, the second biggest of South Sudan's 200 ethnic groups.

Ethnic and tribal rivalries have been fuelled by poverty and scarce resources. One of the poorest countries on earth, despite its oil, minerals, timber and rich farmland, South Sudan was devastated by the decades-long civil war against its northern neighbour Sudan.

When Juba seceded from Khartoum in 2011, less than one percent of the population had electricity and 15 percent had mobile phones. Apart from the road linking Juba with Khartoum, there is just one tarmac road, to Nimula on the border with Uganda. More than half the population is cut off during the rainy season. The country has the worst maternal mortality rate--2,054 per 100,000 births--in the world.

The much vaunted independence, brokered by the US and UK under the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement, was a means of countering China's growing economic influence in the region. The establishment of the breakaway state with a population of barely 9 million was predicated upon the disparity between the Arab and Muslim north and the Christian and African south, differences consciously fostered by Britain, Sudan's former colonial ruler.

The reality is that there is no such homogeneity. Sudan is made up of numerous ethnic groups, each with their

own language and beliefs. The assertion of a Christian/Muslim split was never more than a cover for the establishment of another small state whose rulers could--or so Washington hoped--be controlled for its own geopolitical interests.

While South Sudan would have the majority of the country's oil, Sudan would control the oil pipeline that was the sole means of bringing the oil from the landlocked and underdeveloped south to the international markets. The CPA and subsequent talks failed to settle the borders of the two countries, particularly in the oil-rich Abyei province. There were also ongoing internal armed conflicts within the provinces either side of the border, even where this was defined, that were being fuelled by Khartoum and Juba. As the drought in the region intensifies, the growing conflict over the distribution of the Nile waters, of which Egypt and Sudan currently get the lion's share and have a veto over the construction of dams upstream, creates a further element of rivalry in the region.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time, "The partition of Sudan paves the way for further conflicts", both within South Sudan and between Juba, Khartoum and its neighbours. What is now being portrayed in the international media as a conflict within the world's newest state is in fact part of the ongoing balkanisation of Sudan to control its oil and mineral wealth.

Far from bringing peace and prosperity, partition has produced yet another unviable state, ruled over by warring factions beholden to one or other major power, bringing nothing but hardship to all but a tiny layer in Juba.

South Sudan's relations with Khartoum hovered on the brink of all-out war in 2012 over control of the oil-rich border province of Abyei, leading to the collapse of oil production during the 16-month closure of the pipeline through Sudan to South Sudan's export markets. GDP fell by 53 percent in 2012.

South Sudan has seen cattle rustling, abductions of women and children, and ethnic and tribal clashes, whipped up by corrupt and dissident factions of the SPLM and splinter groups. With the country awash with automatic weapons from the civil war, at least one thousand people have been killed and 100,000 have reportedly fled into the bush in Jonglei State alone since January this year.

The country has been on a knife edge after Kiir sacked Machar and his supporters in the cabinet in July, following Machar's declaration of his intention to run for

the presidency in the 2015 elections. Armed clashes between units of the SPLA and militias have taken place in half the country's ten states and at least 20 towns and cities in the east, with rebel forces seizing control of some of the oil producing regions.

Control over these states is vital, as oil provides 98 percent of the government's revenues. Such was the scale of the opposition to Kiir that neighbouring Uganda sent troops into Juba to protect the government against Machar's forces.

While government forces have retaken control of Bor, in Jonglei State, they are battling to retake the key cities of Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State and site of South Sudan's second international airport, and Bentiu, the capital of the oil-producing Unity State.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' latest update, "the real number of people displaced is likely to be significantly higher" than 100,000. It added that nearly 60,000 people had sought safety at various UN peacekeeping bases in the country, including about 20,000 in the capital Juba alone.

Such is the scale of the violence that aid agencies say they need \$166 million to address the repercussions of the violence, including sanitation, health care, shelter, food and water.

Should it prove impossible to start peace talks between the rival factions, the atrocities committed by both sides and the humanitarian disaster threatening South Sudan's people may provide the necessary pretext for yet another US-sponsored intervention in pursuit of its geostrategic interests.



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