

Japan exploits violence in South Sudan to dispatch military

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In a test case of Japan's new military legislation passed last year, Tokyo dispatched its Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to evacuate Japanese aid workers in South Sudan. The newest nation in Africa has been riven by political and military strife since splitting from Sudan in 2011 with the backing of the US and Europe.

On Monday evening, three military C-130 transport planes left the Komaki Air Base in Aichi Prefecture for Japan's only overseas base, in Djibouti, and arrived late Wednesday. By that time a chartered plane had left South Sudan, evacuating 47 aid workers from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to Kenya. Another 20 Japanese citizens remained behind. The Defense Ministry said it would assess the situation before deciding whether to send in planes to evacuate the remaining personnel.

There are also 350 Japanese ground troops working ostensibly to aid construction projects as part of the UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS). Japan first sent troops in 2012, but their role has continually expanded. In December 2013, Japanese troops provided South Korean soldiers, also part of UNMISS, with 10,000 rounds of ammunition in violation of Japan's Peacekeeping Operation (PKO) law, which bans providing weaponry to third nations.

Last week fighting broke out in and around the South Sudanese capital of Juba between troops loyal to President Salva Kiir and those backing Vice-President Riek Machar. More than 300 people, including civilians, were killed in the violence before a ceasefire took effect Monday night. According to the UN, 36,000 people have been displaced. The clashes raised fears of a return to the civil war that ravaged the country from December 2013 to August 2015.

During the fighting, two Chinese soldiers, attached to UNMISS, were killed on Sunday evening in a shelling

attack while on patrol near a UN compound. A UN source also reported that clashes took place near the Japanese military's camp, according to the *Japan Times*. The renewed fighting, particularly with UN troops being drawn into the conflict, is significant. Under Japan's previous PKO law, SDF soldiers could be deployed only so long as a ceasefire existed between the conflicting sides.

When asked at a press conference on Monday, before the new ceasefire went into effect, whether this was still the case in South Sudan, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga replied: "We don't consider that any armed conflict as defined by the PKO law has broken out in the operation area of UNMISS."

While cast simply as a mission to protect Japanese citizens, the situation provides Tokyo with the opportunity to deploy SDF forces under the military legislation passed last September, while simultaneously expanding its operations in South Sudan. Under these new laws, Japanese troops are permitted to take part in battles and accept larger and more aggressive roles, under the guise of a UN peacekeeping operation or in coming to the assistance of an ally—in particular the United States.

At the same time, Suga was reluctant to invoke the new laws on Monday. The government is well aware that, despite its passage, legal scholars have denounced the legislation as unconstitutional. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and his ruling Liberal Democratic Party are pushing to revise the constitution to permit the SDF, which would be renamed the National Defense Force, to take part in wars overseas.

The latest deployment follows the killing of seven Japanese JICA aid workers in Dhaka, Bangladesh during an attack on July 2 claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The SDF deployment to Africa

is designed to draw the least amount of public objection.

In the past, the Abe government has exploited terrorist attacks or threats to Japanese citizens abroad to further his remilitarization agenda. Following the deaths of 37 hostages, including ten Japanese, in the 2013 hostage situation at In Amenas, Algeria, the prime minister and his cabinet approved a bill, passed in November of that year, allowing the SDF to enter conflict zones, so long as the pretext of a rescue mission existed.

The hostage crisis in early 2015 involving Kenji Goto, a reporter, and Haruna Yukawa, a self-described military contractor, both murdered by ISIS in Syria, was similarly exploited to introduce and promote September's military legislation. Emboldened by its recent electoral victory in the upper house of Japan's parliament, the Abe government will rapidly accelerate its remilitarization drive.

JICA's role is also an important one for Japanese imperialism. The aid agency allows Japan to expand its presence in countries, like South Sudan and Bangladesh, where China is vying for influence. In South Sudan, China's state-owned National Petroleum Corporation owns a 40 percent stake in a joint venture operating the African nation's oil fields.

South Sudan was divided from Sudan under the pretext of ending a 22-year civil war. The true purpose of a 2005 peace deal and then the 2011 referendum on independence was to pull Sudan, and more specifically, the vast oil and mineral reserves located in South Sudan, out from under Chinese influence. Japan, no less than the US, is involved in this operation, relying heavily on economic aid to push its agenda against China in Africa. However, Tokyo is no less intent on using its military to achieve its aims.



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