

October 1, 2014

South Sudan: Current Issues

South Sudan emerged in 2011 as the world's newest country, and as one of its least developed. After almost 40 years of war between the Sudan government and southern insurgents, an overwhelming majority of southern Sudanese voted in January 2011 to secede from Sudan. More than 2.5 million people were killed in the civil war and more than 4 million were displaced. Many fled as refugees, including to the United States. South Sudan was devastated by the conflict, which hindered the development of basic infrastructure and formal civilian institutions. The war created massive, chronic humanitarian needs that have persisted, despite a bounty of natural resources, including 75% of Sudan's former oil reserves. Corruption also slowed post-war recovery and development. South Sudan was the world's largest recipient of humanitarian aid in 2013.

In December 2013, less than three years after independence, growing political tensions among key leaders in South Sudan erupted in violence. The political dispute that triggered the crisis was not based on ethnic identity, but it overlapped with preexisting ethnic and political grievances, sparking armed clashes and targeted ethnic killings in the capital, Juba, and then beyond. Ongoing fighting, between forces loyal to South Sudan President Salva Kiir and forces aligned with his former vice president, Riek Machar, and among armed civilians, has caused a security and humanitarian emergency, adding to vast pre-existing needs and development challenges.

After the initial outbreak of violence, Riek Machar declared a rebellion against President Kiir, who accused Machar of plotting a coup. The fighting has continued, despite international pressure to resolve the conflict and repeated commitments by the warring parties to observe a cessation of hostilities deal signed in January.

Regional mediators have led negotiations in Ethiopia amid ongoing violence, but progress has been limited. In early June, the two sides agreed to the mediators' proposal for a transitional government, but they continue to disagree on its composition. Significant questions remain regarding the scope of the dialogue to come, the willingness of either side to compromise, and the extent to which other stakeholders are included in the process. Some South Sudanese express concern that a proposed power-sharing arrangement may not address the root causes of the conflict.

Impact of the Conflict

More than 1.8 million people have been displaced since December, and experts warn that the country is on the verge of a humanitarian catastrophe. U.N. officials estimate that 7 million people are at risk of hunger and disease in 2014, with nearly 4 million, almost one-third of

Capital: Juba
Population: 11.6 million
Comparative area: slightly smaller than Texas
Religions: animist, Christian
Official language: English
Literacy: 27%
Life Expectancy: 55 yrs.
GDP; GDP per capita: \$11 billion; \$1,000



Sources: Graphic created by CRS. Map data from Department of State and Esri (both 2013). Fact information from CIA World Factbook and IMF.

the population, facing alarming levels of food insecurity. The fighting has disrupted farming cycles and grazing patterns, and local markets have collapsed. Aid agencies warn that parts of the country may face famine conditions in early 2015. Of the displaced, more than 458,000 people have fled as refugees to neighboring Ethiopia, Sudan, Uganda, and Kenya. The conflict also affects humanitarian access to over 220,000 refugees who fled an ongoing conflict in neighboring Sudan and who are sheltering in camps in South Sudan.

U.N. officials assert that targeted attacks against civilians and U.N. personnel during the conflict may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. The U.N. Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) reported in May that "from the very outset of the violence, gross violations of human rights and serious violations of humanitarian law have occurred on a massive scale. Civilians were not only caught up in the violence, they were directly targeted, often along ethnic lines." Both sides have reportedly used child soldiers. Thousands have been killed, and almost 100,000 have sought refuge at UNMISS peacekeeping bases. By numerous accounts, many of those sheltering at the crowded U.N. bases fear that they may be targeted based on political or ethnic affiliation if they leave. Disease outbreaks are a major concern in the rainy season—the first cholera cases were reported in May.

Background and Context

The current crisis reflects underlying tensions and mistrust among South Sudanese leaders and ethnic groups that date back to Sudan's civil war, and before. While the war was described broadly as a north-south conflict, infighting among southern rebel commanders in the 1990s nearly derailed the southern bid for self-determination, as leaders of the insurgency, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA), competed for power and mobilized supporters along ethnic lines, resulting in atrocities by all sides. Khartoum fueled SPLM splits by financing and arming breakaway factions.

The major factions reconciled in the early 2000s, although several smaller southern militias continued to operate.

In 2005, the Sudan government and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to end the war. That deal paved the way for 2010 elections and the southern referendum, after which South Sudan, led by the SPLM, seceded in July 2011. **The relationship between Sudan and South Sudan remains tense**, and parts of the CPA have yet to be fully implemented. In early 2012, South Sudan's government, angered by Khartoum's unilateral decisions regarding the transit and export of South Sudanese oil through Sudan, and by border disputes, suspended oil production for over a year. This led to fiscal austerity measures and economic shocks in both countries.

Most SPLM leaders publicly put aside their differences as the war was ending to present a unified front and, in some cases, position themselves for political office. Ethnic tensions and bitter interpersonal rivalries grew under the strain of increased governing responsibilities, amid severe human, institutional, and infrastructure capacity constraints. The country remained awash in small arms, and localized interethnic violence increased and appeared progressively politicized. **Political maneuvering ahead of anticipated 2015 elections** added to these dynamics. Work on a new constitution stalled, and a political struggle among senior SPLM members unfolded. President Kiir's July 2013 cabinet reshuffle, in which long-time political rival and presidential hopeful Machar and other key officials were removed from office, formalized a major fissure in the ruling party. Tensions rose as Machar and others publicly accused President Kiir of becoming increasingly dictatorial.

The initial fighting, on December 15, reportedly occurred in Juba between presidential guard soldiers from the country's largest and second largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer, from which Kiir and Machar, respectively, hail. The fighting soon spread beyond the capital to the eastern state of Jonglei, where inter-communal violence had already displaced 100,000 people, and to the oil-producing states of Unity and Upper Nile. South Sudan's military split, largely along ethnic lines. Some military units rebelled against Kiir, purportedly in response to targeted ethnic attacks against Nuer in Juba by government forces. The fighting has primarily occurred in Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile as the two sides vie for territory. Ugandan military support for the government has been controversial. Other neighbors have sought to maintain the appearance of neutrality, although some South Sudan officials accuse Sudan of arming Machar's forces.

Senior SPLM political figures were initially arrested in December for plotting what President Kiir claimed was a failed coup attempt. U.S. officials have reported no evidence of such an effort. The detained politicians were later released, but not exonerated, and they have sought to form a third block at the peace talks. Rebuilding trust among political leaders, and between communities affected by ethnic violence, may prove increasingly difficult the longer the crisis continues. Many warn that the fighting may increase with the onset of the dry season in late 2014.

Responding to the Crisis

The international community is mobilizing diplomatic, humanitarian, and peacekeeping resources to protect civilians, respond to rising needs, and bring an end to the conflict. Donors have pledged about \$963 million to date in response to a U.N. appeal for \$1.8 billion in relief aid for 2014. **The United States is by far the largest humanitarian donor, allocating more than \$720 million.**

The humanitarian response has been constrained by funding shortfalls, access challenges, threats against U.N. and other aid agency personnel, and ongoing hostilities. The looting of relief supplies at the onset of the conflict, followed by heavy seasonal rains, has necessitated the costly distribution of food supplies by air. The U.N. Security Council unanimously authorized a substantial increase in peacekeeping forces for UNMISS in December, and in late May modified the mission's mandate to focus on four key tasks: protecting civilians, monitoring and investigating human rights abuses, facilitating aid delivery, and supporting the cessation of hostilities deal. African leaders have joined U.N., U.S., and other international leaders in criticizing both sides for the civilian suffering arising from the ongoing fighting, and East African officials have threatened sanctions against the warring parties.

"If the conflict continues, half of South Sudan's 12 million people will either be displaced internally, refugees abroad, starving or dead by the year's end." U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to the U.N. Security Council, May 12, 2014

U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

The United States played a major role in facilitating the CPA and South Sudan's subsequent independence, and the United States has been the country's largest bilateral foreign aid donor. It also has played a lead role in U.N. Security Council deliberations on the country. Engagement by Congress has been historically driven by human rights and humanitarian concerns. Despite strains in the relationship with the South Sudan government, several senior Obama Administration officials have expressed a personal stake in resolving the current crisis. U.S. officials have sought to pressure both sides to accept a settlement that will facilitate reconciliation and as accountability for crimes committed during the conflict. **President Obama imposed targeted sanctions under Executive Order 13664** on two military leaders deemed responsible for fueling the war—a senior rebel commander and the head of the presidential guard—in May 2014. Two additional commanders were sanctioned in September. The State Department has requested **\$331 million in FY2015** foreign aid for South Sudan (not including anticipated humanitarian aid) to protect development gains, ensure delivery of essential services, and promote peace, in addition to a request of more than \$390 million to support UNMISS.

See also CRS Report R43344, *The Crisis in South Sudan*.

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