

# SITUATION UPDATE

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## An Iron Fist in Lakes State: Law, Order, and Volatility on the Margins

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### KEY FINDINGS

- The governor of Lakes state, Rin Tueny Mabor, rules the state with an iron fist, and is credited with reducing overall levels of inter-communal violence during his two years in office. Despite widespread allegations of human rights violations linked to his heavy-handed approach to security, he has received considerable national recognition for pacifying Lakes state.
- The governor's reputation has suffered setbacks—including public unrest over a decision to demolish informal housing in Rumbek, erected by internally displaced people, and a perceived loss of authority in his home county, Yirol West, following the contested dismissal of a county commissioner nominated by the Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO).
- Since September 2022, pastoral violence has re-emerged along the border with Warrap state, especially in Rumbek North and Cueibet counties, highlighting faults with the governor's disarmament strategy and his emphasis on a deterrence-based approach to curbing inter-communal violence.
- Despite these recent challenges, Rin Tueny appears to be interested in a national-level position. While he is seen as indispensable among national leadership in tackling insecurity in Lakes state, he has political backing to support an appointment in a high-level security sector role.

## Context

Since the appointment of Rin Tueny Mabor as governor of Lakes state in June 2021, security in the state has improved. Within his first year in office, Rin Tueny managed to significantly reduce inter-communal fighting and armed violence for which Lakes has been notorious. Formerly the chief of military intelligence of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF), his heavy-handed approach is centred on targeting alleged perpetrators of violence—often illegally armed youth—with harsh penalties, regularly circumventing legal processes.

An ally of President Salva Kiir, the governor wields broad powers to pacify Lakes and transform it into a political stronghold for the ruling party, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). Over the course of his two years as governor, his methods to reduce violence have sparked controversy and raised concerns, mainly among civil society actors who consider that his interpretation of law and order prioritizes order over the law.

While some have criticized the governor's approach, others have praised him for reducing levels of violence in the state. His supporters appear willing, however reluctantly, to accept the harsh consequences that have befallen both perpetrators—and in some cases suspected perpetrators—of violence and civilians openly carrying firearms.

According to perception data collected from residents in Rumbek Centre and Yirol West counties in 2022, his approach has, so far, been successful. Nearly 100 per cent of the respondents from these counties ranked road security as 'safe' or 'very safe'.<sup>1</sup> Rin Tueny's approach is widely credited with having increased road security between Rumbek and Yirol. Disarmament campaigns among cattle camps along the road, coupled with warnings issued to cattle camp youth to refrain from violence, appear to have had positive impacts. In recent months, however, an uptick in violence in areas bordering Warrap state, especially in Rumbek North

and Cueibet counties, may indicate that Rin Tueny's violence reduction strategy is under strain and no longer sustainable.

## Heavy-handed pacification

During Rin Tueny's time in office, he has transformed Lakes from one of the most troubled areas in South Sudan to one of the most secure, prompting some to speculate whether his methods could be adopted by other state governments troubled by communal violence. The southern part of the Greater Bahr al-Ghazal region, including Lakes and Warrap states, has long witnessed cattle raiding and inter-communal violence. In recent years, cattle camps have increasingly become heavily armed and fortified compounds.

According to state officials, disarmament is at the heart of Rin Tueny's strategy. Indeed, some have noted that, since he took office, weapons—once a common sight in all parts of the state—are now rarely seen in public. Views diverge, however, on whether this is due to weapons collection or because armed youth are simply leaving firearms at home to avoid trouble with the SSPDF. Another strategy to reduce interpersonal conflict, and the risk of armed violence, is a ban on alcohol.<sup>2</sup>

The governor is very much at the centre of the state's security apparatus. As a close ally of President Kiir and a former chief of military intelligence, he has amassed a strong SSPDF presence in the state. Moreover, his high status among military commanders has made them amenable to implementing his deterrence-based approach, whereby extra-legal processes are employed to discourage people from committing crimes, including raiding and the possession of illegal arms. SSPDF-run detention centres are a key component to this strategy.

Having demonstrated measurable achievements in reducing everyday violence, Rin Tueny has generated public support, including from state

<sup>1</sup> See PeaceRep (2022, slide 7); Deng et al. (2022, p. 7).

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with civil society, researchers, and government officials, Rumbek, Lakes state, April 2023.

officials among Lakes' political opposition.<sup>3</sup> There is little tolerance, however, for disapproval or criticism of his methods.

Extra-legal detentions and killings are allegedly perpetrated by SSPDF units whose commanders are in close contact with Rin Tueny.<sup>4</sup> On 19 April 2023, the state's human rights adviser resigned in light of these allegations, which he said were common practice within the state, accusing Rin Tueny of acting as an 'arresting officer, prosecutor, and judge' (Radio Tamazuj, 2023c). A week after the adviser's resignation, the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan released a report stating that local observers had attributed the reduction of violence to the governor's law enforcement, characterizing it as 'swift and sweeping military operations that often bypass legal safeguards' (UNSC, 2023, p. 25). Additionally, the Panel reported that, between April and May of the previous year, at least 15 extrajudicial killings were recorded by human rights monitors (UNSC, 2023, pp. 25–26).

## A model approach to security?

After his appointment, Rin Tueny solicited support from state constituencies—including from senior politicians, elders, youth, and women representatives—to identify challenges and solutions to tackling insecurity. The consensus among these groups was that cattle-rustling and the prevalence and misuse of firearms were the main drivers of violence.

Several measures emerged from these consultations and were integrated into the governor's security strategy, dubbed 'security without compromise'. Among them is a call for direct government intervention—including lethal force—against perpetrators of violence or those in possession of illegal firearms. Furthermore, the measures stipulate that every murder, killing or attempted killing, and cattle-rustling incident should be 'answered by immediate death penalty' (Lakes state, 2021).

To implement his security strategy, the governor began collaborating with paramount chiefs, requesting that they regularly share information concerning security incidents within their communities. This intelligence enabled the state government to further develop and maintain a community surveillance network that would compel the national government to respond in order to prevent and mitigate cattle raiding and revenge attacks. To further his security strategy, Rin Tueny lobbied for the establishment of three special courts in Lakes—established by the Chief Justice in Juba—to reduce criminal caseloads and swiftly adjudicate violent crime cases and other acts deemed too severe for customary courts to resolve. The special courts—located in Yirol West, Rumbek Centre, and Cueibet—are composed of one high-court judge, local chiefs, a public prosecutor, police officers, and a defence lawyer.

From the early stages of implementing his security strategy, Rin Tueny had to strike a balance in terms of the public's view of his methods. On the one hand, he needed the broader public to be aware that security services in the state were willing, with the state's encouragement, to inflict harsh punitive measures upon criminals, alleged or otherwise—which formed the basis of his strategy of deterrence. On the other hand, in order to support these methods, he also needed the public to accept the legal opacity of his approach. While the ethical and legal issues surrounding the governor's methods in Lakes are widely known, few people seem either willing or politically positioned to challenge him on the matter. Opposition to some of the governor's decisions has, however, played out publicly, as the following section illustrates.

## Political challenges and cooperation

As South Sudan prepares for elections in 2024, the governor's political ambitions at a national level are

3 Interviews with South Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO) politicians and SPLA-IO military in Lakes state, April 2023.

4 Interview with security agent from Lakes state, Juba, April 2023.

not yet known, although he is said to be seeking a bigger role. An Atuot Dinka from Yirol, Rin Tueny has built a solid resume; he served as deputy director general of the External Bureau of the National Security Service from 2012 to 2015, as governor of Eastern Lakes state under the 32-state framework from 2015 to 2016, and, finally, as chief of military intelligence from 2019 to 2021.

His appointment to the SPLM Political Bureau in December 2022 is a clear indication of his status within Kiir's inner circle and suggests the possible pursuit of a national role. In March 2023, political observers saw Rin Tueny as a potential replacement to Angelina Teny, following her dismissal as minister of defence.<sup>5</sup> The position was eventually given to Chol Thon Balok—the Padang Dinka former governor of Upper Nile state.

There are two possible reasons for Rin Tueny not being named as minister. One is that the SPLM party leadership in Juba feared that his departure as governor would hasten the return of elevated levels of violence in Lakes, thus complicating the SPLM's electoral prospects there in 2024. Another possible reason is that President Kiir lost confidence in the governor following Rin Tueny's apparent downplaying of a politically sensitive situation in Rumbek town, involving his handling of housing demolitions. The episode received national media attention and painted the state government in a scandalous light<sup>6</sup>—marking a rare moment in Rin Tueny's political career where he faced open political opposition and public scrutiny of his leadership.

On 3 March 2023, a ceremony was held at the Rumbek National Secondary School to draw attention to pending construction at the site, and to highlight the government's commitment to improving secondary education in Lakes and across the country. In the presence of national media, attendees included Awut Deng Achuil, the minister of education, the

governor, and school pupils set to benefit from the improvements (Yang, 2023). The problem for Rin Tueny arose days later, when demolitions began to make way for school improvements. Houses around the schoolyard, which state officials said were built illegally by internally displaced people, were destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Protests immediately ensued, with residents claiming the homes were legal and that they had land ownership documents to prove it.

Rin Tueny downplayed the protests and continued with the demolitions, but violence later erupted; security personnel fired on protestors, some of whom were allegedly wielding sticks and stones, and civilian casualties and hospitalizations were reported (Radio Tamazuj, 2023b). The event spiralled into an uncomfortable situation for the governor, with protestors claiming that state corruption and Rin Tueny's personal business interests were behind the demolitions. After continued protests, Rin Tueny tried to pacify the situation by registering those affected by the demolitions and promising relocation assistance.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding the governor's agreement to dispense compensation, the protests highlighted growing political discontent, and showed that public acquiescence to Rin Tueny's regime has breaking points.

## Re-eruption of inter-communal violence

By the end of 2022, incidents of inter-communal violence had increased in Rumbek North and Cueibet counties, both bordering Warrap state. Tensions have historically existed between the Agar Dinka in Rumbek North and the Gok Dinka in Cueibet, often resulting in extremely violent episodes, linked mainly to cattle-rustling and revenge attacks.

<sup>5</sup> Interviews with political observers in and from Lakes state, Rumbek and Juba, April 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with a civil society figure, Rumbek, Lakes state, April 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with government security agents from Lakes state, Juba, April 2023.

<sup>8</sup> While it is only speculation that the incident contributed to Rin Tueny not being nominated as minister of defence, Chol Thon's appointment on 29 March, a day after the protester's death, led people to link the two events.

Overall levels of armed violence were reduced through a significant security presence in the area, provided predominantly by SSPDF soldiers and closely coordinated with the state government; however, tensions among the subsections and with communities in Tonj, in Warrap state, remained high (Craze, 2022, pp. 54–56). While infighting between various subsections in the two counties has been relatively under control since Rin Tueny took office, cross-border raiding to Tonj East (from Rumbek North) and Tonj South (from Cueibet) has spiked since late 2022. Severe fighting took place between youth from the Pakam subsection in Rumbek North and the Luacjang subsection in Tonj East in Warrap in late February and early March 2023, for instance, and left more than 150 people dead (Radio Tamazuj, 2023a). Rin Tueny visited the region shortly after these attacks and held consultations with the governor of Warrap state, Manhiem Bol Malek. Some raided cattle were subsequently returned, and the situation appeared to improve in the period leading up to the rainy season in May 2023.

Cattle-rustling incidents resulting in this level of death and injury have not been witnessed since Rin Tueny took over governorship. As a result, communities within border areas with Warrap are beginning to question the sustainability of his approach to security. Recent violence in these areas suggests that the youth involved consider the socio-economic rewards gained by raiding to outweigh the risk of being targeted by security forces. Should similar sentiments spread, this dynamic will undermine Rin Tueny's broader security strategy, and foster doubts about whether the deterrence-based security approach is sustainable.

## Conclusion

While Rin Tueny's tenure as governor is characterized by a significant pacification of Lakes state overall, political vulnerabilities and the re-emergence of cattle-related violence suggest that the 'honeymoon period' that Rin Tueny enjoyed during his first year in office has come to an end. The governor is struggling to institutionalize his approach to governance, and the recent bloody fighting at the border areas to Warrap suggests that heavy-handed deterrence cannot be sustained indefinitely.

The current challenge for Rin Tueny is to transform the highly personalized, deterrence-based system into an institutionalized, rule-of-law-based strategy. While this is the administration's declared ambition, efforts to move beyond the highly personalized, repressive style of governance that Rin Tueny represents have not yet succeeded. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that this approach has not led to impactful investigations by human rights professionals and activists, especially since the nature of the system relies on publicly known, extra-legal repressive tactics.

According to many in the state, the positive effects of Rin Tueny's heavy-handed approach outweigh the downsides. The recent slide back into violence in some areas, however, suggests that a rule-bound governance system will not be socio-politically accepted without resistance in the state. Even government officials acknowledge that such acceptance has yet to be achieved. Given growing concerns about the negative impacts of current policies, these dynamics could influence Rin Tueny's short- and mid-term career path. ●

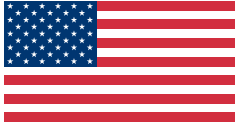
## Abbreviations and acronyms

<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army
<b>SPLA-IO</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army-in-Opposition
<b>SPLM</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
<b>SSPDF</b>	South Sudan People's Defence Forces

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