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ARMED VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

For the four-year-old Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), 2009 was a punishing year. Created in 2005 as a result of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and Sudan's governing National Congress Party (NCP), the GoSS was struggling to manage multiple financial, governance, and security crises while fighting for implementation of the peace agreement. Looming large were CPA-mandated legislative and executive elections scheduled for April 2010 and a referendum on Southern self-determination in January 2011.

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For Southerners, the referendum—deemed likely to result in a vote for secession—is the reward for decades of armed conflict with Khartoum (two civil wars were fought in 1956–1972 and 1983–2005). Dogged by allegations of corruption and poor performance, the GoSS also recognizes it as one of the few ways to re-establish its waning legitimacy. By 2009, and with much talk of the CPA collapsing, desperate GoSS officials were using public threats and recriminations to counter obstruction to this and other key CPA provisions. As the peace process stalled, the rhetoric escalated: in September, the SPLA chief of general staff estimated there was a 50 per cent chance of a 'return to war'. Southern politicians publicly threatened a unilateral declaration of independence. The resulting brinkmanship generated deep uncertainty about the country's future, especially the elections and the prospects for post-referendum Sudan.



The village of Duk Padiet, Jonglei, in the wake of a September 2009 attack by Lou Nuer tribesmen that left 160 dead. © Tim McKulka/UNMIS

As the peace process lurched forward, Southern Sudan experienced a wave of intense armed violence that swept through rural areas in 2009. The violence was well organized, involved multiple tribal groups, and exhibited a brutality not reported in recent years. The SPLM/A blamed the NCP for continuing its civil war-era practice of arming Southern groups to destabilize the region, while the NCP accused the GoSS of being unable to provide security for its citizens and hence of illegitimacy. By the end of the year, some 2,500 Southerners had been killed and 350,000 displaced, with no real progress made to address the conflicts.

The most extreme localized violence involved tribal groups, some with long histories of conflict during the civil war. One of the deadliest feuds occurred between the Murle and the Lou Nuer in Jonglei state, where repeated attacks and retaliations claimed the lives of hundreds—often women and children—at a time. During the war, the Murle were organized as a local self-defence force to counter the SPLA, and were then backed and armed by the SAF to fight a proxy war in the South. The Lou Nuer, more independent and flexible, received arms and support from both the SPLA and the SAF. Despite post-CPA disarmament drives, both groups have remained armed and active. Their ongoing feud is highly suggestive of civil war-era dynamics, exacerbated by post-CPA jockeying for services, power, and influence. In a region where tribal identities carry over into the political realm, there is a widespread perception that Southern politicians are using and provoking these tribal conflicts to consolidate their support bases.

As of late 2009, the impact of intra-Southern fighting during the civil war was still deeply felt.

Other actors involved in insecurity in Southern Sudan in 2009 included the Joint Integrated Units—CPA-mandated security units composed of both SAF and SPLA that remain profoundly unintegrated and, in certain locations, a security risk—and the Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), one of Khartoum's proxy militias during the war. Although largely broken as a fighting force, the LRA's reach is now wider than ever before (covering the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Sudan). Its commander Joseph Kony has managed to elude capture and has possibly relocated to Darfur—perhaps with the assistance of the SAF. The group's well-documented survival skills suggest it may remain an active 'player' in North–South relations for some time.

A number of structural factors have underpinned and exacerbated the violence. The GoSS has failed to create accountable, democratic state institutions and to provide basic services such as health, education, and security. This failure affects both the likelihood of violence—as disenfranchised communities compete for basic resources—and the inability of the state to contain the violence when it breaks out. Because the Southern police remain poorly trained and under-supplied, the SPLA remains the de facto dominant security actor in the South. But it, too, is struggling to transform itself from a 'rebel' movement into a professional army. Fragmented and factionalized, its internal command and control remains weak. When local violence erupts, there is an ongoing risk of soldiers taking sides based on their tribal affiliations.

As the CPA's six-year interim period of power-sharing winds down and the referendum on Southern self-determination approaches, the risk of further insecurity—both between the CPA parties and within Southern Sudan—remains high. The GoSS and the SPLA are already struggling to respond to ongoing violence in the South. In the event that this escalates, or CPA benchmarks remain blocked and lead to North–South violence, it will present severe challenges for the fledgling government. The South is in desperate need of reenergized international support. As elites in Khartoum and Juba are increasingly discussing the likelihood of separation, the international community needs to help Sudanese prepare for that possibility by guaranteeing the referendum vote and supporting the outcome. Detailed planning for a peaceful divorce, if that is the will of Southern Sudanese, is essential to prevent further instability. ■