

May

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South Sudan's Deep Divisions Surface



[TRADOC G-2 Intelligence Support Activity](#)
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Complex Operational Environment and
Threat Integration Directorate (CTID)





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Purpose

- To inform the Army training community of the events leading up to the 2013 ethnic-driven insurgent attacks in South Sudan.
- To provide information on reasons for the insurgency.
- To provide information regarding the impact of civilian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDP) on the battlefield.

Executive Summary

- Historical ethnic tensions, hidden during the fight for secession from Sudan, surfaced with independence.
- These ethnic tensions were flamed into combat by President Salva Kiir's sacking of his cabinet and his vice president, Riek Machar.
- Kiir, an ethnic Dinka, and Machar, an ethnic Nuer, represent the largest two ethnic groups in South Sudan.
- An ethnically inspired clash between Dinka and Nuer soldiers was the flashpoint for ethnic violence that began in the capital city of Juba, but quickly gained ground all across South Sudan.
- Juba was quickly brought under control by SPLA soldiers loyal to Kiir.
- Machar loyalists and others driven by ethnic hatred quickly moved the major fight to the oil-rich cities of Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal, with ethnic violence unleashed over most of South Sudan.
- Within days, the ethnic violence overwhelmed humanitarian resources, logistics, and camp capacities.
- A ceasefire signed on 24 January 2014 did not prevent violations on both sides, providing little hope that the violence will stop.

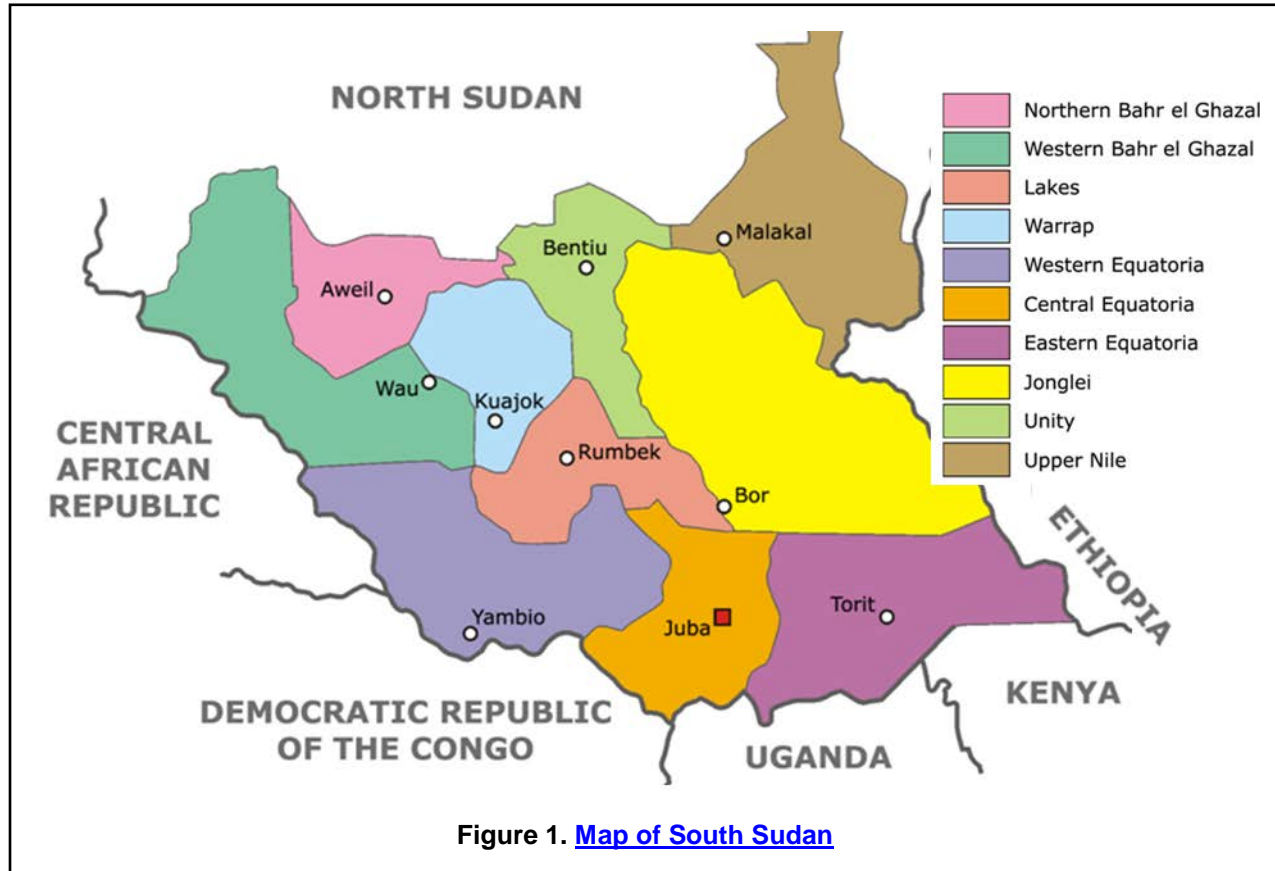
Cover photo: [*IDP Camp on UN grounds in Juba, South Sudan*](#), 6 January 2014.



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Map



Introduction

On 9 July 2011, after years of fighting and political wrangling, South Sudan became the world's newest independent country. The excitement of the moment, however, hid the deep ethnic divisions within the new country. Relatively united while fighting to secede from Sudan, South Sudanese unity did not come with independence. Internal conflicts have added to the pressures of writing a new constitution and preparing to hold the first South Sudanese elections in 2015, creating a powder keg waiting to explode.

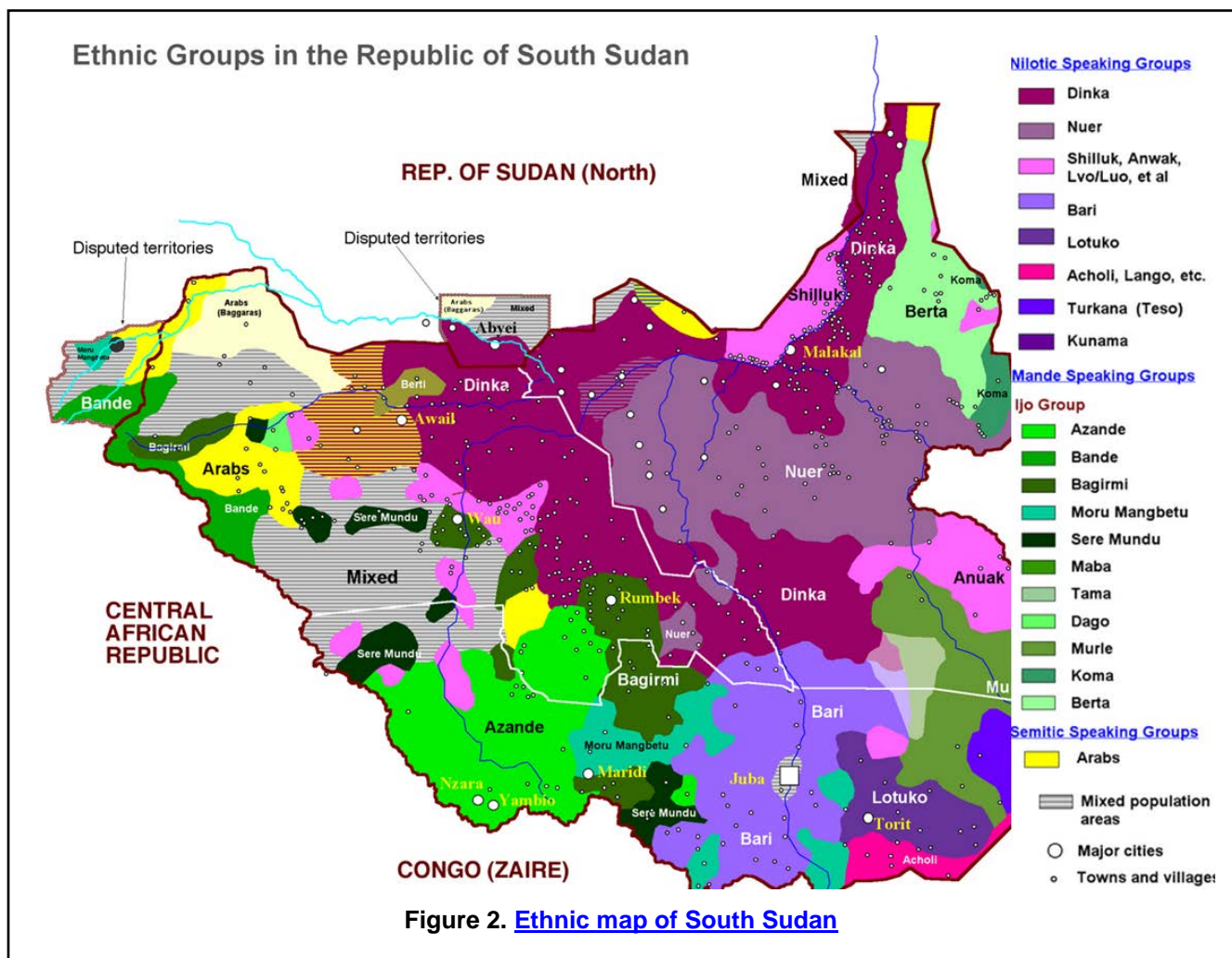
President Salva Kiir Mayardit has been feeling growing pressures from a number of directions. In July 2013, President Kiir dismissed his entire cabinet and Vice-President Riek Machar with accusations that they were plotting a coup against him. This was likely a power play to diffuse Machar's ability to oppose Kiir in the 2015 elections. The United Nations peacekeeping mission and South Sudan's government have been experiencing growing mutual frustration and distrust as South Sudan is now recognized as one of the most dangerous theaters of operation for the United Nations. In February 2013, Kiir forcibly retired over a hundred generals, citing the need to professionalize the military and remove partisanship among its leaders.¹ Domestic demands to alleviate pervasive poverty amid claims of government corruption have also created political stressors.²



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The omnipresent problem in South Sudan is the growing and pervasive violence that manifests itself along ethnic fault lines. President Kiir is an ethnic Dinka, and his dismissed vice president is an ethnic Nuer, setting the stage for conflict on both the military and political fronts. These two largest ethnic groups have provided the impetus for the violence now plaguing South Sudan, with other ethnic groups playing contributing roles. Kiir's dismissal of his cabinet and vice president has been viewed by many South Sudanese as the continuation of his efforts to consolidate power, particularly among his fellow Dinka, ahead of the 2015 elections.



Kiir's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) has been at the forefront of civilian abuse claims. In August 2013, Kiir ordered that Brigadier General James Otong be relieved of command in Jonglei State and flown back to the capital to face charges of civil rights abuses. The alleged violations were related to soldier killings of civilians in the city of Pibor. Jonglei was the site of clashes in July 2013 where fighters from the Lou Nuer ethnic group raided towns and villages belonging to members of the Murle group, resulting in 300 deaths.³



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South Sudan Conflict

Deep ethnic divisions, hidden below the surface while fighting to secede from Sudan, remain pervasive in South Sudan. Possessing weak institutional infrastructure and lacking any national democratic traditions, South Sudan has found its voice through localized ethnicity. This voice has manifested itself through violent attacks among the various ethnic groups. Kiir's dismissal of his vice president and political rival provided the political context for a rebellion. A dispute among Kiir's Dinka and Machar's Nuer SPLA soldiers a few months later provided the military impetus for country-wide violence.

Against a backdrop of almost daily attacks inspired by ethnic divisions, an escalation of violence occurred in mid-December 2013. On Sunday, 15 December 2013, an incident involving Dinka and Nuer members of the SPLA sparked a national outbreak of violence, causing both large numbers of casualties and thousands of internally displaced persons (IDP), who in some cases strayed across national borders, creating a regional crisis. While this incident may be viewed as a discrete event, it cannot be divorced from the larger context of national politics and the local and regional ethnic disputes that fan the flames.

A dispute between Dinka and Nuer SPLA soldiers quickly resulted in the Nuer SPLA soldiers occupying the military headquarters in Juba and reports of small arms fire in other parts of the city.⁴ A day later, Kiir held a press conference in full military uniform, instead of his trademark black suit and cowboy hat, saying the rebellion had been quelled and that Juba was firmly in the hands of government forces. His confidence that the rebellion had ended was, however, short-lived.

The conflict quickly became confused, dangerous, and complex. Pushed out of Juba by government troops, the insurgents moved to take the key oil-rich cities of Bor, Bentiu, and Malakal. The insurgency was a call to arms for civilian youth who, with forces from both sides, participated in ethnic cleansing as control of the towns see-sawed back and forth between the government and the insurgents. Reports of mass civilian graves, torture, and more than a half million IDPs testified to the brutality of the fighting. Ivan Simonovic, a UN human rights official visiting South Sudan, said that considerable atrocities have been committed by both sides.⁵

Mass movements of civilians fleeing the violence created a significant problem for UN peacekeepers and humanitarian efforts. UN compounds, lightly defended by UN peacekeepers and attacked directly on several occasions, were overcrowded as civilians fleeing the violence tried to find refuge. IDPs began pushing across national borders, creating a potential regional crisis. A first attempt to rescue American citizens from a UN compound outside Bor was turned back by small arms fire, damaging the three Osprey aircraft and inflicting injuries on their crews. A successful rescue a few days later, with assurances that the insurgents would not attack, suggested some command and control by insurgent leaders. On 10 January 2014 *International Crisis Group* reported the number of dead from the conflict in South Sudan was close to 10,000 people, an increase from earlier UN projections.⁶

Uganda, feeling the pressure and threat of South Sudanese refugees moving across its border and wary of the escalating violence, threatened intervention if the conflict could not be resolved. In late December 2013, at the request of the South Sudanese government, Ugandan People's Defense Force (UPDF) soldiers were sent to Juba to assist in guarding the airport and to evacuate Ugandan citizens.⁷ In late January, a joint force of SPLA and UPDF recaptured the city of Bor.



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Even with a ceasefire agreement finally negotiated on 23 January 2014 after over a month of brutal fighting, peace may still be elusive.⁸ A day after signing the ceasefire agreement, insurgent forces claimed that government forces had attacked their positions.⁹ As late as 18 February 2014, insurgent forces claimed they had retaken the town of Malakal. On 28 January 2014, Kiir announced treason charges against seven opposition politicians, including former Vice President Riek Machar, raising further fears about the fate of the ceasefire. Kiir has stated he will not agree to a power-sharing agreement, closing a door to reconciliation and giving the insurgents a reason to continue fighting.¹⁰

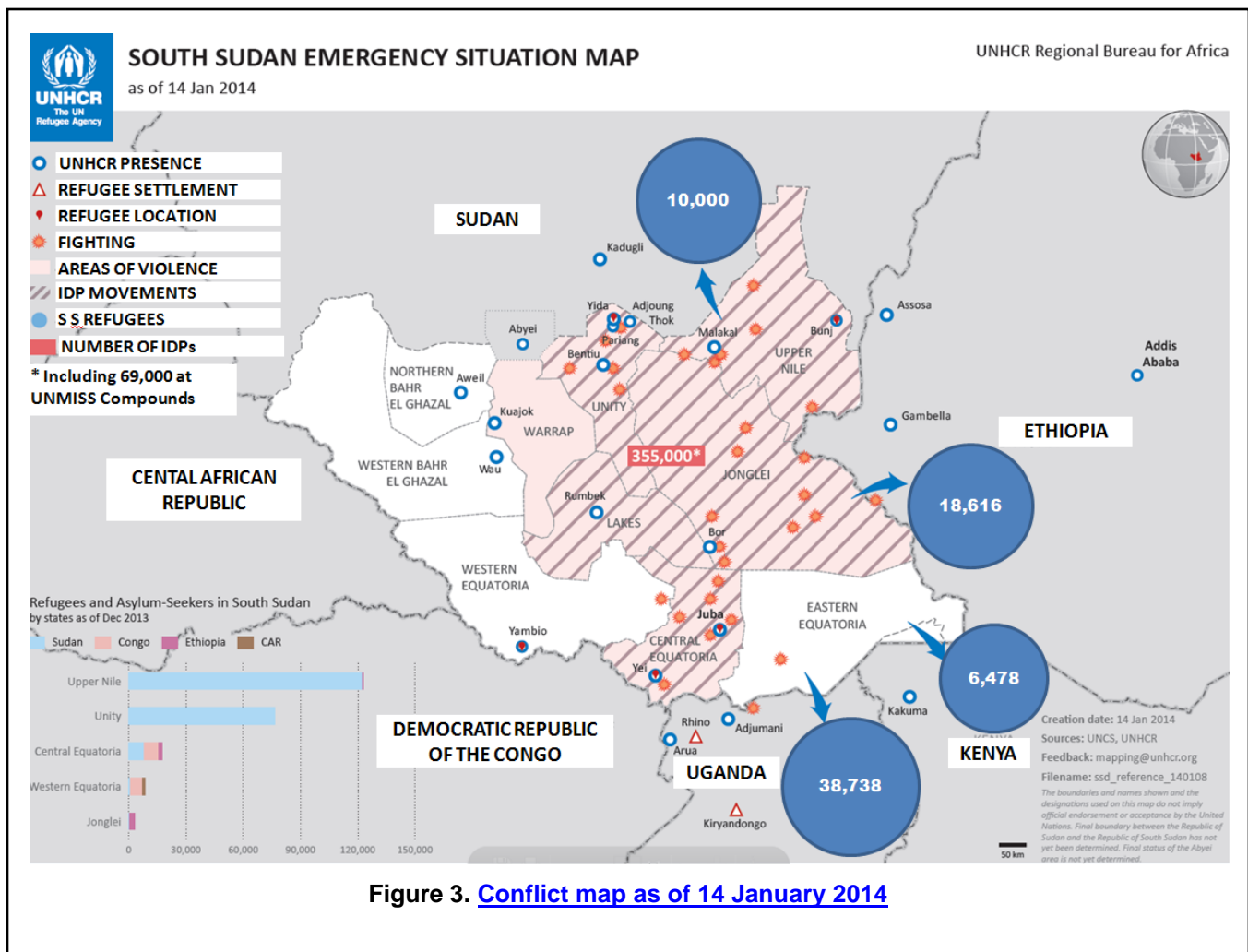


Figure 3. [Conflict map as of 14 January 2014](#)

While the ethnic conflicts are nuanced and difficult to understand by outsiders, a quick look at Figure 2 and Figure 3 provide clues to the current conflict. The chief areas of violence are set within areas that are predominately Dinka and Nuer and the area surrounding the capital of Juba. This will be a major battleground area in the near future. Understanding where the subsidiary alliances lie is critical to understanding how and where to control the conflict.



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Events Chronology

15 December 2013

A dispute between Nuer and Dinka SPLA soldiers broke out in Juba. Nuer SPLA soldiers managed to occupy the military headquarters in Juba. Other attacks occurred at different places around the capital city of Juba.¹¹

16 December 2013

South Sudanese President Salva Kiir appeared on television in military uniform and claimed victory over the rebels. He stated that soldiers loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar tried to overthrow the government, continuing the political tension that has hung over the country for months.¹²

17 December 2013

The government said it had arrested 10 people, including eight former ministers, and was tracking Machar.¹³

18 December 2013

South Sudanese Interior Minister Michael Makuei Lueth stated there were at least 75 people killed in the violent attacks; other estimates put the number of deaths at 400. The United Nations reported at least 13,000 people fleeing to a UN base in Juba.¹⁴

19 December 2013

Rebels loyal to Machar seized the strategic town of Bor, capital of the eastern powder keg state of Jonglei. Bor is located 126 miles north of the South Sudan capital of Juba. Machar, previously denying involvement in the rebellion, called for Kiir to be overthrown and accused him of trying to "incite inter-ethnic fighting." The United Nations Mission to South Sudan (UNMISS) reported on a Twitter feed that it was supporting 20,000 people in its two compounds in Juba and up to 14,000 in Bor.¹⁵

20 December 2013

The political crisis in South Sudan worsened as the UN base in the town of Akobo in Jonglei State was attacked. Three Indian peacekeepers were killed in the assault, and communication with the base was lost. The number of civilians seeking refuge in the UN's other bases exceeded 30,000. Britain began evacuating its citizens while the United States suspended operations at its embassy and encouraged American citizens to leave.¹⁶

22 December 2013

Three US Osprey aircraft attempted a rescue of civilians holed up in a UN compound outside the city of Bor at about 1000 hours. The aircraft were met with rebel small arms fire that damaged all three aircraft and wounded four personnel. The aircraft diverted to Entebbe, Uganda, about 500 miles away. Reports indicated the UN compound, holding about 14,000 refugees, was surrounded by armed young men.¹⁷ Hundreds were believed to have been killed in South Sudan's capital, Juba, with thousands more fleeing into the bush to escape the violence.¹⁸ Rebels seized the capital of the oil-producing Unity State, Bentiu, north of Juba.¹⁹ At the request of the South Sudanese government, Uganda sent troops to Juba to assist in guarding the airport and to evacuate Ugandan citizens.²⁰



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23 December 2013

The US military evacuated 15 American citizens from the Bor UN compound by helicopter to Juba after the area rebel leader gave assurances that there would be no interference. The successful evacuation indicated the local commanders of the 2,000 armed insurgents in the area had sufficient control to fulfill their promise of safety.²¹ An estimated 45,000 people were huddled at UN compounds to escape the violence.²² UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon sought a near doubling of peacekeeping forces in the country to protect tens of thousands of civilians from the uprising.²³

24 December 2013

The South Sudanese government reported it had retaken Bor, a city where an estimated 17,000 people had sought refuge at a United Nations compound.²⁴ Serious fighting in Malakal started at the military headquarters at 0600 hours, causing many people to flee to the UNMISS compound for refuge.²⁵ A mass grave containing 75 ethnic Dinka bodies was uncovered in Bentiu. At least two mass graves were reportedly found in Juba. Refugees told stories of horrific torture and killings based on ethnicity.²⁶ The UN Security Council agreed to almost double the size of the military peacekeeping force in South Sudan to 12,500 troops.²⁷

26 December 2013

Government forces fought to gain control of Bentiu and Malakal.²⁸

27 December 2013

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn arrived in South Sudan for talks with Kiir on finding a solution to the fighting, but failed to begin formal talks with the insurgents.²⁹ Government forces and insurgents both claimed control of the key oil town of Malakal, capital of Upper Nile State in the northeast.³⁰

28 December 2013

The government reiterated accusations that Machar was mobilizing up to 25,000 youths to attack its interests.³¹ Regional leaders in East Africa said they had made progress on a peace deal to end the crisis in South Sudan; however, continued clashes between insurgents and the SPLA indicated that neither side was abiding by the ceasefire.³² The South Sudanese government announced it had taken Malakal.³³

30 December 2013

As many as 22,000 people were crammed into a United Nations peacekeeping base outside Malakal, South Sudan.³⁴

31 December 2013

The insurgents claimed they recaptured Bor, a strategic launching point for an attack on the nation's capital of Juba. Machar agreed to send envoys to peace negotiations in Addis Ababa but rejected face-to-face talks with Kiir. He said his forces were marching on Juba. Kiir refused a power-sharing arrangement with the rebels. The African Union threatened "targeted sanctions" over the violence.³⁵ Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni threatened to intervene in South Sudan if the rebels kept fighting, introducing the possibility of a broader regional conflict.³⁶



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2 January 2014

Insurgent forces in South Sudan seized major sections of Bor city on the eve of negotiations to end the rebellion. Government troops and rebel forces drove an estimated 180,000 people from their homes, forcing them to seek shelter in more than a dozen United Nations compounds across the country.³⁷

4 January 2014

Fear kept thousands of people on the run in South Sudan, where violent conflict between forces of President Salva Kiir and those of his former vice president, Riek Machar, had fostered widespread distrust, with former friends targeting one another.³⁸

5 January 2014

The South Sudanese government and representatives of insurgent forces met at a hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia for the formal opening of peace talks.³⁹

10 January 2014

International Crisis Group reported the number of dead from the conflict in South Sudan was close to 10,000 people, an increase from earlier UN projections.⁴⁰

11 January 2014

Military forces of South Sudan's President Salva Kiir retook Bentiu, capital of an oil-producing state, from rebels loyal to the former Vice President Riek Machar.⁴¹

16 January 2014

Gunfire into a United Nations compound in South Sudan wounded dozens and killed at least one civilian seeking refuge there.⁴²

18 January 2014

A joint force of SPLA and the Uganda People's Defense Force recaptured the city of Bor. Ivan Simonovic, top United Nations human rights official visiting South Sudan, said mass atrocities had been committed by both sides.⁴³

19 January 2014

A spokesman for the insurgents said negotiations were getting closer to a deal to suspend hostilities.⁴⁴

24 January 2014

The government of South Sudan and insurgents signed a ceasefire agreement.⁴⁵

25 January 2014

South Sudanese insurgents said government forces attacked several of their positions a day after a ceasefire was signed.⁴⁶

18 February 2014

South Sudan Rebels recaptured the strategic town of Malakal.⁴⁷



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Analyst Assessment

South Sudan will remain an unstable and volatile area of the world for the foreseeable future. The hotspots will be defined by ethnic fault lines. Knowing where those fault lines are will be critical to anticipating where the next outbreak will likely be. Understanding the historical context of multi-generational ethnic disputes is essential in anticipating how the protagonists will line up.

Weak institutional infrastructure and limited experience with democracy will contribute to political opportunism manifested in violent outbursts by those who perceive themselves as victims. South Sudan is at a very fragile juncture in its national development. Political tensions surrounding the writing of the national constitution, slated for approval in 2015, will cause ethnic posturing to advance political agendas. The same kind of political posturing will occur in the lead-up to elections, also scheduled for 2015, as political ambitions are seen through the prism of current and historical ethnic disputes, both real and perceived. A weak government will attempt to consolidate political power among trusted partisans, shunning ethnic power-sharing and resulting in violent conflict.

As the conflict continues without political reconciliation, opposition leaders will be limited in their ability to control the vast numbers of their followers on the ground. A ceasefire agreement, signed by insurgent leaders and the South Sudanese government in late January 2014, has not stopped the localized fighting on either side of the conflict. A large number of the insurgent forces are not trained SPLA soldiers and, therefore, subject to undisciplined localized outbursts. Even within the ranks of the SPLA, soldiers have been consistently accused of civil and human rights abuses. Several UN compounds, housing thousands of civilian refugees from the fighting and lightly protected by UN peacekeepers, have been attacked. Command and control of insurgent forces will be difficult, if not impossible, the longer the conflict continues.

In a little over a month, more than one-half million South Sudanese have been displaced. Many of these found their way to increasingly overcrowded UN compounds. Others crossed into neighboring countries, expanding the crisis regionally. The movement of such a large number of IDPs in such a short period of time creates enormous complexity in protecting civilians and delivering humanitarian aid. The rainy season, which began in April, will cause issues with housing, disease, poor roads for delivering aid, and overcrowding in refugee camps. The potential for ethnic violence within refugee camps is also an unavoidable consideration. Without prior contingency planning, the potential for expanded and increased violence in refugee camps is a very real possibility.⁴⁸

Training Implications

- Understanding the tribal and ethnic fault lines and historical tensions provide clues about where conflicts will occur and between which groups.
- Refugees and IDPs can quickly overwhelm both resources and logistics and change a national conflict into a regional crisis.
- National political instability, institutional weakness, and deep-seated partisanship will also be manifested in the military.
- A small, seemingly insignificant event can spark a rippling larger conflict.



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- A signed ceasefire agreement does not necessarily mean an end to the fighting, particularly if insurgents see a greater advantage in continuing to fight.

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POCs

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Figure Credits

- Figure 1. [Map of South Sudan](#), Wikimedia, 28 February 2014.
Figure 2. [Ethnic Map of South Sudan](#), European Commission, 28 February 2014.
Figure 3. [Conflict Map as of 14 January 2014](#), Relief Web, 14 January 2014.

End Notes

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