



## Field Dispatch: The Challenge of Tackling Terrorism in South Sudan

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The independent state of South Sudan has come into existence with many unresolved issues weighing on its conscience. One of the greatest among these is the continued activity of seven South Sudanese rebel militias, in addition to the ubiquitous threat of the Lord's Resistance Army, or LRA. The militia menace has fixed South Sudan within its first month of independence as an infamous place among the top five countries in the world where terrorist attacks are most likely to occur, according to the Terrorism Risk Index 2011.<sup>1</sup> Authors of the report claim that this year alone, clashes between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, or SPLM/A, and militias have claimed 211 lives.

The President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir Mayardit, ceremoniously offered amnesty to the rebels in his independence day speech on July 9, indicating that he intended to actively pursue reconciliation as a means for dealing with the various rebel elements. President Kiir thus demonstrated that he, perhaps better than anyone else, understands the importance of unity among the South Sudanese, a people with a number of diverse cultures and tribes.

South Sudan expert Steve Paterno told the Enough Project that this most recent offer of amnesty by President Kiir is not the first time these militias have been offered a peace deal, but many of the previous truces have been dishonoured.<sup>2</sup> He believes that the militias will remain a menace for a considerable period of time.

Almost all South Sudan militias claim that their *raison d'être* for rebellion is fighting the corrupt regime of the SPLM. Despite widespread unease with the current government, however, few Sudanese view the militias as a viable alternative to the system, according to Paterno. South Sudanese have no illusions about incompetence and corruption among the ruling elite, yet have often pronounced that even a corrupt and incompetent southern government is better than being ruled by Khartoum. "The public seems well aware that corruption and injustice are only being used by the militias as an excuse," says a senior SPLM official. According to him, "[The] people of South Sudan are aware that some of the rebel leaders had their stake in corruption while serving in the SPLA." Such statements represent what seems to be the common perception that the militias' *raison d'être* is self-serving,

Dr. John Apuruot Akec, Vice Chancellor of the University of Northern Bahr el Ghazal in Sudan and former professor at the University of Juba, says that the "feeling of being marginalized from having a good cut of the cake" is usually what drives these rebellions. "There is no clear cut case for their motives," he said.<sup>3</sup> He believes that further deterioration of the economic situation may create a flow of new recruits, but overall he doubts that there will be greater

popular support for the militias, apart from those that are being encouraged by opposition parties from Juba. Akec believes that negotiated settlements will likely prevail over amnesty, as the commanders are unlikely to accept an amnesty without compensation; readiness to accept an amnesty offer appears to be directly proportional to the level of support these groups will be getting in the future from either opposition parties within South Sudan or their alleged Khartoum sponsors.

Some sources in Juba are repeating the allegations, almost in unison, that all militias in South Sudan are sponsored and supported by the regime in Khartoum; Paterno believes these militias would not be able to carry on without Khartoum's support. Senior SPLM officials from Juba, who spoke on condition of anonymity, also expressed their belief that the Sudanese government is using all means available to destabilize the new state of South Sudan. This is especially true in regards to the border and oil-producing states, where the majority of the militia operations are taking place. The rebellion of Lt. Gen. Gabriel Tang, for example, was allegedly allied to Khartoum when he instigated multiple conflicts in the town of Malakal, in Upper Nile state, prior to independence. While Tang's previous failed attempts to negotiate with the SPLA resulted in clashes and calls for Khartoum to cease its involvement, his recent surrender and detention by the SPLA in South Sudan suggests that Tang struck some sort of deal with the South.

Another militia leader with alleged ties with Khartoum is Abdul Bagi Ayii Akol Agany, a former presidential advisor turned militiaman, though with few significant forces supporting his rebellion. An SPLM source in Juba said that southern militias such as these are openly using military camps in suburban areas of Khartoum, information that can be verified even by regular passers-by. These rebels have allegedly harassed southerners in Khartoum by stealing vehicles with South Sudan registration plates.

### **Peter Gadet: Back to the base?**

The unanticipated arrival of Maj. Gen. Peter Gadet in Juba this August raised a great deal of attention. The excitement was, however, short-lived once the public realized that his army would not follow. His soldiers, who make up the South Sudan Liberation Movement/Army, or SSLM/A, released a press statement that described Gadet's peace deal as "a defection" and rejected the ceasefire with the SPLA. The group claimed to have appointed a new leader, Colonel General James Yoach, and vowed to keep their rebellion going. The SSLM/A also claimed that Peter Gadet and his close associate and spokesperson, Bol Gatkuoth, were offered large sums of money for their defection and that the group was not included in the ceasefire bargain in any way.

Gadet's deal with the government, as unexpected as it may seem, has not genuinely surprised long-time observers of Sudan. Throughout his long military career Gadet has traded his allegiances dozens of times, a pattern that Paterno suggests has been motivated by sheer greed. Paterno also predicts that this latest move will cost Gadet greatly, "by losing support from Nuer militias, from whom he always could draw formidable backing."<sup>4</sup> As the days go by, the prospect of drawing SSLM/A forces into Gadet's peace deal seems increasingly improbable. As the Deputy Commander of the SSLA, Maj. Gen. Bapiny Monituel exclusively told the Enough Project, "He came alone [to the SSLA] and left alone."<sup>5</sup>

Bapiny also told the Enough Project that the “SSLA has no trust in Salva Kiir,” and wants the president to inform the public why Gatluak Gai was killed and Gabriel Tang is in detention. He stated that the fighting against SPLA forces would continue, with the definitive objective being to unite all rebel groups in order to “bring down the government.” Unification of different rebel groups as suggested by Bapiny would not be an entirely new thing in South Sudan. It has been rumoured, for example, that SSLA forces have already carried out coordinated operations with Southern Sudan Democratic Movement forces under the command of George Athor. Bapiny went on to say that SSLA forces number more than 6,000 men, in addition to 700 officers, and that Peter Gadet’s “defection” would not affect their strength and position whatsoever. At the same time, Bapiny expressed a willingness to talk to the international community but “never with Salva Kiir”, thus indicating a willingness to accept international mediation between them and the SPLA.<sup>6</sup>

### **Gatluak Gai: Assassination or mutiny**

Gatluak Gai’s death may be one of the most significant setbacks for the amnesty process moving forward. Maj. Gen. Bapiny’s request for clear answers about Gai’s death suggests suspicion on the part of the militias toward the government and its stated intention to extend forgiveness to the rebels. Gai was reportedly killed by his own deputy, shortly after he initiated negotiations with SPLA — yet to this day it is uncertain under what circumstances he was murdered. The deputy went on the air at a local radio station shortly after Gai was pronounced dead to tell the public that he had killed Gai because the leader was contemplating halting negotiations with the SPLA in order to join the northern forces, an idea over which they fundamentally disagreed. Gai’s family categorically accused the SPLA of being behind Gai’s death, but the SPLM strongly denied these allegations.

Paterno stated that, similar to Gadet, Col. Gatluak Gai’s rebellion was motivated by both greed and power. His original ambition was to become the commissioner of Koch County in Unity state. Once his bid for the position of commissioner produced no results, he invested his time and energy in supporting Angela Teny, a major rival to the Unity state governor, whom Gai despised, in the 2010 elections. Angela Teny’s unsuccessful run for the governorship destroyed his hopes for assuming the position of commissioner. He went on to launch a rebellion.

### **Continuing threats and disproportionate responses**

Although Kiir’s amnesty offer, Gadet’s defection, and the death of Gatluak Gai may temporarily ease the security concerns around militia activity, the outstanding armed groups, as well as the often abusive and disproportionate military response to them by the SPLA, continue to pose a critical issue for the nascent state of South Sudan.

The most significant remaining military threat comes from Lt. Gen. George Athor, who originally launched his rebellion in the aftermath of his election defeat in 2010 in Jonglei state. Of the 211 civilians killed in 2011, George Athor and his army were responsible for 111 people, all of whom died in an attack in the Fangak area of Jonglei state, following the breaking of a ceasefire agreement negotiated before the January 9 referendum. George

Athor denied responsibility, saying that the SPLA had attacked his forces first, being that he had been a focal point for allegations regarding external militia support. The U.N. Monitoring Group for Somalia and Eritrea travelled to Sudan in April 2011 to investigate the claim that Eritrea was supplying Athor with weapons. They found rocket-propelled grenades of identical make and lot number to arms provided by Eritrea to Ethiopian rebel groups, but could not reach a conclusive decision regarding the relationship, calling for further monitoring of these developments.

How the SPLA responds to militias will prove critical, as military campaigns that commit human rights violations and target civilian populations are likely to worsen the underlying grievances between the Government of South Sudan and its people. For example, SPLA raids against the militia of Johnson Oliny in the Upper Nile state in February and April of 2011 have been under scrutiny by Human Rights Watch, or HRW, and the Enough Project itself. Johnson Oliny's militia is believed to be closely associated with South Sudan People's Liberation Movement for Democratic Change, or SPLM-DC, a major opposition political party in South Sudan. HRW has indicated in reports that both sides have committed serious human rights abuses against the civilian population. They have called for "improved accountability of SPLA forces" and accused the SPLA of deliberately killing civilians.<sup>7</sup> Again, SPLA leadership in Juba dismissed the HRW report, stating that it was based on allegations and information that were collected without proper research.

## Conclusion

Peter Gadet's declaration of a ceasefire appears to have been his unilateral decision, thus while there has been considerable excitement about the peace deal, few on the ground are convinced that it will be a turning point for the SPLA in its dealings with the militias. Motivations and reasoning behind the rebellions vary from case to case, but many seem to be self-serving in nature. Further attempts toward destabilization are therefore imminent and are, in fact, likely still happening in the field. George Athor, perhaps the only remaining of the big names in the rebel world, is still leading forces to be reckoned with, and who knows which characters will emerge next?

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<sup>1</sup> "Newly formed South Sudan joins Somalia, Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan at top of Maplecroft terrorism ranking – attacks up 15% globally," August 3, 2011, available at:

[http://maplecroft.com/about/news/terrorism\\_index\\_2011.html](http://maplecroft.com/about/news/terrorism_index_2011.html)

<sup>2</sup> Steve A. Paterno is author of a number of articles on the state of South Sudan's militias and author of the acclaimed book "The Rev. Fr. Saturnino Lohure: A Roman Catholic Priest Turned Rebel, The South Sudan Experience."

<sup>3</sup> Enough Project interviews with Dr. John Apuruot Akec, July 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Enough Project interview with Steve A. Paterno, August 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Enough Project phone interview with Maj. Gen Bapiny Monituel, August 8, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, "South Sudan: Improve Accountability for Security Force Abuses," February 8, 2011, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/02/08/south-sudan-improve-accountability-security-force-abuses>. Human Rights Watch, "Southern Sudan: Abuses on Both Sides in Upper Nile Clashes," April 19, 2011, available at:

<http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/19/southern-sudan-abuses-both-sides-upper-nile-clashes>. Also see, Jones, Laura, "Sudan Dispatch: Lessons from Upper Nile," April 28, 2011,

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available at:

<http://www.enoughproject.org/files/Malaka%20Field%20Dispatch%20FINAL%20%282%29.pdf>.