



Sudan's Bloody Periphery

The Toll on Civilians from the War in Blue Nile State

By Matthew LeRiche



enough

The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

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COVER PHOTO

Civilians in Sudan's Blue Nile state flee their homes and go to refugee camps.

VIKTOR PESENTI

Introduction

Since September 2011, the Sudanese government's campaign of repression against opposition groups in its Blue Nile state has developed into an armed conflict between the Sudan Armed Forces, or SAF, and a coalition of rebel groups, the Sudan Revolutionary Forces, or SRF. This war has exacted a severe humanitarian toll on Blue Nile's civilian population, due in large part to the SAF's indiscriminate aerial bombing of civilian areas, a ground offensive that does not distinguish between civilian and military targets, and repression of groups in government-controlled areas suspected of supporting the rebels.¹

In early 2013, the SAF and associated armed groups launched attacks with increasing frequency in areas of Blue Nile state. For most of 2012, a consistent aerial-bombardment campaign terrorized the state's population, causing the majority to flee to refugee camps in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and informal settlements for internally displaced persons, or IDPs. SAF ground attacks during the dry season in early 2013—while maintaining aerial bombing—marked a shift in tactics, causing even more civilians to flee the violence.

This report is based on visits to the front lines in central Blue Nile in late 2012 and early 2013, and details the current situation of the armed conflict there and its effect on the civilian population.



Refugees leave the ruins that were once their homes.

VIKTOR PESENTI

Background

Fighting in Blue Nile erupted after South Sudan separated from Sudan in 2011. Looking to eliminate remnant Sudan People's Liberation Movement, or SPLM, opposition left in Sudan after the independence of South Sudan, the government moved to isolate and target the newly designated SPLM-North, or SPLM-N, as distinguished from the SPLM, South Sudan's largest political party. The SPLM-North is a Sudanese opposition movement that derives most of its support from Blue Nile state and the Nuba Mountains area of South Kordofan state.²

Not long after fighting with the SPLM-N in the Nuba Mountains began,³ the government took action against the SPLM-N political leadership in Blue Nile. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir removed Malik Agar, the elected SPLM-N Blue Nile governor, and other lower-level officials.⁴ Simultaneously, the state security forces launched a series of major security operations, including aerial attacks on the populations of Blue Nile perceived to be in support of Agar and the SPLM-N.⁵ Agar and SPLM-N colleagues then joined the uprising already underway by other opposition groups.⁶ With Agar as their leader, the opposition formed the SRF as an umbrella group, including the SPLM-N and other armed opposition groups.⁷

With the onset of the dry season in early 2013, government forces took the opportunity of increased mobility to begin clearing villages and launching renewed ground attacks heading south.⁸

Indiscriminate aerial-bombing campaign

SAF's initial campaign, which was largely carried out through indiscriminate bombing, resulted in the majority of southern Blue Nile's population fleeing to South Sudan and Ethiopia by late 2012.⁹ In northern areas of Blue Nile, large numbers of civilians were unable to reach neighboring countries.¹⁰

A survey of reported attacks during January and February 2013 indicate that the bombing campaign has focused on Yabus, Ora, Mufu, Wadaka, Chali, and Mguf—all in Kurmuk County. A smaller number of reported attacks occurred in Wtabok of Bau County, but with only limited areas of the county under SPLA-N control, information on attacks from there is not readily available.¹¹

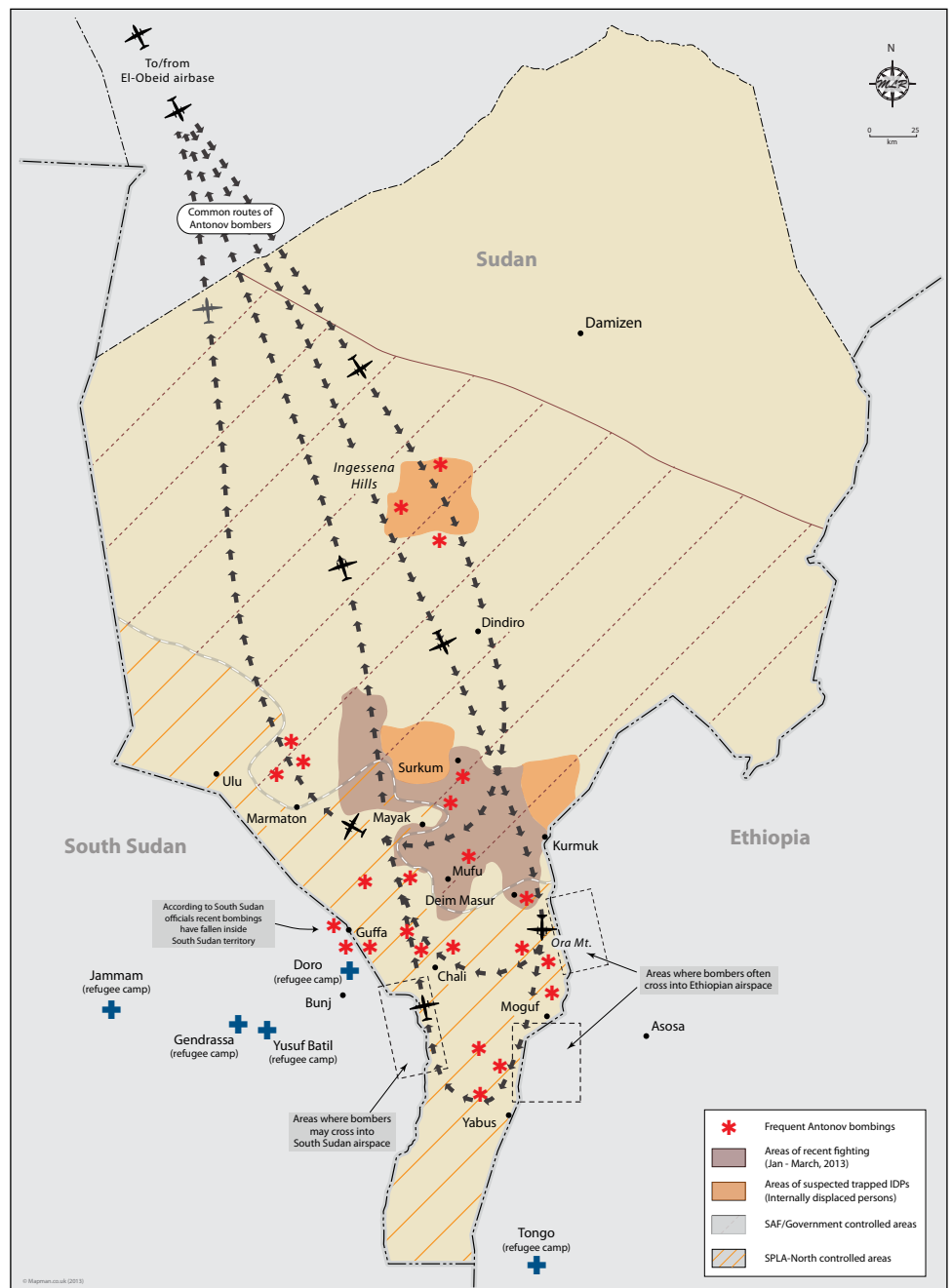
Although the bombing has injured or killed relatively few people, the toll from the psychological terror it induces, and the deprivation caused when people flee their homes, have profound and widespread effects. In the aftermath of the campaign, hunger and disease threaten the lives of those affected most. February and March, an important harvest period for southern Blue Nile, saw farming virtually come to a halt as the threat of bomber attacks and targeted attacks by jet fighters and helicopter gunships prevented farmers from harvesting in safety. This has led to increased hunger and malnutrition.¹² The Chali area, once known for its agricultural productivity, has been abandoned. During field visits late in 2012 and in February 2013, it was clear that the majority of the crops there could not be harvested. The local staples, sorghum, maize, and pumpkin, were rotting in the fields.¹³

Escalation in ground fighting

Since the beginning of March, ground fighting has increased and intensified in severity. On February 17, Yasir Arman, the secretary general of the SPLM-N, issued a statement claiming that “the Sudanese army and their allied militias have restarted a dry season campaign.”¹⁴ In response to the launch of ground fighting, the SPLM-N claimed that it successfully counter-attacked and retook areas captured by the SAF.¹⁵

Early in 2013, in areas from near Ulu in the west to Deim Mansur and Kurmuk in the east (see attached map), fighting between SAF and the SPLM-N ground forces increased. The fighting has resulted in an influx of refugees and casualties. Reports indicate that in February 2013, as many as 1,000 or more new refugees arrived in South Sudan and Ethiopia, joining more than 100,000 already in the refugee camps.¹⁶

While many refugees continue to flee due to aerial bombing, food shortages, and disease, a large number of those leaving their homes in early 2013 were seeking to escape the crossfire. Since early this year, ground attacks and frequent engagements between SPLM-N and SAF forces have further complicated matters for people living in the areas along the frontlines (see attached map), making daily activities dangerous. For example, collecting water is difficult since wells are centrally located in towns that have come under attack. In addition, a number of refugees have reported being directly targeted by SAF ground forces as they fled toward South Sudan.¹⁷ One humanitarian medical worker in Bunj, South Sudan, in reference to the conditions of new refugees, said, “these are some of the most serious injuries we have seen since the major fighting in 2011. The fighting must have been fierce to cause some of the kinds of traumas we are seeing.”¹⁸



Recently, SAF ground forces, with air support, have increased ground attacks in the territory held by the SPLM-N. Along the Deim Mansur road to Kurmuk, in the areas of Mufu and Surkum, there has been intense fighting. Helicopter gunships and ground-attack aircraft have been brought into the area to reinforce increased numbers of SAF ground forces, reportedly including substantial numbers of government-aligned Popular Defence Forces militias, or PDF.¹⁹

The use of jet fighters indicates an intensification of the government's military effort. Ahmed, a witness to the bombing of the town of Guffa described the jets as "sounding like thunderous sounds of rain, you cannot see or hear it before it passes over you and is already attacking."²⁰ Mohammed, a local journalist reporting on the fighting, told the Enough Project that fighting had occurred on March 7 when "the SPLA-N clashed with SAF in Surkum." He said that the SPLM-N took control of the town for several hours, later ceding it to the SAF after heavy fighting.²¹

In mid-January, Mufu village— directly to the south of Surkum and the west of Kurmuk—was razed to the ground by Sudanese government forces. During a visit to the remains of the village in February, we saw that all 26 huts had been burned. Not long after the visit, ground fighting intensified in the area of Mufu, with SPLN-N and SAF exchanging control of the area. Surkum was burned on several occasions by government forces, most recently before fighting that occurred in March.²² The inhabitants of Surkum and Mufu are now hiding in the forest and hills to the south. Yasir Arman and SPLM-N commanders on the ground have said that aerial bombardment in the area was "directly targeting large groups of civilians" taking refuge to the south of Mufu.²³

While surveying the destruction of Mufu, we were caught in a bombing run and quickly left the area, as our guides anticipated a ground assault would follow the aerial bombardment. Although the SAF did not attack that day, they did so days later. In mid-February, the SAF launched an offensive down the road from Kurmuk to Mufu.²⁴ Gathering statements of Mufu's former inhabitants to confirm these stories was difficult because most eyewitnesses had scattered. It took some time to find anyone involved in the January exodus from the Mufu area. The few who remained were taking cover in dispersed locations, hiding from Sudanese ground forces and the bombers that regularly circled overhead.

According to a young woman from Mufu describing why she and her family had fled, "We ran from the government soldiers. They were burning our homes but we escaped."²⁵



Aerial bombing has destroyed the homes of many and made areas completely uninhabitable.

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Tarafy, another displaced civilian, explained that the SAF had chased everyone from the village; as they fled, they saw the army torching the buildings. Tarafy said that he believed they burned the buildings to prevent the villagers from returning and the SPLM-N from using the village as a base of operations.²⁶ Both villagers indicated that there was no reason for them to return since their homes, or tukuls, and belongings were destroyed, and wells could no longer provide drinking water. Those interviewed indicated that they have continued to hide in the forest, alongside those that are sick and injured. “We are fearing the fighting will get worse here,” Tarafy said, since he was sure the government would “want to take the territory back from the SPLM-N.” Tarafy added, “We also have to avoid being in large groups with other displaced [people] and even being close to the army [SPLM-N] because these are targets for the Antonovs [cargo planes used by the SAF for aerial bombardment].”²⁷

Government repression and the targeting of IDPs and refugees

Although there is sparse information coming from inside SAF-controlled areas, there are reports that large numbers of people are fleeing harassment by Sudanese security services.²⁸ In the major population centers, it appears that security forces are imposing control through threats, detention, and other forms of extortion.²⁹ The government of Sudan is in control of the majority of Bau County, all of Ed Damazen County, Al Tadamon County, and El Roseires County. They also control some of Kurmuk County, including the town of Kurmuk. In places where the populace has supported the SPLM-N, people have been targeted for abuse by the security services.

The people of Ingessana Hills, the home of SRF and SPLM-N leader Malik Agar, have been particularly subjected to attacks by the SAF. Reports from those fleeing the area indicate that helicopter gunships have been used to strafe groups of people gathering or moving along the roads.³⁰ In late 2012 new arrivals in South Sudan’s refugee camps reported that some 7,000 to 15,000 people from Ingessana Hills were on the move trying to reach the relative safety of southern Blue Nile and the refugee camps in South Sudan.³¹

It is apparent that the number of refugees arriving in late 2012 and early 2013 was fewer than expected based on reports of attacks on the Ingessana Hills.³² People arriving in refugee camps in South Sudan from the Ingessana Hills have said that the majority of their community had been trying to flee for months and were outflanked and trapped by government security forces³³ (see video for interview with Ingessana refugees). Similarly, in Bau County there are reportedly significant numbers of people who have made efforts to leave government-controlled areas but have not been able to find their way to the refugee camps in South Sudan.³⁴

The humanitarian toll

The sheer size of the refugee camps in South Sudan is striking. For the people of Maban County in South Sudan's Upper Nile state, a small locality of approximately 10,000 to 15,000 residents before the camps were established in 2011, it has not been easy to deal with the arrival of nearly 150,000 refugees from Blue Nile.³⁵

The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, and international humanitarian organizations are providing most of the medical and health services to refugees. The groups running hospitals in the area are Médecins Sans Frontières and Samaritan's Purse, in conjunction with UNHCR.³⁶ Reports indicate that the number of refugees in Ethiopian refugee camps is much smaller, however, they face similar challenges in accessing medical treatment. The major issues reported at the camps in South Sudan were a continuation of a Hepatitis E outbreak, growing numbers of cholera cases, high malaria rates, malnutrition, and various other water-borne diseases.³⁷

In addition to poor health conditions, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other organizations have expressed growing concern about security for refugees.³⁸ According to these groups, women and children are particularly vulnerable to assault and abuse. The South Sudan military and National Security Service are operating in the area, but they are focused on border defense rather than security within the camps. Because of the light South Sudanese security presence, protecting substantial numbers of those in the camps is a difficult task. The government of South Sudan has given the national police responsibility for security within the camp, but a police officer working in the camps told the Enough Project that "We need the army here in Bunj to support us because the refugee camps are too big."³⁹



Civilians flee their homes to seek shelter from violence.

VIKTOR PRESENTI

Conclusion

In recent months, the already difficult situation in the Blue Nile state has worsened. A year of indiscriminate aerial bombardment by the SAF has continued to cause increased displacement, and the escalation in ground combat has made living there nearly impossible. Increasing numbers of refugees are arriving at camps in South Sudan and Ethiopia due to fears of getting caught in the crossfire between the SAF and the SPLM-N, or of being targeted by Sudanese security forces for living in communities that had once shown support for the rebels.

The conditions in the camps in South Sudan are dire. While the situation is worsening, UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations are providing substantial assistance, though their capacity is stretched by significant health and security concerns in the areas. If the plight of refugees and IDPs is to be addressed, further attention and consideration must be paid to the multifaceted nature of this conflict.

Endnotes

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- 8 Human Rights Watch, "Sudan: Bombardment of Civilians in Blue Nile and South Kordofan."
- 9 Peter Orr and Takawira Kapikinyu, "South Sudan: Displacement Plagues World's Newest Nation," *Refugees International*, December 14, 2011, available at <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/policy/field-report/south-sudan-displacement-plagues-worlds-newest-nation>.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Details obtained in reports collected by the South Kordofan and Blue Nile Coordination Unit. Many of the bombings in Kurmuk County were confirmed by field visits to the locations. Exact dates could not on all occasions be confirmed, however, interviews with locals in each area indicated that attacks had occurred. This often included being taken to photograph and see craters caused by the bombings.
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- 13 Observation while on a field visit in February 2013. Key information on this matter was taken from an interview with Sila Musa, the former county commissioner for Kurmuk County, while visiting Blue Nile. We accompanied him on visits to agricultural areas to survey the situation and look for new areas to plant fields away from the current areas typically targeted by aerial bombardment.
- 14 SPLM-North, "Sudan Government Attacks the Displaced Camps in Blue Nile, 8,000 on the Run," Press release, February 17, 2013 via email.
- 15 Interview with author, name withheld for security reasons.
- 16 Reports provided by South Kordofan and Blue Nile Coordinating Unit, "Update on Humanitarian Needs in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Sudan" (2013), available at <http://www.interaction.org/sites/default/files/Update%20on%20humanitarian%20needs%20in%20South%20Kordofan%20and%20Blue%20Nile%20States%20-%20June%205%202013.pdf>. Confirmation of this number was attempted by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations operating in the area. Other than confirmation that there has been a "significant increase in arrivals at the camps in Maban," further specifics could not be attained. Also, this number was confirmed in an interview with a UNHCR relief worker in Bunj, Maban County, South Sudan on March 18, 2013. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from MSF and NPA, with similar response, both conducted in Juba, South Sudan in February 2013. A representative of the Government of South Sudan's Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs in a confidential interview, however, confirmed the numbers. Deputy director, Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, interview with author, Juba, South Sudan, February 2013.
- 17 Interview with author, name withheld for security reasons.
- 18 Nurse working at hospital in Doro camp name withheld for security reasons, interview with author, Maban County, South Sudan, February 2013.
- 19 The new forces are largely from SAF Infantry Battalion 931 based at Merowe. See Pan-African News Wire, "Sudanese Military Dispatches More Troops to Blue Nile State," March 2, 2013, available at <http://panafricannews.blogspot.ca/2013/03/sudanese-military-dispatches-more.html>. Antonov makeshift bombers also continue to operate, flying from as far away as El Obeid airfield. Helicopters and jet fighters—including Mig29s, Nanchang Q-5s, and Sukoi Su-25s—are now operating out of Daminzen and Kurmuk, with reports also indicating that they are flying from, or at least refuelling at airfields in Kenena and Singa. They have been sighted in the March 5 attack on the Guffa area on the border between Blue Nile state, Sudan, and Upper Nile state, South Sudan. The attack consisted largely of strikes inside South Sudan territory, with SAF claiming that the government of South Sudan supports the SPLA-N inside Blue Nile and that Guffa is a major base of operations for that support. Reported widely in the press, initial reports came from local civil administrators, the SPLA spokesperson, and the governor of Upper Nile state, South Sudan. An UNMISS monitoring patrol to the area confirmed there had been an attack on the area, however, did not report it widely. UNMISS analyst, interview with author, Juba, South Sudan, March 10, 2013. See, Misuk Moses Mule, "SPLA Accuses Sudan Of Bombing Upper Nile State Territory," *Gurtong*, March 6, 2013, available at <http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/9899/SPLA-Accuses-Sudan-Of-Bombing-Upper-Nile-State-Territory.aspx>.
- 20 Personal communication from Mohammed Gindi, journalist, Bunj, South Sudan, March 9, 2013.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Yasir Arman, "Sudan Government Attack the Displaced Camps in Blue Nile, 8,000 on the Run," SPLM-North Press Statement, February, 17, 2013.
- 24 AFP, "Sudan rebels say fighting in strategic Blue Nile town," *Daily Nation*, February 25, 2013, available at <http://www.nation.co.ke/News/africa/Sudan-rebels-/1066/1703776/-/dt9ur5z/-/index.html>; Amnesty International, "We Had No Time To Bury Them: War Crimes in Sudan's Blue Nile State" (2013), available at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AFR54/011/2013/en/96b0c8a7-55aa-4f04-8ab7-cf85ce3e4c8f/af8540112013en.pdf>.
- 25 Interview with author, name withheld for security reasons, February 2013.
- 26 Interview with author, name withheld for security reasons, February 2013.
- 27 Tarafy, interview with author, southern Blue Nile, February 2013.
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- 29 Matthew LeRiche, "Terror and Crisis in Sudan's Blue Nile State," *The Huffington Post*, January 15, 2013, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/matthew-leriche/sudan-blue-nile-terror_b_2480153.html; Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2013: Sudan" (2013), available at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2013/country-chapters/south-sudan>.
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- 34 Refugee from Bau, interview with author, Doro Camp, South Sudan, February 2013.
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- 38 Green, "Humanitarian Crisis Worsens as Fighting Escalates in Sudan."
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