



**“We just want a rest from war.”  
Civilian perspectives on the conflict in Sudan’s  
Southern Kordofan State**



**April 2015**

**International Refugee Rights Initiative  
National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation**

# **"We just want a rest from war."<sup>1</sup>**

## **Civilian perspectives on the conflict in Sudan's Southern Kordofan State**

**"I am sending my voice loudly to the international community and the Security Council to stop this government from killing its own civilians and to protect them. Your silence is a shame to humanity."**

Interview with bombing victim, Delami County, Southern Kordofan,  
March 2015

### **Background to the Paper**

This paper is a collaborative effort between the International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) and the National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation (NHRMO). Field research was carried out by an anonymous researcher and the staff of NHRMO. Dr. Lucy Hovil, Senior Researcher at IRRI, was the primary drafter of the report, with input and support from Olivia Bueno, Andie Lambe and Yotam Gidron of IRRI. The team would like to express their gratitude to all those who participated in the study.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

## **About the International Refugee Rights Initiative**

The International Refugee Rights Initiative (IRRI) enhances the rights of those excluded from state protection as a result of forced displacement, conflict, discriminatory violence and statelessness. IRRI believes that strengthening the rights, capacities and democratic participation of these communities—refugees, the forcibly displaced, the conflict-affected, the stateless and those suffering violent discrimination on the basis of their political status—is essential to building just, peaceful and flourishing states and communities.

IRRI redresses the imbalances in power that fuel the violent exclusion of vulnerable populations from protection through:

- tackling the root causes of exile, statelessness, discriminatory violence, and conflict through which state protection is lost;
- enhancing the agency and protection of those who are forcibly displaced or threatened with displacement; and
- promoting the re-building of just and inclusive communities in which genuine citizenship is forged and displacement and exile comes to an end.

IRRI grounds its advocacy in regional and international human rights instruments and strives to make these guarantees effective at the local level.

## **About the National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation**

The National Human Rights Monitors Organisation (NHRMO) was founded in March 2012, with the primary objective of promoting human rights in Sudan. Working with the support of IRRI, NHRMO has been monitoring human rights abuses committed against civilians in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States.

## Summary

The ongoing conflict in Sudan’s Southern Kordofan (SK) and Blue Nile (BN) states, while massively underreported, has had devastating consequences. Widespread aerial bombardment of rebel held civilian areas by the government of Sudan (GoS) are a hallmark of the conflict, and more than 3,000 bombs – on average three a day – have fallen since April 2012.<sup>2</sup> Monitoring on the ground has shown that bombings coincide disproportionately with planting and harvesting cycles, as well as market days, suggesting a deliberate plan to decimate the local economy. Despite its disruption of agricultural production and access to markets, the GoS refuses to allow humanitarian access to these areas, citing fears that such aid would be used to support rebel fighters. With increasing numbers being displaced from their homes, and humanitarian access all but cut off, the ability to survive grows more precarious by the day. As a result, 1.7 million people – roughly half of the population of the two states – have been displaced, and food insecurity has reached crisis levels for many of those who remain.<sup>3</sup> Living with the daily threat of aerial bombardment, of GoS land forces breaking through the rebel Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement–North (SPLM-N)<sup>4</sup> frontline, and a chronic lack of food and medicine, the resilience of this population is being severely depleted. Meanwhile the international community remains, for the most part, silent.

This report highlights the voices of those civilians living in the midst of this conflict. Based on 52 qualitative interviews in three counties in the rebel held areas of SK, and building on the findings of a trusted team of human rights monitors who have been working to monitor the impact of the conflict on civilians since the current round of conflict started in June 2011,<sup>5</sup> the report highlights both the devastating impact of the conflict on every aspect of people’s lives, as well as the resilience and resistance of the civilian population who are living through it.



Bombings of Adouna village, Delami County, 6 November 2014.

In the case of the latter, local awareness raising campaigns have helped to minimise civilian casualties and allowed many people to remain in SK despite the substantial impact of the conflict. For instance, local organisations and activists have taken it upon themselves to educate the population about the means of surviving Antonov<sup>6</sup> attacks, in particular by digging foxholes and learning when and where to take cover. Furthermore, the findings show that many people have

<sup>2</sup> Sudan Consortium, “Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan’s Two Areas and Darfur,” March 2015. Available at: [http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Humanitarian%20Briefing%20-%2013%20March%202015%20-%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Humanitarian%20Briefing%20-%2013%20March%202015%20-%20FINAL.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The Sudan People’s Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) is the armed wing of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Where referring specifically to the military or civilian wing, the text specifies. Where referring to the movement as a whole (both the armed and political section), the paper uses SPLM-N. When used in a direct quote we have used the wording of the interviewee.

<sup>5</sup> The findings of this monitoring are regularly published by the Sudan Consortium, and are available at: [http://sudanconsortium.org/Darfur\\_Consortium\\_actions/reports.html](http://sudanconsortium.org/Darfur_Consortium_actions/reports.html)

<sup>6</sup> Antonovs are cargo aircraft designed in the Soviet Union in the 1980s that lack any bombing guidance systems. Bombs are simply rolled out of the cargo hold and, as a result, any bombing carried out with them is inherently indiscriminate.

remained in SK not only because the alternatives are bleak (most of those who have been displaced have fled to South Sudan, itself in civil conflict), but because they see their ongoing presence as a form of resistance to a state they believe is trying to destroy them. Therefore, many aspects of day-to-day life continue in rebel held areas of SK, as evidenced by children going to school and markets functioning (albeit under the daily threat of bombing and with chronic shortages), and a wedding celebration that took place during the field research. In addition, there is a strong level of engagement around a number of inter- and intra-communal tensions that exist, showing a determination to resolve them despite the broader conflict.

At a political level, the SPLM-N has recently set up a civilian structure in conjunction with the military structures that already exist, which the findings demonstrate is broadly accepted by the civilian population. They are putting their faith in mechanisms and structures which, they hope, will create an alternative, inclusive form of governance – in contrast to those of the Sudanese state, which they see as highly exclusionary. However, the research shows that there are significant challenges to creating a functioning system of governance in the rebel held areas. While some inter-community tensions are being dealt with, other tensions, many of which pre-date the conflict, have been exacerbated by the pressure that the conflict puts on communities. Although civilians conveyed significant appreciation for the SPLM-N’s efforts in this regard, concerns were expressed about the latter’s lack of training and experience in civil administration and the need to address communal tensions arising out of the dwindling resources available to the population.

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**“What government in the world uses planes to bomb civilians and the denial of food to force people from their land?”**

Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

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Levels of resilience, however, are also being worn away by the continuing onslaught. Those interviewed expressed frustration that they are struggling to have their voices heard – or rather, heeded. Since the conflict began, courageous local organisations and citizen journalists have been reporting on the intolerable circumstances in which civilians live in SK. Yet these organisations remain limited in their external reach and some in the international community have questioned the credibility of NGO information. While they are free to question information from NGOs, this should spur them to mandate an official investigation by a body that they trust, not simply ignore these allegations. Meanwhile, the government of Sudan continues to block independent media and international organisations from the field in a deliberate effort to cover up the consequences of the violence. As a result, there is both insufficient awareness at the international level about what is taking place and a failure to mobilise around what information is available.

One of the strongest messages that came through the research was that those living in SK do not want pity: they want solidarity. They want the international community to acknowledge what is taking place and work with them to end the conflict. Their resilience is not being matched by support from the international community, which appears caught between denial and helplessness. The consequent lack of decisive action is proving disastrous, and the disconnect between the standards of international humanitarian and human rights law and their lack of enforcement could not be more stark.

## Recommendations

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### To the government of Sudan

It is widely acknowledged that the GoS has been, and continues to be, responsible for the overwhelming majority of abuses being committed against the civilian population in the rebel held areas of SK, including the indiscriminate, and also deliberate, bombing of civilian targets, the forced displacement of the civilian population, arbitrary detention, torture, extra-judicial killings and sexual and gender-based violence. These acts violate numerous international commitments on the part of the Sudanese government.

The government of Sudan, therefore, should:

- Adhere to its international obligations under, for example, the Geneva Conventions, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, including Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and immediately cease all indiscriminate or targeted bombings of civilian infrastructure.
- Ensure immediate, independent humanitarian access to both rebel and government held areas.
- Commit to achieving peace in Southern Kordofan and other conflict ridden regions (including Blue Nile and Darfur). In order to do this, the government must reach out to historically marginalised groups and negotiate with them in good faith. One step in this regard would be to re-open negotiations with the SPLM-N without undue restrictions on the scope of the discussions.
- Build national identity in such a way as to ensure that all groups, including those that have traditionally been marginalised, are unequivocally included within the Sudanese polity.
- Recognise the need to take a comprehensive national approach to resolving Sudan’s governance crisis and related conflicts. A robust and truly inclusive national dialogue process that can address the conflicts in SK, BN and Darfur, as well as underlying governance concerns, would be an important part of this.

### To the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North

Although the majority of violations reported in the context of the conflict have been attributed to the government of Sudan, the movement also bears some responsibility for the ongoing conflict and for resolving it.

The SPLM-N, therefore, should:

- Ensure it respects international human rights and humanitarian law. There have been allegations that civilians have “been caught in the cross-fire as the rebel Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Movement – North (SPLM-N) has prevented civilians from moving out of Kadugli area. Scores of civilians have been trapped in the western region of the Nuba Mountains.”<sup>7</sup> In addition, the SPLM-N was accused of a number of violations against civilians in the context of attacks on Habila and Kalogi in March 2015.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, “Sudan Human Rights Monitor, December 2014 – January 2015,” April 2015. Available at: <http://www.acjps.org/sudan-human-rights-monitor-issue-27/>

<sup>8</sup> Sudan Consortium, “Human Rights Update: February – March 2015,” April 2015. Available at: [http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Consortium%20SK-BN%20Update%20March%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Consortium%20SK-BN%20Update%20March%20FINAL.pdf)

- Continue its engagement with the government of Sudan in an effort to ensure a swift, political solution to the conflict.
- Ensure that both the SPLA-N and their partners in the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF)<sup>9</sup> do not conduct military activity in civilian areas in order to avoid endangering civilians further. In addition, the group must avoid any action that could encourage the targeting of civilians, for example, by preventing civilians from fleeing.
- Ensure that the local civilian authority operates independently of the military.
- Invest in training and capacity building of individuals in positions of local authority, whether within the SPLM-N or not, in order to increase governance capacity.
- Encourage independent voices, which are critical to long term stability.

**To the international community, including the African Union (AU), United Nations (UN), International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and League of Arab States (LAS)**

An end to aerial bombardment and a comprehensive solution to the governance crisis in Sudan is unlikely without considerable domestic and international pressure. As a result, many civilians expressed intense frustration, or even anger, at the lack of adequate recognition of their circumstances.

The international community, therefore, should:

- Refrain from recognising the legitimacy of Sudan’s 13 April election results. There is ample evidence that the elections do not meet the standards laid out in the AU Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, not least due to the exclusion of the entire population of the rebel held areas from the process.<sup>10</sup> Recognition of the election results will undermine the progress that has been made to date in promoting national dialogue and will re-entrench positions and encourage participants to look to armed struggle as the only way of making change.
- Mandate an international commission of inquiry, under the auspices of the UN, the AU or the ICGLR, to investigate allegations that international crimes (war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide) and other human rights abuses that may have been committed by either side in the conflict in SK and BN.
- Condemn unequivocally all acts of violence committed against civilians in violation of international humanitarian law and human rights law, but especially the targeting of hospitals and other protected places.
- Remind the government of Sudan of its responsibility to protect all populations in its territory from war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing.
- Act on its responsibility to protect all populations within Sudan from war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and ethnic cleansing in the event that the government of Sudan fails to do so.
- Take a consistent line on the consequences of Sudan’s flagrant violation of international laws and norms. Although a number of punitive actions have been taken, such as the imposition of sanctions and the referral of the situation in Darfur to the International Criminal Court, governments are continuing to send mixed messages. One example of this is the US government’s welcoming of Presidential Assistant Ibrahim Ghandour to the US in February 2015.

<sup>9</sup> The umbrella group of SPLA-N and Darfur rebel groups.

<sup>10</sup> Radio Tamazuj, “Sudan electoral body to leave out 7 Nuba Mountain constituencies,” 8 April 2015. Available at: <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/sudan-electoral-body-leave-out-7-nuba-mountain-constituencies>

- Expand the arms embargo established under UN Resolution 1591 (2005) to prohibit the sale and export of arms and ammunition to the government of Sudan entirely – or, at a minimum, ensure that the ban, which currently covers only Darfur, is expanded to cover SK and BN.
- The Security Council should pass a new resolution, empowering the sanctions committee set up under UN Resolution 1591 to apply travel bans and asset freezes to individuals whose actions threaten civilians throughout Sudan, not only in the context of Darfur. In the meantime, the committee could expand the list of people on the travel ban and asset freeze lists under Resolution 1591, many of whom have been implicated in violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in both Darfur and Southern Kordofan.
- Insist on immediate, robust and independent humanitarian access to all areas of SK and BN, including both rebel and government held areas.
- Recognise the need for a comprehensive national approach to Sudan's crises and only support a forum for negotiations that recognises this necessity.
- Only support a truly comprehensive national dialogue process that includes participation of *all* marginalised peoples of Sudan.
- Consider supporting civil society and political groups from these marginalised areas to be better able to articulate and argue in favour of their political positions.



## Background

Southern Kordofan State is located in the southern part of Sudan, with South Sudan to its south, and Sudan’s North Kordofan, White Nile and South Darfur States to the north, east, and west respectively. The Nuba Mountains, occupying more than one third of the state’s 120,000 square kilometres, are located at its centre. The rest of the state is fertile, arable land. With the oil-rich region of Heglig at its south and the disputed Abyei region at its south west, SK arguably became Sudan’s most strategic borderland after its separation from South Sudan in 2011.<sup>11</sup>



Southern Kordofan State, Sudan.

The state is populated by multiple different identity groups, generally described as Arab and African. The African groups, often called the “Nuba”, are composed of more than 80 communities. These communities do not necessarily share the same faith or language, and Sudanese Arabic is the *lingua franca*. Indeed, the construction of a “Nuba people” has been very much defined by outsiders,<sup>12</sup> and has been reinforced at a local level as a result of a common experience of repression and discrimination by Khartoum. The Arab groups of Misseriya and Hawazma form the other major identity group in SK and are generally pastoralists, relying on mobility for their livelihoods. None of these groups are homogenous, and labels must be treated with caution. In addition, all groups in the region irrespective of “race”, have long been marginalised and neglected by the central government and have strong grievances against it.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the GoS has for years played on internal communal conflicts within SK over access to land, water and cattle, to create or inflame antagonisms between African and Arabic groupings.

One of the most contested areas within SK is the Nuba Mountains. Multiple grievances led many Nuba to join the SPLA during the war between the central government and the south of Sudan.<sup>14</sup> Located in the centre of what was then Sudan (prior to South Sudan’s independence), SK and its environs became some of the worst affected areas during the conflict. The conflict was not only excessively violent, but also government actions showed an intention to depopulate the area of civilians.<sup>15</sup> Although casualty numbers vary, a source in the GoS estimated that 60,000-70,000 were killed in only seven months between 1992 and 1993.<sup>16</sup> Many have emphasised, therefore, the extent to which this earlier round of conflict was genocidal in its intent.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG) “Sudan’s spreading conflict,” 2013, p.3. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/198-sudans-spreading-conflict-i-war-in-south-kordofan.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> African Rights, “Facing Genocide: The Nuba of Sudan,” 1995. Available at: <http://www.justiceafrica.org/publishin/online-books/facing-genocide-the-nuba-of-sudan/>

<sup>13</sup> IKV Pax Christi, “Sudan’s ‘New South’: The War in Southern Kordofan and the Prospects for Peace.” CPA Alert no. 4, October 2011, p. 8. Available at: <http://www.paxchristi.net/sites/default/files/documents/2011-0542-en-af-CT.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Sudan Human Rights Security Baseline Assessment (HRSBA), “Conflict in South Kordofan/Nuba Mountains,” 2011. Available at: <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/abyei/HSBA-Conflict-in-SK.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Alex de Waal, “Averting Genocide in the Nuba Mountains, Sudan,” 22 December 2006, [http://howgenocidesend.ssrc.org/de\\_Waal2/](http://howgenocidesend.ssrc.org/de_Waal2/)

<sup>16</sup> Sudan Consortium, “Background briefing on allegations of international crimes in, and related to, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states in Sudan.” Prepared for the ICGLR Committee for the Prevention and the Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, War Crimes, and Crimes Against Humanity and All Forms of Discrimination. October 2013. On file with the author.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, De Waal, 2006; and IKV Pax Christi.

In 2002, a ceasefire for the Nuba Mountains was signed between the government and the SPLM, which was later incorporated into the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Within the CPA, SK (along with BN and Abyei, together referred to as the “three areas”), was given special status with the possibility of limited autonomy: their future governance was supposed to be decided by a popular consultation to be held at a local level. However, as the interim period neared its close, frustration grew around the lack of implementation of the core provisions of the CPA.

Following the vote for secession of South Sudan, tensions in SK, which was to remain part of (north) Sudan, escalated.<sup>18</sup> Deep-rooted problems remained unaddressed and international actors, desperate to ensure South Sudan’s secession was peaceful, were slow to respond to the signs of impending conflict in both SK and neighbouring BN. Many in SK and BN began to feel marginalised not only by the government, but also by the SPLM, which they felt failed to prioritise their concerns. This encouraged a split between the SPLM-North and the main SPLM.

Tensions in SK built, particularly in May 2011 as a result of a contested state election. The outcome was critical as the elected state governor was to lead the popular consultations as outlined in the CPA. Despite widespread support for the SPLM-N – including among the non-Nuba populations such as the Misseriya in the west who were upset by the fact that their state had been incorporated into SK – the incumbent governor, Ahmed Haroun, was declared the winner by a margin of less than 1% of the total vote. Haroun not only represented the ruling National Congress Party (NCP), but is also accused by the International Criminal Court of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur.<sup>19</sup> The Carter Center, somewhat notoriously, declared the outcome flawed but “peaceful and credible,”<sup>20</sup> although off the record, diplomats questioned the legitimacy of the poll.<sup>21</sup>

The SPLM-N refused to accept the election results, and tensions between the NCP and SPLM-N escalated, particularly over security arrangements in the state. It is reported that on 23 May 2011, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) wrote to the SPLM in Juba, demanding that the SPLM members of the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs) in SK and BN (which had been created under the CPA and consisted of soldiers from both SPLM-N and the GoS) withdraw to what would soon be South Sudan by 1 June 2011, failing which they would be considered legitimate enemy targets. The SPLM leadership rejected the ultimatum, noting that the said JIU forces comprised local Sudanese, not South Sudanese, and that it thus had no authority over them. They also argued that the CPA allowed six months to withdraw after the completion of the popular consultations, which had not yet occurred.

Notwithstanding these disputes and tensions, the government tried to disarm SPLM-N elements of the JIUs.<sup>22</sup> As a result, fighting broke out on 5 June 2011. The SPLM-N declared its intention to overthrow the government in Khartoum, and the GoS responded with characteristic ferocity through the aerial bombardment of civilians, indiscriminate shelling, summary executions and other atrocities.<sup>23</sup> The conflict then spread to neighbouring Blue Nile State on 1 September 2011.

<sup>18</sup> As a result, many Nuba felt that they were abandoned by the SPLM, which also accepted the merging of Arab-dominated West Kordofan into South Kordofan. See ICG 2013, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> HRSBA 2011.

<sup>20</sup> See Aly Verjee, “Disputed Votes, Deficient Observation: The 2011 Election in South Kordofan, Sudan,” Rift Valley Institute, August 2011, available at: [www.riftvalley.net](http://www.riftvalley.net)

<sup>21</sup> HRSBA, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Johan Brosché, “The Crises Continue: Sudan’s Remaining Conflicts,” ISPI Working Paper 41, October 2011, available at: [http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/WP41\\_2011.pdf](http://www.ispionline.it/it/documents/WP41_2011.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, a report of the United National Mission to Sudan (UNMIS) Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Preliminary report on violations of international human rights and humanitarian law in Southern Kordofan from 5 to 30 June 2011,” August 2011, available at: [http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/13thSouth\\_Kordofan\\_report.doc](http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/13thSouth_Kordofan_report.doc); and, the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, “Update on Human Rights Violations in Blue Nile and South Kordofan”, January 2012, available at <http://www.acjps.org/update-on-human-rights-violations-in-blue-nile-and-south-kordofan/>

Since June 2011, aerial bombardments (mostly by Antonov cargo planes using barrel bombs) and artillery shelling by the SAF – with recent ground reinforcements from the notorious Rapid Support Forces (a reinvention of the infamous janjaweed militias) – have persisted, although at varying levels of intensity. This has had a devastating effect on the civilian population in the area: a common tactic used by the government forces has been to deliberately target communities that support the SPLM-N or are affiliated with it.<sup>24</sup> These attacks by the GoS have not only caused physical harm in the form of fatalities or injuries, but have also spread fear that has led hundreds of thousands to flee their homes – some sheltering in caves in the mountains, some crossing the border to refugee camps in South Sudan’s Unity State (itself a conflict zone), and others moving elsewhere within SK.<sup>25</sup> Despite the immense risk, some have managed to stay in their homes, digging foxholes to hide in when the Antonovs fly overhead. Despite these efforts, however, inevitably many attacks have led to horrific consequences.

As a result of the fear and destruction caused by bombing and shelling, in addition to the fact that large areas remain covered in landmines left over from the previous round of conflict, communities in SK are often unable to work their lands, and food insecurity has reached crisis levels in large areas of the state.<sup>26</sup> In addition, health services, as well as education services, are limited and often not



Village of Tunguli, 8 November 2014.

available. Most recently, after attacks on the Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital in Frandalla, MSF was forced to suspend its health services.<sup>27</sup> The humanitarian crisis in the area has been exacerbated by the GoS denial of access by humanitarian agencies to SPLM-N held areas.<sup>28</sup>

In April 2014, the government of Sudan launched its “Decisive Summer Operation” that was meant “to the end rebellion in South Kordofan, Darfur and Blue Nile.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, the following months (April – June) saw an intensification of the indiscriminate aerial bombardments and shelling against civilians and civilian objects.<sup>30</sup>

This intensification of attacks against civilians

during the planting season suggests that the GoS was intentionally attempting to increase the already severe food insecurity in the region. Despite a short respite during the rainy season in 2014 (July – October), fighting and targeting of civilian areas by the GoS increased again in the run up to

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Furthermore, the Sudan Consortium is carrying out ongoing documentation of the situation, available at:

<http://www.SudanConsortium.org>

<sup>24</sup> See Sudan Consortium reports available at: [http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports.html](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports.html)

<sup>25</sup> As at 18 January 2015, there were 86,649 Sudanese refugees in South Sudan’s Unity state, most of whom (69,550) were located in Yida refugee camp with Adjoung Thok refugee camp hosting the additional 17,099. Both camps are located just across the border from South Kordofan. See UNHCR South Sudan Situation Information Sharing Portal, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/region.php?id=26&country=251> (accessed 21 January 2015)

<sup>26</sup> See FEWSNet, “Sudan Food Security Outlook Update,” December 2014, available at:

[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sudan%20FSO%20July\\_Decembr%202014.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Sudan%20FSO%20July_Decembr%202014.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/sudan-msf-hospital-bombed-south-kordofan>

<sup>28</sup> See Eric Reeves, “Aerial Attacks on Civilian Agriculture and Food Supplies: ‘Starving’ the Nuba,” September 27, 2014, available at <http://sudanreeves.org/2014/09/27/aerial-attacks-on-civilian-agriculture-and-food-supplies-starving-the-nuba-part-two-of-looking-directly-into-the-heart-of-darkness-27-september-2014/>

<sup>29</sup> Sudan Vision, “Defence Minister declares Start of Decisive Summer Operation to End Rebellion,” 14 April 2014, available at <http://news.sudanvisiondaily.com/details.html?rsnpid=234529>

<sup>30</sup> See Sudan Consortium monthly reports available at:

[http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports.html](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports.html)

peace talks between the Sudanese government and the SPLM-N in Addis Ababa in November 2014.<sup>31</sup> This has continued in the run up to the planned elections in April 2015.

It is important to note that although aspects of the conflict in SK are unique, both the conflict and its eventual resolution need to be viewed within a wider national context. What is taking place in SK is part of a broader GoS strategy to use violence and displacement as a mechanism of control. Similar tactics were used during the war that led to South Sudan’s independence, in Darfur and in neighbouring Blue Nile. Repeatedly, and in violation of fundamental principles of international humanitarian law, the GoS has shown a willingness to force the mass displacement of civilian populations in order to alter the political and ethnic fabric of the country – and to strengthen those who are seen as supportive of the regime.

In recognition of the inter-connections between the different sites of conflict in Sudan, armed and unarmed opposition groups have come together to push for a national solution to marginalisation, poor governance and conflict in the country.

The peace talks in Addis Ababa that started in November 2014, collapsed the following month on this issue. GoS insisted that discussion be limited to the “two areas” of SK and BN while the SPLM-N argued that broader national issues needed to be included. Despite recognition by the AU Peace and Security Council in Resolution 456<sup>32</sup> of the need to take a comprehensive approach to peace in Sudan, and in particular the need for an integrated approach to the conflicts in SK, BN and Darfur, the GoS adamantly opposed this approach. When the talks collapsed, fighting in SK intensified even further. January 2015 saw the highest number of civilian injuries<sup>33</sup> since fighting began in June 2011, and the same month heavy fighting was reported near key towns in SK. However, despite the increased violence, battle lines have not changed significantly during the last months.

A comprehensive approach is the only way forward for Sudan, and momentum for this approach is growing. In December 2014, groups including the National Umma Party (NUP), the National Consensus Forces (NCF), and the armed opposition alliance of the SRF – of which the SPLM-N is a part – signed the Sudan Call declaration,<sup>34</sup> laying out a platform of shared objectives for political change. Most recently, in late February 2015, the German Foreign Ministry hosted a number of Sudanese civilian and armed opposition groups which, combined, represent the opposition alliance. In addition, representatives of a group of civil society actors were part of the meeting.<sup>35</sup> The GoS response was to arrest three of the key actors in the Sudan Call agreement including prominent 76 year old lawyer Amin Mekki Medani, accusing him of “waging war on the state” and “undermining the constitutional system”.<sup>36</sup> Although subsequently they have been released, the government’s actions are symptomatic of a broader response to any form of criticism or opposition to the status quo.

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<sup>31</sup> Nuba Reports, “Bombings Exceed 2000 as Peace Talks Begin,” 14 November 2014, available at: <http://nubareports.org/bombings-exceed-2000-as-peace-talks-begin/>

<sup>32</sup> AU Peace and Security Council Resolution 456, available at <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-456th-meeting-of-the-peace-and-security-council>

<sup>33</sup> Sudan Consortium, “Human Rights Update: December 2014 and January 2015,” available at: [http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Consortium%20SK-BN%20Update%20January%202015%20FINAL.pdf](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports/2015/Sudan%20Consortium%20SK-BN%20Update%20January%202015%20FINAL.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> “Sudan Call: A Political Declaration on the Establishment of a State of Citizenship and Democracy,” 3 December 2014, available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article53263>

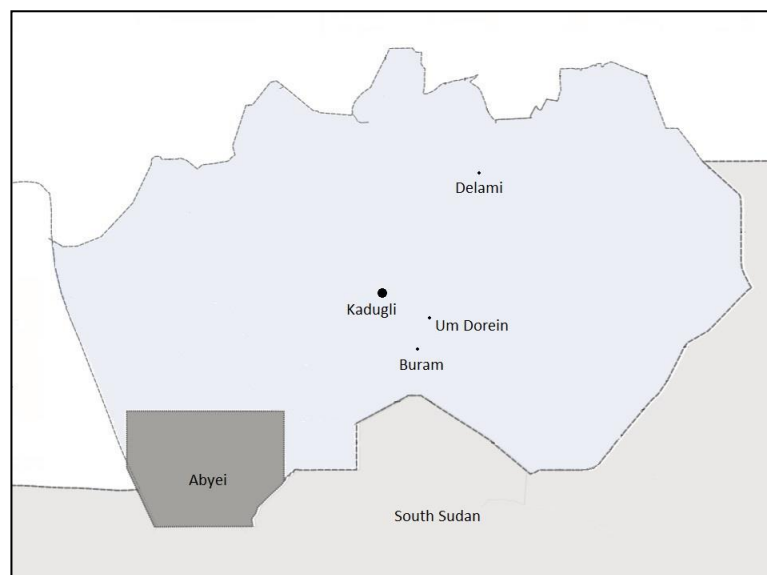
<sup>35</sup> Sudan Democracy First Group, Briefing, “The Berlin meeting: what’s at stake?” 25 February 2015, available at: <http://us7.campaign-archive1.com/?u=7acabab6ae470b89628f88514&id=c49a0f635a&e=5127444938>

<sup>36</sup> Front Line Defenders, “Sudan – where calling for the rule of citizenship and democracy constitutes waging war on the state,” undated, available at: <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/28418>

## Methodology

Research was undertaken in December 2014 to gain greater insight into the local population's perceptions of the causes of the conflict and the way in which civilians are responding to it. The intention was to deepen external understanding beyond the information that can be gleaned from the ongoing monitoring of human rights violations. Within the research into the broader conflict dynamics, two areas were explored specifically: first, local community dynamics in order to see where stress points are developing within the context of the conflict; and second, civilian perceptions of civil and military structures of the SPLM-N in order to see how – or if – they understand a difference between the two.

Field research was carried out in collaboration with a team of human rights monitors operating as the National Human Rights Monitoring Organisation (NHRMO) who have been working on the ground in SK since the conflict began in 2011. Qualitative interviews were carried out in December 2014 with 45 civilians in Delami, Tobo (Al Buram) and Um Dorein counties. These counties comprise three of the nine counties of SK that are currently within rebel held territory. While interviews took place across each of the three counties, more specific details on locations have been withheld for security reasons. Additional interviews took place with seven key informants.



Southern Kordofan State

Clearly, the findings are slanted in a number of ways. First, all the interviews took place in rebel held areas. Therefore, we are unable to report on the situation facing civilians in GoS controlled parts of SK. Second, field research took place in December 2014 in a context in which the conflict was not only ongoing, but was escalating. Not only did this make travel even more dangerous than usual, but it created an increased level of fear and paranoia among the local population and authorities. This latter restriction was, to a certain extent, counter-balanced by the fact that most of the researchers are well known and trusted within the communities in which they were carrying out interviews, therefore ensuring access for them.

## The realities of war

### Victims of a brutal war

Without a doubt, the war has had a terrible impact on civilians living in SK. As stated above, one of the main characteristics of the war has been the targeting of civilians and civilian assets, including schools, medical facilities, churches, livestock, farms and homes. One interviewee, himself an IDP, summarised the situation:

The NCP are fighting for the oppression of the peoples of Nuba Mountains. It is a war of economics by preventing our needs of food items like sugar, oil and even salt... There is systematic looting and attacks through the aerial bombing of our livestock... Even my family has been bombed and two of my children killed... They do this to create instability so that we cannot cultivate – so then we have no food and people are starving.<sup>37</sup>

Although people have done all they can to survive attacks, whether by digging foxholes to hide in or moving into the mountains to hide in caves, there is a limit to what unprotected civilians can do in the face of such attacks.

As a result, displacement within and from SK – including both GoS held areas and SPLM-N held areas – has been considerable. It is also increasing on a daily basis. As another IDP man living in Um Dorein County said, “Almost the whole county of Um Dorein is either now an IDP in the county or a refugee in South Sudan. As for me, my whole family is scattered to Kadugli, Khartoum, South Sudan and some here in Um Dorein.”<sup>38</sup> Many have had no choice but to move within SK or to leave the state altogether, fleeing to South Sudan. For others, the fact that they are still living in SK is due to a lack of alternatives in a broader context in which displacement often leads to greater danger. As one man asked, “Where else would I go? I have no choice to move to anywhere.”<sup>39</sup> Or as a woman, who identified herself as being Arab, said:



Yida refugee camp market  
(BBC World Service, CC BY-NC 2.0).

Some of my family are in Yida, others are in the bush and living in caves. Others are in Khartoum. But they just face the same problems like I do – in fact, I think I am better off than them. They are not able to feed themselves and although here I am affected by war, I can grow some crops and I can eat my own food.<sup>40</sup>

With almost no reserves left, coping mechanisms have been stretched to breaking point: the situation is becoming increasingly difficult as the number of displaced grows. As a mother of ten children living in Delami County said, “All the time we are having to move from the threat of ground attacks and aerial bombings... We cannot cultivate because of the aerial bombing and the regular movement of bomber planes. Now we are just IDPs with no food. It is the same for all civilians.”<sup>41</sup> A

<sup>37</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

man, the chief of his village, living in Um Dorein County echoed this sentiment: "Areas and villages of civilians have been burned, farms damaged and water sources attacked by the aerial bombing."<sup>42</sup>

Living in this perpetual state of insecurity continues to have devastating consequences for livelihoods which have already been put in jeopardy by the conflict. As one IDP man said:

"They have killed so many of our cattle. And now prices are high and communication is difficult between refugees and people here."<sup>43</sup> Another man, who was a chief from his home area in SK but had been displaced from GoS controlled area, said, "There is no education, health and development, just killing, internal displacement and hunger."<sup>44</sup> The ongoing fear created by living under the daily threat – and reality – of bombardment, therefore, is making people scared to cultivate. As one woman said, "There has been so much loss of life and some have lost parts of their bodies... And now we are only few here because so many have been killed and bombarded by Antonovs."<sup>45</sup> Lack of medical care is devastating in this context. People talked of having to walk for days to get medical treatment – and then only receiving minimal care, and the situation has only got worse since the research took place with the withdrawal of MSF. The physical and mental impact of the conflict is hard to quantify.

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**"There is no education, health and development, just killing, internal displacement and hunger"**

Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

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## Resistance

While recognising that choices are severely limited in this context, many also saw a refusal to be displaced – either from their homes, or from rebel held areas of SK – as a form of defiance in the face of attacks which, they believe, are intended to force them off their land. As a woman living in Delami County said, "Many of my family are in Yida, but I made a decision by myself to stay here and



Students in Delami County take exams sitting on stones.

I will stay here until I am buried because it is my land."<sup>46</sup> Another interviewee, herself displaced from GoS territory, said, "I will stay here [in Southern Kordofan] until death because this is my homeland."<sup>47</sup> A young man, when asked why he has stayed, answered, "Because this is my home. That's why I stay here."<sup>48</sup> Or, as a woman living in Tobo (Al Buram) County with her two children said, "I will never make the decision to leave here because it is my land and the land of my grandparents and my relatives."<sup>49</sup> One young man described how 31 members of his family, all civilians, had been killed by a fire following a bombing incident. He then stated, "[b]ut I decided to live [here] so that I could help some of

<sup>42</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with IDP man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with IDP man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

my remaining family in Southern Kordofan.”<sup>50</sup> The interview took place in his homestead surrounded by huts that have all been destroyed by bombs. One woman described her decision to stay and fight despite the fact that the rest of her family have been displaced to Khartoum: “I took the decision to stay here to fight for the marginalised people of Sudan. And I will remain until I have achieved my goals of struggle.”<sup>51</sup>

This resistance – in the face of such dire conditions – was inextricably linked to people’s understanding of the conflict. Not surprisingly, when asked how the current conflict started, there was widespread consensus that the trigger was the elections in 2011: “The conflict started in the elections in 2011 after the SPLM/A accused the Sudan government of forging the election result and Sudan government used guns to finish this.”<sup>52</sup>

However, while the elections were seen as the trigger, their alleged rigging was seen as symptomatic of entrenched bad governance. In particular, people saw the struggle as being one in which the

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**“I took the decision to stay here to fight for the marginalised people of Sudan. And I will remain until I have achieved my goals of struggle”**

Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

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government is seeking to eliminate them. Frequent reference was made to the fact that the conflict is a continuation of a broader GoS strategy of “Arabisation and Islamisation.”<sup>53</sup> The current conflict was seen as a means of destroying those who do not conform to a narrowly defined interpretation of Sudanese identity by a centralised power source. As an elderly man, who was living in caves up in the mountains, said: “The war is bad, but we have no option, it is either fight or allow the Sudan

government to finish the black Africans in Sudan;”<sup>54</sup> “[t]hey are fighting because the NCP wants to take the land but there is no way to take it. We as Nuban, they can’t defeat us.”<sup>55</sup> As another woman, herself a nurse, said: “The conflict in Southern Kordofan is ethnic conflict with the aim to kill people here in Southern Kordofan... it is because of injustice and marginalisation.”<sup>56</sup>

The war has left civilians with no doubt – if there had been any – about the lack of credibility of a government that has not only failed to protect them, but has openly attacked them. As one man asked, “What government in the world uses plane bombers to bomb civilians and uses denial of food to force people from their land?”<sup>57</sup> Another man, a policeman, talked of the government as “criminals of war and killers.”<sup>58</sup> One woman said, “This is the worst kind of government – one that kills its own civilians by bombing them with jet fighters and Antonovs.”<sup>59</sup> Many emphasised the fact that it is the government that is preventing humanitarian organisations from reaching them and helping them.

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with IDP man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with IDP man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with policeman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.



## War in its broader context

While the 2011 elections were seen as a trigger, the war was viewed in a historical context that includes the previous war between the SPLM/A and the government of Sudan, the interim peace brought about by the CPA, and the secession of South Sudan. Despite the devastating impact of the current war, it was seen by many as being different – and, often, less devastating – than the previous one. This comparison is not intended to imply that the current conflict is somehow acceptable, but to emphasise the fact that the current conflict is operating in an altered geopolitical context – which, in turn, has an impact on its potential resolution.

In particular, South Sudan’s independence was often referred to as something that had made the current conflict easier, as now people could more easily escape to another country – whereas in the previous conflict, they had been surrounded by GoS controlled areas. As one woman said, “South Sudan is playing a positive role in my opinion because it has opened up camps on its land.”<sup>60</sup> “Secession has been good because now we can get goods more easily in SK.”<sup>61</sup> Another interviewee, displaced from a GoS controlled area, echoed this sentiment: “The government of South Sudan is playing a positive role because their land is open to the Nuba people.”<sup>62</sup>

Of course, the benefit of South Sudan’s independence has been tempered by the outbreak of war at the end of 2013, which has undermined the country’s ability to offer protection to refugees. As an elderly man, displaced and living in Um Dorein County, said, “[The war in South Sudan] has made it worse because now we feel restricted as we have only one active road to South Sudan.”<sup>63</sup> Yet the possibility of having a neighbouring country to which people can escape remained: “Even though South Sudan is another country, the people in Southern Kordofan can still go to and come back from there without a passport.”<sup>64</sup>



A cluster bomb, Southern Kordofan, 2015.

Furthermore, not only has the secession of South Sudan provided those in rebel held areas of SK with a “friendly” neighbour, but it was seen as a victory ideologically. As one man, who was living in an area surrounded by huts that had recently been destroyed by bombing, said: “Separation of South Sudan is good because before they were colonised and now they are free.”<sup>65</sup> Or, as a woman from Tobo (Al Buram) County said, “The secession of the south is so good and I wish to be like them to form our own country”<sup>66</sup> – a sentiment that was echoed by many of those interviewed.

However, it was recognised that South Sudan’s descent into civil war was spoiling such gains. As one woman said:

<sup>60</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with elderly IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

Secession was bad and good at the same time. The good thing about it is because they have got their independence and the bad thing they will not have stability in South Sudan because they are fighting for leadership... They fought for 21 years in order for them to get freedom, but they have started again to fight, that results again in the killing of the civilians.<sup>67</sup>

Or, as another woman said, “[f]or me secession is good because they are free from oppression of Sudan government. But the bad thing about it is because they have started fighting again.” When she was then asked if she thought that people in SK would fight like them if they got independence,

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**“[f]or me secession is good because they are free from oppression of Sudan government. But the bad thing about it is because they have started fighting again.”**

Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

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she replied: “No, because the fighting in the south is for leadership, but we are not fighting for leadership. We are fighting for the rights of all Sudan people – we need either Arab or black person to rule Sudan people and to accept them as human beings with equal rights and human dignity.”<sup>68</sup>

There was also recognition that South Sudan’s secession had not only left Nubans with little to show for their part in fighting, but had also left them in a worse situation: “Secession was not good because as we started from the beginning

as one so we should continue as one.”<sup>69</sup> “We are not from South Sudan nor Sudan but just in the middle.”<sup>70</sup> As one man said, “The Sudan government forced the secession of South Sudan by marginalising them and not sharing with them in the government so it is better for them to have secession... But our problem is that the Nubans struggled with those from South Sudan but they got nothing.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, some feel it left them more isolated in their struggle. As one man said, “...in the past the conflict was between north and south, but now it is between Sudan government and the people of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile.”<sup>72</sup>

Despite the secession of South Sudan, therefore, the CPA was seen to have fundamentally failed to deliver for those in SK: “The CPA was supposed to give us in Southern Kordofan public consultations, but the government refused to give it to us.”<sup>73</sup> Instead, they have war: “The CPA promised peace, but the war has continued.”<sup>74</sup> There was consensus on the fact that the problem did not lie in the CPA itself, but in its lack of implementation: “The CPA was not implemented, because still we have marginalisation, injustice and war.”<sup>75</sup>

Furthermore, those from Arab tribes who were interviewed expressed a similar understanding of their status within Sudan: “Fighting is bad, but there is no other way at the moment. We are all marginalised people, fighting to get our rights and freedoms... It was the Sudan government that started the war because they are the ruling regime and they are biased.”<sup>76</sup> Discrimination was seen to take place not only on the basis of race, therefore, but also on the basis of geography.

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with IDP man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

## Antidote to elimination: A military response?

In response to the government’s attacks, those interviewed talked of how they are determined to do all that they can to resist elimination and fight for a government that is inclusive rather than exclusive, whether that takes place in the context of Sudan or a new nation. Not surprisingly, therefore, most identified themselves strongly with the cause of the SPLM-N, namely comprehensive reform of governance:

The ongoing conflict in Sudan has killed many civilians, destroying our properties and burning our farms, I do not think fighting is good, but there is no alternative. We are fighting to get our rights and freedom, because the Sudan government is marginalising us in education, health and development. They wanted to finish us as black people. That is why we need the SPLM-N.<sup>77</sup>

As one man working as a teacher said, “The war has opened our eyes to the fact that the ruling regime is a dictatorship that needs to be changed.”<sup>78</sup>

Although it is important to note the possibility that the findings could be skewed by the fact that individuals may not feel comfortable criticising the de facto authority in the area, it was telling that, when asked who they saw as their leaders, many of those interviewed – and in all three counties in which field research took place – referred to Abdel Aziz Adam El-Hilu, the senior commander of the SPLM-N: the “SPLA commander-in-chief is my actual leader because I trust them, they are given nothing to fight for their rights”;<sup>79</sup> “Abdel Aziz is my actual leader... He is a very transparent and a man with objectives for all Sudanese people.”<sup>80</sup>

In part, this relates to the current military success of the SPLM-N, in taking control over and holding a considerable part of SK (and all the areas in which the research took place). Indeed, when asked how the current conflict is different to that in the 1990s, many pointed to the amount of land the SPLM-N controls: “It is different than that of before because SPLA are controlling 85 percent of the state.”<sup>81</sup> “Before, the SPLA were controlling only a very small area but now they are controlling a very wide area. This shows that they are advancing.”<sup>82</sup>

Part of the reason for this success was seen to be the increased number of weapons on the side of the SPLA-N: “The difference is the additional number of modern weapons being owned by the SPLA-N in the ongoing conflict and they are capable to defend themselves.”<sup>83</sup> “The first civil war was weak from lack of equipment and lack of understanding of methods of warfare. But the ongoing conflict has been improved by having SPLA-N well equipped by training in guerrilla warfare and in owning enough weapons. We are organised enough to be independent country.”<sup>84</sup> As another man said, “The difference is that the first civil war has taken 21 years while the ongoing conflict has taken only three years to have SPLA-N well equipped.”<sup>85</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with IDP man, (chief of his area), Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with IDP man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with IDP man, security expert, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

However, inevitably the benefits of military advancements by the SPLM-N were weighed against the increased use of heavy weapons by the GoS. "The second civil war is more improved with better equipment for the SPLA-N. But it is also worse because of the use of bomber planes by the NCP in attacking civilians in SK and using chemical bombs and different types of methods of warfare."<sup>86</sup>

"The difference we have now is the increase in the number of civilians killed by aerial bombing, and the poisoned smoke of bombs."<sup>87</sup> "Before, it was Sudan fighting SK and South Sudan together. Now it is the government of Sudan and the United Arab Emirates fighting SK. We know this because now they have advanced weapons."<sup>88</sup>

Militarily, therefore, the war has reached something of an impasse, with the civilian population suffering the consequences.



IDPs inside a small bridge below the main road.

## A civilian response?

Not only did people view the SPLM-N as a military force, they also recognised their presence and legitimacy as an alternative means of governance within rebel held areas of SK. In 2013, the SPLM-N began to set up a civilian government in the areas of SK and BN that were under their control – the so-called "liberated areas". Civilian structures currently in place include a governor, two deputies, a number of secretariats, a chief of the judiciary and a number of commissioners. The intention was to create a clear demarcation between civilian and military issues, with duties assigned accordingly. It was also hoped that the creation of civilian structures would empower civilians to govern and play an active role in the administration of the "liberated areas."<sup>89</sup>

Civilians caught up in this conflict placed much hope in the potential of this alternative governance structure being created by SPLM-N. When asked what their hopes were for these structures, one man replied: "I would like them [SPLM-N] not to be like the Sudan government but to have a strong relationship with the community, hence to provide water and schools."<sup>90</sup> As a man who identified himself as a Misseriya cattle keeper said, "A person who respects my rights is my real and actual leader, and SPLM are of the kind who respect my rights. That's why I am here for them... I want a government that respects all human beings in Sudan and treats people equally despite their religion, colour, sex, and ethnicity. Then there will be no problems in Sudan."<sup>91</sup>

It was also interesting that in all three counties where research took place, civilians understood and recognised the difference between SPLM-N military and civilian structures. The SPLM-N is increasingly putting civilian structures of governance in place, and most of those interviewed differentiated between these military and civilian structures. As one man, a chief from his area, said:

<sup>86</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with woman, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with key informant, December 2014.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

“They are dealing with civilian issues separately and military separately especially in terms of courts.”<sup>92</sup>

Another woman, when asked whether or not she saw a difference between SPLM-N military and civilian authorities, replied:

Yes. Before SPLA may accuse you for nothing, they may even kill you, but now they do not, because when they accuse you, they will take you to be investigated and you will be taken to court. If you are found guilty you will be judged and if you are innocent you will be released freely.<sup>93</sup>

Another woman in Delami County, when asked the same question, replied “Yes, they have separate systems of operating. The civilian government deals with us and the military with soldiers – those who are carrying the guns. Now they have separate courts for civilians and military from boma to payam level [local administrative units smaller than counties], county and state level.”<sup>94</sup>

When asked about whether or not there was a difference, one interviewee said, “The military SPLA and the civilian authority were one in the past, but now they are separated. Each has their own rules and regulations binding them.”<sup>95</sup> In particular, many emphasised the extent to which the SPLM-N is working through local structures that were already in place: “There is good cooperation between SPLM and the community leaders. That’s why they control this area well. Mostly the SPLM do not interfere in local issues.”<sup>96</sup>

The main criticism of the SPLM-N civilian structures, which came through most strongly in Um Dorein County, related to a perceived lack of training and sensitisation in carrying out their work. Many of the interviewees emphasised the need for better training for the civil administration. As one man said, “the military SPLM are well trained, as opposed to the civil authorities which are weak and not really qualified.”<sup>97</sup> Therefore while many talked of how they have good communication with the civilian structures and can approach them, others were concerned about some of their conduct. For instance one woman said, “I would like [SPLM-N] to be more transparent and guiding people well.”<sup>98</sup> Another Misseriya cattle keeper, said “It would be good if they did more mobilisation in the community and so we are aware about their aim and vision.”<sup>99</sup>

It is clear that the SPLM-N is making significant efforts to build up alternative governance structures in SK and that the population holds out tremendous hope that they will be successful. That said, these structures are operating in a very difficult context, battling low capacity, intra- and inter-communal tensions (many of which are exacerbated by war), and the stresses of the conflict situation in which they are operating. In this context, capacity building for both local communal and SPLM-N structures, as well as support for civil society voices that can act, where necessary, as a counterweight to any SPLM-N excesses, are critical for building good governance in the region in the long term.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with IDP man (chief of his area), Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

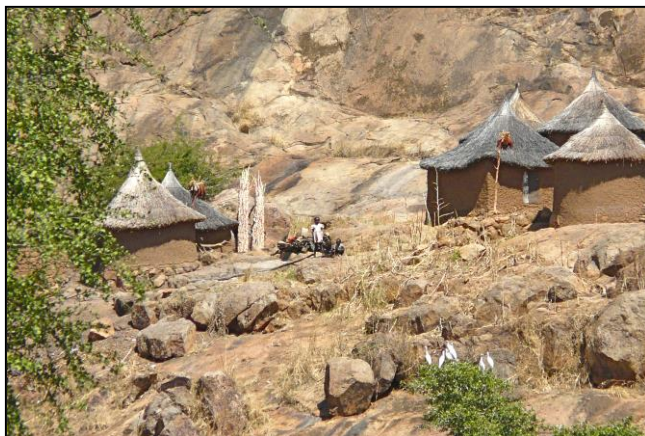
<sup>99</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

## Community relationships

The conflict has created a context in which people are living with not only the consequences of the current war, but also the layers of conflict and marginalisation that preceded it. While communities are showing huge resilience, inevitably mass displacement and the reality of living in heavily militarised areas is putting enormous strain on those who remain in SK. This pressure, in turn, is translating not only into tensions within and between communities, but also into concerns about the long term impact of the conflict.

One of the most striking aspects of the data was the extent to which those interviewed spoke of a strong sense of solidarity amongst civilians living in rebel held areas of SK, united against the government in Khartoum. For the most part, therefore, civilians did not see internal tensions in SK as a significant problem relative to the other problems confronting them: “At the moment there is no tension between communities. We all have a problem with the government of Sudan.”<sup>100</sup> This statement was backed up by an interview with a displaced woman who identified herself as “Baggara Arab and Sudanese”. She talked of how the local community has been supporting her and five other families from their small amount of cultivation since she was displaced six months ago, despite the differences between her own background and those living in the area to which she had been displaced.<sup>101</sup>

However, while civilians are clearly doing all they can to assist others who are in a similar – or worse – situation, inevitably the war is putting huge pressure on communities. As one man, a doctor’s assistant, said,



West Nuba Mountains, Southern Kordofan (Rita Willaert, CC BY-NC 2.0).

“[i]nsecurity and malnutrition are creating tensions in the community.”<sup>102</sup> In particular, the addition of displaced persons into areas where there are already chronic shortages of food is putting terrible pressure on community relations. As a man in Um Dorein County said, “[t]ensions rise from lack of water resources because of the few number of water pumps. Also in the whole county of Reif Shargi, IDPs are causing pressure in aspects of land for cultivation, as well as grazing issue. But at the moment it is not serious.”<sup>103</sup>

Another source of pressure is the fact that people from the area are also being used – often under duress<sup>104</sup> – to fight on the side of the GoS. As one woman said, “the problem with this conflict is that it is now between Nuban on both sides.”<sup>105</sup> Such tensions created by the war are inevitably going to have an impact on the recovery of communities – and, more generally, on the social fabric of the area – in any post-conflict environment.

In addition, people differentiated between tensions that have been created by the war, and those that pre-dated the war. As an example of the latter, many referred to tensions over the use of land

<sup>100</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>101</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with key informant, December 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with woman, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

for both grazing and cultivation, a tension that was described as falling along ethnic lines: “There are still conflicts between us and Arabs, the Baggara, particularly around livestock looting and grazing issues. And this has been made worse by the NCP oppression: there is no security for us to cultivate. But despite that, there is still cooperation between people.”<sup>106</sup> As another man said, “I am Nuban even though I came from the north. But some people, Arabs, are not accepted around here.”<sup>107</sup> One man living in Delami County said, “Sometimes tribalism and the looting of property creates tensions in our communities. But at the moment there is not any tension, even the Arabs we are living with us peacefully.”<sup>108</sup> This was echoed by a man who identified himself as a nomad:

Sometimes land can create tension, one can claim it is mine and the other the same. At the moment that is not a problem because we are very busy fighting [the] Sudan government. But I am afraid that one day there will problems, because when everyone comes back, even those from Khartoum, they will come claiming for their land, and if they do not know their land well they might cause problems with people.<sup>109</sup>

In other words, while tensions might be dormant for now, it is likely that they will resurface once hostilities have ceased.

Indeed, it is clear that the issue of land is going to be crucial in the post-conflict context. Because such a high proportion of the population has been displaced, and so many structures have been destroyed by bombs (which, apart from anything else, removes important land marks for demarcating land boundaries), ensuring the equitable redistribution of land is going to be particularly challenging. Yet it will be key to post-conflict recovery. For those interviewed, access to land was seen both as a resource for providing livelihoods and as a symbol of inclusion and equality. They hoped for a system of access to land antithetical to the approach taken by the GoS. A man who was working as a teacher explained the situation in this way:

[Under the SPLM-N], the land belongs to the community which means that each person is entitled to get some land in SPLM-N controlled areas. However, in north [Sudan] the issue is different. The land in the north belongs to an individual citizen and in Southern Kordofan the land belongs to the government. There is a bias in this system of land division and we do not like it. We prefer the SPLM-N system because is very transparent equalising all the people of Sudan.<sup>110</sup>

This quotation points to the fact that not only are land disputes likely to arise in the aftermath of the conflict, but the way in which disputes are settled is going to be a key component to inter- and intra-community recovery in the aftermath of conflict, and to the legitimacy of any post-conflict governance structures.

However, not all tensions are being ignored during the conflict. In Um Dorein County, many of the interviewees talked about a recent peace-building conference that was organised by the deputy governor and the commissioner in the area to resolve a dispute between five Nuba tribes over access to land. The fact that this conference took place in the midst of the conflict is an indicator of the extraordinary resilience that is being demonstrated in this territory. It also shows the extent to which community coherence is recognised as essential to resisting the pressure the community faces.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>108</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with man, Delami County, December 2014.

## Belonging: Community and identity

When asked how they defined community, therefore, most talked of community as representing unity and inclusion, of something that acts as an antidote to the causes of conflict. As a young man in Um Dorein County said, “[f]or me, community is comprised of five tribes of Tojo, Ajron, Lumun, Moro and Tira... It is us all living together. Being cosmopolitan. It is what the government does not want.”<sup>111</sup> Or, as a man in Tobo (Al Buram) County said, “[c]ommunity is about all the marginalised Sudanese who suffer injustice from Sudan government.”<sup>112</sup> A man who referred to himself as Baggara Arab said, “[c]ommunity is about different tribes living together, and we are as one community, Nuba and Arab.”<sup>113</sup> As another man said, “[i]t is when nobody thinks that he or she is more Sudanese than another.”<sup>114</sup>

While it is important not to over-romanticise the concept of community, this emphasis on coherence is an important reaction to a context in which the social fabric is not only being physically torn apart by war through displacement and the physical destruction of symbols of those communities, but is also being created and reinforced as a form of resistance.

“I identify myself as Sudanese Nuban... It means I belong to a certain group of people or nation that is why am proud of my identity. I identify myself by the colour of my skin and by my culture.”<sup>115</sup> “I am a Nuban and a Sudanese by nationality.”<sup>116</sup> “I am from [the] Nuba mountains and [the] Nuba mountains are in Sudan.”<sup>117</sup> “I am Sudanese, I am black and I am a civilian of Southern Kordofan.”<sup>118</sup> At one level, the

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**“[community] is when nobody thinks that he or she is more Sudanese than another.”**

Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

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discussion around belonging was strongly racialised. As one woman said, “I am black... but I will never be told that I am not Sudanese”;<sup>119</sup> “I am a black Sudanese. I am a human being and I should be treated equally like the rest of the Sudanese.”<sup>120</sup> For those who identified themselves as “Arab”, a similar racialised narrative emerged: “I am Sudanese, I was born in Sudan, but the problem is that I am Arab and have light skin, and Sudan means suds, land of black. The Arabs in Khartoum are first class citizens, but we are the second and the rest are the third.”<sup>121</sup> As another man said, “I am Arab but I am accepted because we are also marginalised like the Nuba.”<sup>122</sup>

Yet there was an awareness that belonging within SK is deeply problematic in its relationship to a politicised understanding of national belonging, as defined by the state. When asked if he feels Sudanese, one IDP man replied “Not in other parts of Sudan, but yes in Southern Kordofan.”<sup>123</sup> Another man, a chief of his village, said, “I feel accepted as Sudanese in Southern Kordofan, but not inside of [the] NCP.”<sup>124</sup> Another man said, “I am from Alhawazma and am an Aleawawga Arab... I feel

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with man, Arab Baggara, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Interview with IDP woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with man, Tobo (Al Buram) County, December 2014.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with woman, Delami County, December 2014.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

<sup>122</sup> Interview with man, Arab Misseriya cattle keeper, December 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with man, chief of village, Um Dorein County, December 2014.



Sudanese in Southern Kordofan, but from Kosti up to the northern part of Sudan I am not accepted as a Sudanese. It is the same for all of us here."<sup>125</sup>

As this demonstrates, many saw a disjuncture between local and national belonging, which was succinctly summarised by one man: "I am Nuban and I speak my mother tongue. I am black, and my culture and traditions reflect my identity... However, I never feel accepted or a Sudanese on the side of the NCP or the Arabs, only in SK because I am discriminated and marginalised and only have been used as an object."<sup>126</sup> People are supporting each other and resisting the conflict in any way they can, but ultimately this resistance is severely diluted in the face of destruction unleashed by a government against its own people. Therefore, although the research uncovered some evidence of positive relations at a local level between Arab and Nuban groups, these relationships are being placed under considerable stress by the broader context of exclusion within Sudan.

## Conclusion

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The report highlights some of the realities facing civilians living through an incredibly brutal conflict. But it also looks beyond the immediacy of the conflict and points to the extraordinary resilience shown by individuals and communities who remain in SK despite the circumstances. This resilience is a key component to the current configuration of the conflict. In many respects, civilian support for the SPLM-N is both the reason for the attacks, and part of the reason for the SPLM-N's ability to hold onto the territory under its control. Many wars have been lost or won on whether or not the civilian population supports those who are allegedly fighting on their behalf.

Due to this extraordinary resistance, therefore, it is quite possible that fighting in SK could continue for a very long time. While the situation is, of course, volatile and could change at any moment, it is telling that the rebels appear to be repelling the GoS's latest assault, which the government had claimed would be "decisive". Therefore, it is hard to see a military victory for either side any time soon. Furthermore, for as long as the government fails to put in reforms that have been demanded, for decades, by those on the peripheries within the broader context of Sudan, there will be a reason for people to fight. Yet a stalemate is unacceptable. It takes an intolerable toll on a civilian population that has been depleted of most of its reserves.

Adequate response, therefore, is key. It is also currently absent. While primary responsibility for the situation lies with the government, its ability to protect its own civilians has not only been shown to be lacking, but it has shown itself to be the cause of attacks. It is up to external actors, therefore, to recognise and work with the resilience of those living through this conflict and act decisively to bring this conflict to a swift resolution.



Children in a foxhole, Southern Kordofan.

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<sup>125</sup> Interview with man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with IDP man, Um Dorein County, December 2014.