

# A Crisis Normalised: Civilian perspectives on the conflict in Sudan's Blue Nile State



## 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 Monitors 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.

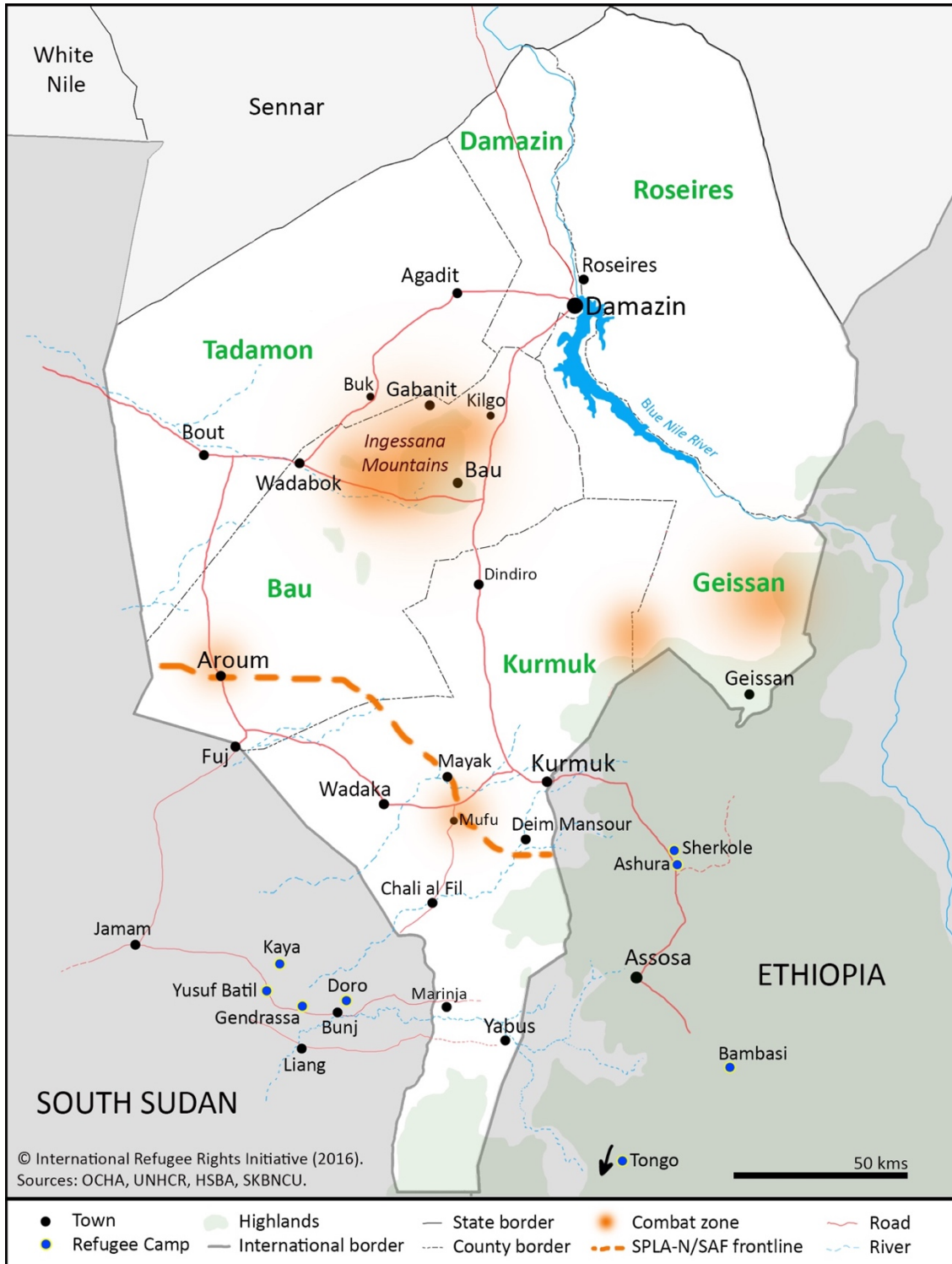
### Background to the paper

This paper is a collaborative effort between IRRI and NHRMO. Field research was carried out by NHRMO and an anonymous researcher, who was also the primary drafter of the report. Lucy Hovil, Olivia Bueno and Andie Lambe of IRRI gave additional input. The team would like to express their gratitude to all those who participated in the study, and to Wendy James, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology and Fellow, St Cross College, University of Oxford, for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

**Cover photo:** A damaged school bench on burnt grass in a village in southern Kurmuk County, Blue Nile State, days after the place was bombed (© 2016 anonymous photographer/IRRI).



SPLA-N/SAF combat zones and front lines in Blue Nile State, and camps hosting Sudanese refugees from Blue Nile State in South Sudan and Ethiopia (May 2016)



## Introduction

In early September 2011, less than three months after war broke out between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM/A-N) in Southern Kordofan, violence erupted in Blue Nile State.<sup>1</sup> It began in the capital Damazin, and spread quickly throughout the state, drawing on similar grievances and tensions that had driven the previous civil war and that had been left unresolved by the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

For decades, land distribution, access to natural resources and their exploitation and the underdevelopment of Blue Nile State have been contentious issues between local populations and the government in Khartoum. Large scale commercial agricultural schemes, backed by national legislation, have deprived local communities of their land and increased tensions between communities. At the same time, the government has allowed the resources of Blue Nile State – agricultural lands, minerals and the Blue Nile River – to consistently be exploited, but with very little benefit to the local population.

The CPA excluded Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan (known collectively as the Two Areas) from participation in the referendum that allowed South Sudan to eventually choose to separate from the North, even though both states had substantial SPLM constituencies and were important theatres during Sudan's second civil war. Instead, a vaguely defined process – a “popular consultation” – was to reflect the expectations and views of the local populations on the CPA and the future of their state. This process made more progress in Blue Nile State than it did in Southern Kordofan, raising hopes for the creation of a more equitable society and sustainable stability. Renewed war, however, quashed these hopes.

Since the outbreak of the war, civilians in Blue Nile State have consistently been targeted during both aerial and ground offensives. The Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) has repeatedly bombed SPLM-N held territories, often targeting civilian areas. These attacks have killed numerous civilians, have destroyed civilian property and have severely disrupted livelihoods and markets. As a result, some 172,000 people have left Blue Nile State for Ethiopia and South Sudan. Many of those who fled had already spent most of their lives displaced during Sudan's second civil war.

The outbreak of the violence in Blue Nile State has intensified the old fault lines between the “indigenous” communities, historically associated with the SPLM/A, and other groups of more recent Arab and West African immigrants to the area, who have historically been associated with the government. Throughout the years, inter-communal tensions have been strongly related to local conflicts over grazing lands, migration routes and cattle. However, despite the popular political division between communities, members of all communities – Arabs, West Africans and indigenous groups – have joined both sides of the conflict, in the past as well as during the current war.

After five years of fighting in Blue Nile State and with little sign that the conflict might end any time soon, civilians are having to adapt to a context in which war has become the norm, and are facing incredibly hard

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<sup>1</sup> The Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N) is the armed wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Before South Sudan's independence in 2011, the northern wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) broke away from the movement and formed the SPLM-N – a political party in Sudan. In this paper, SPLM-N refers to the movement as a whole, and SPLA-N refers specifically to its armed forces.

and increasingly limited choices as a result. Inside the SPLM-N held areas, fighting and aerial bombardments are ongoing, and livelihoods opportunities are extremely limited. Meanwhile, the refugee camps in South Sudan are being drawn into the interconnected conflicts of Blue Nile State and South Sudan, and tensions between refugees and the host communities in Maban are making survival in the camps more and more challenging. It is in this context, while fighting continues to displace new populations from Blue Nile, that some refugees are choosing to go back into Sudan, either to government or to SPLM-N held areas. They do not necessarily go back to their homes, but rather to territories that are deemed less prone to aerial bombardments or where some livelihood opportunities exist.

Another aspect of the “normalisation” of the crisis was the establishment, in 2014, of a civilian SPLM-N administration, in an attempt to legitimise the movement’s control over the populations in the so-called “liberated areas”. SPLM-N government institutions are less developed in Blue Nile than they are in Southern Kordofan, where they were established earlier, and have limited capacity due to Blue Nile’s minimal infrastructure and the ongoing war.

The war in Blue Nile State is one of the most under-reported conflicts in the world, attracting very little attention outside Sudan and is, at best, mentioned as a second, less important, frontline in the war between the government and the SPLM-N in Sudan’s “New South” (the conflict zones in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile). As frequently happens in the Sudans and their numerous intertwined conflicts, complex local dynamics and histories get lost in broader, often oversimplified, narratives.

This report aims to bring such local dynamics, as understood by the people of Blue Nile State, to the fore, and explore the ways in which they are also influenced by national and regional issues. By doing this, the report aims to provide a background for the ongoing monitoring work that is carried out in Blue Nile State by the NHRMO and other organisations that are documenting the conflict,<sup>2</sup> based on the perception that human rights violations and humanitarian crises must be understood in their broader political and historical context.

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<sup>2</sup> The findings of the NHRMO monitoring teams are regularly published by the Sudan Consortium, and are available at: [www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_crisis/SKBNUupdates.html](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_crisis/SKBNUupdates.html) (accessed 23 August 2016).

## Recommendations

### To the government of Sudan:

- **Guarantee SAF and all other forces fighting on behalf of the Sudanese government adhere to international humanitarian law (IHL).** In particular, immediately cease all indiscriminate attacks, all attacks targeted against the civilian population and its infrastructure, and all acts that are intended to spread terror among civilians. Attacks that are not directed at a specific military objective, or, as in the case of bombs dropped out of Antonov planes, employ means of combat that are inherently indiscriminate, violate customary rules of IHL.
- **Allow immediate, independent humanitarian access to both SPLM-N and government held areas, including from neighbouring countries, and ensure the freedom of movement of humanitarian relief personnel.** Restrictions prevent humanitarian actors from providing proper assessments of the precise needs inside Blue Nile State, but the data available indicates that relief is necessary in order to ensure fundamental human rights are respected. The government may ask for guarantees that all assistance is provided in a principled manner, but such concerns should not prevent humanitarian access altogether.
- **Negotiate a permanent ceasefire in the Two Areas to guarantee that humanitarian assistance is delivered, and commit to a peace process that is based on a truly inclusive national dialogue,** in line with the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) Roadmap Agreement of March 2016 (signed by the SPLM-N in August 2016). This also means acknowledging that ending the turmoil in Sudan's peripheries – the Two Areas and Darfur – requires a fundamental change in the country's governance model.
- **In Blue Nile State, initiate a parallel process of inclusive public discussions and consultations to deal with the local aspects of the conflict.** Such a process should recognise the legitimacy of all opinions voiced by civilians during the popular consultation process of 2011, and must address the historical root causes for tensions in Blue Nile State. This process could take different forms. One option would be to follow the path set by the popular consultation and establish a commission that would hold public hearings throughout the state. However, a more diverse and less political composition should be considered for the commission, in comparison to that which oversaw the popular consultation, in order to ensure more productive and open discussions. The conclusions of this process must inform both national and local government policies.

### To the SPLM-N:

- **Guarantee all SPLA-N forces adhere to IHL.** As party to a non-international armed conflict, the SPLA-N is also bound by the rules of IHL. In particular, it must avoid any indiscriminate attacks or attacks that target civilian populations or infrastructure, and must, to the extent feasible, avoid locating military objectives within or near civilian areas.

- **Respect the civilian nature of refugee camps.** No military activity should take place in the refugee camps, including recruitment. SPLA-N forces should not be based in camps or in close proximity to them.
- **Allow immediate, independent humanitarian access to SPLM-N held areas, including cross line access from government held areas.** If there are security concerns with regard to cross line relief operations the movement may ask for guarantees that all assistance is provided in a principled manner, but such concerns should not prevent humanitarian access altogether.
- **Negotiate a permanent ceasefire in the Two Areas to guarantee that humanitarian assistance is delivered, and engage with the government of Sudan to ensure a productive process of national dialogue,** in order to bring the conflict in the Two Areas to an end and achieve sustainable peace in Sudan.

**To the international community, including the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD):**

- **Insist on immediate and independent humanitarian access to all areas of Blue Nile State, and offer support to guarantee all assistance is delivered in a principled manner.** Considering the high levels of suspicion both the government and the SPLM-N have demonstrated with regard to either cross border and cross line relief operations, it is necessary to have international involvement by actors that both parties trust in order to guarantee that relief is impartial in character.
- **Promote the establishment of a commission of inquiry,** under the auspices of the AU or the UN, to investigate allegations that crimes in violation of international law may have been committed by either side in the conflict in the Two Areas.
- **Only support the national dialogue in Sudan if the process is truly inclusive, taking place in a conducive environment, and all marginalised groups are represented.** This requires recognising that a comprehensive national approach is essential to bring to an end Sudan's ongoing crises.
- **Urge the Sudanese government and the SPLM-N to follow the recommendations presented above.** In particular, demand that all armed forces respect IHL and do not carry out any military activity that targets civilians. This also requires considering the consequences for failure to comply with IHL, such as an arms embargo and other sanctions.

## Methodology

This report is based on qualitative field research carried out in late April and early May 2016 in Juba and Maban (South Sudan), and SPLM-N held southern Kurmuk County, Blue Nile State (Sudan). The intention was to explore the views of civilians displaced from or living within Blue Nile State on the causes of the current conflict, and to better understand ways in which they are responding to it. The research specifically focused on civilians' views on the causes of the conflict and the core issues that need to be resolved in order to bring it to an end; the ways in which civilians respond to the violence and tensions in Blue Nile and in Maban; and the impact of violence and displacement on community dynamics.

Field research was carried out in collaboration with NHRMO. Interviews were carried out with 36 civilians from different areas in Blue Nile State, and from different, though predominantly “indigenous” Funj,<sup>3</sup> communities. Most interviewees were refugees in South Sudan, but internally displaced and non-displaced civilians in Sudan were also interviewed. Most interviews were conducted in Arabic, a few were conducted in English, and some were also conducted in Uduk and Jumjum, with translation into English. In addition, interviews were also carried out with individuals affiliated with NGOs working in South Sudan or Blue Nile, and with some SPLM-N officials. Desk research was carried out in order to contextualise the findings.



Yusuf Batil refugee camp, South Sudan (© 2016 anonymous photographer/IRRI).

<sup>3</sup> While recognising that the word “indigenous” risks reinforcing essentialised categories that have dominated the war in Sudan, it is used in this report to refer to those who are perceived – and who see themselves – to be the first peoples to have settled in what is now Blue Nile.



## Background

Blue Nile State is located in south-east Sudan, with South Sudan to the south-west, Ethiopia to the south-east and Sudan's Sennar State to the north. The state is divided into the six counties of Damazin, Tadamon, Bau, Roseires, Geissan and Kurmuk, and is mostly a flat plain, with hills and escarpment along the Ethiopian frontier and in the centre of the state (the Ingessana Hills). The Blue Nile River crosses the state, flowing from Ethiopia's Lake Tana, via Damazin, to the north. The total area of the state is slightly over 40,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and its capital Damazin lies 550km south of Khartoum.<sup>4</sup> In the disputed census of 2008 Blue Nile State was estimated to have a population of 832,112, but some have argued that the number is higher.<sup>5</sup>

In recent decades, a considerable population of immigrants has settled in Blue Nile State, and distinctions have been made between those who are seen to be "indigenous" to the territory and those who are seen as "non-indigenous" or "newcomers". The "indigenous" groups of Blue Nile include, among others, the Ingessana (Gamk) people, from the centre of the state and the Ingessana Hills, the Berta and the Gumuz peoples, from the state's north and close to the border with Ethiopia (with many living in Ethiopia as well), and the Uduk, the Jumjum and the Koma peoples, living in the southern part of Blue Nile, closer to South Sudan.<sup>6</sup> Each group has its own distinct language. The "indigenous" people in Blue Nile were, and many still are, agro-pastoralists, meaning that their livelihoods are based on animal herding and cultivation, the latter including sorghum, sesame, cotton and okra.<sup>7</sup>

The "non-indigenous" populations of Blue Nile include members of Sudanese Arab (or "Arabised") and non-Arab communities, as well as West Africans that migrated to the area. Members of northern Sudanese Arab communities often came to Blue Nile as traders, business owners or administrators.<sup>8</sup> Arab (in particular, Rufa'a Al-Hoi),<sup>9</sup> as well as West African (mostly Fulani, or "Fellata", in Arabic) nomadic groups have increasingly settled in Blue Nile State during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> To a large extent their

<sup>4</sup> UNDP, "Blue Nile State: Situation Analysis," March 2010, 8 (UNDP, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Population size estimation according to the 2008 census, see Republic of Sudan: Central Bureau of Statistics, "Census 2008 results - Blue Nile State," 10 October 2013. The census was highly controversial. According to the CPA, 60% of the seats in the national assembly were to be allocated according to the population of the states as estimated in the census. The SPLM rejected the results, and according to some analysts, the census undercounted southern Sudanese living in northern states. See Joshua Craze, "Counting a Divided Nation," *Anthropology News* 51(5) (2010), 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group, "Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile," 2013, 4, available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/sudan-s-spreading-conflict-ii-war-blue-nile>, (ICG, 2013), Claudio Gramizzi, *At an Impasse: The Conflict in Blue Nile*, Small Arms Survey, 2013, 11-12, available at:

<http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP31-Blue-Nile.pdf>, (Gramizzi, 2013), (both accessed 23 August 2016). On the Gumuz and Berta in Ethiopia see also John Young, "Along Ethiopia's western frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in transition," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37(2), 1999, 321-346.

<sup>7</sup> Mey Eltayeb Ahmed, "Blue Nile: National and indigenous conflict management – competing or complementary systems?," *New Routes* 2 (2012), 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> ICG, 2013, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "Transforming Pastoralism: The Case Study of the Rufa'a Al-Hoi Ethnic Group in the Blue Nile," *Nomadic Peoples*, 13(1), (2009), 113-133 (Ahmed, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> C. Miller & A.A. Abu-Manga, "The West African (Fallata) Communities in Gedaref State: Process of settlement and local integration," in Catherine Miller (ed.), *Land, ethnicity and political legitimacy in Eastern Sudan* (University of Khartoum, Le Caire, Centre d'etudes et de documentation economique, juridique et social (CEDEJ) & Development Studies and

migration to Blue Nile has been the result of the state's climate, which is suitable for livestock husbandry.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Blue Nile's large commercial agricultural schemes also attracted both Sudanese from other parts of the country and foreigners.<sup>12</sup>

## Blue Nile from the Funj to Sudan's independence

The territories of today's Blue Nile State were under the authority of the Funj Sultanate of Sennar for more than three hundred years, until Turko–Egyptian forces occupied the area in 1821. Many of the ethnic groups “indigenous” to Blue Nile still identify themselves today as “Funj”, alongside their specific ethnic identity. It was already under the Funj and starting from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century that Islam spread in the area, allowing the creation of an “indigenous” Muslim identity in Blue Nile among many, but not all, of the local communities.<sup>13</sup> Later Christian missionary work in the area, starting in the late 1930s, means that there is also a considerable Christian community.

Even though local communities associated themselves with the Funj Sultanate, for centuries, communities at the southern frontier of the Sultanate were victims of slave raids both from the Funj and from the neighbouring Ethiopian kingdoms.<sup>14</sup> Such raids significantly increased under Turko–Egyptian rule (1821–1885). The collection of “tributes” in the form of gold and slaves from the populations residing south and all the way to the Yabus River was administered from Jebel Gule (today's Al Tadamon County).<sup>15</sup> In response to government raids, local people took up arms to defend their communities, sometimes also launching attacks against traders or government troops travelling in the region.<sup>16</sup> Similar patterns of violence remained during Mahdist rule (1885–1898): as Sudan suffered drought and famine, the territories of the southern Funj were raided for supplies and cattle, which were then taken to northern Sudan.<sup>17</sup> Again, these were also met with local armed resistance.

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Research Center (DSRC), 2005), 375–424, Elhadi Ibrahim Osman, “The Funj region pastoral Fulbe: from ‘exit’ to ‘voice’”, *Nomadic Peoples*, 13(1), (2009), 92–112 (Osman, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Khalil Abdalla Al Medani, “From assimilation to confrontation: Macro- and micro-level processes of acculturation and cultural pluralism in the Blue Nile Region, the Sudan,” *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 5(1), (2010), 111, 114.

<sup>12</sup> ICG, 2013, 5, UNDP, 2010, 15.

<sup>13</sup> A.C.S. Peacock, “The Ottomans and the Funj sultanate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,” *Bulletin of SOAS* 75(1) (2012), 88–89, 99, Khalil Abdalla Al Medani, “From assimilation to confrontation: Macro- and micro-level processes of acculturation and cultural pluralism in the Blue Nile Region, the Sudan,” *International Journal of African Renaissance Studies*, 5(1), (2010), 115–116. While Muslims were present in Nilotic Sudan centuries before the Funj, they did not achieve “any semblance of political, cultural, and linguistic hegemony.” See Neil McHugh, *Holy men of the Blue Nile: the Making of an Arab-Islamic Community in the Nilotic Sudan, 1500–1850*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, Illinois, 1994, 37–42.

<sup>14</sup> M. C. Jedrej, “The Southern Funj of the Sudan as a Frontier Society, 1820–1980,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 46(4), (2004), 709, 712–714.

<sup>15</sup> The Turko–Egyptian authorities appointed Idris Adlan, a descendant of the last Funj ruler of Sennar, to be the “Sheikh of the Funj Mountains”. He was based in Jebel Gule. See M. C. Jedrej, “Ingessana and the Legacy of the Funj Sultanate: The Consequences of Turkish Conquest on the Blue Nile,” *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 70(2), (2000), 278, 281–284.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The period of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium (1899–1956) brought a number of significant changes to Blue Nile. First, the imposition of the Pax Britannica on the Sudan benefited the “indigenous” communities of Blue Nile: less threatened from the outside, some were able to expand their cultivation and develop their livestock.<sup>18</sup> Second, the newly drawn border with Ethiopia gave the area increased strategic importance, and a border post was set up in Kurmuk in 1910.<sup>19</sup> Ethiopia’s borderlands on the other side of this frontier – the regions of Benishangul and Gambella – were to play a major role in the history of Sudan’s second civil war.

The current border between South Sudan and Sudan was also shaped during the Condominium. In 1938, it was decided that the southern territories of Kurmuk District in the northern Blue Nile Province, where the “primitive pagan tribes” of the Maban, Uduk and Koma lived, should be transferred to the authority of the southern Upper Nile Province.<sup>20</sup> Christian missionary work, limited at the time to southern non-Muslim provinces, was therefore allowed into these areas from this point.<sup>21</sup> However, in 1953, three years before Sudan gained its independence, two sub-districts – that of the Uduk (the territory of Chali al-Fil) and that of the Koma (Yabus) – were transferred back to the north, into Blue Nile Province, mainly for administrative convenience.<sup>22</sup> These changes have influenced the area significantly, and continue to do so.

## Blue Nile during Sudan’s second civil war

In recent decades, conflict and displacement became an increasingly salient feature of life in southern Blue Nile. Although Blue Nile was relatively unaffected by the violence of Sudan’s first civil war and the government’s campaign against the newly formed Anya-Nya,<sup>23</sup> the situation changed dramatically during Sudan’s second civil war, which started in 1983. With SPLA bases in Ethiopia to the east, and Southern Sudan’s SPLA strongholds to the south, from the mid-1980s Blue Nile became an important theatre in the war. As a result, people living in Blue Nile became increasingly drawn into the wider Sudanese conflict.

During the first years of the second civil war, the Ethiopian Derg regime supported the SPLA, and allowed it to establish bases inside Ethiopia across the Sudanese border. SPLA troops therefore arrived in southern Blue Nile as they crossed the southern areas of the state on their way to and from Ethiopia, and young men, predominantly among the Uduk and Ingessana, joined the new movement.<sup>24</sup> The SPLA’s original cause, a

<sup>18</sup> H. R. J. Davies, “Cultures under Pressure in the Sudan: the Ingessana and the Uduk,” *Geo Journal* 36(1), (1995), 67.

<sup>19</sup> The first post was set up in Jebel Surkum in 1904 but was moved to Kurmuk, which is on the frontier, in 1910. Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan’s Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, 11, 20–21 (James, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders: The impact of boundary-making in Southern Sudan’s frontier zones*, Rift Valley Institute, 2010, 74–80.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The first civil war started shortly before the country’s independence in 1956 but escalated only after the formation of the Anya-Nya movement in 1963. Despite the fact that the violence spread into Upper Nile Province and in some cases also across the border into Ethiopia, it did not reach Blue Nile. See Øystein H. Rolandsen, “The making of the Anya-Nya insurgency in the Southern Sudan,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(2) (2011), 211–232.

<sup>24</sup> Douglas H. Johnson & Gerard Prunier, The Foundation and Expansion of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, in *Civil War in the Sudan*, M.W. Daly & Ahmad Alwad Sikainga (eds.), British Academic Press, London, 1993, 136 (Johnson & Prunier, 1993).

reformed democratic “New Sudan”, appealed to the people of Blue Nile more than the secessionism of the Anya-Nya.<sup>25</sup> However, men from the same communities were also recruited into the national army.<sup>26</sup>

Sadiq el Mahdi’s government, in an attempt to crush the growing support of the SPLA in southern Blue Nile, launched a violent counter insurgency campaign in early 1987: the army burned villages and churches, and armed nomad Rufa’a militias who then also burned villages and killed Uduk civilians.<sup>27</sup> Support for the SPLA consequently increased in the area.<sup>28</sup> Thousands of Uduk fled to Ethiopia, starting a long journey of displacement that, for many, would only end 20 years later.

Taking advantage of its bases on the Ethiopian side of the border, the SPLA captured the towns of Kurmuk and Geissan in November 1987. In Damazin, men who were identified as “southerners” or “SPLA sympathisers” based on their racial appearance or religion were then rounded up by the Sudanese police and the army and killed in revenge.<sup>29</sup> The two towns were recaptured by the Sudanese army a month later. Then shortly after Omar al-Bashir came to power in 1989, another offensive was launched against the SPLA in Blue Nile. The SPLA repelled the attack, and captured Kurmuk and other small towns in the area, including Chali al-Fil.<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, events in Blue Nile dovetailed with what was taking place in neighbouring Ethiopia: the weakening of Mengistu’s government in Ethiopia and its eventual collapse in 1991 meant that the SPLA lost its support there.<sup>31</sup> The Sudanese government recaptured Kurmuk again in 1990, supported by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF), who then moved into Ethiopia to capture Assosa, together with the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).<sup>32</sup> The refugees from Blue Nile who were taking shelter nearby at Langkwai (Tsore) were forced to flee south via Sudan, to Itang (in Gambella, Ethiopia), and then to Nasir and Nor Deng in Sudan’s Upper Nile.<sup>33</sup>

Fighting resumed in Blue Nile after the SPLA regained the support of the government in Addis Ababa in 1995, allowing it once more to operate inside Ethiopia. In 1996-1997, the SPLA, together with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), captured Yabus, Kurmuk and Geissan.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, the SPLA/M supported guerrilla operations of other opposition groups along the Eritrean border, presenting a new threat to Khartoum, from the east.<sup>35</sup> The Sudanese government, concerned that the insurgents would be able to

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew LeRiche & Matthew Arnold, *South Sudan: From Revolution to Independence*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, 51 (LeRiche & Arnold, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> James, 2007, 51.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson & Prunier, 1993, 136.

<sup>28</sup> James, 2007, 53.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil Wars*, James Currey, Oxford, 2003, 136-137 (Johnson, 2003).

<sup>30</sup> James, 2007, 54.

<sup>31</sup> Ann Lesch, “The impasse in the Civil War,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 23(2) (2001), 20 (Lesch, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> James, 2007, 55.

<sup>33</sup> James, 2007, 111-151.

<sup>34</sup> The NDA, established in 1989, united a number of northern Sudanese opposition groups. It was based in Asmara, Eritrea. LeRiche & Arnold, 2012, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Lesch, 2001, 19-24.



advance further north and capture Damazin and its hydroelectric dam, declared “*jihad*” against Sudan’s enemies.<sup>36</sup>

Fighting in Blue Nile continued throughout the late 1990s. In 2002, the Machakos Protocol laid the foundations for what eventually became the CPA. Under this agreement, the status of Blue Nile State was addressed in the Protocol on the Resolution of the Conflict in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States, signed at Naivasha, Kenya, on 26 May 2004.

The CPA provided a formula for democratic transformation and the creation of a “New Sudan”. The transitional period was designed to allow these changes to take root and to build confidence between the north and the south. Southerners, however, were given the option of a referendum and secession in the event that these changes were not implemented to their satisfaction. The north-south division in the CPA was based on



Yabus: the remains of a military helicopter that was allegedly shot down during fighting in 1996 (© 2016 anonymous photographer/IRRI).

the line that divided the three southern provinces from the northern ones at the time of Sudan’s independence in 1956. Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan were therefore excluded from the referendum. Instead, the separate 2004 protocol on the Two Areas stipulated that a “popular consultation” would be held in both states in order to “ascertain the views of the people [...] on the comprehensive agreement reached by the government of Sudan and the SPLM.”<sup>37</sup> Essentially, they were to be consulted on the extent to which the CPA and its implementation met with their expectations, but there were no promises made about what measures would be taken if it did not.

Between 2005 and 2007, Abdelrahman Abu Median of the National Congress Party (NCP) was the governor of Blue Nile State. According to the CPA’s rotational governorship system, he was replaced in 2007 with the SPLM’s Malik Agar.<sup>38</sup> In tense elections in April 2010, Malik Agar won, and remained governor, while the NCP won more assembly seats than the SPLM.<sup>39</sup> It was under this leadership that the promised “popular consultation” took place.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, 2003, 209.

<sup>37</sup> Art. 3.1, Chapter V: The Resolution of the Conflict in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Comprehensive Peace Agreement, 2005, available at: <https://unmis.unmissions.org/Portals/UNMIS/Documents/General/cpa-en.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016), (Chapter V, CPA, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Art. 11, Pre-Election Arrangements, Chapter V, CPA, 2005, “Sudanese president names SPLM’s Agar as governor of Blue Nile,” Sudan Tribune, 1 July 2007, available at: <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article22660> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>39</sup> ICG, 2013, 11.

The Blue Nile Popular Consultation Commission, formed in September 2010, held its hearings between January and July 2011 in different locations throughout the state. More than 70,000 people participated, and the hearings were “generally conducted in a peaceful atmosphere.”<sup>40</sup> However, war broke out in Blue Nile in September 2011, before the commission published its final report.<sup>41</sup>

## Civilian perspectives on the causes of the conflict

### The CPA, the popular consultation, and Blue Nile’s autonomy

When asked about causes of the current conflict, a key issue mentioned by most interviewees was the failure by the government of Sudan to implement key provisions of the CPA. Although these provisions were weaker for Blue Nile than for the South, interviewees did not criticise the agreement itself, but rather the failures of its implementation. For many of the interviewees the war started as a direct result of the 2010 elections, the popular consultation and the views expressed by civilians supporting the SPLM during this process. The outbreak of violence is therefore seen as Khartoum’s response to the strengthening of the opposition in Blue Nile and to demands it did not wish to entertain. One community leader in Yusuf Batil refugee camp said: “In the elections the SPLM won... and the opinions in the popular consultation were in harmony with SPLM. This is why the government wanted war.”<sup>42</sup> Another woman said: “We claimed for self-rule, and this is why we were chased away. He [Omar al-Bashir] doesn’t want anyone to speak on our behalf.”<sup>43</sup>

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**“The South Sudanese were frustrated but we are still willing to be one country.”**

The demand for “self-rule” (*al-hukm al-zati*) mentioned in the latter example and by many other interviewees was indeed one of the most contested issues during the popular consultation. The SPLM supported the idea of “self-rule”, requesting a high degree of autonomy for Blue Nile State, while the government called for federalism, accusing the SPLM of using the popular consultation process for encouraging secessionism.<sup>44</sup> Both the NCP and the SPLM were criticised at the time for orchestrating people’s statements and attempting to manipulate the popular consultation.<sup>45</sup>

However, civilians interviewed described the idea of “self-rule” as mostly related to political representation and equality, rather than separation from Sudan. “The solution is that we need people from Blue Nile to rule the state and be represented in Khartoum. Khartoum has to allow us to share together,” said one man from Soda who currently resides in Juba.<sup>46</sup> Another man in Gendrassa refugee camp said: “The people of Blue Nile

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<sup>40</sup> “Carter Center urges political parties and Blue Nile Popular Consultation Commission to ensure genuine dialogue on key issues in Blue Nile State,” The Carter Center, 21 March 2011, available at: <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/sudan-032111.html> (accessed 23 August 2016), (Carter Center, 2011), ICG, 2013, 13.

<sup>41</sup> ICG, 2013, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with a camp manager (a refugee from Blue Nile State), in Maban, May 2016.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with a woman, Yusuf Batil, May 2016.

<sup>44</sup> ICG, 2013, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Carter Center, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with a man from Blue Nile State in Juba, April 2016.

want the right to talk, to say what they want. [...] People from Blue Nile need to get a chance to be part of the state [...].”<sup>47</sup>

In fact, separation was mentioned by some as an undesired solution, but one that might become unavoidable at some point. One community leader in Gendrassa refugee camp said: “The South Sudanese were frustrated but we are still willing to be one country. If we will reach the same level of frustration we may also claim independence.”<sup>48</sup> One young woman in Gendrassa said: “During the secession I was not aware of the reasons [behind it] but now that we go through similar things, I understand why they decided to separate. I wonder whether we are going to face the same thing.”<sup>49</sup>

## Inequality, exploitation and marginalisation

By far the most fundamental issues behind the conflict for most interviewees were the underdevelopment of Blue Nile State and the unjust distribution of its resources. Grievances around these issues have existed for decades in Blue Nile State (and in different forms, in other parts of Sudan), and it was exactly such grievances that many had hoped that the CPA and the popular consultation would be able to address.

Since Sudan’s independence in 1956, land distribution and land grabbing, access to natural resources and their exploitation and the development of infrastructure in Blue Nile State became an increasingly contested issue between local populations and the government, resulting in tensions that remained central throughout the CPA period and are viewed by many as one of the main causes for the re-emergence of the conflict.

In particular, since the late 1960s, the appropriation of land by the state and its allocation to private investors and companies from outside Blue Nile for large scale commercial agricultural schemes has put local agro-pastoral communities under severe pressure.<sup>50</sup> The 1970 “Unregistered Land Act” and the 1971 “Abolition of Native Administration Act” accelerated this process, further depriving local communities of the land they had used for generations, and allowing the government to own land that was not privately owned.<sup>51</sup>

As a result, agro-pastoral communities increasingly saw their agricultural and grazing lands shrink. At the same time, they did not benefit from the expanding agricultural schemes that belonged to foreign investors or Sudanese from Khartoum. One community leader in Yusuf Batil refugee camp, for example, whose home area in Tadamon County was one of the first places to be affected by the allocation of land to farming schemes,<sup>52</sup> said:

When this war started we lost everything. But even before the war: Agadi is an agricultural area. The government used the land for investment. The companies surrounded us and left the people with little land to cultivate. The crops from these fields go somewhere else – we don’t get anything.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Interview with a man, Gendrassa refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with a man, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with a woman, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, 2009, 116.

<sup>51</sup> UNDP, 2010, 29.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with a man, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

Land distribution remained a contested issue during the transitional CPA period as well. As governor, Malik Agar pushed for legal reform that would have required investors to seek the approval of local communities before they could acquire or retain land, but his proposed legislation was not discussed before the war started.<sup>54</sup> Agar has also previously argued that as a result of his policies some land that was used for commercial farming and mining had been reallocated to local communities.<sup>55</sup> This would seem to be supported by a man from the area of Gabanit (a village south-west of Damazin) who described such a process and the tensions it generated:

There were many problems that the Arab factories went to the government and the government gave them our lands. Sometimes they take your fields, and to bring it back is impossible. [...] When the SPLM came before the war our lives were better. But when we were comfortable, the Arabs were not. Before the SPLM came most of the land was taken from us but then some was returned and we could farm.<sup>56</sup>

However, the findings also show that grievances and notions of marginalisation do not revolve only around land. Interviewees repeatedly talked about the abundant natural resources of Blue Nile State and its importance to the country's economy, and yet the poverty of its people and the government's disregard for their living conditions. One man from Damazin, currently living in Gendrassa refugee camp, said:

The government wants the resources of the marginalised people but not the people. For example, the dam, the agriculture, the fields and the minerals. The whole country is dependent on these resources but the government is not interested in the people.<sup>57</sup>

The minerals mentioned include Blue Nile State's chromite and gold, found predominantly (but not exclusively) in the Ingessana Hills. The exploitation of these resources by private actors from northern Sudan began in the late 1960s, and later expanded to foreign companies from the Gulf States and China.<sup>58</sup> The dam mentioned is the Roseires dam, built in 1966 and expanded in 2013, which flooded surrounding lands and displaced tens of thousands of civilians at both stages of its development. It reportedly generates most of Sudan's electricity production.<sup>59</sup>

Despite these resources, Blue Nile State, and even more so its southern parts, remain chronically underdeveloped. A man from Wadaka, currently living in Doro refugee camp, said: "The electricity comes from our river and we don't get it. Kurmuk, Bau, Geissan and other parts – all are still in the darkness. Schools, services, roads, even water - we don't have it."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> ICG, 2013, 10.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with a man from Damazin, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Gramizzi, 2013, 13-14.

<sup>59</sup> ICG, 2013, 7, Gramizzi, 2013, 12, Ulf Laessing, "Sudan launches major dam to boost agricultural production, investment," Reuters, 01 January 2013, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-dam-idUSBRE9000B320130101> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>60</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, April 2016.



As another man, a sheikh in Doro refugee camp,<sup>61</sup> originally from Mayak, said: “We cannot cure people because there are no health services. The people in Khartoum get everything.” He further argued: “The Arabs hold all the authority – they distribute everything. They push it into their areas. Only with equality we can live together in peace.”<sup>62</sup> Or as an omda in Yusuf Batil said: “He [Omar al-Bashir] doesn’t want black people. He just cares about our lands, our minerals and our mountains. Even if we are all destroyed, he will not care.”<sup>63</sup>

While the idea of “self-rule” seemed to have remained fairly abstract in its implications to most interviewees who mentioned it, the grievances related to the lack of development in Blue Nile State and the unfair exploitation of the state’s resources were often associated with more concrete everyday experiences.

For example, as a young woman from Gabanit who currently lives in Doro refugee camp said: “Now in Gabanit there is no pump for water or electricity, no running water – we have to dig wells, and we don’t have a hospital.”<sup>64</sup> A woman, active with the camp women’s association of Yusuf Batil refugee camp, explained: “Freedom and development [mean that] women don’t have to walk two hours to get water.”<sup>65</sup> Another woman in Kaya refugee camp said: “We the women of Ingessana live in very tough conditions. We want to live like the women in Khartoum: we want running clean water, development, and nice buildings.”<sup>66</sup>

## National identity, "indigenusness" and exclusion

Of course, the feelings of marginalisation and the attention given to the demand for autonomy during the popular consultation are clearly linked to each other. Both result from a broader sense of exclusion experienced by communities in Blue Nile, and more generally by communities in Sudan’s peripheries, who feel that in today’s Sudan they remain second-class citizens, consistently denied equal status by the government in Khartoum on account of their identity.<sup>67</sup>

The interviews demonstrated how most “indigenous” communities of Blue Nile State associate their Sudanese identity with their Funj origins and their long history in the area. Interviewees consistently stated that they primarily identify themselves according to their ethnic community. National Sudanese identity was often described as secondary, but directly related, to “indigenous” Funj identity. “I am Sudanese because I can tell you my family’s history eight to nine generations back. They were born in Wadaka, in Sudan, in Blue

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<sup>61</sup> The titles “sheikh”, “omda”, “nazir”, “wakil” (originally Arabic words), and “chief”, all refer to positions in the “traditional” hierarchical community leadership. The extent to which this leadership is indeed “traditional”, and its relationship with the state, have been the subject of deep analysis. A review of literature on the subject can be found at: Thomas Spear, “Neo-traditionalism and the limits of invention in British Colonial Africa,” *Journal of African History*, 44 (2003), 3.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with a man (sheikh), Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with man (omda), Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016. On the title “omda” see footnote 61.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with a woman, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with a woman, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with a woman, Kaya refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>67</sup> Sudan’s conflicts of identity dominate much of the writing about the county’s politics and history. For a recent, vivid discussion, see James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan’s Bitter and Incomplete Divorce*, Hurst & Company, London, 2014, 9-40.

Nile,” explained one refugee living in Doro.<sup>68</sup> Another refugee from Roseires argued that “the original Sudanese are Funj.”<sup>69</sup>



Women from Wadaka (Kurmuk County, Blue Nile) in Doro refugee camp  
(© 2016 anonymous photographer/IRRI).

However, this identity is contested by the Sudanese government, which promotes the notion of Sudanese identity as being synonymous with an Arab-Muslim identity. A man in Doro refugee camp, originally from Gabanit, explained: “The Arabs feel that they are more Sudanese. For me, I feel that I am originally Sudanese.”<sup>70</sup> Another woman currently living in Gendrassa, said: “If Bashir agrees or not, I am Sudanese.”<sup>71</sup> A woman from Mayak, now a refugee in Doro, said that she feels Sudanese but joked that “when Omar chased us

away, I don’t know if I am Sudanese or not.”<sup>72</sup> A man in Yusuf Batil refugee camp said: “If they recognise that I am Sudanese as well, and I have the freedom to choose my religion and my leaders, this war will end.”<sup>73</sup>

Thus, for some, the conflict between different interpretations and notions of Sudanese identity is a key issue behind the conflict, and the reason for their political and economic exclusion. A nazir from Bau County now living in Gendrassa camp said that “it is clearly a war between the blacks and the Arabs. They want to eliminate all black people.”<sup>74</sup> Another man in Gendrassa, originally from Damazin, explained:

When the war started in Southern Kordofan Ahmed Harun [governor of Southern Kordofan] said: “wipe and eliminate the people and don’t bring them alive.” They want to clean the ethnic groups from the area. When the war in Blue Nile started Bashir said: “clean all the black plastic bags.” I am one of these plastic bags. This is why we are refugees in another country. The president of my country doesn’t recognise me. If it continues like this, the war will continue. The war will end when the government changes its policy or is replaced. If nothing changes this may lead for another separation, like South Sudan.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with a man from Roseires, Juba, April 2016.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with a woman, Gendrassa refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with a woman, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with a man, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with a man (nazir), Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016. On the title “nazir” see footnote 61.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with a man from Damazin, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016. Ahmed Harun, the state governor of Southern Kordofan, is the subject of an arrest warrant issued by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity in Darfur, and was documented in 2012 calling soldiers to “take no prisoners”. See “Sudan governor to troops: ‘Take no prisoners’,” Al-Jazeera, 1 April 2012, available at:

With Blue Nile being a destination for considerable numbers of migrants in recent decades, questions of identity and belonging are not only drawing lines and fuelling tensions between “indigenous” communities and the government, but also, though to a lesser extent, between these communities and more recent populations of “newcomers”. As many of the immigrants to Blue Nile are – like the “indigenous” groups – not Arabs (most notably, the West African Fellata), the division between “indigenous” and more recent immigrants remains more influential than the one between Arabs and non-Arabs, and certainly more than the one between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>76</sup>

Some interviewees (all of whom self-identified as being from “indigenous” communities) mentioned those who were seen as West African or Arab as being “less Sudanese” as a result of their migration to the region. A woman from Damazin, for example, stated that “the Hausa and Fellata are less Sudanese because they came from outside, from another country.”<sup>77</sup> Others, however, maintained that they were also Sudanese due to their long history in the region. For example, one man said that Arabs were “less Sudanese” but now “because they have [been] a long time in Sudan, they became Sudanese.”<sup>78</sup> Another man from Soda said that the Fellata are now “a part of the community of Blue Nile, because they were there for a long time.”<sup>79</sup>

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**“[The Fellata] are now a part of the community of Blue Nile, because they were there for a long time.”**

However, it is important to emphasise that these perceptions of belonging and Sudanese identity are not isolated from other layers of association. Both the Fellata and the Rufa’a, like other pastoral non-Funj groups in Blue Nile State, have been affiliated in recent decades with the government. Members of both groups were allied with the government during Sudan’s second civil war, were armed and trained, and participated in fighting against the SPLM.<sup>80</sup> This alliance served their interests as they had pre-existing conflicts with some SPLM-supporting Funj communities over grazing lands, migration routes and cattle raids. These tensions grew before the second civil war started as a result of the loss of land for agricultural schemes. During the current conflict, the government has established local militias again, predominantly among Fellata and Arab groups, to fight the SPLA-N.<sup>81</sup>

Local communities and SPLM-N officials interviewed described the alliances between the Arab and West African nomad groups and the government as alliances that were meant to improve their status in the state and allow them to acquire lands and cattle that originally belonged to “indigenous” communities. Supporting the government against the SPLM was thus described as a way to gain rights that these groups

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[www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/03/2012331114433519971.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/03/2012331114433519971.html). There have been several reports of the use of the term “black plastic bags” to describe black Africans in Blue Nile State, but IRRI could not establish who used this term in this context first. See also AFP, “UN ex-official warns of ethnic cleansing in south of Sudan,” Arab News, 18 January 2013, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/un-ex-official-warns-ethnic-cleansing-south-sudan> (both accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>76</sup> In “indigenous” communities in some areas it is not uncommon for Christians and Muslims to be part of the same family.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with a woman from Damazin, Gendrassa refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with a man from Wadaka, Doro refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with a man from Soda, Yusuf Batil camp, May 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Osman, 2009, Johnson & Prunier, 1993, 136.

<sup>81</sup> Gramizzi, 2013, 35-40.

lack since they are “newcomers” to the state. One man from Wadaka, for example, said that the Fellata side with the government because they “were promised that if they capture land, Bashir will give it to them.”<sup>82</sup>

For most interviewees, however, the political conflict with the Sudanese government overshadows the “simple” conflicts between pastoralists and farmers over grazing lands and cattle, which were articulated as conflicts that could be easily solved locally under “regular” circumstances. A man from Chali al-Fil said: “We don’t have any problem with the Fellata who are staying with us, only with those that were sent by the Sudanese government.”<sup>83</sup> Another man from Bau, now a refugee in Gendrassa refugee camp, stated: “The Fellata, we can accept them. The Arabs can also stay – when the government gives us what we need.”<sup>84</sup>

In recent years, and in particular since the signing of the CPA, some Fellata groups have shifted from supporting the government to supporting the SPLM (and later, the SPLM-N). The SPLM-N has also attempted to be more inclusive and gain the support of some Fellata groups.<sup>85</sup> According to one SPLM-N official, in 2015 two conferences were held, in Yusuf Batil refugee camp (South Sudan) and in Yabus (Blue Nile), in order to promote coexistence between local communities and Fellata nomads. Three committees were formed in Yabus, Belatuma and Chali al-Fil (all in SPLM-N held Kurmuk County) in order to address tensions between the communities when problems arise.<sup>86</sup>

## Impact of war

### Civilians targeted

From the first days of the current war civilians have been greatly affected by the government’s violent campaign against the SPLM/A-N. Fighting in Blue Nile State started in the state capital Damazin on 1 September 2011 following a confrontation between SAF and SPLM-N troops at a checkpoint.<sup>87</sup> The following day, the house of Malik Agar, then still the governor of the state, was attacked, and he fled to Kurmuk.<sup>88</sup> From Damazin violence spread quickly south to other parts of the state. SPLM-N officials were targeted in a number of towns, with some being arrested and some killed.<sup>89</sup>

Civilians across Blue Nile State soon found themselves under fire, including those fleeing southwards and later out of the country, as numerous battles between SPLA-N and SAF forces took place in different parts of southern Blue Nile State. A woman who initially fled Damazin to Kurmuk when the war started, then went to Ethiopia and later moved to South Sudan, recounted her story:

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with a man from Wadaka, Doro refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with a man from Chali al-Fil, Juba, April 2016.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with a man from Bau, Juba, April 2016.

<sup>85</sup> Interview with key informant, April 2016.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with an SPLM-N official, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>87</sup> The convoy that was involved in the incident at the checkpoint was the convoy of Brigadier General al-Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman, who was the commander of the SPLA-Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) troops in Blue Nile. The JIUs were units composed of an equal number of SPLA and SAF troops, and were established as part of the implementation of the security arrangements stipulated in the CPA. See Gramizzi, 2013, 18, ICG, 2013, 15-19.

<sup>88</sup> Agar was soon replaced, and the SPLM-N banned. Gramizzi, 2013, 21.

<sup>89</sup> Gramizzi, 2013, 18-23.



We were in Damazin. We went to Kurmuk, but the war continued there. We arrived there at five in the morning and were told that more fighting had started nearby. We were told to go to the border. We went and spent some time at the border and then the aerial bombardment started again. It was our first time to be in a war and to be displaced. When people said that we had to evacuate because the planes were coming, we did not know what the planes do.<sup>90</sup>

Ground offensives have also targeted civilians since the beginning of the war. Some populations near the Ingessana Hills first escaped there, hoping to find shelter from the violence when fighting reached the area in late 2011 and early 2012.<sup>91</sup> A woman from the area of Buk (north-west of the Ingessana Hills, in Tadamon County), currently living in Yusuf Batil camp, said:

This war started at night. When the shooting started we all ran away to the hills, but the planes came there as well and we left. From the moment the war started, for us it was a new experience. Everybody ran randomly to different directions, sick people and old people were left behind. SAF put everything on fire so we lost some dear ones. I left my in-law in the house and the next morning I found her dead, burned. They have also looted the houses. Old people were put on fire, and they raped and kidnapped women and girls. This is why we don't want anything with him [Bashir], even reconciliation.<sup>92</sup>

During the first weeks of the war, the frontline between the two forces moved southwards, with the SPLM-N eventually gathering in Kurmuk. Blue Nile was effectively divided into a small, southern, SPLM-N held part, and a northern, government held part. The SPLM-N also maintained its presence in other small areas of the state, predominantly in the Ingessana Hills.<sup>93</sup> After the first months of the war in which the SPLM-N lost Kurmuk and was pushed further south, the frontline between the SPLM-N and the government areas has not changed dramatically, but confrontations continued in different parts of the state, and civilians continued to be targeted, predominantly during SAF aerial and ground attacks, but also by SPLA-N troops.<sup>94</sup>

Aerial bombardment of civilian populations in areas associated with, or controlled by, the SPLM-N soon became one of the main characteristics of the government's war against the SPLM-N. These indiscriminate air attacks, also carried out by the government regularly in Southern Kordofan State and Darfur, have had a terrible impact on the lives of the people of Blue Nile.<sup>95</sup> In the SPLM-N held areas, air raids by Antonov planes

<sup>90</sup> Interview with a woman in Gendrassa, May 2016.

<sup>91</sup> On attacks against civilians by ground forces near the Ingessana Hills, see Amnesty International, "We Had No Time to Bury Them": War Crimes in Sudan's Blue Nile State," June 2013, 18-27, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR54/011/2013/en/> (Amnesty International, 2013), Human Rights Watch, "Under Siege: Indiscriminate Bombing and Abuses in Sudan's Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States," December 2012, 39-41, available at: [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/sudan1212webwcover\\_0.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/sudan1212webwcover_0.pdf) (HRW, 2012), (both accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>92</sup> Interview with a woman, Yusuf Batil, May 2016.

<sup>93</sup> Gramizzi, 2013, 18-23.

<sup>94</sup> African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies, "Attacks on Civilians by Sudanese Armed Forces and Sudanese People Liberation Movement-North in Blue Nile," 1 May 2015, available at: [www.acjps.org/attacks-on-civilians-by-sudanese-armed-forces-and-sudanese-peoples-liberation-movement-north-in-blue-nile/](http://www.acjps.org/attacks-on-civilians-by-sudanese-armed-forces-and-sudanese-peoples-liberation-movement-north-in-blue-nile/) (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>95</sup> See also: HRW, 2012, 35-39, Amnesty International, 2013, 15-17.

sometimes take place on a daily basis, characteristically with more attacks during the dry season when fighting between the armed forces on the ground also escalates.<sup>96</sup>

Although many civilians have learned to recognise the sound of approaching planes and have dug foxholes in an attempt to provide themselves with some shelter during raids, the bombs still often claim lives or cause terrible injuries, kill livestock, and destroy crops and private property. In addition, the indiscriminate nature of the attacks, and the fact that they can take place at any time, has had a terrible psychological impact on the population. The sound of the planes, sometimes lingering in the



A burnt hut in a village in southern Kurmuk County, days after it was bombed, May 2016 (© anonymous photographer/IRRI).

sky above several villages for a significant time before finally dropping bombs on any of them, constantly disrupts any normal activity and sends people to hide. As one omda in Yabus said, this stressful routine also has a cumulative impact on the community: “There is instability in the community. This is creating a climate of fear. People cannot carry on with their normal activities.”<sup>97</sup> Another man, speaking days after an Antonov plane bombed his village at night and destroyed seven houses, said that “now there are civilians who sleep inside the trenches, they go inside because they can’t sleep at night.”<sup>98</sup>

## Humanitarian aid blocked

Due to a combination of factors, the humanitarian situation in Blue Nile State has also significantly deteriorated. Inside the SPLM-N held areas, the ongoing aerial bombardments and insecurity disrupt livelihoods and markets.<sup>99</sup> Low rainfall, occasional flooding and crop pests have also added to food insecurity.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, since the beginning of the war, humanitarian access to the SPLM-N held areas has been consistently denied by Khartoum. Negotiations and diplomatic efforts have been fruitless, with the SPLM-N demanding that aid should be delivered through South Sudan or Ethiopia, and the government

<sup>96</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.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with a man (omda), Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with a man, a village outside Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>99</sup> For recent updates, see: Food Security Monitoring Unit for Blue Nile and South Kordofan States (FSMU), “Quarterly Report 5: Food Security Monitoring in Blue Nile and the Central Region and Western Jebel Region of South Kordofan,” May 2016, FSMU, “Food Security Monitoring in Blue Nile and the Central Region and Western Jebel Region of South Kordofan,” June 2016 (on file with IRRI).

<sup>100</sup> South Kordofan and Blue Nile Coordination Unit, “Humanitarian Update - February 2016,” available at: [http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur\\_consortium\\_actions/reports/2016/SKBNCU%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%20February%202016%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.sudanconsortium.org/darfur_consortium_actions/reports/2016/SKBNCU%20Humanitarian%20Update%20-%20February%202016%20(1).pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016).

maintaining that it should only be allowed into SPLM-N held areas from the north.<sup>101</sup> Without a green light from Khartoum, most humanitarian agencies are unwilling to conduct cross border operations into SPLM-N held areas from South Sudan or Ethiopia.<sup>102</sup>

Under these circumstances, humanitarian assistance in the SPLM-N held territories is extremely limited, and the few local organisations operating in these areas refrain from publishing information on the amount of assistance that they are providing. A few local initiatives of humanitarian assistance were mentioned by



Artisanal gold mining in southern Kurmuk County, Blue Nile State, May 2016 (© anonymous photographer/IRRI).

interviewees. Most notably, the Funj Youth Development Association (FYDA, a local NGO) has been involved in the distribution of some food items in the SPLM-N areas since late 2012. At the time of research, it only provided very limited assistance once a year, during the rainy season.<sup>103</sup>

Health and education services are also extremely limited inside the SPLM-N areas. Massive displacement in and from Blue Nile State has resulted in a lack of staff capable of maintaining clinics or schools. With no humanitarian

assistance, they also lack the necessary equipment. Since 2012, there have been only five primary schools and no secondary schools operating in SPLM-N held Blue Nile.<sup>104</sup> Children in these areas have not had access to routine vaccinations since the beginning of the conflict.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>101</sup> Another round of talks ended in August 2016, after the Sudanese government and the SPLM-N again failed to agree on humanitarian access to the Two Areas. See: AUHIP, “Press Release: Statement by African Union High-Level Implementation Panel on the Cessation of Hostilities Negotiations,” 15 August 2016, available at: <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/statement-by-african-union-high-level-implementation-panel-on-the-cessation-of-hostilities-negotiations> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>102</sup> See also Irina Mosel & Ashley Jackson, “Talking to the other side: Humanitarian negotiations in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, Sudan,” Humanitarian Policy Group, July 2013, available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8591.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>103</sup> Observations and interviews in Blue Nile, May 2016.

<sup>104</sup> The SPLM-N Secretariat of Education previously announced an ambitious plan to ensure 31 schools, all teaching the South Sudanese curriculum, operate in SPLM-N areas in Blue Nile by November 2015, providing education for 7,108 pupils (see Blue Nile Region: SPLM-N Held-Areas, Secretariat of Education, “Draft Work Plan: Preparation for the Primary Schools Year 2015- 2016,” 2015). This plan, according to a local SPLM-N official and IRRI observations, did not materialise and only 5 schools operated during the 2015-2016 school year. The same number of schools were reportedly operating in previous years. See also Benedetta De Alessi, *Two Fronts, One War: Evolution of the Two Areas Conflict, 2014-15*, Small Arms Survey, 2015, 45, available at: <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/working-papers/HSBA-WP38-Two-Areas.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>105</sup> Negotiations on humanitarian access in order to provide vaccinations were also fruitless. See, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Sudan: Humanitarian Bulletin Issue 47 | 16 – 22 November 2015,” 22 November 2015, available at:

The lack of security and mass displacement, combined with the underdevelopment of the SPLM-N held areas and their inaccessibility (particularly during the rainy season), also render commerce highly limited. Petty trade of bamboo and crops, an important source of income for the local populations before the war,<sup>106</sup> has been crippled and the economic situation is dire.<sup>107</sup> This means not only reduced supplies of essential food items in the markets, but also that local populations often lack the means to purchase even the limited food that can be found in the markets.<sup>108</sup> One farmer in Yabus, when asked about the impact of the war on his daily life, explained:

There is an impact economically. Before the war we used to cultivate and raise cattle. We benefited from it. Now we are not doing that. We cannot cultivate big fields and we don't have a lot of cattle. It is only for survival. Before the war we had different sources of income. We could hire people. We could make some money and then develop the fields.<sup>109</sup>

In addition, even those willing to cultivate despite the challenges do not always have the financial means to buy the necessary tools or seeds. With no other income-earning opportunities, many have turned to artisanal gold mining, despite its limited economic potential.<sup>110</sup>

In government controlled areas, heavy restrictions have been imposed on humanitarian organisations since the outbreak of the conflict,<sup>111</sup> and access to populations in need, including IDPs, and to Blue Nile State as a whole, remains restricted "through the implementation of effective bureaucratic hurdles, both structural and systematic," according to the UN.<sup>112</sup> UN humanitarian assessments, under government supervision, were

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[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA\\_Sudan\\_Weekly\\_Humanitarian\\_Bulletin\\_Issue\\_47\\_%2816\\_-\\_24\\_November\\_2015%29.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/OCHA_Sudan_Weekly_Humanitarian_Bulletin_Issue_47_%2816_-_24_November_2015%29.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>106</sup> UNDP, 2010, 10.

<sup>107</sup> Interviews in Blue Nile. The economic crisis in South Sudan has exacerbated the economic situation in Blue Nile as well, as South Sudan remains the main source of products for most places inside the SPLM-N held areas. Commerce with Ethiopia also exists in southern Kurmuk County, in the area of Yabus, but access from Ethiopia is even more limited than access from South Sudan's Maban.

<sup>108</sup> See also Famine Early Warning System, "Increased conflict in South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur drives additional displacement," April 2016, available at:

[http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/SD\\_FSOU\\_2016\\_04\\_final.pdf](http://www.fews.net/sites/default/files/documents/reports/SD_FSOU_2016_04_final.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>109</sup> Interview with a man, Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Observations and interviews in Blue Nile State. Gold can be sold to traders who are able to cross the frontlines into government held areas in order to sell it, or, reportedly, to traders from Ethiopia. This has also been documented at Gramizzi, 2013, 56, ICG, 2013, 29, and more recently at Ashley Hamer, "A journey deep into Sudan's forsaken Blue Nile," Al-Jazeera, 16 June 2016, <http://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2016/blue-nile-sudan-gold-gum-arabic/> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>111</sup> In the beginning of the war, Sudan's Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) – a government body overseeing the work of NGOs in Sudan – only allowed assistance in Blue Nile to be provided by national NGOs and the Sudanese Red Crescent Society (SRCS). See OCHA, "Sudan: Humanitarian update on Blue Nile and South Kordofan states," 27 September 2011, [www.unocha.org/eastern-africa/top-stories/sudan-humanitarian-update-blue-nile-and-south-kordofan-states](http://www.unocha.org/eastern-africa/top-stories/sudan-humanitarian-update-blue-nile-and-south-kordofan-states) (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>112</sup> OCHA, "Regional Outlook for the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Region, April-June 2016," April 2016, 5, 33, available at: [www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/March\\_Outlook\\_Doc\\_PDF\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/March_Outlook_Doc_PDF_FINAL.pdf), (OCHA, 2016), Sudan Democracy First Group, "Blue Nile State: Under Fire," 28 May 2015, [www.democracyfirstgroup.org/blue-nile-under-fire/](http://www.democracyfirstgroup.org/blue-nile-under-fire/) (both accessed 05 September 2016).

only allowed from early 2013,<sup>113</sup> but international staff members were often barred from taking part in these,<sup>114</sup> and were generally prevented from accessing the state. As at mid-2016 there was only one international UN staff present in Blue Nile.<sup>115</sup> Food distributions by the World Food Programme (WFP) were resumed in some parts of the government areas of Blue Nile in April 2013.<sup>116</sup>

## Communities divided

While support for the SPLM-N comes chiefly from the “indigenous” communities of Blue Nile, the simplistic political labelling of groups along ethnic lines, more often done by outsiders than by locals in the context of the Sudans as a whole and Blue Nile specifically, obscures more complex and nuanced dynamics within communities and sometimes even families.

During the second civil war, many of the groups in Blue Nile were divided when some men from the same communities and ethnic groups joined the SPLA, while others fought on the government side.<sup>117</sup> Such divisions have also occurred in the current war, although it is difficult to estimate on what scale: for a variety of reasons, from ideological ones to mere personal circumstances, not all “indigenous” people necessarily stand behind the SPLM-N.

Many of the civilians interviewed said that they know people from their communities or other communities who are fighting with both SAF and the SPLA-N. Some were also familiar with cases of defections between the two sides. A man in Yusuf Batil, referring to communities in which men are fighting on both sides, said: “This guy [Omar al-Bashir] just puts conflicts inside families. If peace comes and he is still in power, there will be personal problems inside families.”<sup>118</sup>

Those fighting with SAF, however, were not blamed for their actions, but were usually regarded by interviewees as no more than cannon fodder, “used by the government” in the frontlines, often by force. A man from Fadamia (Bau County) currently living in Gendrassa refugee camp, mentioned that “even from the Ingessana, many are with the SPLM-N and many are with SAF,” but those who fight with SAF, “don’t know anything. They don’t understand what the government of Bashir is doing.”<sup>119</sup> Similar positions were sometimes expressed with regard to members of other “marginalised” (a term often used by more politically involved individuals) communities from Sudan’s peripheries that are fighting alongside government troops.

<sup>113</sup> ICG, 2013, 30.

<sup>114</sup> See, for example: “International staff barred from Blue Nile aid assessment,” Radio Dabanga, 19 October 2014, available at: [www.reliefweb.int/report/sudan/international-staff-barred-blue-nile-aid-assessment](http://www.reliefweb.int/report/sudan/international-staff-barred-blue-nile-aid-assessment) (accessed 05 September 2016).

<sup>115</sup> OCHA, “Sudan: Blue Nile - Who Does What Where (SWs),” May 2016, available at: [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/blue\\_nile\\_who\\_does\\_what\\_where\\_3ws\\_29\\_may\\_2016\\_a3.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/system/files/documents/files/blue_nile_who_does_what_where_3ws_29_may_2016_a3.pdf) (accessed 05 September 2016).

<sup>116</sup> WFP was operating in Blue Nile State before the conflict. WFP, “Life-Saving Food Assistance Reaches Conflict-Hit People Of Sudan’s Blue Nile State,” 4 April 2013, available at: <https://www.wfp.org/news/news-release/life-saving-food-assistance-reaches-conflict-hit-people-sudan-blue-nile-state> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>117</sup> James, 2007, 51, 56-57.

<sup>118</sup> Interview with a man (omda), Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with a man, Gendrassa refugee camp, April 2016.



## Displacement: community impact

Another characteristic of the war in Blue Nile are the high levels of displacement within and from the state since 2011. Without a doubt, this movement of populations, resulting primarily from the indiscriminate attacks against civilians and the growing humanitarian needs in the affected areas, has impacted individuals, families and communities, and changed the social, political and economic landscape of the entire state and the surrounding borderlands.

Within less than two weeks after the outbreak of violence in 2011, it was estimated that more than 100,000 people were displaced.<sup>120</sup> The majority fled to South Sudan. As of mid-2016, the country hosted more than 132,000 Sudanese refugees from Blue Nile in Maban County (Upper Nile State), living in four camps: Doro, Gendrassa, Yusuf Batil and Kaya.<sup>121</sup> Ethiopia received a smaller number of refugees, and as at early 2016 hosted close to 39,000 Sudanese refugees in camps in Benishangul-Gumuz region across the border from Blue Nile.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, the entire refugee population in both South Sudan and Ethiopia – around 172,000 – amounts to 16-20 percent of Blue Nile's pre-war estimated population.<sup>123</sup>

Reliable data on internal displacement in Blue Nile State is hard to ascertain. Estimations of the number of IDPs within the state stood at 176,000 by the end of December 2013, but the current number is likely to be higher not least because during 2015 an additional 20,000-30,000 persons were forcibly displaced from Bau County to the outskirts of Damazin.<sup>124</sup> These IDPs are scattered in different locations in both government and SPLM-N areas. Estimations of the displaced population, and the population in general, inside the SPLM-N areas, vary, but suggest that most people in these territories are IDPs. The Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (SRRA, the SPLM-N's humanitarian wing), estimated in late 2012 that 98,003 people lived inside the SPLM-N held territories in Blue Nile State, of which 79,550 were internally displaced.<sup>125</sup> The same number of IDPs was reported by the SRRA in mid-2015.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>120</sup> "Fighting in Sudan's Blue Nile state displaces tens of thousands of people – UN," UN News Centre, 13 September 2011, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=39538#.V0F4FHgTHzJ> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>121</sup> Doro is the largest refugee camp, with a population of 51,654. Yusuf Batil hosts 40,655, Gendrassa, 17,281 and Kaya, 24,825 (data as of 31 July 2016 according to UNHCR). See UNHCR, "South Sudan Statistics: Population by Country of Origin, Sex and Age Group," July 2016, available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/download.php?id=2878> (accessed 03 September 2016).

<sup>122</sup> UNHCR, "Ethiopia: Factsheet," January 2016, available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/EthiopiaFactSheetJanuary2016.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>123</sup> See footnote 5, p. 9.

<sup>124</sup> International Displacement Monitoring Centre, "Sudan: Other crises distract attention from tremendous needs of IDPs," 9 July 2014, [www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/sudan/2014/sudan-other-crises-distract-attention-from-tremendous-needs-of-idps](http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/sudan/2014/sudan-other-crises-distract-attention-from-tremendous-needs-of-idps) (accessed 23 August 2016), OCHA, 2016, 33.

<sup>125</sup> SRRA, "Special Report on: The Humanitarian and Human Rights Situation of the IDPs and War Affected Civilians in the SPLM/A-North Controlled Areas of Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States," 31 December 2012, available at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/118518463/SRRA-Special-Report-on-the-Humanitarian-and-Human-Rights-Situation-in-BN-SK-States-Final> (accessed 03 September 2016).

<sup>126</sup> SRRA, "Humanitarian and Human rights situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and war affected civilians in the SPLM/N controlled areas of South Kordofan/Nuba Mountains & Blue Nile states: Sixth issue, six monthly report January – June 2015," July 2015, available at: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/272104268/SRRA-6th-Report-January-June-2015> (accessed 03 September 2016).

This massive displacement has inevitably divided families, in situations in which families scattered either to different countries or to opposite sides of the frontline.<sup>127</sup> In the areas affected by violence, including inside SPLM-N territories, some villages have been abandoned by most of their residents. Other villages inside SPLM-N held areas now host returnees or IDPs. One man from Soda, now residing in Kaya camp, recounted: “All the people of Soda left. The majority came to refugee camps but a few also went to IDP camps around Damazin. The government burned these camps and they were displaced again.”<sup>128</sup>

Perhaps the most evident impact of the displacement, on those civilians who had to leave their homes, has been the loss of livelihoods and property, and the growing dependency on aid. As most communities maintained an agro-pastoral lifestyle before they fled, the loss of land, and in many cases also livestock, has been critical.<sup>129</sup> A community leader in Yusuf Batil explained: “We were farmers. We could provide for ourselves. We raised cattle. These are the two things we were dependent on. When this war started we lost everything.”<sup>130</sup> Another man in Doro refugee camp said: “We had enough food. Now we eat much less. People cannot work the land. Now we are in a problem: you want to feed your children but you don’t have any options. All the people are looking for help from NGOs but the aid is not enough.”<sup>131</sup>



Clothes distribution in Gendrassa refugee camp, South Sudan (© 2016 anonymous photographer/IRRI).

A man in Gendrassa camp similarly mentioned that “people who had enough for their living lost everything. They are very poor now.”<sup>132</sup> A girl in Yusuf Batil camp also recounted:

In Buk, we didn’t need things from other people. Now we need things but we cannot get them. [...] We had beds and cupboards. We had trees and the area was nice. Our house was built of bricks. Here it is built of grass – we only have one shelter made of tin. The grass shelter collapsed when it rained and also the neighbours’ so they came and stayed with us.<sup>133</sup>

<sup>127</sup> This has been mentioned by interviewees in both Blue Nile and Maban.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with a man, Kaya refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>129</sup> Some communities were able to travel to Maban with their livestock. See Lauren Hutton, *Displacement, Disharmony and Disillusion: Understanding Host-Refugee Tensions in Maban County, South Sudan*, Danish Demining Group, January 2013, 12, available at:

[http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Displacement%20Disharmony%20and%20Disillusion\\_%20DDG%20South%20Sudan.pdf](http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Displacement%20Disharmony%20and%20Disillusion_%20DDG%20South%20Sudan.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016), (Hutton, 2013).

<sup>130</sup> Interview with a man, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>132</sup> Interview with a man, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with a girl, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

Many of the refugees interviewed blamed the cramped living conditions in the camp for increased tensions within and between different communities. One man in Doro refugee camp, a sheikh in his home community, said: “There are much more problems inside the community now. Before, the communities were separated but now everybody lives together in the same place.”<sup>134</sup> Another omda in Yusuf Batil refugee camp, referring also to the security problems outside the camps in Maban, further explained: “If I went to the forests to cut wood, if they don’t kill me, they will ask me to pay. Then when I stay in the house, I get into problems with the family.”<sup>135</sup> Another nazir in Gendrassa refugee camp added: “The war changed the behaviour of people and their lifestyle. People are misbehaving now: there are thieves.”<sup>136</sup>

For others, however, the mutual challenges refugees face has also generated solidarity. One young woman from Damazin, currently living in Gendrassa camp said:

In Damazin I did not move a lot, but where I stayed there were different communities in one place and there were no issues between them. Here in the camp I also don’t see conflicts. There is solidarity because of the situation.<sup>137</sup>

## Displaced again: returning to exile

These experiences of displacement and loss should be viewed within an historical context. The four camps in Maban currently host refugees from different parts of Blue Nile, and from different communities that were not necessarily close to each other before the war. In addition, while many of the refugees from Blue Nile only became refugees for the first time when the current cycle of violence started, others, predominantly among the Uduk from southern Kurmuk, were previously displaced for almost two decades during Sudan’s second civil war.

As previously mentioned, displacement from southern Blue Nile, during the second civil war, started in 1987. The Uduk and other Blue Nile displaced communities that fled to Ethiopia were settled in Langkwai. The Uduk were viewed by the authorities at the time as “model refugees” since they maintained their family and community structures and brought their own seeds and tools with them.<sup>138</sup> Their refuge in Langkwai, however, only lasted until 1990, when the OLF attacked Assosa and they were forced into a long journey of onward displacement, zigzagging between Ethiopia and Sudan before finally settling in Bonga (Ethiopia) in 1993.<sup>139</sup> Many did not survive this journey. Following the CPA, refugees from Bonga started to return to Sudan, a process that was supported by UNHCR.<sup>140</sup>

<sup>134</sup> Interview with a man (sheikh), Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with man (omda), Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with a man (nazir), Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with a woman from Damazin, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>138</sup> James, 2007, 115-116.

<sup>139</sup> Refugees fled from Ethiopia back into Blue Nile, then south, through Upper Nile, back into Ethiopia’s Itang, then back into Sudan to Nor-Deng (near Nasir), back to Ethiopia, to Karmi and finally to Bonga. This journey was a result of the broader conflict dynamics in Sudan and the region, including the 1991 SPLA split. James, 2007, 111-186.

<sup>140</sup> UNHCR, “Voluntary Repatriation of Sudanese Refugees From Gambella, Ethiopia, to Blue Nile State, Sudan: Mission Report, 17-27 October 2005,” October 2005, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/43aa76614.pdf>, Millicent Mutuli, “Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia clamour for repatriation to southern Sudan,” 5 April 2007, available at [www.unhcr.org/461515b84.html](http://www.unhcr.org/461515b84.html) (both accessed 23 August 2016).

Hence, as opposed to the Blue Nile refugees who were displaced for the first time in 2011, many Uduk who are currently displaced had been forced to flee having only returned to Blue Nile a few years earlier. These returnees-turned-refugees were still in the process of rebuilding their lives and restoring their cultivations and livelihoods when the 2011 conflict began.<sup>141</sup> As a result, the younger generation among the Uduk have spent most of their lives as refugees. Their re-displacement has made their lives even more precarious, and, having had their resilience depleted by years of displacement, they are reportedly more dependent on aid.<sup>142</sup>

Their previous experience of displacement, however, does also appear to have some benefits. One camp manager, not an Uduk himself, mentioned that the Uduk are “much better in accepting the conditions, much more than others. Many work with NGOs because they have experience.”<sup>143</sup> Another Ingessana woman said that the Uduk are “the only refugees who can teach,” because they have been to refugee camps in Ethiopia and speak English.<sup>144</sup> One Uduk man in Doro referred to a more daily impact of his community’s past experience:

When people are going to the food distribution place they are going with their kids, and carry a knife. We just take the ration card and sacs. We know that we are just going to collect the food from the store.<sup>145</sup>

Uduk families that were displaced during the second civil war and were interviewed in Doro camp also drew comparisons with past experiences of displacement. In general, they described the current conditions in Maban as more challenging than the situation they faced in Ethiopia due to the lack of food and tensions with the host community. In addition, while tensions between different Blue Nile communities inside the camps were not mentioned as a problem by any of the interviewees, some Uduk did express sentiments of alienation. One woman in Doro mentioned that “in South Sudan we stay with different tribes in the camp. In Bonga we were only Uduk.”<sup>146</sup> Another woman said that the Ingessana “are proud of themselves, saying that Uduk don’t know anything.”<sup>147</sup>

## Tensions with host communities in Maban

One of the most pressing issues for many of the refugees interviewed in Maban has been the tensions and violent incidents between the refugee communities and host Maban (sometimes called Mabaan, or Mabanese) communities around the camps. According to the Commission for Refugee Affairs (CRA), 37 locals and 53 refugees have been killed due to tensions between refugees and the host community in Maban

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<sup>141</sup> Wendy James, “Perspectives on the Blue Nile,” in Samuel Totten & Amanda F. Grzyb (eds.), *Conflict in the Nuba Mountains: From Genocide-by-Attrition to the Contemporary Crisis in Sudan*, Routledge, 2014, 203 (James, 2014).

<sup>142</sup> Hutton, 2013, 20-21.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with a camp manager (a refugee from Blue Nile), Maban, May 2016.

<sup>144</sup> Interview with a woman, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with a man from the Balila Uduk community, Doro refugee camp, May 2016. James also mentions some Blue Nile refugees as having “experience of some decades in a succession of camps learning about resource management, collaborating with foreign officials, aid agencies and specifically UNHCR, in a series of sites mainly in Ethiopia.” James, 2014, 195.

<sup>146</sup> Interview with a woman from Chali al-Fil, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>147</sup> Interview with a woman from Chali al-Fil, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

since 2011.<sup>148</sup> Some refugees interviewed put the number of casualties among the refugees at 100 or more, arguing that not all cases are being properly documented by the authorities.<sup>149</sup>

Tensions mostly revolve around access to wood, which is prepared as charcoal for sale and used to build or improve shelters. Almost five years of extensive use of the natural resources in the camps and surrounding areas has resulted in evident deforestation, therefore increasing the competition over the available resources and making resources ever scarcer.<sup>150</sup> In addition, refugees grazing their livestock in territories belonging to Maban communities have also generated tensions. One woman living in Gendrassa camp explained: “In the refugee camps there are communities with goats and cows, and they [the local communities] don’t allow them to take the cattle outside. If they find you outside you can be killed.”<sup>151</sup>

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**“We ran from war but found another war.”**

At the same time, Maban communities are frustrated with the number of refugees in the area, which outnumber the local population of around 36,000,<sup>152</sup> and with what they perceive as preferential allocation of resources to refugee communities.<sup>153</sup> According to a recent study that focused on tensions around Gendrassa camp, host communities also report that refugees have been stealing their crops.<sup>154</sup>

Although tensions have existed since the arrival of refugees from Blue Nile, their levels have varied, and they have affected some of the camps more than the others.<sup>155</sup> Regardless, they have created a general sense of

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<sup>148</sup> REACH, “Mapping of Tensions and Disputes between Refugees and Host Community in Gendrassa, Maban,” December 2015, 5, available at: [http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach\\_ssd\\_report\\_maping\\_tensions\\_and\\_disputes\\_between\\_refugees\\_and\\_host\\_community\\_in\\_gendrassa\\_maban\\_jan\\_2016.pdf](http://www.reachresourcecentre.info/system/files/resource-documents/reach_ssd_report_maping_tensions_and_disputes_between_refugees_and_host_community_in_gendrassa_maban_jan_2016.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016), (REACH, 2015).

<sup>149</sup> Interviews in Maban, May 2016.

<sup>150</sup> Interviews in Maban, deforestation was already noticeable in 2012. See Hutton, 2013, 18.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with a woman, Gendrassa refugee camp, April 2016.

<sup>152</sup> Sandrine Tiller and Sean Healy, “Have we lost the ability to respond to refugee crises? The Maban response,” *Humanitarian Exchange*, 57, May 2013, 17-20, available at: [http://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/HE\\_57\\_web.pdf](http://odihpn.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/HE_57_web.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>153</sup> Small Arms Survey, “Conflict in Upper Nile,” 16 April 2015, available at: <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/south-sudan/HSBA-Conflict-Upper-Nile-April-2015.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016), (Small Arms Survey, 2015a).

<sup>154</sup> REACH, 2015.

<sup>155</sup> Tensions increased in early 2014 and then again in 2015. In the beginning of 2016 they had calmed down, according to interviews with refugees in Maban, but exploded again in late May when two South Sudanese and one refugee were killed in clashes in Doro refugee camp. See also: “5 wounded in fighting between refugees and Maban community,” Radio Tamazuj, 3 March 2014, available at <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/5-wounded-fighting-between-refugees-and-maban-community>, “More clashes between Maban community and Blue Nile refugees,” Radio Tamazuj, 6 March 2014, available at <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/more-clashes-between-maban-community-and-blue-nile-refugees>, “Blue Nile refugees face expulsion by Maban County youths,” Radio Tamazuj, 19 March 2014, available at <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/blue-nile-refugees-face-expulsion-maban-county-youths>, “Two dead in fresh clashes between Maban and Blue Nile refugees,” Radio Tamazuj, 2 February 2015, available at <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/two-dead-fresh-clashes-between-maban-and-blue-nile-refugees>, “UNHCR decries death of refugee in S. Sudan’s Upper Nile state,” Sudan Tribune, 4 June 2016, available at: [www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article59188](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article59188) (all accessed 14 August 2016).



insecurity, and have limited the movement of refugees as a result. Many interviewees mentioned that they avoid going out of the camp. One woman from Mayak, currently in Doro, said: “We ran from war but found another war.”<sup>156</sup> A woman from the Uduk community of Balila, also living in Doro, explained: “When we go to get firewood the host community attack us. We don’t know what to do. The Maban used to take our axe. Now we don’t go out.”<sup>157</sup> A refugee from Soda in Doro added: “We are sitting in the camp and we cannot move because of the host communities. People don’t go out of the camp.”<sup>158</sup>

However, access to natural resources is not the only issue behind the conflict between refugees and host communities. Maban County has stood, most notably since mid-2014, at the intersection of two



The outskirts of Doro refugee camp, South Sudan, May 2016 (© anonymous photographer/IRRI).

interconnected conflicts: the conflict in Blue Nile, and the conflict in South Sudan, between the South Sudanese government and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO). The tensions in Maban are now an inseparable part of these two conflicts and are perceived by some as part of a proxy war between Khartoum and Juba.

The Sudanese government has repeatedly accused its South Sudanese counterpart of supporting the SPLM-N, and has also bombed inside Maban County several times since the conflict in Blue Nile State began.<sup>159</sup> At the same time the SPLA-IO, allied with SAF, received assistance from Khartoum and was based in several locations inside Sudan, including Blue Nile State. In Maban County, both the SPLA and the SPLA-IO have been using (different) local Maban militias.

The Sudanese government has repeatedly accused its South Sudanese counterpart of

The Maban Defence Force (MDF), locally known also as the Maban White Army, was established in early 2014 but drew considerable attention only after its troops clashed with Nuer deserters from the SPLA and killed six Nuer aid workers in Maban in August 2014.<sup>160</sup> The group has cooperated with the South Sudanese

<sup>156</sup> Interview with a woman, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>157</sup> Interview with a woman, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>159</sup> “Sudan accused of bombing border area of Maban County,” Radio Tamazuj, 15 February 2014, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/sudan-accused-bombing-border-area-maban-county>, “Sudan accused of bombing S Sudan’s Maban County,” 14 January 2016, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/article/sudan-accused-bombing-s-sudans-maban-county> (both accessed 14 August 2016).

<sup>160</sup> Interviews in Maban, May 2016, Small Arms Survey, “Conflict in the Two Areas,” 30 January 2015, available at: <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/Border-Disputed-Areas/HSBA-Two-Areas-Jan-2015.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016), (Small Arms Survey, 2015b), Sam Jones, “UN outraged at ethnic murder of South Sudanese humanitarian workers,” The Guardian, 6 August 2014, available at: [www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/06/un-murder-south-sudan-humanitarian-workers](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2014/aug/06/un-murder-south-sudan-humanitarian-workers) (accessed 15 August 2016).

government in its conflict with the SPLA-IO, but refused to fully integrate into the SPLA, maintaining its loyalty to local interests and communities.<sup>161</sup> Despite the MDF's cooperation with the SPLA (that is perceived as pro-SPLM-N), hostility between the group and Sudanese refugees in Maban remained.<sup>162</sup> The SPLA-IO, operating further away, south of the refugee camps, was also reportedly successful in recruiting Maban civilians.<sup>163</sup> As mentioned above, it had troops based inside Sudan, and according to the SPLA and SPLA-N, one battalion of South Sudanese Maban militia joined SPLA-IO troops that have been trained in Bout, in government held Blue Nile (Tadamon County).<sup>164</sup>

It is in this context that some refugees suggested that the Maban, or at least those that clash with refugees, "were sent by Khartoum to make problems," as a man in Doro put it.<sup>165</sup> One man, an SPLM-N official who was interviewed in Maban, argued:

The explanations on wood and water are just different stories. The actual reason for the conflict is the Sudanese government. Khartoum has hosted the rebels – the Maban and the Nuer were given arms to fight Kiir. Maban in Sudan communicate with the Maban in South Sudan, who want to weaken the SPLM-N by dismantling the camps. The Maban want us to go back and the Sudanese government prepared IDP camps for those who will leave the camps.<sup>166</sup>

A number of interviewees mentioned that they have heard rumours of Maban fighting alongside SAF inside Blue Nile in the battles that took place in April 2016 in Mufu and Alroum.<sup>167</sup> As one refugee from Gendrasa camp explained: "The war in South Sudan is bad for us. Some tribes came to fight against SPLA-N in Blue Nile. In Jebel Mufu, the Nuer and Maban were fighting with SAF."<sup>168</sup> Such allegations with regard to recent battles in Blue Nile could not be verified by IRRI, but were made by a number of unrelated interviewees in different locations, indicating that regardless of their accuracy, they are widespread. As another man in Yabus argued:

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<sup>161</sup> UNSC, "Report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan (covering the period from 18 November 2014-10 February 2015)," S/2015/118, 17 February 2015, 4, available at: [http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2015\\_118.pdf](http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2015_118.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016), Small Arms Survey, 2015a. Clashes between the MDF and the SPLA-IO south of refugee camps in Maban occurred on several occasions throughout 2015. Interviews with key informants in Maban. See also Small Arms Survey, "Conflict in the Two Areas: Security and political dynamics at the beginning of the fifth season of fighting," 16 February 2016, available at: [http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/sudan/HSBA-Two-Areas-Feb-2016\\_02.pdf](http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/sudan/HSBA-Two-Areas-Feb-2016_02.pdf) (accessed 23 August 2016), (Small Arms Survey, 2016).

<sup>162</sup> Interviews in Maban, May 2016.

<sup>163</sup> Small Arms Survey, 2016, 7, Small Arms Survey, 2015b, 5.

<sup>164</sup> Small Arms Survey, 2015b.

<sup>165</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with a SPLM-N official, Maban, May 2016.

<sup>167</sup> On the fighting in Alroum and Mufu, see "Rebels seize materiel in battle with Sudanese army," Radio Dabanga, 6 April 2016, available at <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/rebels-seize-materiel-in-battle-with-sudanese-army>, "'Sudan forces defeated in Blue Nile, chopper downed in Kordofan': rebels," Radio Dabanga, 19 April 2016, available at <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-forces-defeated-in-blue-nile-chopper-downed-in-kordofan-rebels> (both accessed 14 August 2016). On Maban fighting in Blue Nile State see also Gramizzi, 2013, 35-40.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with a man from Blue Nile State, Juba, April 2016.

Maban people who left South Sudan and went to government controlled areas [in Sudan] – they were recruited and now they are fighting with SAF. In Alroum and Mufu, Maban and Nuer were found among the dead.<sup>169</sup>

One way of addressing the tensions in Maban has been the reactivation of joint Peace Committees in February 2015. These are composed of representatives from the refugee and host community, and are facilitated by the Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), UNHCR and the South Sudanese CRA.<sup>170</sup> While community leaders who take part in these committees argued that they had helped in decreasing the tensions over the first couple of months of 2016, many of the refugees interviewed were more pessimistic, with some arguing that they see no solution to the current tensions, except not going out of the camp or leaving Maban.

## Adjusting to a new status quo?

### SPLM-N civil authority

In 2013, the SPLM-N established civilian government institutions in the territories under its control in Southern Kordofan. In 2014 these were expanded to Blue Nile. The structures in place currently include 13 secretariats (responsible for issues including education and health); a police force; a judiciary (including one Chief of Justice for the Two Areas, a high court and a number of community administration courts) and in Blue Nile State, a governor and a deputy, three commissioners for the counties of Kurmuk, Tadamon and Bau,<sup>171</sup> as well as officials at the district level. These institutions replaced the earlier system of military control over civilian populations that had previously been in place.

The civilian administration was intended to create a separation between civilian and military issues that had previously been under the authority of the same body. It was also meant to empower civilians to take part in the administration and governance of the so-called “liberated areas”, as well as to enhance the rule of law in these territories in order to offer better protection for civilians “not only from SAF”.<sup>172</sup>

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**“Now we are in war. There is nothing except that.”**

At a political level, the establishment of a civil administration also aimed to provide legitimacy as well as demonstrate the capacity of the SPLM-N to effectively govern the territories under its control, a crucial issue for the movement given that it is fighting for autonomy or “self-rule”. As one camp manager in Maban argued, the civilian government is meant to “prepare for the future.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Interview with a man in Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>170</sup> REACH, 2015, 16.

<sup>171</sup> There are no commissioners for the three other counties, Roseires, Geissan and Damazin, in which SPLM-N presence has been limited.

<sup>172</sup> IIRI & NHRMO, “We just want a rest from war”: Civilian perspectives on the conflict in Sudan’s Southern Kordofan State,” April 2015, 20, available at: <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2015/TiredofWar.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016), (IIRI & NHRMO, 2015), interview with a community leader, Yusuf Batil refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>173</sup> Interview with a man (community camp manager of one of the refugee camps in Maban), May 2016.

The civil administration is currently less developed in Blue Nile than it is in Southern Kordofan,<sup>174</sup> mainly as a result of the limited capacity of its structures and institutions under the current circumstances, in which most resources are invested in fighting, and in which there is almost no infrastructure of any sort inside the “liberated areas”. As one County Commissioner put it: “Now we are in war. There is nothing except that.”<sup>175</sup> In this context, he argued that the authorities are more concerned with raising the awareness among civilians on how to deal with ground attacks and air raids.<sup>176</sup>

As such, while there are clear structures of governance, not all civilians are familiar with them in practice, as there is a continued reliance on the hierarchical “traditional” community administration. This system of community leadership is based on sheikhs (or chiefs, in some of the communities), omdas, and nazirs, and was preserved in the camps as well, where communities have in general settled in groups based on their home area in Blue Nile. These structures are deeply rooted in the communities, and are a recognisable system for governance and conflict resolution even in the context of displacement. As one man in Doro refugee camp said, “this system for solving problems is still in place. It is not going to end.”<sup>177</sup>

Therefore, under the new SPLM-N administration, the first avenue for conflict resolution for most civilians has remained their local sheikh or chief. In the camps, issues can be raised via these community leaders to the NGOs, the camp management or SPLM-N representatives in some cases. Inside SPLM-N held areas in Blue Nile, issues that are not resolved within the community administration are theoretically transferred to the relevant SPLM-N authorities or judiciary, though the extent to which SPLM-N judicial institutions in Blue Nile State are indeed functional is unclear.

The civilian authority, despite its minimal effect on the daily lives of most civilians, did help communities inside SPLM-N held areas “to be more organised,” as the omda of the Koma-Ganza community (residing south of Yabus) put it.<sup>178</sup> “If people have an issue they go to the sheikh, then to the wakil, and then to me. If the problem is complicated, I forward it to the court,” he added.<sup>179</sup> Another man, living in Yabus, also described a positive change in law enforcement since the establishment of the civilian authority: “Now it is more organised. Before, if anything happened the soldier would come, beat you, and that’s it. Now the police will take you to the sheikh to solve it and if he fails, to the omda, and finally to the court.”<sup>180</sup>

It was also interesting to note that the interviews in both Blue Nile and Maban suggest that the distinction between military forces and civilian authority is clear to civilians, who, by and large, see community chiefs, sheikhs and omdas as their leaders. Less clear were the limits of SPLM-N authority in the refugee camps in Maban. While interviews suggest that SPLM-N officials recognise that they have no legitimacy to exercise their authority on refugees in a foreign country, many also shared the view that the SPLM-N is representing the refugees in Maban before the South Sudanese authorities.

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<sup>174</sup> On the civilian authority in Southern Kordofan State see IRRI & NHRMO, 2015, 20-21.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with SPLM-N official, Maban, May 2016.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>178</sup> Interview with a man (omda), Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.* On the title “wakil” see footnote 61.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with a man in Yabus, May 2016.

## Coping with displacement

The hardships of displacement are difficult to exaggerate. Food levels were a huge concern at the time of the research, a problem that has become increasingly dire over time. A nutrition survey conducted in late 2015 found increased levels of malnutrition in all the camps in Maban, and in particular in Doro.<sup>181</sup> According to UNHCR, this recent increase is mainly attributed to the 30 percent reduction in WFP food rations introduced in August 2015,<sup>182</sup> but the crisis in South Sudan and the lack of infrastructure meant that malnutrition was already a concern in Maban even before the reduction. The shortage of food was worsened by the tensions with local communities, as many of the alternative ways refugees were familiar with for acquiring food or generating an income were also blocked. While some refugees in Doro cultivate in the tiny areas outside their huts in an attempt to supplement the insufficient food rations, the impact is minimal.<sup>183</sup> In Yusuf Batil and Gendrassa camps, refugees talked of how a number of children had been injured falling out of trees, attempting to collect leaves and fruits. They were also being forced to eat inedible plants.

These conditions in the camps in Maban, combined with the prolonging of the war, appear to be pushing some refugees to leave. Some are returning to the SPLM-N held areas (although not necessarily to their home areas), and others are moving to the refugee camps in Ethiopia. The main factors for moving from Maban to Ethiopia, as mentioned by a number of interviewees in Maban who were familiar with cases of refugees who moved, include the lack of security in Maban and the better services, predominantly education, provided in camps in Ethiopia. Some refugees in Maban mentioned that families who can afford the journey had moved to Ethiopia hoping that their children will be able to get better education there.

At the same time, however, refugees have also been moving from Ethiopia to Maban. The main reason for this appear to be the pull of family or community members already in Maban, and the lack of freedom of movement in the camps in Ethiopia. One woman who spent four months in Ethiopia and then came to South Sudan, recounted:

Our friends and relatives were in South Sudan. We felt like strangers. [...] We sold some things to make our luggage light and walked four days to Yabus. From there we found vehicles to Jamam. After that we met many people we know. We were registered and became refugees in South Sudan.<sup>184</sup>

As this woman's story indicates, movement between the camps in Ethiopia and South Sudan is possible via Yabus. The market in Yabus Bala (a village to the east of Yabus and close to the Ethiopian border) attracts

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<sup>181</sup> UNHCR, "South Sudan Nutrition Survey: Upper Nile/Maban Refugee Camp," October/November 2015, available at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/SouthSudan-UpperNileRefugeeCampsNutritioinSurvey-SENS-2015-Report.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>182</sup> UNHCR, "South Sudan: UNHCR Operational Update 7/2016, 1-15 April," April 2016, available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/download.php?id=2706> (accessed 23 August 2016).

<sup>183</sup> This has been observed by IRRI amongst the Uduk, and may also be a result of their prior experience of living in a refugee settlement. In Bonga, Ethiopia, where a number of the Uduk interviewed stayed for more than a decade before returning to Blue Nile, each house plot was planned to include a small cultivable land. See James, 2007, 194.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with a woman, Gendrassa refugee camp, May 2016.



some traders with goods from both countries as well, as long as the ways leading to it are passable.<sup>185</sup> This means that there is some movement – even if extremely limited and not significant enough to ensure markets remain functional during the peak of the rainy season – between Ethiopia, Maban, and Yabus, arguably the most important village currently held by the SPLM-N.<sup>186</sup>

Even though Ethiopia has largely maintained its neutrality throughout the current conflict (and is indeed participating in the mediation between Khartoum and the SPLM-N), the areas in which most refugee camps are located are perceived as accessible and welcoming to the Sudanese government and security forces, in particular, because there is a Sudanese consulate in Assosa.<sup>187</sup> This has made some refugees reluctant to stay in Ethiopia, fearing harassment.<sup>188</sup>

While displacement inside and out of Blue Nile has been ongoing since 2011, some refugees from South Sudan and Ethiopia have also decided to return to Blue Nile, both into government and SPLM-N held areas. There are different factors impacting people's decision to move and different patterns of movement, with some people moving back to their home areas, and others moving into other areas, in particular in situations in which their home area is under government control.

Such movement is evident in Yabus Bala, where many families or returnees from other parts of Blue Nile have settled, because they are not able to move back into government held areas. This area is also considered relatively safe due to its proximity to the Ethiopian border and therefore less frequented by the Antonovs. It is also a trade route, with a local market and a road connecting it to Bunj.

One Ingessana man, originally from Bau County and currently residing in Yabus Bala, said: "When we came from the mountains we went to Jamam and then to Yusuf Batil. Because of the problems of food and security – because many people were killed – we decided to come here."<sup>189</sup> Since moving back into Blue Nile, this man has been appointed sheikh of the local Ingessana community, which is composed of different Ingessana families from the camps who returned to Sudan.<sup>190</sup> He said that there are 1,320 returnees under his authority, including children:

These are random families that became a community here [not a whole community that moved together]. Sometimes the man comes first to organise and then the family joins later. Here people can farm and cultivate and also there are roots they can eat. There are no conflicts [between the communities]. The planes are disturbing us but we go into the foxholes.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>185</sup> The path between Yabus and Assosa is reportedly unsuitable for vehicles and also less secure (due to occasional bandits). During the dry season, access to Yabus from Bunj (the town near Doro refugee camp) is possible with vehicles.

<sup>186</sup> South Sudanese refugees that fled to Ethiopia have also used this route, according to interviews in Yabus.

<sup>187</sup> For more on Ethiopia's role in the current conflict, see ICG, 2013, 37-41.

<sup>188</sup> Interviews in Maban, May 2016.

<sup>189</sup> Interview with a man (sheikh), Yabus, May 2016.

<sup>190</sup> According to interviews in Yabus, such settlements in the area are not causing tensions between communities because certain lands were allocated for returnees in advance. According to the sheikh interviewed, he is in charge of telling returnees where to settle and cultivate according to the orders he received from the local omda.

<sup>191</sup> Interview with a man (sheikh), Yabus, May 2016.

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**"If the Antonov is still coming, we dig a foxhole. I will also need tools to cultivate. If I have this, I can stay."**

As this example demonstrates, due to the situation in the camps some have made the decision that the Antonovs are less of a threat than the inability to access livelihoods. A refugee in Doro, originally from Balila (Kurmuk County), who said he wants to go and see his home area and decide whether he can stay or not, said: "If it is good, I will stay. If the Antonov is still coming, we dig a foxhole. I will also need tools to cultivate. If I have this, I can stay."<sup>192</sup> One man, originally from northern Kurmuk (currently under government control) who moved from Sherkole camp in Ethiopia to Yabus Bala, said: "I did not feel comfortable. The food was very little and there was no chance to find work. I decided to come back and work on cultivation."<sup>193</sup>

## Conclusion

International observers often describe the conflict in Blue Nile State as a "forgotten conflict". This term, of course, refers to the international community's interests and priorities, that have consistently neglected Blue Nile. The conflict has never been forgotten, however, by those individuals who endure its consequences on a daily basis, inside Sudan or in exile. Moreover, given Omar al-Bashir's seven year old ICC arrest warrant, the failure of the internationally mediated CPA, international organisations' inability to provide humanitarian aid inside SPLM-N held territories, and, most recently, the reduction in food rations in the refugee camps in South Sudan, local communities' confidence in the ability of the international community to act effectively to end the crisis in Blue Nile State is understandably low.

The conflicts in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile have been ongoing for years, and there are no signs that Khartoum intends to change its national priorities or ruling model any time soon in order to bring them to an end. Negotiations on peaceful solutions to the conflicts in the Two Areas have repeatedly collapsed, and neither side appears to be able to bring the conflict to an end by military means. Moreover, following the failure of the CPA, it is perhaps clearer than it ever was that stopping the violence is just the first step in ending the conflict in Blue Nile State – as in other parts of Sudan. Civilians are aware that the crisis may last for a very long time, and with a political impasse at home and minimal international attention, they also know that the only thing they can do is rely on their own resilience and ability to adjust to the brutal circumstances.



A shelter in a village in southern Kurmuk County, Blue Nile, May 2016 (© anonymous photographer/IRRI).

<sup>192</sup> Interview with a man, Doro refugee camp, May 2016.

<sup>193</sup> Interview with a man, Yabus, May 2016.