

Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
Recommendations.....	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. A Sudan in Miniature	3
A. Old-Timers Versus Newcomers	3
B. A History of Land Grabbing and Exploitation	5
C. Twenty Years of War in Blue Nile (1985-2005)	7
III. Failure of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement	9
A. The Only State with an Opposition Governor (2007-2011)	9
B. The 2010 Disputed Elections.....	9
C. Failed Popular Consultations	11
D. What to do with SPLA's 10th Division?.....	14
IV. All-Out War	16
A. Outbreak of Conflict.....	16
B. Main Armed Actors.....	19
C. Course of War	22
V. The Humanitarian Crisis.....	25
A. A Heavy Toll on the Civilian Population	25
B. Rising Food Insecurity.....	26
C. Limited Humanitarian Access	28
VI. National and Regional Dimensions.....	30
A. National and Local Agendas	30
B. Links with South Sudan	33
C. Ethiopia: Neighbour, Friend and Peacemaker	36
VII. Toward a Peace Process.....	41
A. Conflicting Agendas, Stalled Discussions.....	41
B. Humanitarian Versus Political Priorities	45
C. International Role.....	46
VIII. Conclusion	48
APPENDICES	
A. Map of Sudan.....	49
B. Map of Blue Nile: Land and Resources	50
C. Map of Blue Nile: Borders and Front Lines	51
D. Glossary of Personalities	52
E. Glossary of Main Parties, Movements and Agreements	53
F. About the International Crisis Group	55
G. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Africa since 2010.....	56
H. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	58

Executive Summary

The war in Blue Nile state has had a horrible impact, with about a third of the state's population in need of humanitarian assistance, including some 150,000 refugees in South Sudan and Ethiopia and approximately 200,000 displaced or severely affected within the state. It resumed in September 2011 because the root causes – mainly the concentration of power and resources in Sudan's centre at the expense of its peripheries – had not been resolved by the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The war pits against each other old enemies, the long-ruling National Congress Party (NCP) regime in Khartoum and the northern branch of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) that won South Sudan's independence, but was not able to achieve as much autonomy as it had hoped in Blue Nile. The conflict's local and national dimensions are more intermingled than ever, and it will not end conclusively without a truly comprehensive national dialogue between the regime and both armed and unarmed oppositions.

Blue Nile state is a "microcosm of Sudan", inhabited by an array of communities and deeply divided between "indigenous" and Arab and non-Arab "newcomers". The area has long been marginalised, its natural wealth mostly enriching elites in Khartoum without them sharing power and redistributing resources. This feature is the main cause of Sudan's multiple conflicts. Many had hoped the CPA would transform governance, but neither the NCP nor the SPLM focused on the reforms that would make "unity attractive" and prevent South Sudan from pursuing self-determination. Such a right was not granted to the "two areas" of Blue Nile and South Kordofan, and the CPA instead offered vague "popular consultations". In 2011, the process allowed 76,000 Blue Nile citizens to air their grievances, and the SPLM used this to push for "self-rule". The consultations were supposed to be finalised before South Sudan's July 2011 independence, but once that deadline passed the NCP was less inclined than ever to share power, let alone to allow local autonomy.

The SPLM-North (SPLM-N) was supposed to become an opposition political party after July 2011, but it still had troops, which Khartoum wanted to expel or disarm expeditiously. This in particular led to the resumption of war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. A last-minute deal between the NCP and the SPLM-N, the 26 June 2011 framework agreement, brokered by the African Union (AU) and late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, was rejected by Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. Hardliners in his party in particular disagreed with the agreement's commitment to a national solution. Since then, both humanitarian and political negotiations, with international players confused on whether they should be separated or linked, have largely stalled.

The SPLM-N in Blue Nile was less prepared for war than in South Kordofan, where the rebels managed to seize more territory and weapons than they ever had during the earlier war (1985-2005). In Blue Nile, they were rapidly pushed toward the South Sudan border and lost Kurmuk, their historical stronghold on the border with Ethiopia. Addis Ababa, a former SPLM/A supporter, has refused to help and cautiously remained a neutral mediator. Even South Sudan, under international pressure, has not proved willing or able to support former comrades as much as might have been expected given their historical ties.

The SPLM-N now has united with the main Darfur rebel movements under the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) with a more than ever national agenda. But divisions remain between South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and within Blue Nile itself, notably over whether the conflict should take a national dimension. Those differences are benefiting Khartoum's strategy to limit peace talks and subsequent agreements to local issues in order to prevent reform – seen as dilution of NCP power – in the centre. While they partly supported SPLM-N calls for autonomy during the popular consultation, Blue Nile's political elites, including NCP members, are now critical of the SRF's national agenda and support a local solution. Yet a local deal is unlikely to address the root causes of the conflict in Blue Nile, which are not different from those of the other regions' conflicts.

This report is the second in a series analysing the spreading conflict in Sudan's peripheries. A comprehensive solution, including broader governance reform and meaningful national dialogue involving the whole armed opposition, is necessary to end the multiple conflicts and build a durable peace. Thus, many of the recommendations in the first report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I): War in South Kordofan* (14 February 2013) and the preceding, *Major Reform or More War* (29 November 2012), are relevant for solving chronic conflict in Blue Nile, which goes beyond local dynamics.

Since the 1980s, the state has become a major battleground for the ideological competition between two opposed models: Khartoum's attempts at unifying and centralising the country with a dominant Arab-Islamic identity, which South Sudan's separation is paradoxically reviving, versus the rebel SPLM/A's and now SRF's agenda for a more inclusive and devolved Sudan. Attempts to resolve Blue Nile's past and current conflicts thus very much reflect Sudan's existential dilemma as to how best it should define itself.

Recommendations

To save lives and cope with massive displacement

To the government of Sudan:

1. Refrain from linking humanitarian access and ceasefire to political conditions in the direct negotiations with the SPLM-N.
2. Allow international humanitarian organisations – UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – full access to both government- and SPLM-N-controlled areas of Blue Nile, including from across the South Sudanese and Ethiopian borders; allow those humanitarian actors to conduct proper humanitarian assessments and deliver aid involving international staff, with no presence of government security forces unless they demand otherwise; and consider guaranteeing the neutrality of the operations by permitting monitoring by independent international observers.

To the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N):

3. Allow international humanitarian organisations to conduct humanitarian assessments and deliver aid involving international staff in SPLM-N-controlled areas, including from government-controlled areas, with no SPLM-N military or intelligence presence, unless the humanitarian organisations demand otherwise; and ensure, within its capabilities, that all humanitarian aid goes to civilians and that combatants are separated from civilians and not based in refugee camps.

To address the local dimensions of the Blue Nile conflict

To the government of Sudan and the SPLM-N:

4. Negotiate a ceasefire in the “two areas” of South Kordofan and Blue Nile to facilitate both humanitarian operations and negotiations, including at the national level.
5. Resume the popular consultation process in Blue Nile where it was left at the outbreak of the conflict so that it can serve as a basis for state- as well as national-level negotiations.

To the government of Sudan:

6. Acknowledge the popular consultations or any purely local process will not be sufficient to solve the conflict, and should run in parallel with a national process including the whole armed opposition.
7. Re-legalise the SPLM-N as a political party allowed to operate in all Sudan; and reinstate SPLM-N elected officials at their pre-war positions.
8. Allow the SPLM-N to retain its troops for a transitional period, following well-monitored security arrangements.

To initiate a meaningful national dialogue and transition

To the government of Sudan:

9. Bring the NCP, the SRF, other opposition forces and civil society groups together in an arrangement to govern for a limited period with well-defined parameters (based on agreed principles reiterated in previous agreements) that is intended to lead first to a comprehensive ceasefire and humanitarian access to conflict areas; and allow the political forces to flesh out a roadmap for a durable peace process, perhaps taking the 28 June 2011 framework agreement and the 24 April 2013 AUHIP draft Declaration of Common Intent as a basis for discussion of a national transition that includes:
 - a) debate and agreement on a system of governance that can end the conflicts between the “centre-Khartoum” and Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile, as well as the East and North; and
 - b) drafting of a permanent constitution.

To the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF):

10. Develop and articulate detailed political platforms and visions that can form the framework for the transition.
11. Work to broaden the opposition's grassroots support and popular backing for a transitional framework, including in Blue Nile.

To assist in ending conflict and building sustainable peace and reform

To all parties:

12. Urge the SRF and other opposition forces to recognise that a managed transition is much preferable to a coup or violent regime change and their likely attendant chaos.

To the Republic of South Sudan government:

13. Support the SRF's efforts to negotiate directly with the Sudanese government.

To the UN Security Council, AU Peace and Security Council, Council of the League of Arab States, Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the government of Ethiopia:

14. Demand and work for a single, comprehensive solution to Sudan's multiple conflicts in a process that runs in parallel with the negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan but is not conditioned on them; and coordinate effectively between the two tracks so as to prevent obstacles in one delaying, or derailing, the other.
15. Support, through training and capacity building, the establishment and growth of national parties that can represent and articulate the demands of marginalised constituencies, including populations in the peripheries, youth, women, nomads and urban and rural poor.

Nairobi/Brussels, 18 June 2013

Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile

I. Introduction

The war in the Blue Nile is part of a spreading war zone, often called the “new South”, extending from the border with Chad in the west to that with Ethiopia in the east. As Crisis Group noted in its first in this series of reports on the conflicts in Sudan, the roots of the violence are in the failure of multiple regional peace agreements to end chronic warfare: the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), Cairo Agreement, East Sudan Peace Agreement, Darfur Peace Agreement and Doha Document for Peace in Darfur.¹

The main cause of fighting between Sudan's peripheries and the centre is “marginalisation”. Blue Nile is a case study in land grabbing and the exploitative policies that constitute a major cause of the chronic conflicts between Sudan's centre and peripheries. The discrepancies in development and services are striking and inhabitants of the peripheries often complain about the expropriation of their wealth, notably by taxes as well as exploitation of their land and resources (oil, minerals and water), without a legitimate share of the national budget being redistributed to their region.² In addition, people from the peripheries have historically been under-represented in the centre's leadership power structures and administration.

In the south east of Sudan, Blue Nile state has borders with both South Sudan and Ethiopia. Its capital, ed-Damazin, lies 550km south of Khartoum. The north is mostly grassland watered by the Blue and White Nile Rivers. With permanent rivers and an average rainfall of 1,000mm, these plains support both industrial farming and pastoralism.³ Agricultural schemes dominate the state's northern landscape, with

¹ For more, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°198, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I): War in South Kordofan*, 14 February 2013; N°194, *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, 29 November 2012; N°174, *Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party and the Threat to the Country's Stability*, 4 May 2011; Africa Briefing N°68, *Sudan: Preventing Implosion*, 17 December 2009; Africa Report N°130, *A Strategy for a Comprehensive Peace in Sudan*, 6 July 2007. For more background on conflicts in the peripheries, see Crisis Group Africa Reports N°145, *Sudan's Southern Kordofan Problem: The Next Darfur?*, 21 October 2008; N°102, *Sudan: Saving Peace in the East*, 5 January 2006; N°76, *Darfur Rising: Sudan's New Crisis*, 25 March 2004.

² The proportion of the population living below the poverty line in the peripheries is twice that of Khartoum: North Darfur (69), West Darfur (56), South Darfur (61), North Kordofan (58), South Kordofan (60), White Nile (56), Blue Nile (57), Red Sea (58), compared to Khartoum (26). “A Poverty Profile for the Northern States of Sudan”, World Bank, May 2011, p. 3. Furthermore, “Khartoum, River Nile and Northern are the three states with the highest average per capita expenditure of Northern States between 2000 and 2009. At the same time they have among the lowest poverty levels. Then there are states such as North Kordofan, White Nile, and South, North and West Darfur, which have very low levels of expenditure – particularly development expenditure – and the highest poverty rates”. “Public Expenditure Tracking Survey (PETS) for Sudan: Case Study of the Health Sector”, World Bank, December 2011, p. iii.

³ Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge: Accommodating Diversity in the Blue Nile State”, article made available to Crisis Group before publication.

the exception of the central Ingessana Hills, several of them taller than 1,000m. The southern part of the state is dotted with smaller isolated rocky hills, similar to parts of the Nuba Mountains. More important in this area are the foothills of the Ethiopian highlands, including the mountainous area south of the Yabus River, culminating at the 1,678m Jebel Shafa and the 1,383m Jebel Moguf.

According to the 2008 census, Blue Nile state had a population of 832,000, but this is disputed, with other government data suggesting it was closer to 1.4 million.⁴ Various observers, including the SPLM-N, estimate the current population is likely between 1 and 1.2 million.⁵

This report, reflecting the views of both the ruling NCP and the SPLM-N rebels, analyses the root causes of the longstanding conflict in Blue Nile, describes the recent war and offers solutions to mitigate the humanitarian crisis and move toward a comprehensive peace. Field research was conducted in both government- and SPLM-N-controlled areas of Blue Nile state, as well as in South Sudan and Addis Ababa.

⁴ "Blue Nile State Situation Analysis", United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), March 2010, p. 14.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012.

II. A Sudan in Miniature

A. *Old-Timers Versus Newcomers*

Blue Nile state was once part of the Funj Sultanate, whose capital was Sinnar on the Blue Nile River. Between 1504 and 1821, this Muslim kingdom extended along the Nile and Blue Nile valleys from Nubia (now northern Sudan) to the current South Sudan and foothills of the Ethiopian highlands.⁶ The origin of the Funj people remains mysterious, although it is agreed they were not Arabs and gradually converted to Islam.⁷ Today, the Funj identity is particularly important and straddles the divide between communities supporting the government and those close to the rebels. It allows non-Arab Muslims to challenge Sudan's "Arab" identity that the centre has promoted in the last decades.⁸ Among the communities who tend to present themselves as "Funj" are the Hamaj and others from areas where Funj rulers intermarried with the local (often Berta) population. This progressively allowed communities to choose to become "Funj", sometimes even losing their own identity and language.⁹ By extension, Blue Nile communities that lost their language and identity tend to present themselves as "Funj".¹⁰

Blue Nile state has been often described as a "microcosm of Sudan".¹¹ In the last decades, it has seen the arrival of many newcomers, in particular from western Sudan, and even West Africa, looking for work in its agricultural schemes as well as grazing land. This has shaped a major divide between newcomers and various communities labelled as "old-timers", or, more often, "indigenous".¹² Today, some fifteen tribes are considered "indigenous" and still constitute the single largest group (and possibly the overall majority), but newcomers are increasing.¹³

Among the most important "indigenous" communities are the Berta, who straddle the border between Blue Nile and the Ethiopian Benishangul-Gumuz states.¹⁴

⁶ Rex Sean O'Fahey and Jay L. Spaulding, *Kingdoms of the Sudan* (London, 1974), p. 25, 28, 31 and 59; Wendy James, "Social Assimilation and Changing Identity in the Southern Funj, in Yusuf Fadl Hasan (ed.), *Sudan in Africa* (Khartoum, 1971), pp. 197-211; Abdalbasit Saeed, "Challenges Facing Sudan after Referendum Day 2011", Christian Michelsen Institute (2010), p. 5; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

⁷ Wendy James, "The Funj Mystique: Approaches to the Problem of Sudan History", in Ravindra K. Jain (ed.), *Text and Context: The Social Anthropology of Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1977), p. 79; Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands: Voices from the Blue Nile* (Oxford, 2007); P. M. Holt, *A Modern History of the Sudan* (London, 1961), pp. 18-23; O'Fahey and Spaulding, op. cit., p. 1.

⁸ The Funj kings converted to Islam as early as 1524 and claimed an Umayyad Arab lineage. (Most Muslim kingdoms in Africa are non-Arab but headed by dynasties claiming an Arab genealogy.) Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit.; "Funj", in R. V. Weekes (ed.), *Muslim Peoples* (Westport, 1984), pp. 261-263.

⁹ O'Fahey and Spaulding, op. cit., pp. 94-95; Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit., p. 203, 207.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, including with individuals claiming a "Funj" identity, Blue Nile and South Sudan, December 2012.

¹¹ Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

¹² Sharif Harir, *Old-Timers and New-Comers* (Bergen, 1983).

¹³ The "indigenous" people allegedly constitute roughly 50 per cent, the communities from West African or western Sudanese origin 30 per cent and the (mostly nomadic) Arabs 20 per cent of the population. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012, Yabus (Blue Nile), and Addis Ababa, December 2012.

¹⁴ "Benishangul" is an arabised version of the Berta word "Bela Shangul". Alessandro Triulzi, "Benishangul", *Encyclopædia Aethiopia*, vol. 1, (Wiesbaden, 2003), p. 529.

North of Blue Nile state are the Hamaj and the Gumuz, the latter living mostly in Ethiopia.¹⁵ In the centre of the state, the Ingessana or Tabi Hills and the surrounding plains are occupied by the Ingessana.¹⁶ The smaller isolated hills in the south are home to communities known collectively as Burun, but each often associated with only one particular hill.¹⁷ Other people in the south west include the Uduk and the Jumjum, close to the Maban, who live mostly on South Sudan's side of the border. Finally, the Ganza are said to have found refuge from slave raiding in Ethiopia at the very south of Blue Nile, among the Koma tribe.¹⁸

As elsewhere, members of Arabised communities from the northern Nile Valley, collectively known as "Jellaba", came early to Blue Nile, first as traders, Muslim religious men and administrators, and later as owners of, or labourers, in agricultural schemes. Some "indigenous" communities are said to have "Jellaba" origins, which often led their members to side with the government rather than with the rebels.¹⁹

Other communities considered "Arab" include pastoralists who migrated from central and eastern Sudan, in particular the Rufa'a al-Hoy.²⁰ Migrating to Blue Nile in the dry season, they increasingly settled since the 1950s but are still not considered by all to be fully part of the state.²¹ However the Arab/non-Arab divide is much less pronounced than the one between "indigenous" and "newcomers", because most recent immigrants are not Arab. The majority of the newcomers are from West African communities, in particular the Fellata (the Sudanese Arabic name for the Fulbe or Fulani) and Hausa, who reportedly started arriving in the early 1920s, and in greater numbers since the late 1940s, in search of grazing lands for their cattle.²² They

¹⁵ Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit., p. 199; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

¹⁶ Many indigenous Blue Nile tribes are currently identified by externally imposed, and often pejorative, names. The Ingessana prefer the name "Gâmk". Crisis Group interviews, Juba, Blue Nile and Addis Ababa, November-December 2012; Wendy James, *Kwanim Pa: The Making of the Uduk People* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 4-8; Douglas H. Johnson, "When Boundaries Become Borders: The Impact of Boundary-making in Southern Sudan's Frontier Zones", Rift Valley Institute (2010), p. 74.

¹⁷ Like "Funj", "Burun" is also sometimes used as an umbrella identity for various tribes. Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit., p. 200; Douglas Johnson, *When Boundaries become Borders*, op. cit., p. 74. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 3; Crisis Group interviews, traditional leaders, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁸ Although still speaking different languages, both tribes now seem to constitute one Koma-Ganza community under a Koma hereditary leader from a Ganza mother. Crisis Group interview, *omda* Uweisa Madi Zima, Koma-Ganza paramount chief, Yabus, December 2012; Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit., p. 200.

¹⁹ These include the Dawala, Rakabiya and Harakin sub-groups of the Berta. They are often called collectively by the derogatory term "Watawit" (bats). Wendy James, "Social Assimilation", op. cit., p. 207; Crisis Group interviews, members of those tribes, including Ali Mismis, Rakabiya *omda* of Moguf, Blue Nile, December 2012; Hassan Abbas, SPLM-N Blue Nile secretary of administration, Blue Nile, December 2012; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; Bakri Abdelbasit, SPLM-N representative to Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

²⁰ According to UNDP, in 2010, 12 per cent of the state's population were nomads, with 6 to 8 million livestock. The state is "third in size in terms of animal wealth in Sudan, following North Kordofan and South Darfur". UNDP, op. cit., p. 24.

²¹ "They still pay their taxes in Sinnar and don't consider themselves part of Blue Nile". Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. See Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "Transforming Pastoralism: A Case Study of the Rufa'a Al Hoi ethnic group in the Blue Nile State of Sudan", *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2009), p. 8.

²² Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; Hashim Orta, SPLM-N Blue Nile humanitarian officer, Juba, November 2012. Fellata and Hausa also have tense relations that have sometimes led to violent conflicts. See Elhadi Ibrahim Osman, "The Funj region pastoral Ful-

were followed by migrants from western Sudan, in particular non-Arab Darfurians (Masalit, Zaghawa and Fur) looking for work in agricultural schemes.

As during the earlier civil war (1985-2005), the rebels are largely recruited from among “indigenous tribes”, in particular the Ingessana, Uduk and Jumjum. Thus the geographically separated Burun appear politically divided: if some seem to be siding with the rebels, others, like the Surkum, whose homeland is the isolated, government-controlled Jebel Surkum, are said to be siding with the government.²³ More Arabised “indigenous” tribes, particularly those of “Jellaba” origin or mixed with Arab “new-comers”, are also said to be siding with Khartoum, which is cautiously recruiting its local power brokers from those communities, in particular from Kurmuk, SPLM/A’s historical stronghold.²⁴ Among them are Abderahman Mohammed Hamed Abu Median, twice state governor and now chairman of the Blue Nile caucus in the federal assembly; Ahmad Kormino Ahmad, former deputy governor; Dr Farah Ibrahim Agar, former gubernatorial candidate; and Husein Yasin Hamad Abu Surwal, the current governor.²⁵

Newcomers have largely sided with the government during both wars, regardless of their own divisions (for instance between Arabs and non-Arabs, or Fellata and Hausa) and the affiliations of their groups in their region of origin (for example Darfur). They have also constituted the bulk of local pro-government militias. As in other parts of Sudan, the possibility of acquiring both land and political representation (intrinsically linked) in spite of “indigenous” precedence has been a major motivation.²⁶

B. *A History of Land Grabbing and Exploitation*

According to SPLM-N leader Malik Agar, “the crisis in Blue Nile started by land grabbing, in order to allocate schemes to Arab merchants who came to settle”.²⁷ NCP leaders admit land appropriation and resource exploitation by elites from the centre is the conflict’s primary cause: “Blue Nile is the richest area, but the Jellaba [Khar-

be: from ‘exit’ to ‘voice’”, *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2009), pp. 92-112; Dereje Feyissa and Günther Schlee, “Mbororo (Fulbe) Migrations from the Sudan into Ethiopia”, in Günther Schlee and Elisabeth Watson (eds.), *Changing Identifications and Alliances in North-East Africa*, vol. 3 (New York-Oxford, 2009), pp. 157-178; Günther Schlee, “Pastoralists and peasants in Blue Nile state”, lecture, University of Khartoum, October 2011; “Fulani”, in R. V. Weekes (ed.), op. cit., pp. 257-260.

²³ Crisis Group interview, former NCP member, November 2012.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, various SPLM-N and NCP members, and civilians, including from those Arabised tribes, Blue Nile, South Sudan and Addis Ababa, November 2012-April 2013.

²⁵ Abderahman Mohammed Hamad Abu Median, a local Islamist, was appointed governor from 1997-2000 after various segments of the local population, including from the opposition, demanded Khartoum appoint someone from the state (his two predecessors since the state’s creation in 1994 were from other parts of Sudan). Crisis Group interviews, NCP members, including Abu Median, and former members, November-December 2012 and April 2013, and SPLM-N former member, ed-Damazin, May 2013.

²⁶ Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge”, op. cit.; Jérôme Tubiana, “Darfur: A Conflict for Land?”, in Alex de Waal (ed.), *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 68-91. Those of foreign origin also hope for formal Sudanese citizenship.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. See Mohamed Suliman, “Civil War in Sudan: The Impact of Ecological Degradation”, *Contributions in Black Studies*, vol. 15, article 7 (1997), pp. 99-121; Liz Alden Wily, “Making Peace Impossible? The Failure to Honour the Land Obligations of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Central Sudan”, September 2010, p. 4; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge”, op. cit.

toum elite] didn't want us to be educated and make use of our resources. This is why some of our people joined the rebellion: all felt like second-class citizens".²⁸ Since the 1960s, mechanised farms were allocated to private investors from the centre, including from the ruling elite.²⁹ A decade later, more land was taken for state farms and, since the 1980s, sold to foreign (government and private) investors, mostly from Arab countries (Gulf states and Egypt).³⁰

Large-scale agricultural schemes displaced many subsistence farmers and led to a loss of grazing land, migratory routes and water points, thus increasing conflicts between pastoralists and both subsistence and large-scale farmers. It also brought about deforestation and rapid soil erosion.³¹

The exploitation of rich mineral resources (mainly gold and chromites), starting in the 1960s, also involved investors from the centre and abroad, including China. Mining provoked further displacements, notably in the Ingessana Hills, as well as reportedly environmental pollution and health problems for workers and local communities.³² The current gold rush in various parts of the country is likely to boost both traditional and industrial mining in Blue Nile.³³

According to Malik Agar, mineral exploitation in his Ingessana Hills homeland exemplifies how the peripheries' resources are appropriated by the centre:

In 2009 [when he was Blue Nile governor], I counted the vehicles taking chrome from Ingessana. There were twenty each day, each carrying 36 tonnes. I calculated that each day, \$237,600 was going out from Ingessana Hills. Blue Nile was getting nothing, except taxes on the vehicles, something like 12,000 Sudanese pounds [\$5,000] a day. At the same time, the Roseires dam was producing electricity worth \$75 million a year. The state was getting nothing. Our budget in ed-

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Blue Nile NCP leader, April 2013.

²⁹ Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "Transforming Pastoralism", op. cit., pp. 5-6; Sharif Harir, *Old-Timers and New-Comers*, op. cit., p. 26; Liz Alden Wily, "Making Peace Impossible?", op. cit., p. 5.

³⁰ UNDP, op. cit., p. 29; Sharif Harir, *Old-Timers and New-Comers*, op. cit., pp. 26-28; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.; Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum-based investor in Blue Nile, January 2013; SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012. When Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan (in the early 1990s) he purchased a number of large farms notably in Blue Nile and was thought to be among the largest landowners in the country. Richard Cockett, *Sudan, Darfur and the Failure of an African State* (New Haven/London, 2010), p. 120; Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Oxford, 2003, revised edition 2011), p. 137.

³¹ Mohamed Suliman, op. cit., p. 16, 20, 22; UNDP, op. cit., p. 34; "Sudan: Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment", UN Environment Programme (UNEP), 2007, p. 85, 185, 205; Crisis Group interviews, South Sudan researcher, SPLM-N Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012. The economic benefits of the schemes are disputed; UNDP found that, due to unfavourable natural conditions (poor soil) and "wrong exploitation", productivity is higher in subsistence farming. In addition, they created only limited employment opportunities for local communities. UNDP, op. cit., pp. 23-24, 30.

³² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012.

³³ Even before South Sudan's separation, Khartoum saw gold as a major substitute for oil, notably to get foreign currencies. The Central Bank built a gold refinery and, with a monopoly on purchases, is buying gold at a higher price than the local market to prevent smuggling, and thus bring in badly needed foreign currencies. This and very high global gold prices caused production to increase almost threefold, but also generated new conflicts over gold-rich areas, in particular in Darfur. "Sudan Economic Brief", World Bank, no 2, December 2012, p. 2; Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, presidential assistant al-Amin Hassan Omar, Khartoum, August 2011; Crisis Group interviews, economic experts, February 2013.

Damazin was \$4.5 million, so a small share of the dam benefits would have been sufficient to fund us.³⁴

A local NCP leader acknowledges, “our main resources are considered national and we don’t get a clear percentage of what we produce”.³⁵

Completed in 1966, the Roseires dam on the Blue Nile also displaced thousands of people.³⁶ By 2007, it produced 75 per cent of Sudan’s electricity.³⁷ In January 2013, it was heightened by 10 metres, flooding an additional 46,000 hectares and displacing some 110,000 people.³⁸ Resettlement triggered further discontent; according to SPLM-N officials, the most fertile lands in some of the new villages were allocated to pro-NCP “newcomers”.³⁹ The project is part of a plan to expand large-scale irrigation schemes in both Blue Nile and White Nile and increase export-oriented sugar production.⁴⁰

Also seen locally as land appropriation is Dinder National Park, created during colonial times and now Sudan’s main wildlife area. Recent and planned park expansions are reportedly increasing local conflicts over land.⁴¹

C. *Twenty Years of War in Blue Nile (1985-2005)*

By the 1980s, land grabbing and exploitation by the centre led some in Blue Nile to identify more with the South.⁴² In 1985, the newly formed SPLM/A was quick to send Southern troops to Blue Nile and recruit from among local communities, including initially a few Ingessana men led by Malik Agar Eyre, a 35-year-old teacher from Soda.⁴³ The violent counter-insurgency campaign, with the army and allied Rufa’a militias burning Uduk villages and churches in 1987, increased support for the rebellion both among local communities and in refugee camps in Ethiopia.⁴⁴

The Blue Nile rebellion benefited from direct access to both SPLM/A-controlled areas in the South and Ethiopia, where the Marxist Derg regime supported the rebels. Many rebels and senior commanders fighting in Blue Nile were said to be from

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. By 2010, the state was one of the least-funded by the central government, with international donors contributing 43 per cent of its budget. UNDP, op. cit., p. 27.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, ed-Damazin, May 2013.

³⁶ UNDP, op. cit., p. 28; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge”, op. cit.

³⁷ UNEP, op. cit., p. 226.

³⁸ UNDP, op. cit., pp. 32-33; Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, South Sudanese researcher, Juba, November 2012.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group email correspondence, Nile expert Ana Cascao, April 2013.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, government official, ed-Damazin, May 2013. UNDP, op. cit., p. 35. A planned expansion reportedly will displace 26 Darfurian (mostly Masalit) villages. SPLM-N Deputy Chairman Abdelaziz al-Hilu, a Masalit, thinks those communities are targeted because of their origin. Crisis Group interview, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012. See also Asim el Moghraby and Nadir Mohamed Awad, *An Introduction to Dinder National Park* (New York, undated); UNEP, op. cit., p. 268.

⁴² Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 6.

⁴³ Malik’s original name was Nganyofa Agar Eyre Nganyofa. “It was changed to Malik as I entered school, when I was 8 and didn’t speak Arabic. We used to call our new Arab names ‘government names’. And I was proclaimed a Muslim”. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

⁴⁴ Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes*, op. cit., p. 136.

the South and to a lesser extent from the Nuba Mountains.⁴⁵ Ethiopian support means much of the fighting took place along the border, especially in Kurmuk area. The rebels nonetheless suffered setbacks. After briefly taking Kurmuk town in 1987, and again in 1989, the SPLA was pushed into Ethiopia, and in 1991 it entirely lost its strategic rear base when the Khartoum-backed Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the Derg regime.⁴⁶

In 1996, after Ethiopian-Sudanese relations had once more cooled, Malik Agar reopened the Blue Nile Front, together with northern National Democratic Alliance (NDA) rebels and the Ethiopian army.⁴⁷ In 1997, Malik managed to take Kurmuk and Geisan, further north along the Ethiopian border. That year, the rebels claimed to control 15 per cent of the state.⁴⁸

Many in Blue Nile had hoped the National Islamic Front (NIF), which seized power in 1989 in Khartoum, could end the conflict through devolution.⁴⁹ But the new regime reportedly aggravated local divides by selecting Blue Nile as a model for its Islamist "civilisation project".⁵⁰ After the second fall of Kurmuk in 1997, the regime declared jihad, increasing local mobilisation against rebels depicted as non-Muslim Southerners backed by foreign enemies (including the U.S. and Ethiopia).⁵¹

Through the late 1990s, the SPLM/A continued to slowly gain territory in Blue Nile and came within artillery range of the Khor Adar oil wells in neighbouring Upper Nile.⁵² The conflict stalled in the early 2000s, when peace negotiations started and it became difficult for the rebels, again deprived of Ethiopian support, to repel government attempts to recapture territory.⁵³

⁴⁵ Then-captain Abdelaziz al-Hilu commanded the Blue Nile Front in 1986-1987, with then-first lieutenant Malik Agar as deputy. Malik took over in 1988. Salva Kiir and current SPLA Chief of Staff James Hoth also fought there. Crisis Group interview, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLA and SPLM-N officers, Western observers close to the SPLM/A, Juba, November 2012; SPLM-N Brigadier General Abdelda'im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁴⁶ Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes*, op. cit., p. 136

⁴⁷ The National Democratic Alliance was represented by the Sudan Allied Forces, an Ethiopia- and Eritrea-backed northern rebel movement led by Abdelaziz Khalid. Fabrice Weissman, *Les Sudan Allied Forces and Les enjeux politiques d'une intervention cross-border au Sud Blue Nile*, unpublished reports (September 1997). Abdelaziz Khalid is now heading the Sudan National Alliance, part of the official opposition coalition of the National Consensus Forces, and a signatory to the New Dawn Charter with the armed SRF. Crisis Group interview, former member of the Sudan Allied Forces, Kampala, June 2013.

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 137, 207. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Brigadier General Abdelqader Mohammed Shaban, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁴⁹ The NIF came to power in a 1989 coup. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Divisions in Sudan's Ruling Party*, op. cit. Like other Sudan peripheries, Blue Nile was a stronghold of the traditional religious parties (in particular the Democratic Unionist Party), many of whose local members then joined the NIF.

⁵⁰ Islamisation intensified in the late 1990s, but whether the "civilisation project" was more intensively implemented in Blue Nile than in other northern peripheries is disputed. Crisis Group interviews, former NIF members, ed-Damazin, Khartoum and other locations, November 2012, March, May 2013. See "Sudan's Southern Rebellion: 'The Two Areas'", Civil-Military Fusion Centre, October 2012, p. 4; "The Conflict in Blue Nile", Small Arms Survey, updated 20 August 2012.

⁵¹ Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes*, op. cit., p. 208.

⁵² Ibid, p. 137.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Western observer close to the SPLM/A, Juba, November 2012.

III. Failure of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement

A. *The Only State with an Opposition Governor (2007-2011)*

The question whether Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains were part of North or South Sudan was disputed in the negotiations leading to the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). Finally they were considered part of the North, and not granted the same right to self-determination as the South. Instead, a weaker protocol was adopted that included a power-sharing formula and promise of “popular consultations”.⁵⁴ From 2005 to 2007, NCP's Abderahman Abu Median was re-appointed Blue Nile governor with SPLM's Zayed Issa as deputy, while Malik Agar was investment minister in the federal government. In 2007, according to the agreed rotational system, Malik became governor with NCP's Ahmad Kormino as deputy.⁵⁵

The only opposition governor in Northern Sudan, Malik attempted to address land policy, a major root cause of the conflict which had largely been left unaddressed by the CPA.⁵⁶ As investment minister, he tried to attract new agriculture and mining companies, notably from Europe, to Blue Nile, although according to an SPLM official, they “were not so much better than the first ones”.⁵⁷ As governor he drafted a 2009 law requiring foreign investors or settlers to obtain the approval of local communities and chiefs before they could acquire or retain land. However, the state's legislature had not yet discussed the law when the war broke out in September 2011.⁵⁸ Malik maintains that thanks to his policies, some land once used for commercial farming and mining was reallocated to local communities, and this “managed to halt temporarily land grabbing”. He also acknowledges that his land act probably violated national law, helping SPLM Blue Nile politicians realise national change is needed.⁵⁹

B. *The 2010 Disputed Elections*

The April 2010 state elections were extremely contentious.⁶⁰ The SPLM contends the census did not fully take into account the population in areas where it has strong support, south of the Yabus River and along the Ethiopian border north of Kurmuk, while ed-Damazin and Roseires, considered pro-NCP, were aggressively registered.⁶¹ This, if true, allowed the government to allocate more parliamentary seats to areas such as ed-Damazin, Roseires and Geisan, and would help explain why the NCP won

⁵⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 6-7; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge”, op. cit.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Zayed Issa, Addis Ababa, October 2012; SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Juba, November 2012; NCP Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013. During the transition period, all the state's executive and legislative institutions were controlled by the NCP, with 55 per cent of the positions and the remainder for the SPLM. UNDP, op. cit., p. 30.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 7. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

⁵⁹ Malik Agar said, “legally speaking, constitutionally speaking, I know I was doing something wrong”. Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N Hashim Orta and Bakri Adelbasit, Juba, November 2012. See Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “Transforming Pastoralism”, op. cit., p. 7.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 12-14.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012.

29 legislative assembly seats – including all the seats for ed-Damazin (seven) and Roseires (six) – versus nineteen for the SPLM.⁶²

Malik Agar was elected governor, which arguably showed some NCP supporters voted for the charismatic figure, but not without strong resistance from Khartoum.⁶³ The government announced its candidate Dr Farah Agar's victory several times before the vote count was over, notably in Kurmuk, SPLM's stronghold.⁶⁴ According to Malik, President Bashir offered him a vice presidency if he would recognise his defeat, but the candidate "insisted on counting and recounting".⁶⁵ Juba reportedly threatened Khartoum that war could resume if Malik was not elected.⁶⁶ An NCP leader from ed-Damazin and government officials said that the president, Vice President Taha and the influential NCP co-deputy chairman and presidential assistant, Nafie Ali Nafie, agreed to "let Malik win to spare the state further bloodshed".⁶⁷ "We were not happy but we obeyed instructions from the centre to accept Malik's election", NCP leader Abderahman Abu Median said.⁶⁸

According to the NCP, Malik brought SPLA soldiers from various places to vote for him.⁶⁹ SPLM leaders acknowledged, "our army helped us have Malik elected", but claim the NCP was doing the same.⁷⁰ According to them, the NCP mobilised soldiers and paramilitaries in Disa, an important garrison close to ed-Damazin, to vote for the party.⁷¹

As in South Kordofan, the government deployed many troops during the elections period, not only to vote, but also because Khartoum rightly feared the polls could lead to violence.⁷² From December 2009 to April 2010, the government reportedly

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials including former members of the legislative assembly, Juba, Addis Ababa, November-December 2012; NCP member, Western observer, November 2012.

⁶³ There were also internal divisions within the NCP over the choice of their candidate, notably between Ahmad Kormino and Farah Agar, who was ultimately selected. Ahmad Kormino's supporters argue that Farah Agar, reputed closer to Malik, was chosen in agreement with the SPLM-N. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM electoral commission member, November 2012; NCP and former SPLM-N members, ed-Damazin and Khartoum, May 2013.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. According to other SPLM leaders, Vice President Taha offered Malik a federal ministry. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N leaders, Juba, November 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012.

⁶⁶ "The SPLA in Blue Nile was about to fight, but the whole government of South Sudan imposed on Malik to prevent war". Crisis Group interviews, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM member of the election committee, November 2012. John Young, *The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process* (London, 2012), p. 230. The following year, Abdelaziz lost the South Kordofan election in the absence of such strong support. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 12-14.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, NCP leader, ed-Damazin; and government official, May 2013.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013. The local NCP remains divided on the issue, with supporters of Ahmad Kormino arguing that Malik did not have to rig the polls to defeat Farah Agar. Crisis Group interviews, NCP members, ed-Damazin and Khartoum, May 2013.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, NCP members, November 2012, March 2013; Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Hassan Abbas, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012. A tribal chief in a pro-SPLM area also said local NCP members offered him money to mobilise his tribe. Crisis Group interview, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁷² Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 17; Claudio Gramizzi and Jérôme Tubiana, "New war, old enemies: Conflict dynamics in South Kordofan", Small Arms Survey Working Paper no. 29, March 2013, p. 29. According to a former SAF officer, shortly before the elections,

deployed some 20,000 regular troops, several thousand Central Reserve Police (CRP) and at least 1,500 “Janjawid” militias from Darfur.⁷³ When asked by the then-governor and the UN, Khartoum explained the “Janjawid” were to be integrated into regular army units based in Blue Nile.⁷⁴ Local NCP members were mobilised as well. According to one, some 300 of them, including state parliamentarians, were given AKM-type automatic rifles with 60 bullets a few days before the vote. “We understood there will be war”, he said.⁷⁵

After the election, some of these troops were reportedly redeployed, but others continued to arrive.⁷⁶ Local militias were recruited or remobilised and armed, in particular under the label of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF).⁷⁷

C. *Failed Popular Consultations*

With Malik Agar governor and the NCP controlling the state assembly, there was a balance that allowed the long promised “popular consultations” to proceed. These were the main concession granted to the “two areas” of Blue Nile and South Kordofan in the CPA, in order to allow local people to express themselves on the peace agreement and serve as a basis for the state legislatures to address their shortcom-

units (including Joint Integrated Units (JIU), composed of equal numbers of army and SPLA soldiers) already based in Blue Nile received orders from the chief of staff in Khartoum to put troops on alert. At the same time, several hundred new cars and heavy weapons reportedly were delivered to ed-Damazin and Dindiro. Crisis Group interview, SAF defector, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁷³ According to a former Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) officer, because the CRP is officially a police force, although trained and armed as regular soldiers, deploying them was a way to increase government forces without technically violating the CPA. Similarly, the government increased numbers of the Popular Police (*shorta sha'biya*), present in small numbers in most villages, and Nomadic Police (*shorta zeina*), recruited largely from among the Fellata and Hausa. According to a former local NCP member, 7,000 CRP were deployed, including 4,000 from Darfur and 3,000 from Blue Nile (2,000 Fellata and Hausa and 1,000 from “indigenous” tribes such as the Berta and Hamaj). The “Janjawid” reportedly belonged mostly to Arab tribes, as well as Fellata, with some possibly coming from Chad. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile and Addis Ababa, November-December 2012; SAF defector, Blue Nile, December 2012; former NCP member, November 2012. See “The buildup of forces and arms in Blue Nile”, Small Arms Survey, updated December 2010. On the presence of Chadians, see Jérôme Tubiana, “Renouncing the Rebels: Local and Regional Dimensions of Chad–Sudan Rapprochement”, Small Arms Survey Working Paper no. 25, 2011, p. 40. On CRP and other “police forces”, see UNDP, *op. cit.*, p. 31; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, *op. cit.*, p. 16; Gramizzi and Tubiana, “New war, old enemies”, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁷⁴ Malik spoke to Musa Hilal, the well-known leader of the “Janjawid”, and militia units to ensure they would not fight the SPLM/A. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; “The buildup of forces”, *op. cit.*

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, NCP member, November 2012. According to the NCP Blue Nile parliamentary caucus leader, Abderahman Abu Median, the party has “been always mobilising people, politically or if needed militarily. If needed, I could provide uniforms, weapons, cars”. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile, Addis Ababa, November-December 2012; NCP member, November 2012.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; NCP member, November 2012. See “Report on the current political, human rights and humanitarian situation in Blue Nile Region”, Strategic Center for Social and Cultural Studies (SCSC), March 2013, p. 4; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

ings through possible renegotiations with Khartoum.⁷⁸ In September 2010, a popular consultation commission was formed, composed of thirteen NCP and eight SPLM Blue Nile assembly members.⁷⁹ It held hearings throughout the state from January to July 2011 in which 73,000 people (almost half of them women) participated.⁸⁰

The main issue was Blue Nile's relation with the centre and the degree of autonomy it should receive. According to an international observer, "it turned into a verbal referendum", with a debate on words rather than substance.⁸¹ The SPLM was pushing *hukum al-zati* ("self-rule"), meaning substantial autonomy.⁸² Many in the NCP believed it was a pretext for self-determination. "*Hukum al-zati* is a step to separation. Malik has an intention: he wants to take the same way followed by South Sudan to separate", said Abderahman Abu Median.⁸³ The NCP preferred "federalism", arguing that Blue Nile did not have sufficient resources for wider autonomy.⁸⁴ Some local NCP members, however, supported the SPLM's call for autonomy.⁸⁵ Re-

⁷⁸ "Statement on the Recent Developments of the Popular Consultations", The Carter Center, 15 July 2011, p. 2; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 235; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit. The "two areas" refers to Blue Nile and South Kordofan, two Sudanese states currently experiencing fighting between the army and the SPLM-N rebels.

⁷⁹ "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, p. 4.

⁸⁰ "Statement on the Recent Developments", op. cit., p. 1; Jon Temin and Theodore Murphy, "Toward a New Republic of Sudan", United States Institute of Peace (USIP), June 2011, p. 8; Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials involved in the popular consultation, South Sudan, November 2012. The SPLM said the consultations were fair but that the NCP majority could still rig the outcome, notably during the data entry. Data were only protected by a double password, half known by the NCP and half by the SPLM, and SPLM officials believe, "until now, the NCP doesn't know the [SPLM] password". Crisis Group interview, Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012. See "Statement on the Recent Developments", op. cit., p. 1.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012. See "Statement on the Recent Developments", op. cit., p. 1.; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., pp. 235-242.

⁸² According to Malik Agar, "all, civilians and politicians, came with this self-rule idea. Most will come and ask for water, education and self-rule. There was no detailed discussion on the topic but there was some agreement". Abderahman Abu Median denies this and says 74 per cent were for federalism and 26 per cent for self-rule, although there was no formal vote. Some SPLM-N officials claimed opposite figures. Crisis Group interviews, Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N politicians, including Hassan Abbas, international observer, South Sudan, Blue Nile, November-December 2012. See "Carter Center urges political parties", op. cit., p. 5; "Popular consultations in Blue Nile state, Frequently Asked Questions", UNMIS (UN Mission in Sudan), 25 January 2011, p. 3; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., pp. 241-242; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013. Another NCP leader believes Malik's aim was, after getting autonomy, to attach the state to South Sudan. Crisis Group interview, ed-Damazin, May 2013. Malik Agar said "*hukum al-zati* is not independence", although he and Abdelaziz al-Hilu admit this might not have been so clear for all participants. Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar and Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012. According to an observer, the SPLM had largely given up the self-determination or independence option for autonomy. Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012.

⁸⁴ The "two main parties had coached citizens to give short statements supporting their party-endorsed system of government". "Carter Center urges political parties", op. cit., pp. 2, 5. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials and international observers, South Sudan, November 2012. See Jason Gluck, "Why Sudan's Popular Consultation Matters", USIP, November 2010, p. 10, footnote 17; "Popular consultations in Blue Nile state", UNMIS, op. cit., p. 4; "Consultations reveal little change in Blue Nile", UNMIS, 25 January 2011.

⁸⁵ The NCP majority was key to the outcome as the commission had to draft a report based on the public hearings, to be discussed and endorsed by the state legislative assembly and subsequently

portedly worried by this unexpected dynamic, Khartoum regularly pressured NCP commission members.⁸⁶ The government, which did not want to renegotiate the CPA, tried to prevent discussion on the state's status.⁸⁷

Economic issues were also addressed and often linked to the question of wealth sharing between the state and the centre. Participants from all sides asked for dam revenues to go to the state, and demanded respect for customary land tenure, involving traditional leaders and local people.⁸⁸

Both the talks' substance and possible outcomes were poorly understood, however.⁸⁹ A southern Blue Nile tribal chief remembers being taken to ed-Damazin to speak in front of Vice President Taha: "All SPLM people were saying they want *hukum al-zati*. I'm not educated and didn't understand what they meant, but I followed them".⁹⁰ According to an SPLM official, "popular consultation was a donkey on which everything can be hung, no matter where the donkey is going. It could either bring a solution, or war".⁹¹

The process was supposed to conclude before South Sudan's expected independence in July 2011, with Salva Kiir, still first vice president in the Government of National Unity, able to exert sufficient pressure on Khartoum to support SPLM's Blue Nile demands, and possibly prevent a new war. However, when the war broke out in Blue Nile in September 2011, the commission was still drafting its report.⁹²

presented to the presidency. According to an international observer, the state assembly, in spite of its NCP majority, might not have blocked SPLM demands for autonomy. The report would likely have suggested constitutional reform and led to a Blue Nile constitution. Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012. According to Abdelaziz al-Hilu, local consensus contributed to "an overconfidence on the popular consultations" on the part of the SPLM in Blue Nile, possibly leading to its lack of preparation for the war. Crisis Group interviews, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012; other SPLM-N officials and international observers, Juba, November 2012; NCP member, November 2012; NCP Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013; former NCP member, ed-Damazin, May 2013. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 12; "Carter Center urges political parties", op. cit., p. 7; Jason Gluck, op. cit., p. 5 and 10, footnote 17.

⁸⁶ According to an NCP official involved in the process, "some among us thought the popular consultation was the only way to get some rights for Blue Nile and accepted Malik's ideas. They were considered as traitors by Khartoum". Crisis Group interviews, NCP Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013; NCP member and former member, November 2012, May 2013. See John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 232; Jason Gluck, op. cit., p. 8 and 10.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Sudanese intellectual, March 2013; "The Conflict in Blue Nile", op. cit.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, and Ibrahim Yasin, former international NGO employee involved in the consultation, currently with the (SPLM-N-affiliated) Blue Nile humanitarian coordination unit, South Sudan, November 2012. "Carter Center urges political parties", op. cit., p. 7; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., pp. 23, 236; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

⁸⁹ According to John Young, "the NCP leadership could provide a definition of federalism, but SPLM leaders could not provide a consistent definition of autonomy". John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 236; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, "On the Edge", op. cit.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Blue Nile, December 2012.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, NCP member, November 2012; SPLM-N officials and Western observer involved in the popular consultations, Juba and Maban, South Sudan, November 2012. See Interview with Blue Nile Governor Husein Yasin, *Al-Sahafa*, 9 April 2013.

D. What to do with SPLA's 10th Division?

Even more than the popular consultation, a major source of friction was the fate of SPLA troops from Blue Nile and South Kordofan. According to the CPA, SPLA forces in the North (the 10th Division in Blue Nile) were to redeploy south of the 1956 North-South boundary during the interim period, except for those that were part of the Joint Integrated Units (JIUs), composed of equal numbers from the SPLA and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF).⁹³ This redeployment ostensibly took place in 2008, with the 10th Division relocating its headquarters to Guffa, 5km south of the Blue Nile-Upper Nile border, and most of its troops to al-Fuj at a similar distance south of the border, as well as Yafta and Marinja immediately on the Blue Nile side of the border.⁹⁴

However, NCP members contended SPLA soldiers remained in Blue Nile (as well as in South Kordofan) dressing in civilian clothes and hiding their arms when UN inspectors were visiting.⁹⁵ SPLM-N officials acknowledged that some troops remained in Blue Nile, particularly in Samari and Kurmuk, and two battalions (roughly 1,600 men) remained in their Ingessana Hills stronghold.⁹⁶ In addition, 3,000 SPLM-JIU troops legally remained in Blue Nile, mainly in Dindiro, Kurmuk, Geisan and ed-Damazin.⁹⁷

The SAF in Blue Nile were supposed to demobilise to pre-war numbers (ie, two battalions), but most observers agreed that on the contrary they increased, especially after 2010.⁹⁸ The PDF, which were supposed to be disbanded, expanded as well.⁹⁹

⁹³ Estimates for the 10th Division (excluding the JIUs) varied over time and according to the sources, from above 20,000 in 2005 to 7,500 in 2008 after a reorganisation. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012; confidential report by Western military expert.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, various SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile, November-December 2012. According to a Khartoum-based military observer, the real headquarters was in Kurmuk. Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Khartoum, July 2011; UNDP, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, NCP member, March 2013. SPLM-N officials admit to the practice. The issue was also mentioned as a main cause of tension in an October 2010 memorandum drafted by Islamist SAF officers: "The strong link between the SPLA [South] and its annexes of the remaining troops in Southern Kordofan and Southern Blue Nile constitute a main challenge that threatens the stability in those areas. The many reports of the Commission of Arbitration and ceasefire monitoring indicating that the SPLA forces in these regions have completed the redeployment are inaccurate Once they are informed of an imminent visit of a delegation of the commission (inside which they have their informant), the SPLA disperses its troops in these areas and conceal them among the citizens as farm labourers or something else; they receive their payments of demobilisation and reintegration, and they hide their weapons outside the areas to be visited by the committee whose agenda is known to them in advance". Copy on file. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, various SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile, November-December 2012; First Lieutenant Jibril Issa, SPLM-N commanding officer in Ingessana Hills, Malkan, Blue Nile; other SPLM-N officer having operated in Ingessana Hills and IDPs from Ingessana Hills, al-Fuj, South Sudan, December 2012. At the time, UN officials said Malik Agar also circumvented the CPA by forming a militia, originally of a few hundred men from his own Ingessana tribe. "The buildup of forces", *op. cit.*

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

⁹⁸ John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 233. In October 2010, a Western military observer reported no sign of reinforcement or movement of heavy equipment. "The buildup of forces", *op. cit.*

⁹⁹ Up to three or four times according to an international observer. Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012; UNDP, *op. cit.*, p. 31; "The buildup of forces", *op. cit.*; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

The SAF also reportedly hid troops from UN inspectors by dressing them in civilian clothes.¹⁰⁰

With South Sudan's separation impending, on 23 May 2011, the SAF gave SPLA's chief of staff in Juba an ultimatum demanding its JIUs withdraw to south of the 1956 line, or be disarmed, by 1 June.¹⁰¹ SPLM officials refused, arguing they were legally entitled to keep their forces because the popular consultations had not been completed.¹⁰² According to SPLM-N Blue Nile chief of staff, Joseph Tuka Ali, "this civil war erupted because the president Omer Hassan al-Bashir issued a decree that SPLA-N must ... be disarmed SPLA-N politicians [disregarded] the order, due to the lack of safeguards".¹⁰³ After South Sudan's independence on 9 July, according to SPLM-N officers, attempts to forcibly disarm their forces began and increased tensions even more.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ According to a former member of SAF-JIUs in Dindiro, their officers were informed of UN inspections in advance, and SAF troops were ordered either to leave, stay hidden in their rooms, or dress in civilian clothes. SAF also allegedly under-reported by half the number of SAF-JIUs based in southern Blue Nile. Crisis Group interview, SAF defector, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁰¹ Letter seen by Crisis Group. According to a former officer in the SAF-JIUs, this was preceded by a speech delivered by SAF Major General Ahmad Abdun in which he reportedly declared that were integration of SPLA forces into the SAF to take place, SPLA soldiers should remain subordinate to SAF soldiers at equal rank. Prior to that, in 2010, SAF-JIUs had received orders to sever relations with SPLA-JIUs, and government soldiers taking leaves in areas considered pro-SPLM started being systematically debriefed by military intelligence. Crisis Group interviews, SAF defector, Blue Nile, December 2012; SPLM-N officials, South Kordofan and Juba, May and November 2012; and Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 15.

¹⁰² SPLM leaders had repeatedly argued that the SPLM needed to keep its forces as a main guarantor for implementation of the CPA, including the popular consultations, since the referendum on South Sudan's independence. According to a government official, allowing them to maintain armed troops was the "strategic mistake" that led to the resumption of the war. Crisis Group interviews, international observer, SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Juba, November 2012; government official, May 2013.

¹⁰³ Blue Nile SPLM-N Chief of Staff Major General Joseph Tuka Ali, "The brief Uduk history and their painful road to freedom, and the brief background of Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile Uprising", memorandum given to Crisis Group by the author, undated (probably November 2012); Crisis Group interview, Joseph Tuka Ali, Blue Nile, November 2012.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November 2012.

IV. All-Out War

A. *Outbreak of Conflict*

In early June 2011, attempts to disarm SPLA forces reignited the war in South Kordofan.¹⁰⁵ Blue Nile SPLA troops then started to prepare for combat, but leaders, in particular Malik Agar, still believed negotiations could stop the war in South Kordofan and prevent it in Blue Nile.¹⁰⁶

During the following three months, international mediators, notably the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel on Sudan (AUHIP), led by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, focused on preventing the fighting from expanding to Blue Nile, and above all from derailing South Sudan's independence. This effort led to a framework agreement on "Political Partnership between NCP and SPLM-N, and Political and Security Arrangements in Blue Nile and South Kordofan State", signed on 28 June 2011 in Addis Ababa by Malik Agar and Nafie Ali Nafie. The agreement recognised "the right of the SPLM-N to continue as a legal political party" in Khartoum, as well as the right of SPLA soldiers from South Kordofan and Blue Nile to remain citizens of Sudan. And it committed to an inclusive process of constitutional reform.

This was supposed to lead to a cessation of hostilities, but President Bashir, pushed by NCP and SAF hardliners, immediately reneged on the arrangement.¹⁰⁷ The government apparently believed it was possible to make a separate, cheaper deal with Blue Nile alone, and President Bashir reportedly once again offered Malik Agar a vice president position.¹⁰⁸ According to an NCP leader, "some within the NCP wanted war".¹⁰⁹

During the next two months, Malik, with the support of late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, tried in vain to save the framework agreement, resisting pressure from his SPLM-N comrades in South Kordofan to support them by opening a second front in Blue Nile – NCP government officials also blame Juba for pressing him in this direction.¹¹⁰ According to an international observer close to Malik, he had a gentlemen's agreement that if his Nuba Mountains brothers-in-arms were at-

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 17; Gramizzi and Tubiana, "New war, old enemies", op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Joseph Tuka, Blue Nile, November 2012.

¹⁰⁷ Among those hardliners are often mentioned Defence Minister Abderrahim Mohammed Husein and Presidential Affairs Minister Bakri Hasan Saleh, as well as the president's uncle al-Tayeb Mustafa, editor of *Al-Intibaha* newspaper, which maintains a constant pressure on moderate government negotiators. They opposed the agreement's commitment to a national process and the re-legalisation of the SPLM-N. However, it is said that some hardliners, including within the SAF, rejected the agreement less because of its content but because of their rivalries with Nafie Ali Nafie and frustration he did not consult them before signing. Crisis Group interviews, NCP, former NCP and AUHIP officials, Addis Ababa, ed-Damazin and other locations, March-May 2013. See "Framework Agreement between Government of Sudan and Sudan People's Liberation Movement (North) on Political Partnership between NCP and SPLMN, and Political and Security Arrangements in Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan State", Addis Ababa, 28 June 2011; Crisis Group Reports, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 19; *Major Reform*, op. cit., pp. 12 and 20.

¹⁰⁸ See above, Section III.B. Crisis Group interviews, AUHIP member, Addis Ababa, June 2012; Western source close to SPLM/A, Nairobi, May 2012; Abdelaziz al-Hilu, South Kordofan, May 2012; SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, November 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, NCP leaders, April-May 2013.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, government official, May 2013.

tacked, he would not let them down, but “he tried to avoid the war until the very last minute”.¹¹¹

August 2011 was particularly tense, and more SAF troops, supported by tanks, were deployed in Blue Nile, including ed-Damazin.¹¹² “I thought it was a temporary show of force, I was sure there would not be war”, said Malik Agar, “but they started to harass civilians”. The governor complained to Bashir and Zenawi, and on 21 August, the Ethiopian prime minister flew to Khartoum with Malik. According to the latter, “Meles told Bashir, don’t attack Malik, and Bashir promised, in front of Meles, Mbeki and myself”.¹¹³ Government officials blamed Malik for being “rude” with the president during this meeting, reportedly telling him, “you have an army, I have an army; you have a palace, I have a palace”.¹¹⁴ At this time, many other SPLM-N officials believed there would be war, but when Malik’s intelligence officer told him, on 31 August, that government forces intended to attack, he did not believe it and refused to leave the state capital.¹¹⁵

Fighting started in a very similar way to South Kordofan, reportedly with an SAF attempt to disarm SPLM-N troops at a checkpoint.¹¹⁶ On the night of 1 September 2011, Brigadier General al-Jundi Suleiman Abderahman, commander of the SPLA JIU component in Blue Nile, was leaving ed-Damazin for the units’ headquarters in Dindiro in a convoy of three cars. According to al-Jundi, SAF troops stopped him at the city’s southern gate and shot at his convoy, “without asking any question”.¹¹⁷ Some NCP members, though they blame al-Jundi for refusing to stop at the checkpoint and shooting first, think “the war started because of the behaviour of some soldiers, including government soldiers”.¹¹⁸ Blue Nile SPLM-N Chief of Staff Joseph Tuka says the SAF actually asked al-Jundi’s troops to disarm, and shot after they

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, May, November 2012. Both Malik and Abdelaziz al-Hilu denied this meant the former had to go to war immediately in June 2011. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, NCP former member, November 2012. 40,000 soldiers and eighteen tanks, according to Malik Agar. Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; NCP member, November 2012. “We also prepared our PDF”, said Abderahman Abu Median. Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 19.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, government official, May 2013. The governor reiterated those words publicly at the time. See “Sudan’s Blue Nile governor scraps meeting with Bashir”, *Sudan Tribune*, 3 August 2011.

¹¹⁵ This version is backed by several NCP local leaders. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; other SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile, November-December 2012; NCP officials, Addis Ababa, March 2013; Khartoum and ed-Damazin, May 2013. An NCP member says, “Malik is the last man that wanted to go to war. Our people pushed him to go to war”. Crisis Group interview, NCP member, March 2013.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Brigadier General al-Jundi Suleiman Abderahman, Maban, November 2012.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013. According to NCP leaders, both government and SPLM-N soldiers engaged in skirmishes, or reacted excessively, without orders from their officers. “The checkpoint incident was not premeditated”. Crisis Group interview, *mak* al-Fatih, Blue Nile governor’s adviser, Addis Ababa, April 2013; see “Sudan: Anatomy of a Conflict”, The Signal Program on Human Security and Technology, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, May 2013, p. 82.

refused. SPLM-N soldiers returned fire and one SAF soldier was reportedly killed.¹¹⁹ The convoy escaped.¹²⁰

Fighting spread rapidly throughout the state. “When we heard our leader [al-Jundi] had been shot at, we clashed with the SAF in ed-Damazin”, an SPLA-JIU officer said.¹²¹ On 2 September, the army shelled Malik Agar Cultural Centre and torched the governor’s house, prompting the remaining SPLM-N troops and politicians, including Malik Agar, to evacuate toward Kurmuk.¹²² The same day, planes bombed SPLM-N positions in Kurmuk and other locations.¹²³ A presidential decree dismissed Malik Agar and named the state’s military commander, Major General Yahya Mohammed Kheir, interim governor.¹²⁴ On 3 September, the government banned the SPLM-N in all Sudan.¹²⁵ Hundreds of SPLM-N Blue Nile members, especially politicians from the northern part of the state, publicly declared they did not want to fight and some eventually joined the government. Some, including Siraj Ali Hamid and Ramadan Yasin, founded a new party, the National Movement for Peace and Development, which received SPLM-N state assembly seats as well as control of two state ministries.¹²⁶

The rebels initially controlled some key garrisons, including Dindiro, Kurmuk and Baw, but the SAF quickly recaptured Baw and launched an offensive on SPLM-N’s remaining positions.¹²⁷ Government troops were much better prepared, “our forces

¹¹⁹ No SPLM-N soldier was killed. Crisis Group interviews, Joseph Tuka and other SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile, November 2012; NCP member, November 2012.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N al-Jundi Suleiman, Hashim Orta, South Sudan, November 2012.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N officer, Yabus, December 2012.

¹²² Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N Joseph Tuka, Blue Nile, and international observer, Juba, November 2012; NCP official, Khartoum, May 2013; “The Conflict in Blue Nile”, op. cit. According to an international observer close to Malik, “Malik really didn’t expect this and was shocked when they shot at his house”. Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012. Many SPLA-JIUs stationed in ed-Damazin area escaped through Ethiopia and only came back to the southern Blue Nile battlefield after November 2011. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Hassan Abbas, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹²³ Crisis Group interviews, Sila Musa, former SPLM commissioner and Kurmuk locality parliamentarian, currently commissioner of SPLM-N-linked Blue Nile Relief and Refugee Commission (BNRRC), Maban, November 2012; SPLM-N Abdelda’im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, NCP member, November 2012; SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Addis Ababa, April 2013; email correspondence, Khartoum-based observer, April 2013; “Republican decrees issued on appointment of social welfare minister and two walis”, Sudan News Agency (SUNA), 31 March 2013. Malik, arguing he had been elected, said his removal was unconstitutional. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. A special emergency court was tasked to try the rebel leader *in absentia*. “Blue Nile rebel leader Malik Agar to be tried in absentia”, Radio Tamazuj (online), 23 February 2013; “Neimat Jamaa SPLM-N prominent leader and delegate to Addis talks arrested”, Sudan Radio (online), 9 May 2013.

¹²⁵ “Sudan bans opposition party, seizes offices”, CNN, 6 September 2011.

¹²⁶ In addition, Siraj Ali Hamid was appointed minister of state at the federal mining ministry. According to an SPLM-N official, “they surrendered because they didn’t feel any solidarity with our comrades in South Kordofan”. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Yabus, December 2012; NCP Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, November 2012; Blue Nile, December 2012; Addis Ababa, December 2012, April 2013. “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”, Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (SRRA, the SPLM-N’s humanitarian arm), December 2012, p. 5.

were there but we were not ready. We had no fox holes to protect ourselves from the bombs, and we started distributing ammunition only three hours after the war started”, Malik Agar said.¹²⁸ According to an international observer close to the rebels, “Malik overestimated his preparation and his relation with Ethiopia, believing Meles could put pressure on Khartoum to prevent the war, or maybe even give him ability to operate”.¹²⁹

B. *Main Armed Actors*

At the outbreak of the conflict, the Blue Nile SPLM-N numbered more than 10,000 soldiers, including 7,000 to 8,000 in the 10th Division, mostly based along the border and in Ingessana Hills, and 3,000 JIU members in different locations.¹³⁰ However, by December 2012, Malik Agar said less than 7,000 remained operational. The rebels suffered losses during the first battles and defections, though the extent of these are disputed.¹³¹ Some defectors formed a pro-government militia called “Kopaji”, which also recruited among retired members of government forces, notably from “indigenous” tribes.¹³² Some SPLM-N troops also went to refugee camps in South Sudan and did not return.¹³³

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, June 2012; SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, international observer, Juba, November 2012.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N Hassan Abbas, Bakri Abdekbait, Hashim Orta, Abdelqader Shaban, Abdeldalim Defallah, Juba, Blue Nile, November-December 2012. There are some larger estimates (12,000-17,000) by both SPLM-N leaders and Western sources, but they might reflect an earlier situation or imprecise count. Crisis Group interview, Khartoum-based military expert, April 2013; confidential report by Western military expert; “The Conflict in Blue Nile”, op. cit.; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 234. After South Sudan’s independence, the SPLA’s 10th Division was renamed the 2nd Division of the SPLM-N.

¹³¹ A South Sudanese officer said an important part of Blue Nile SPLM-N forces defected. The SPLM-N denies this and generally admits only “politicians’ defections”, though an officer confessed 70 defections to government forces. Others say some SPLA-JIUs who were based in locations like ed-Damazin and Geisan defected to the SAF in order “not to be killed”. Crisis Group interviews, SPLA officer, Juba, November 2012; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N officials, Juba, Yabus, November-December 2012.

¹³² This force, led by former SPLM-N Colonels Hisein Abeni and Kamal Meisara, fought the rebels in Salih and Kurmuk in October-November 2011, and then numbered some 1,500 men. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Addis Ababa, April 2013; NCP member, November 2012; SCCS, op. cit., p. 4.

¹³³ According to an SPLM-N commander, “when we escort civilians from the Ingessana Hills to South Sudan, some of our soldiers don’t come back”. Crisis Group interviews, Jibril Issa, Malkan, December 2012; other SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile and South Sudan, December 2012; SPLM-N officials, including Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012. “We have now 1,500 to 2,000 soldiers in the camps. We don’t beg them to come back, or they would not fight”, acknowledged Malik Agar. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. There are reports of recruitment, including forced recruitment, in the refugee camps, with the assistance of South Sudanese forces. “We can run away from bombs, but not from hunger’: Sudan’s refugees in South Sudan”, Amnesty International, June 2012, p. 35; “We had no time to bury them’: war crimes in Sudan’s Blue Nile state”, Amnesty International, June 2013, pp. 39-40. However, according to an NGO operating in camps in South Sudan, “recruitment” in the camps appears to be rather an effort to remobilise, more voluntarily than forcibly, troops who left to the camps. Crisis Group interview, NGO worker, South Sudan, November 2012.

In the meantime, Blue Nile soldiers from other divisions in South Sudan joined the SPLM-N ranks, and additional recruitment also took place.¹³⁴ SPLM-N troops currently fighting in Blue Nile are almost exclusively from local “indigenous” tribes, in particular the Ingessana, Uduk, Jumjum and Berta.¹³⁵

The SAF in Blue Nile numbered some 15,000-20,000 troops in late 2010-early 2011.¹³⁶ More have since deployed and SPLM-N estimates in late 2012 claim there may be as many as 30,000.¹³⁷ As during the earlier war, the army is augmented by paramilitary forces and militias, in particular from the PDF. Local militias are mostly recruited among West African “newcomers” (Hausa and Fellata), Arabs (including the Rufa’a al-Hoy), but also indigenous tribes – mostly those close to the government, like the Berta, Watawit and some Burun sub-groups.¹³⁸ Formed during the first war, the Fellata’s main PDF unit, the *Katiba Mabinom* (or *Mayanom*, “sleepless battalion”), is still active.¹³⁹ Several traditional Arab chiefs (with the title of *nazir*, paramount chief, or *omda*, mid-rank chief) are said to have recruited several thousand men into militias, largely from their respective sub-groups.¹⁴⁰

Militia mobilisation occurred mostly after the 2010 elections, and spiked after the outbreak of the conflict.¹⁴¹ A former local NCP member said he attended several PDF arms distributions in ed-Damazin, beginning in early September 2011. According to him, every recruit was given an AKM-type assault rifle, 150 bullets, uniforms and money; some units also received rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) launchers and machine guns. Smaller distributions took place on a daily basis, in places where

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officer having operated in Ingessana Hills and IDPs from Ingessana Hills, al-Fuj, December 2012.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group observations and interviews, SPLM-N officers and soldiers, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Khartoum-based military observer, April 2013. “The Conflict in Blue Nile”, op. cit.; John Young, *The fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 233.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, Abdelqader Shaban, Blue Nile, December 2012. A Khartoum-based military observer contested this figure and said he believes SAF numbers are still below 20,000. Crisis Group interview, April 2013.

¹³⁸ And to a lesser extent, some of the historically pro-SPLM/A tribes, like the Ingessana. In addition to SPLM-N defectors in the “Kopaji” militia, the Ingessana *sheikh* of Maganza is said to have formed a 250 to 300-strong PDF militia. As early as 2010, the military intelligence reportedly formed a militia recruited from “indigenous” communities. Crisis Group interviews, NCP member, November 2012; SPLM-N officials, Addis Ababa, Blue Nile, October-December 2012; Blue Nile civilian from the government area, December 2012; SCCS, op. cit., p. 4. On Rufa’a militias, see Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “Transforming Pastoralism”, op. cit., p. 15.

¹³⁹ In addition, a new Fellata militia was reportedly formed by the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) in November 2011. Crisis Group interviews, NCP member, November 2012; SPLM-N Abdelda’im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012; former SPLM-N member, ed-Damazin, May 2013; UNDP, op. cit., p. 31; Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, “On the Edge”, op. cit.; “Transforming Pastoralism”, op. cit., p. 9; SCCS, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁴⁰ Traditional leaders, most of whom are NCP members, are crucial to the mobilisation of paramilitaries. *Mak al-Fatih al-mak* Yusuf Hassan Adlan, son and deputy of *mak* or *nazir* Yusuf, officially the paramount chief of all “nations and tribes of Blue Nile” and adviser to Blue Nile governor for native administration (traditional authority), is said to have played a key role in recruiting PDF through local chiefs. He denies this. Crisis Group interviews, NCP *mak* al-Fatih, Abderahman Abu Median, Addis Ababa, April 2013; NCP member, November 2012; former SPLM-N member, ed-Damazin, May 2013; SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, November 2012; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SCCS, op. cit., p. 4.

¹⁴¹ See above. Crisis Group interviews, NCP former member, November 2012; SPLM-N Sila Musa, Hashim Orta, South Sudan, November 2012.

speakers were calling for jihad.¹⁴² Others were more formal, attended by officials from Khartoum. For example, on 6 September 2011, Fellata PDF members led by Abderahman Hassan “Jirewa”, head of the state Fellata Union and considered the new coordinator for all Fellata PDF in Blue Nile, were reportedly armed in the presence of Presidential Adviser Ahmad Bilal Osman and PDF National Coordinator Abdallah al-Jeili.¹⁴³

Another major PDF militia is mostly composed of South Sudanese from the Maban tribe, living in an area immediately south of Blue Nile. A former SAF master sergeant, Kamal Loma, the son of the Maban *omda* of Guffa, in Upper Nile, was appointed brigadier general and commander of this force. Created during the first war, the force was reformed after the conflict broke out, and South Sudanese SAF soldiers were reportedly integrated into it.¹⁴⁴ A former NCP member said he witnessed a distribution of arms (AKs, RPGs and machine guns) and food to 1,500 men in this force, in ed-Damazin on 9 September 2011, in the presence of newly appointed Governor Yahya Mohammed Kheir.¹⁴⁵ The force, which has several camps, in particular in Bud in the south west, unsuccessfully fought the SPLM-N in Rum (south of Bud) in November 2011, April 2012 and February 2013, as well as in Mofu in February 2013.¹⁴⁶

According to a member of this force captured by the SPLM-N during the second battle, Kamal Loma had also forcibly recruited farm labourers.¹⁴⁷ Some SPLM-N mem-

¹⁴² On 6 September, NCP Mohammed Mandour al-Mahdi acknowledged the government had sent 1,000 mujahidin to Blue Nile. “NCP: Agar to be reinstated as governor, only if he lays down arms”, *Sudan Vision*, 6 September 2011. There seems to be some confusion between the PDF and mujahidin specifically mobilised along a jihad rhetoric, and also between the PDF and armed nomads not necessarily integrated into PDF. Like in South Kordofan, the PDF in Blue Nile allegedly include students conscripted by force. Blue Nile PDF have only a few vehicles and mostly use infantry tactics, but are sometimes transported by the SAF. They are reportedly paid 250 Sudanese pounds (about \$55) a month and get rewards for captured arms. Crisis Group interviews, SAF defector, Abdelqader Shaban, Blue Nile; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012. Gramizzi and Tubiana, “New war, old enemies”, op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁴³ Ahmed Bilal Osman was appointed federal culture and information minister in June 2012. According to a witness, more than 3,000 men were armed in such ceremonies from September to November 2011. Crisis Group interview, former NCP member, November 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Kamal Loma’s militiaman captured by the SPLM-N, SAF defector, Blue Nile, December 2012; SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile, Addis Ababa, November-December 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, NCP former member, November 2012. Estimates for the whole force vary between 750 to 3,000. Crisis Group interviews, NCP former member, November 2012; SPLM-N Abdelda’im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Kamal Loma’s militiaman captured by the SPLM-N, December 2012; Colonel Badreddin Ali Sam, deputy commander of SPLM-N Blue Nile First Brigade, al-Fuj, December 2012; SPLM-N Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012; Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012. SCCS, op. cit., pp. 3, 5.

¹⁴⁷ The detainee was taken by force from a farm in Bud by seven PDF, then brought to a military camp in Goz Tebelab in a truck full of forced recruits, where the new troops were trained for three days. “They told us ‘from here, nobody is going anywhere except Bunj [in South Sudan]. You’re going to fight the Nyor [nickname given to the Southerners or the SPLA during the first war]’. Each of us was given a uniform, 45 bullets and a rifle whose number had been obliterated – so that, as they told us, the SPLA can’t understand where it does come from. We were not given money but were told, ‘If you reach Bunj and come back, you’ll get money’”. Crisis Group interview, Kamal Loma’s militiaman captured by the SPLM-N, December 2012.

bers believe Kamal Loma's real aim is to fight in Upper Nile against the South Sudan government.¹⁴⁸

There are allegations combatants from other parts of the region are fighting alongside the SAF, in particular Ethiopian mercenaries from cross-border tribes (the Berta, Gumuz and Anuak). According to a former NCP member, they were originally Ethiopian rebels (members of the Benishangul People's Liberation Movement and the Gambela People's Liberation Movement-Front) backed by Khartoum in the 1990s.¹⁴⁹ According to Malik Agar, the SPLM-N captured eleven Ethiopian prisoners, most Anuak from the Gambela Liberation Front and some from Benishangul-Gumuz, in Makaja, in mid-2012.¹⁵⁰ Ethiopian Gumuz also reportedly fought the SPLM-N in Kurmuk in November 2011.¹⁵¹

C. *Course of War*

After SPLM-N troops left ed-Damazin on 2 September 2011, they were constantly driven south. On 21-22 October, they lost a major battle in Salih (between Dindiro and Kurmuk). On 4 November, following a major government offensive on Kurmuk, the SPLM-N chose to spare its forces and evacuated the town without much fighting, thus losing its historical stronghold and only road access to Ethiopia. Then on 22 November, the SAF took Deim Mansour immediately south of Kurmuk.¹⁵² Thereafter

¹⁴⁸ The militiaman asserts, "the enemy was the SPLM-N". Ibid; Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November-December 2012. The forced recruitment and insufficient training are confirmed by an SPLM-N military intelligence officer who interrogated three other prisoners of Kamal Loma's force following the April 2012 battle. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, December 2012. Some 200 troops of this militia reportedly defected to Upper Nile because they did not want to fight the SPLM-N. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Abdelda'im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012. According to South Sudanese government sources, other Southern militias, affiliated in particular to David Yau-Yau, the leader of the currently most active anti-Juba militia, are present in Blue Nile, but refrain from fighting the SPLM-N.

¹⁴⁹ Since the Berta are a cross-border community and some Ethiopian Berta were reportedly integrated into the SAF, some SPLM-N officers say that it is difficult to distinguish an Ethiopian Berta rebel from a Sudanese Berta soldier. Crisis Group interviews, NCP former member, November 2012; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, Abdelqader Shaban, other SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012. John Young, "Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier: Gambella and Benishangul in Transition", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (June 1999), pp. 321-346; "Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier: An Overview and Analysis", Small Arms Survey Working Paper no. 9, November 2007, p. 41; John Markakis, *Ethiopia: The Last Two Frontiers*, p. 348.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, former NCP member, November 2012. The Chadian rebels who were reportedly trained among 1,500 "Janjawid" militias in Disa (see above) are also said to have fought the SPLM-N in Kurmuk in November 2011. They reportedly numbered 300 men, notably former members of the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD)-Fondamentale, the main Chadian Arab rebel group, based in Darfur between 2007 and 2010. Crisis Group interviews, former NCP member, November 2012; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, September 2011, December 2012; Jérôme Tubiana, "Renouncing the Rebels", op. cit., p. 40. Finally, the presence of a Salafi group of some 30 (Sudanese and foreign) combatants led by Dr Osama Mohammed Abdelsalam, was reported in Dinder national park. They were said to have fought government forces (NISS, police and wildlife guards) in the northern part of the park in November 2012. Crisis Group email correspondence, Khartoum-based observer, March 2013; "Jihadists from Mali in Darfur", *Africa Confidential*, vol. 54, no. 4, 15 February 2013, p. 5.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N official, Juba, November 2012; "Blue Nile Burning: Evidence of the Destruction of 'Amara Village'", Satellite Sentinel Project, 30 November 2011, p. 1; "The Conflict in Blue Nile", op. cit.

a respite lasted until October 2012, when government forces took Surkum, south west of Salih. Smaller battles erupted periodically around Kurmuk, in particular in Deim Mansour in May and November 2012; in Surkum in August-September 2012; and in Mofu in December 2011, February 2012 and February 2013.¹⁵³

Since the fall of Kurmuk, the “front line” has not moved much, with rebel-held areas limited to a 20 to 30km-wide stretch along the border with South Sudan, as well as the southern tip of Blue Nile around the Yabus River.¹⁵⁴ In addition, the SPLM-N has tried to keep control over isolated pockets from where it can launch guerrilla attacks, in particular in the Ingessana Hills. It is unclear whether its troops are still present in this area, however, since soldiers who escorted fleeing civilians to South Sudan did not necessarily return, with some staying as refugees and others deploying to other SPLM-N-held areas.¹⁵⁵

In December 2012, Malik Agar said the SPLM-N still had a battalion of 600-700 men in the Ingessana Hills, both in Rumaylik and Jebel at-Tin areas, under the command of Colonel Bel Wayfa, and also controlled other small enclaves at the Ethiopian border close to Keili.¹⁵⁶ But several SPLM-N officers were expecting the SAF to take more territory.¹⁵⁷ “Until today, we’re not ready for [conventional] fighting yet”, an SPLM-N officer acknowledged.¹⁵⁸ Another noted, “we know the government is strong and we’re weak, we can’t deny it. But they can only win short-term, not long-term”.¹⁵⁹

Many explain their difficulties as being down to lack of preparation, but also by a much less favourable situation compared to the earlier war. Between 1985 and 2005, government forces were not only fighting in the “two areas” of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, but also all over South Sudan. The Blue Nile theatre was part of the fifth front encompassing all the area north of the Sobat River, east of the White Nile and west of Ethiopia, and the rebels had direct access to, and support from, Ethiopia in the 1980s and late 1990s.¹⁶⁰ Ethiopian and more indirect Eritrean support were key to SPLM-N successes in Blue Nile in 1997, but this changed in 1998, when the Eri-

¹⁵³ SPLM-N medical register seen by Crisis Group; Crisis Group interviews, Jerome Adam, *sheikh* of Mofu, Blue Nile, December 2012; SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile and South Sudan, November-December 2012. On Mofu, see “Update on humanitarian needs in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Sudan, 1st January-11th March 2013”, South Kordofan and Blue Nile Coordination Unit, March 2013; SCCS, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁴ See map in Appendix B. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Joseph Tuka, other SPLM-N officials, South Sudan, Blue Nile, November 2012.

¹⁵⁵ On 14 December 2012, Crisis Group witnessed the walk, between Kubra and Malkan close to the “front line”, of some 600 civilians who were fleeing the Ingessana Hills to South Sudan, escorted by SPLM-N soldiers. According to the civilians, their escort would not go back to the Hills. However, the escort had split on the way, with some 60 soldiers, deciding to return to the Hills to fight, against their officers’ orders. Among the reasons to leave, soldiers and civilians alike mentioned the loss of positions and the lack of ammunition and food. The rebels had to venture at night into government-controlled Maganza market to get food from relatives. Malik Agar denied that this convoy was a complete evacuation from the Ingessana Hills, but said this was the first of three shifts of 100 men each, going for “refresher training”, then returning with much needed ammunition. Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N officers, some having operated in Ingessana Hills, Blue Nile, December 2012; IDPs from Ingessana Hills, Malkan, al-Fuj, December 2012.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Abdelda'im Defallah, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa; Abdelqader Shaban, Blue Nile, December 2012.

trea-Ethiopian Border War (1998-2000) began, and both gradually sought peaceful relations with Khartoum.

As a consequence, in contrast to the better prepared rebels in South Kordofan, the Blue Nile SPLM-N appears to suffer from equipment shortages, recruiting difficulties, lower morale and more internal (tribal and age) divisions. Young cadres complain that old veteran commanders are promoted before more recent, but better educated recruits.¹⁶¹ The latest battle in Mofu, in February 2013, in which the SPLM-N reportedly managed to capture some SAF vehicles and weapons (this has happened less often in Blue Nile than in South Kordofan) triggered hope among the rebels that this might be a turning point.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁶² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Addis Ababa, March-April 2013.

V. The Humanitarian Crisis

A. A Heavy Toll on the Civilian Population

As in South Kordofan, the government is targeting SPLM-N's civilian supporters, largely on the basis of ethnicity (groups like Ingessana or Uduk being systematically considered pro-rebels), but also pro-SPLM sympathisers. According to an NCP member, recent electoral results gave the government precise knowledge of who was pro-SPLM, so that in some villages "only the SPLM part was targeted".¹⁶³ In the first days of the conflict, civilians considered pro-rebels were arrested and some eventually killed.¹⁶⁴

SAF Antonov cargo planes have frequently bombed rebel-controlled areas. SPLM-N humanitarian sources estimated that between October 2012 and March 2013, some 240 bombs were indiscriminately dropped on rebel areas.¹⁶⁵ Even if casualties are limited, government attacks provoked massive displacements, both to neighbouring countries (South Sudan and Ethiopia) and within Blue Nile, where many communities now live scattered in the bush, under trees that hide them from the planes.¹⁶⁶

By June 2013, some 150,000, at least 15 per cent of the state's population, were living in refugee camps, including 117,500 in South Sudan and 30,000 in Ethiopia.¹⁶⁷ Those figures are likely to increase. In late 2012, government forces reportedly pre-

¹⁶³ Crisis Group interview, NCP member, November 2012; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 27. The popular consultations' public hearings (see above) might also have contributed to this mapping.

¹⁶⁴ Notably in ed-Damazin, but reportedly also in Sinja, in neighbouring Sinnar state. Crisis Group interview, Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012; "We can run away from bombs", Amnesty International, op. cit., pp. 12-13; "Under Siege", Human Rights Watch, December 2012, p. 41; "The Conflict in Blue Nile", op. cit.

¹⁶⁵ All in all, the same sources estimate some 2,000 bombs were dropped on Blue Nile between September 2011 and May 2013. However, before October 2012, the bombs had not been systematically counted. "The Humanitarian and Human Rights Situation", SRRA, op. cit., pp. 19-21; SCCS, op. cit., p. 6; Crisis Group interview, Hashim Orta, Addis Ababa, May 2013.

¹⁶⁶ Aerial bombings have also provoked changes in markets' dates, hours and locations; some markets now take place under the trees, and are generally smaller than before the conflict. Crisis Group observations and interviews, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

¹⁶⁷ South Sudan's Upper Nile camps for Blue Nile refugees include Doro (45,500), Yusuf Batil (38,000), Jendrasa (16,000), Kaya (12,500) and Jamam (4,000). "Refugees in South Sudan", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), updated 5 May 2013. Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz camps include Bambasi (12,300), Tongo (9,500) and Sherkole (7,800). In those three, camps, 80 per cent of the refugees declared coming from Blue Nile, and 20 per cent from other parts of Sudan and South Sudan – although even those might have been living in Blue Nile prior to their arrival in Ethiopia. UNHCR unpublished data, 31 January 2013. The refugee agency also numbers 2,800 refugees who refused to move to a designated refugee camp when their transit camp was closed in July 2012 – it was too close to the border (25km) and reportedly serving as a rear base for the SPLM-N – and are now living in the bush along the Ethiopian border. Thousands of displaced along the border, including some who recently came back to their villages, have been presented by the government as "returnees" from Ethiopia. Government officials announced plans to resettle them in large, model settlements rather than their villages of origin, which can be interpreted as a way to prevent them from harbouring rebels. By April 2013, Blue Nile governor Husein Abu Surwal claimed only 4,000 refugees remained in Ethiopia. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian sources, April 2013; Interview, *Al-Sahafa*, op. cit.; "Blue Nile refugees stranded on Ethiopian border", Radio Tamazuj (online), 28 February 2013.

vented 10,000 to 15,000 Ingessana civilians from fleeing to South Sudan.¹⁶⁸ Since November 2011, SPLM-N troops (both based in Ingessana Hills and coming from SPLM-N areas further south) have secured a corridor and escorted civilians between the Hills and Malkan on the “front line” further south.¹⁶⁹ In May 2012, escorts stopped after government forces arrested some 600 civilians in Jebel at-Tin.¹⁷⁰ The corridor reportedly was reopened in December 2012, but thousands who had gathered in Khor Jidad at the request of the SPLM-N found the road blocked by the PDF.¹⁷¹

In addition, SPLM-N humanitarian sources estimated some 80,000 to 100,000 civilians, most of them displaced, were still living in rebel-controlled areas in December 2012. Almost all are considered “vulnerable”.¹⁷²

B. *Rising Food Insecurity*

According to international humanitarian sources, food security conditions in SPLM-N-controlled areas are likely to deteriorate to “emergency acute food insecurity” during the usual hunger gap of the rainy season (July-September).¹⁷³ In government-con-

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Jibril Issa, Malkan, SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian source, Juba, December 2012; “The Humanitarian and Human Rights Situation”, SRRA, op. cit., p. 10.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid; “Sudan Field Dispatch: Refugees Provide Details of Attacks in Isolated Blue Nile State”, Enough Project, July 2012, p. 6.

¹⁷⁰ Their light SPLM-N escort had run away. They were reportedly brought to government-controlled settlements – including Maganza, from where civilians are reportedly not allowed to leave to fetch wood or water without an SAF escort. This indicates that the government wants to prevent Ingessana civilians, supposedly pro-rebels, to flee to SPLM-N areas. There are also reports of civilians, with no or a weak SPLM-N escort, attacked, arrested and sometimes killed on the way. The men, suspected of being SPLM-N soldiers, are often killed, the women arrested and brought to government-controlled settlements. In April 2012, a small group of Ingessana men from Jebel at-Tin found the way south blocked by the SAF in Makaja. Accused of being rebels, they were arrested, and some tortured to death, according to survivors who managed to reach Wadaka. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers having operated in Ingessana Hills, IDPs from Ingessana Hills, Malkan, al-Fuj; traditional leader, Wadaka; SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian workers, Blue Nile, Juba, December 2012.

¹⁷¹ See above. During these risky evacuations, the weakest and the oldest are often left behind or abandoned on the way. Crisis Group interview, Jibril Issa, Malkan, December 2012.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interview, Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012; “More than 1 million under attack by Sudanese government”, SRRA press release, 30 December 2012; “The Humanitarian and Human Rights Situation”, SRRA, op. cit., p. 9; “Sudan Food Security Outlook, April to September 2013”, Famine Early Warning Systems Network, p. 8. Figures provided by SPLM-N affiliated bodies are slightly higher than those Crisis Group gathered through interviews with local civilians. The lack of access for international aid organisations means data from rebel areas are often limited to those provided by SPLM-N affiliated bodies. By August 2012, the government had a much lower figure of 19,100 affected people in SPLM-N areas, though it has no access to those. “Humanitarian Bulletin Sudan”, Issue 40, op. cit. Some civilians have also sought refuge in cities, in particular ed-Damazin, Sinja in Sinnar state and Khartoum. After the first weeks of systematic targeting of supposedly pro-rebel communities, the government seems to have deployed a more conciliatory approach in order to prevent civilians from fleeing to SPLM-N areas. As a result, members of the Uduk community of ed-Damazin, who had taken refuge in the bush, came back to town after one month and were welcomed by the authorities, who reportedly provided them food aid. Crisis Group interview, Uduk civilian from ed-Damazin, December 2012.

¹⁷³ “Sudan Food Security Outlook”, op. cit.

trolled areas, some 86,000 civilians in three out of the six localities (Geisan, Baw and Kurmuk) were in urgent need of assistance.¹⁷⁴

The fear, not to mention the reality, of attacks and bombings impedes farming.¹⁷⁵ The war started before the 2011 harvest, leading many to give up gathering their crops.¹⁷⁶ The harvest was better in 2012, although with important local variations.¹⁷⁷ An SPLM-N official acknowledged this allowed civilians in rebel areas to give the rebels 3,000 sorghum sacks in early December.¹⁷⁸ Malik Agar said the quantity was much lower, with a “contribution” fixed at one *malwa* (3kg) per family, and mostly in isolated rebel enclaves at the Ethiopian border in Keili area.¹⁷⁹

Many people relied on wild plants and fishing.¹⁸⁰ There are reports of starvation. In December 2012, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (SRRA), the SPLM-N’s humanitarian agency, said “in just one small area, the payam [county] of Wadaka, 1,205 people have starved to death, half of them children”, since the beginning the conflict.¹⁸¹ However, their “Rapid needs and opportunity assessment” invited caution, given deaths were “reported by the community” and could not be verified by the assessment team.¹⁸²

Care is justified: the data did not match what Crisis Group obtained in December 2012 from interviews in the same communities. For instance, in the most affected front-line locations, Mofu and Mayak, the assessment reported respectively 200 and 150 hunger-related deaths while Crisis Group was told exactly ten times less (twenty and fifteen respectively).¹⁸³ In Moguf, where the assessment found 377 hunger-related deaths (the highest number for a single community), local leaders did not attribute any deaths to starvation.¹⁸⁴ Even where civilians reported deaths to hunger,

¹⁷⁴ According to joint World Food Programme (WFP) and government estimates. Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, Khartoum-based humanitarian sources, April 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012; civilians, Chali al-Fil and Mayak; Jerome Adam, *sheikh* of Mofu, James Tiya, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

¹⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civilians, Blue Nile, December 2012. Some communities managed to farm in 2011, and were said to have farmed more than in 2012. Crisis Group interview, Juma’ Joda, *sheikh* of Tenfona, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁷⁷ Some “front-line” communities, like Mofu, managed to farm despite aerial bombings and attacks, while others suffering only from occasional aerial bombings, for instance south of the Yabus river, largely gave up on farming. Lack of seeds, bad climatic conditions and insects also impact crop yields. Crisis Group observations and interviews, traditional leaders of Mofu, Tenfona and Yabus areas, Blue Nile, December 2012. “Update on humanitarian needs, 1st January-11th March 2013”, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N official, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁷⁹ See above. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

¹⁸⁰ Crisis Group observations and interviews, traditional leaders, Blue Nile, December 2012; Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012.

¹⁸¹ “More than 1 million under attack”, SRRA, op. cit. There are more reports of starvation in Blue Nile than in South Kordofan. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 24, 28.

¹⁸² “Rapid needs and opportunity assessment, Blue Nile comprehensive report”, South Kordofan-Blue Nile Coordination Unit, November 2012, p. 19.

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 19; Crisis Group interviews, *sheikhs* of Mofu and Mayak, medical personnel, Blue Nile, December 2012. The ratio between adults and children (roughly 50/50) seems consistent. Crisis Group interviews, various traditional leaders, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁸⁴ “Rapid needs and opportunity assessment”, op. cit., p. 30; Crisis Group interviews, traditional and local civilian leaders, Moguf, Chali al-Fil, December 2012; SPLM-N humanitarian source, Juba, November 2012. Similarly, SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian sources explained more hunger-related deaths had been recorded in Wadaka than in Chali al-Fil, because the (Christian) Uduk are coping better than the Jumjum. Members of both communities denied this, however. Crisis Group inter-

it appears the lack of food was only one factor. Children's deaths attributed to hunger are often explained by their mother's lack of breast milk, possibly, but not necessarily, linked to lack of food.¹⁸⁵ According to a local aid worker, "nobody died from hunger only, but some indirectly died from hunger".¹⁸⁶

Many civilians in rebel areas, as well as SPLM-N soldiers lacking their pre-war salaries, are involved in artisanal gold mining, including in old mines where extraction has resumed since the conflict broke out. The SPLM-N is not levying taxes on artisanal mining, but hopes to get revenues from mechanised mining.¹⁸⁷ The gold is sold on markets at the Ethiopian border, where traders come from Benishangul-Gumuz state, resuming a practice from the earlier war.¹⁸⁸

C. *Limited Humanitarian Access*

Food aid (and humanitarian support in general) remains very limited, mostly due to Khartoum's restrictions on humanitarian access to both government- and rebel-controlled areas. Cross-border aid from South Sudan (no attempt has so far been made from Ethiopia) has been much more limited than in South Kordofan, with only a few local NGOs providing aid with international support.¹⁸⁹ One reason is that SPLM-N-controlled areas are much smaller and, unlike in South Kordofan, most of the affected population in Blue Nile lives in refugee camps. With priority given to these, cross-border "indirect assistance" has been very late, with a first pilot food distribution in December 2012 (witnessed by Crisis Group). The Funj Youth Development Association (FYDA), a local NGO close to the SPLM-N, bought sorghum in South Sudan and distributed it to some of the most affected communities in Blue Nile.¹⁹⁰

The quantity was insufficient, however. For instance, in Wadaka area (including desperate communities in Wadaka, Samari, Mayak and Mofu), some 80 tonnes of

views, SPLM-N affiliated sources, Juba, November 2012; civilians, Chali al-Fil and Wadaka, November-December 2012; "Rapid needs and opportunity assessment", op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, traditional leaders and civilians, Wadaka, Mayak, December 2012.

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, FYDA (Funj Youth Development Association) monitor assistant, Blue Nile, December 2012. This was corroborated by the main commander in Wadaka area.

¹⁸⁷ By late 2012, it was unclear whether mechanised mining had started, but machines had been brought by a Blue Nile exile in the U.S. It is said a crusher can extract 100 grams a week, versus 3 grams for an artisanal digger. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian workers, Maban, November 2012; gold-diggers, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, international observer close to the SPLM/A, Juba, November 2012; "Rapid needs and opportunity assessment", op. cit., p. 30. In December 2012, the gold was bought for 80 Ethiopian Birrs (\$4.5) a gram on the main border market. Crisis Group observations and interviews. In March 2013, the price of the gold in Asosa, the capital of the Benishangul-Gumuz state (also a gold-rich region), was 400 Birrs (\$22) a gram. Crisis Group interview, researcher, Addis Ababa, April 2013. Artisanal gold digging in Blue Nile rebel areas is unlikely to produce more than 1 to 2 kg a month, thus bringing to local civilians an income of \$4,500-9,000. The international gold price in December 2012 was approximately \$53 per gram.

¹⁸⁹ The government is aware of it and tolerating it. Crisis Group interview, Khartoum-based humanitarian source, April 2013; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 28.

¹⁹⁰ Other local NGOs gave money for civilians staying in rebel areas to buy food in South Sudan's markets, as well as fishing nets and hooks. Crisis Group interview, Sila Musa, Maban, November 2012. FYDA was founded in 2011 to replace ROOF (Relief Organisation Of Fazughli), also said to be very close to SPLM/A (its last chairman was former 10th Division commander Ahmad al-Omda), created during the earlier war and later frozen, reportedly because of mismanagement. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N-affiliated humanitarian officials, November-December 2012, April 2013.

sorghum was shared between 4,000 families; with an established ratio of 20kg per family, that meant only 60 per cent received food.¹⁹¹ Locals complained of insufficient rations and unfair distribution, and humanitarian workers acknowledged they lacked proper methods for selecting beneficiaries and sometimes applied a “first-come, first-served” rule.¹⁹² Even though imperfect, the food distribution did allow people to remain on their land. In Tenfona for instance, although less than half of the population reportedly received food, the local chief said most decided to stay because of the distribution.¹⁹³

According to Malik Agar, the lack of food has a strong impact not only on civilians but on SPLM-N combatants as well. “Khartoum uses food as a weapon – when civilians run away because of lack of food, combatants will follow them from tree to tree, then to refugee camps Once there, it might take time for combatants to come back to the field, or they might not come back at all”.¹⁹⁴

In government-controlled areas, humanitarian access has slightly improved since January 2013, with Khartoum allowing UN assessments, including international staff, in three of the six Blue Nile localities (Geisan, Baw and Kurmuk). Those took place with a government escort, including officers from the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), Military Intelligence, and Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC), present during the interviews with the civilian populations.¹⁹⁵ “Cross-line” access from government-controlled to SPLM-N areas was impossible.¹⁹⁶

In April 2013, the WFP distributed food for the first time since the outbreak of the conflict, reaching more than 50,000 beneficiaries, mostly displaced in Geisan and Kurmuk localities, under the supervision of international staff. In addition, since January 2013, “non-food items” (plastic sheets, blankets, etc.) were distributed to several thousand people. To date, international NGOs have not been involved in this process.¹⁹⁷ With distributions for now limited to government areas, population movements from SPLM-N to government areas are expected.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, FYDA monitor assistant, traditional leader, Wadaka, December 2012.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interviews, Wadaqa, Samari, Mayak, Tenfona; FYDA monitor assistant, Blue Nile, December 2012.

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interview, Juma' Joda, December 2012. Allowing Blue Nile's population to remain on their land is arguably a good investment, avoiding complicated return processes in a region where land property remains a highly contentious issue.

¹⁹⁴ Malik and other SPLM-N officials say it is almost impossible to prevent combatants from benefiting from the food aid, because they often live together with civilians. Crisis Group interviews, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; other SPLM-N officials, December 2012.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, Khartoum-based sources, February-April 2013.

¹⁹⁶ In addition to government restrictions, some Khartoum-based humanitarian actors say the SPLM-N does not give them sufficient guarantees to allow cross-line access. The rebels fear cross-line operations could be infiltrated by government spies, and their preference is for cross-border access. Crisis Group interviews and email correspondence, Khartoum-based sources, February-April 2013; SPLM-N leaders, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group email correspondence, Khartoum-based source, April 2013. “Life-saving food assistance WFP reaches conflict-hit people of Sudan's Blue Nile state”, WFP, 4 April 2013; “Humanitarian Bulletin Sudan”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Issue 11, 11-17 March 2013, p. 3. Blue Nile Governor Husein Abu Surwal claimed 150,000 people were affected in the state, all of whom received support. He denied aid was prevented to reach SPLM-N areas, “except where the rebels are using people as human shields”. Interview, *Al-Sahafa*, op. cit. (Crisis Group translation).

¹⁹⁸ “Update on humanitarian needs in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Sudan, 1st January-11th March 2013”, South Kordofan and Blue Nile Coordination Unit, April 2013.

VI. National and Regional Dimensions

A. National and Local Agendas

The SPLM-N was more successful in South Kordofan than in Blue Nile, its paramount leader's stronghold. Malik Agar also became the chairman of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), a coalition gathering the SPLM-N and the three main rebel groups of Darfur in November 2011. That makes him de facto leader of Sudan's armed opposition, if not of the whole opposition, since the SRF signed a "New Dawn Charter" with representatives of the main official opposition parties in January 2013.¹⁹⁹ In May 2013, an NCP member acknowledged the dilemma, "there are new realities which must be taken into consideration, now we have to deal with the SRF and not only the SPLM-N. We can't ignore the fact that Malik is heading the SRF".²⁰⁰

The SRF program, like the New Dawn Charter, is clearly national.²⁰¹ However, during the field research in Blue Nile, Crisis Group heard no mention of this national agenda, or of the SRF, except by Malik Agar himself. Some local SPLM-N politicians did not share his commitment to the SRF, and pointedly advised him to focus on reinforcing the SPLM-N, not the SRF.²⁰² Malik answered that, as governor, he was often helpless to solve Blue Nile's problems, for instance on land reform, because such laws can only be changed at the national level.²⁰³

The SPLM-N also suffers from divisions, aggravated by the very different military situations in Blue Nile and South Kordofan. Some Blue Nile members do not feel their problems are the same as those of their Nuba comrades; they explain they had fewer reasons to fight and partly went to war in support of the Nuba. "Abdelaziz started this war on his own, he should have waited for Malik to be ready".²⁰⁴

Since September 2012, the SPLM-N has been planning combined military training, leading to joint operations, for mixed troops from the two areas to help overcome differences, as well as bring experienced Nuba combatants to Blue Nile.²⁰⁵ In December 2012, Malik Agar said he had 900 men ready to go to South Kordofan, and was expecting in return two Nuba battalions.²⁰⁶ However, several Nuba leaders doubted this could actually take place; "Nuba people don't want to help Blue Nile,

¹⁹⁹ Malik was supposed to abandon the rotational chairmanship to one of the Darfuri leaders in 28 February, then April 2013, but given the persistent rivalries between the Darfurians, he is likely to remain chairman for some time. Crisis Group interviews, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and SPLM-N officials, March-April 2013.

²⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, ed-Damazin, May 2013.

²⁰¹ "The Document of Restructuring the Sudanese State", SRF, (official translation), October 2012; "Charter of the New Dawn", January 2013 (Crisis Group translation from Arabic).

²⁰² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N politicians, Juba, November 2012.

²⁰³ He further remarked that limiting his scope to Blue Nile, or even to the "two areas" of South Kordofan and Blue Nile, would be playing into Khartoum's hands. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012. This partly echoes opinions of SPLM-N defectors as well as some Blue Nile NCP members. "To me, we have to fight from within the system. Already we succeeded to convince those people in the centre to let us participate [in] the government structure. Now 85 per cent of Blue Nile legislative and executive powers are in the hands of local people". Crisis Group interview, Blue Nile NCP official, April 2013.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²⁰⁶ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. Another SPLM-N leader said there were discussions to bring Nuba and Darfuri rebels to Blue Nile. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, November 2012.

they think they already fought too much for South Sudan without getting much in return”.²⁰⁷ Malik also said Abdelaziz al-Hilu instructed 400 Nuba “trainers”, and 200 of them were already sent to Blue Nile.²⁰⁸ According to one, they did both military training and political mobilisation among civilians, both in Blue Nile’s rebel areas and in South Sudan refugee camps, since December 2011.²⁰⁹

There also appears to be divisions over the SPLM-N’s Blue Nile political agenda. During the war and the CPA negotiations, many in the SPLM/A were in favour of secession for Blue Nile (or at least its southern part), with two possible options: full independence, or, in case of the South’s separation, incorporation into South Sudan.²¹⁰ During the CPA interim period, separatist demands decreased in favour of autonomy within a truly federal Sudan, which, according to the popular consultations, seemed to gather wide local support.²¹¹ Since the conflict resumed, secessionist claims have regained traction, with the same two options of independence or joining South Sudan.²¹² However, for many, separatist demands seem to be, as they often are in such conflicts, a bargaining chip.²¹³

Even if calls for secession are growing, most still appear to prefer autonomy. The SRF program favours a federal system giving large autonomy to the states.²¹⁴ NCP leaders (or at least its members in the centre) publicly oppose this, claiming further concessions on regional autonomy would feed secessionist trends, as they believed happened for South Sudan.²¹⁵ Malik Agar said he favours preserving Sudan’s unity, but shows openness to less consensual options; “our SRF program can satisfy each of those three categories: autonomists [or federalists], nationalists [centralists], and

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N South Kordofan politicians, November 2012. In early 2012, Malik also requested three Nuba commanders, including Brigadier General Nimeiri Suleiman Mourad, the commander of Jaw area, be transferred to Blue Nile. But in March 2013, Nimeiri was still in South Kordofan, and SPLM-N Nuba leaders doubted his transfer would take place. Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N South Kordofan official, December 2012.

²⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N “trainer”, South Sudan, November 2012. Abdelaziz did not confirm this. Crisis Group interview, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²¹⁰ The entity that would separate would not necessarily correspond to the current Blue Nile state. Splitting the state into two, with the northern part remaining in Sudan and the southern part seceding, was and still is promoted by Blue Nile “separatists”. The possibility of joining Ethiopia was never seriously contemplated, although Blue Nile is culturally closer to Benishangul-Gumuz state than to South Sudan. According to John Young, “neither independence nor joining Ethiopia was a serious option, and the CPA foreclosed the possibility of joining the South even if many in the SPLM in the state were in denial”. John Young, *The Fate of Sudan*, op. cit., p. 230; Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N Hashim Orta, Juba, November 2012.

²¹¹ See above, Section II. C.

²¹² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N Hashim Orta and Bakri Abdelbasit, Juba, November 2012; SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012; Alex de Waal, “Sudan’s Choices: Scenarios Beyond the CPA” in *Sudan: No Easy Ways Ahead*, Heinrich Böll Foundation, (April 2010), pp. 9-30. As a tribal leader from southern Blue Nile said, “we’re not educated people, we don’t want a separate country. But the government that will treat us well will be our father, be it South or North Sudan”. Crisis Group interview, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²¹³ Comment by expert on decentralisation, Crisis Group Policy Workshop on “Minorities and Conflict”, 21-22 March 2013.

²¹⁴ SRF, op. cit.

²¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, NCP member, March 2013; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 43.

separatists”.²¹⁶ He also mentioned the Ethiopian system of ethnic federalism, which includes a right to self-determination for ethnic groups, as a model for a future constitution, but warned that attempts by separatists to create de facto situations would be fought by partisans of other options.²¹⁷

Separatist demands appear to be mostly voiced by the Christian Uduk, as well as their co-religionists in other communities (Jumjum, Koma and Ganza) and Muslims from groups close to South Sudan (Jumjum).²¹⁸ In an unpublished paper, Blue Nile Chief of Staff Joseph Tuka (Uduk) argues that the Uduk fought alongside the South for a united “New Sudan”, but “with the separation of South Sudan ... have been cut off”. His group, it concludes, is “part of southern Sudan [and is] appealing anxiously to the United Nations that their requests and problems have to be discussed with the one of Abyei”.²¹⁹ Another Uduk SPLM-N leader explains, “we’re the only Christians. We’re afraid: what if the SRF accepts Sharia law?”²²⁰

Competing local agendas go hand in hand with communal (and sometimes religious) divisions. “Even if we win the war, we’re going to face tribal divides in Blue Nile”, former deputy governor Zayed Issa said.²²¹ SPLM-N soldiers from Uduk, Jumjum or Berta tribes complained commanders from Malik Agar’s Ingessana tribe dominate the rebellion’s leadership.²²² In November 2012, this was addressed by the replacement of Blue Nile SPLM-N Chief of Staff Ahmad al-Omda Bade (Ingessana) with his deputy Joseph Tuka Ali (Uduk).²²³ Blue Nile’s 2nd Division is divided into three brigades, headed by Brigadier General Abdelqader Mohammed Shaban (Berta), Brigadier General Abdelda’im Defallah (Jumjum), and Brigadier General Gasim Um-

²¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. Other SRF leaders do not agree with this very inclusive interpretation of their agenda. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N, Sudan Liberation Army-Minni Minawi (SLA-MM) and JEM leaders, various locations, November-December 2012, March 2013.

²¹⁷ “We want to put in the constitution that ethnic groups could exercise their right to self-determination, on the Ethiopian model ... except we would really implement it”. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. “We have a lot to learn from Ethiopia, from the experience in managing diversity and including it into the constitution”, Dr Ahmed Abderrahman Said, member of SPLM-N delegation to the negotiations, stated during the second “Civil Society Forum on Sudan and South Sudan”, Addis Ababa, 16 May 2013.

²¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, South Sudanese researcher, Juba; SPLM-N soldiers, Blue Nile, November 2012; Wendy James, *War and Survival in Sudan's Frontierlands*, op. cit.; Douglas Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders*, op. cit., p. 79.

²¹⁹ Joseph Tuka, op. cit. Between 1938 and 1953, the territories of the Uduk and Koma, then animist and considered culturally closer to southern Sudan, were part of the Upper Nile province. The 1972 Addis Ababa agreement that put an end to the first war in southern Sudan recognised Chali al-Fil, like the Abyei enclave, as “geographically and culturally part of the Southern complex”, whose belonging to the North or the South was to be decided through referendum. This did not happen. Crisis Group interviews, Chali al-Fil, November 2012; Douglas Johnson, *When Boundaries Become Borders*, op. cit., pp. 76-78.

²²⁰ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, November 2012.

²²¹ Crisis Group interview, Zayed Issa, Addis Ababa, October 2012.

²²² Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N soldiers and officers, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

²²³ The new military intelligence head is Uduk as well; al-Jundi Suleiman (Dawala) became deputy chief of staff; Ahmad al-Omda, who had been 10th Division commander since 2009, often accused of tribalism and blamed for SPLM-N defeats in Blue Nile, became deputy in charge of operations of the whole SPLM-N Deputy Chairman Abdelaziz al-Hilu – a role that has taken him away from the Blue Nile Front. Crisis Group interviews, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012; Crisis Group analyst interview in another capacity, Western military observer, Khartoum, July 2011.

Basha Shashay (Nuba from South Kordofan).²²⁴ On the political side, Malik's second-in-command, the SPLM-N's secretary general in Blue Nile, is Abdallah Ibrahim Abba (Koma), followed by Hassan Abbas (Hamaj).²²⁵

Despite increasing diversity, SPLM-N members frequently criticise the movement's structure as "pyramidal".²²⁶ A South Kordofan SPLM-N leader described Blue Nile as a "one-man show", with a charismatic and competent leader lacking sufficient support from the base: "since 2002, we told Malik to organise cadres – he didn't do it ...".²²⁷ At the same time, it seems local commanders retain a strong autonomy to the point some say they can launch major military operations without orders from Malik Agar or the chief of staff.²²⁸

B. *Links with South Sudan*

During the earlier war, the SPLM/A in Blue Nile and South Sudan largely operated as part of one army, with soldiers and officers fighting all over the South.²²⁹ At South Sudan's independence, the SPLM-N became a Sudanese opposition party, independent from the ruling SPLM in Juba. But troops had remained largely mixed.²³⁰

When the war resumed in September 2011, there were one to two battalions of Southern soldiers in both the 10th Division and the JIUs. They initially fought with the SPLM-N, but started leaving after the rebels were pushed out of Dindiro and following an order by Malik Agar in October 2011.²³¹

Conversely, when the war started, 1,000 to 1,500 Blue Nile soldiers were scattered in South Sudan. In August 2010, Malik Agar had already asked Juba to transfer these troops, without result.²³² Immediately after the referendum, in February 2011, a closed SPLM political bureau meeting (including Malik) reportedly took the decision to transfer Northern soldiers from both Blue Nile and South Kordofan, though they were given the choice to become South Sudanese citizens and remain in the SPLA.²³³ The process was slow, and they mostly went north between January and March 2012; with the earlier departure of Southern troops in November 2011, this left the SPLM-N in Blue Nile understaffed during the crucial months of November-

²²⁴ In spite of being under a non-Blue Nile commander, the 1st Brigade, whose area of operations includes the Ingessana Hills, is said to be dominated by Ingessana soldiers and officers who did not always follow the orders of their non-Ingessana superiors. The Jumjum are still said to be frustrated by Ingessana and more recently Uduk pre-eminence, although one of them is a brigade commander. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian officials, Blue Nile, Juba, November-December 2012.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Hassan Abbas, SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²²⁶ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, SPLM-N affiliated humanitarian officials, Blue Nile, Juba, November-December 2012.

²²⁷ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N leader, December 2012.

²²⁸ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²²⁹ See above, Section I.C.

²³⁰ "This should have been solved before the separation", according to an NCP member blaming both the SPLM/A and Khartoum for not doing so. Crisis Group interview, NCP member, March 2013.

²³¹ There are unconfirmed reports that some also fought in Salih. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Juba, Blue Nile, Addis Ababa, November-December 2012; confidential report by Western military expert; Gramizzi and Tubiana, "New war, old enemies", op. cit., p. 47.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid; Crisis Group interviews with participants to the meeting, including Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Juba, Addis Ababa; SPLA officers, South Sudan; SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November-December 2012.

December 2011.²³⁴ Few troops remained in the South, and “all were happy to go, the morale was good at that time”, according to an SPLM-N officer.²³⁵

In late 2012, Malik Agar estimated that half of Blue Nile soldiers once based in South Sudan had come back.²³⁶ There were regular arrivals and expectations that more would come.²³⁷ After the September 2012 cooperation agreements between Sudan and South Sudan, Juba put more pressure on its Northern soldiers to leave. Ironically, in the following months, Khartoum's insistence on the “disengagement”, including on identifying Northern soldiers in the SPLA, brought more recruits to the SPLM-N.²³⁸ From Juba's perspective, it was a response to international pressure while giving some indirect support to its Northern brothers-in-arms.

There are reports that Juba continued paying SPLM-N salaries after separation. Rebel officials said a period of “transition” was granted to their troops.²³⁹ In late 2011, Blue Nile soldiers reportedly regularly crossed the border to get their salaries in South Sudan.²⁴⁰ This practice apparently stopped in 2012, after increased international pressure as well as the acute economic crisis in South Sudan.²⁴¹ In June 2013, however, Khartoum accused Juba of continuing to pay salaries to SPLM-N troops.²⁴²

Blue Nile and South Kordofan soldiers returned to the North with their arms. This was especially important in Blue Nile, where the rebels lacked ammunition, artillery,

²³⁴ The transfers had not yet started when, in August 2011, Salva Kiir and Malik Agar reportedly issued a common order for Blue Nile and South Kordofan soldiers to move north. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012. In South Kordofan, transfers of Nuba soldiers started earlier, in October 2011. Crisis Group interview, Abdelaziz al-Hilu, Addis Ababa, December 2012; Gramizzi and Tubiana, “New war, old enemies”, op. cit., p. 47. Some Blue Nile soldiers had also travelled north earlier on their own initiative, both before and after Kurmuk's fall in November 2011. Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²³⁵ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N officer who travelled in a group of 750 from South Sudan to Blue Nile in February 2012, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012.

²³⁷ Ibid; Crisis Group interviews, other SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile and South Sudan, South Sudan official and Western military observer, Juba, November–December 2012.

²³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum-based observer, December 2012; SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, November 2012. “Sudan defence minister blames Juba for failure in reaching security deal”, *Sudan Tribune*, 15 November 2012. On 28 December 2012, Khartoum complained to the Sudan-South Sudan Joint Political and Security Mechanism (JPSM) Secretariat, that “the 9th and 10th Divisions continue to be integral parts of the SPLA”, and “Sudanese nationals” are still present within South Sudanese security forces. Other complaints concerned the participation of the SPLA in battles alongside Northern rebels, the presence of rebel camps and leaders in South Sudan and the provision of “military logistic support” in the form of ammunition and fuel (interestingly arms are not mentioned). “Concerns and Complaints Submitted to JPSM Co-Chairs”, annexed to “Implementation Modalities for Security Arrangements agreed on 27th September 2012 between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan”, Addis Ababa, 8 March 2013.

²³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, November–December 2012; Gramizzi and Tubiana, “New war, old enemies”, op. cit., p. 48. SPLM-JIUs also received three months of salaries from Juba just before the outbreak of the conflict in Blue Nile. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Yabus, December 2012. According to a Western analyst close to Juba, by December 2011, some 15,000 Blue Nile soldiers (and the same number in South Kordofan) seemed to remain on South Sudan's payroll. However, those numbers might be relying on older counts and have to be treated cautiously. Crisis Group interview, Juba, November 2012; see “Sudan: Anatomy of a Conflict”, op. cit., p. 82.

²⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, military expert close to the SPLA, Juba, November 2012.

²⁴¹ The oil production shutdown even forced Juba to stop paying its own soldiers for months. Ibid.

²⁴² “Document on GoSS supporting and harboring for Sudanese rebel groups”, Government of Sudan, 11 June 2013.

had only three functioning tanks and relied largely on old weapons.²⁴³ Unlike in South Kordofan, they were not able to capture a consistent supply of weapons, and more crucially ammunition, from government forces. So dire was the situation in Blue Nile that SPLA officers in Juba were reluctant to provide support because those forces did not seem strong enough to reverse the course of the war.²⁴⁴ SPLM-N officers note that the absence of direct external support is a major difference with the earlier war. However, they, as well as politicians and officers in Juba, acknowledge “indirect” or “political support”, which South Sudanese officials consider a “moral obligation” given their common history.²⁴⁵ In April 2013, NCP’s Abderahman Abu Median acknowledged “support from South Sudan [for the SPLM-N in Blue Nile] is not there, while we [the NCP in Blue Nile] have support from Khartoum”.²⁴⁶

Khartoum’s stance on the issue became more aggressive after successful SRF raids on Um Ruwaba in North Kordofan and Abu Kershola in South Kordofan in May 2013. In late May-early June 2013, alleged military and logistical support from South Sudan to Northern rebels came back to the forefront when President Bashir threatened to suspend the implementation of the September 2012 cooperation agreements, including by closing the oil pipeline from South Sudan, if Juba did not sever links with the rebels.²⁴⁷ Khartoum accused Juba of continuing to harbour the SPLM-N and providing the rebels with arms, ammunitions, vehicles, spare-parts, fuel, food and money.²⁴⁸ Juba responded by accusing Khartoum of continuing to arm rebels in South Sudan.

Most government accusations point to support to the rebels active in South Kordofan, on the eve of the attacks on Um Rawaba and Abu Kershola. There are lesser accusations regarding southern support to the SPLM-N in Blue Nile, including with the delivery of 50 cars, arms, ammunitions and fuel in late March and April 2013.²⁴⁹ In order to contain the crisis, the AUHIP demanded the AU commission dispatch a team to investigate the respective accusations.

The South Sudan-Blue Nile borderlands do not include areas of major dispute (like Abyei and Hejlij) and have not been the theatre of direct fighting between Khartoum and Juba. The SPLM-N areas create a buffer zone between the two countries,

²⁴³ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Abdelqader Shaban and other SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, December 2012. A Khartoum-based military observer said that some South Sudanese officials even tried to take back material that SPLM-N divisions brought from South Sudan to the North, without success. Crisis Group interview, military expert, December 2012.

²⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, SPLA officers, Juba, November 2012. However, the Small Arms Survey mentioned indications of possible movements of military equipment. “The Conflict in Blue Nile”, *op. cit.* At the same time, the Nuba forces were capturing enough arms not to need military support in the short term. Crisis Group interviews, SPLA officers, Juba, November 2012; Gramizzi and Tubiana, “New war, old enemies”, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁴⁵ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officer, Blue Nile, December 2012; South Sudanese officials, Juba, November 2012.

²⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

²⁴⁷ “Sudan may review decision to halt South Sudan oil flow”, Reuters, 9 June 2013. In late May, on the sidelines of the AU summit in Addis Ababa, Bashir first threatened to shut down the oil if Juba did not stop its support to Northern rebels within two weeks. Then on 9 June, he ordered a gradual shutdown of the pipeline within 60 days. The oil had just started to reach again Port Sudan in mid-April, fifteen months after a first shutdown decided by South Sudan in January 2012.

²⁴⁸ “Sudan’s position on the implementation of agreements signed with South Sudan”, Government of Sudan, 11 June 2013.

²⁴⁹ “Document on GoSS supporting”, *op. cit.*

but also complicate the demilitarisation of the borderlands.²⁵⁰ According to Khartoum government delegates to the April 2013 talks, most SPLM-N troops in Blue Nile are now inside the “safe demilitarised border zone” agreed by Sudan and South Sudan since September 2012, which extends 10km each side of the border, and international players must pressure them to disarm or leave.²⁵¹ Most doubt disarmament is possible and fear this could eventually lead SPLM-N troops to move north and aggravate the conflict.²⁵² Yasir Arman reiterated that the movement controls a significant part of the North-South border, in particular between Blue Nile and Upper Nile, and thus has to be involved for the buffer zone to be operational. “The SPLM-N is positive and ready to cooperate for a solid demilitarised zone”, he said.²⁵³

C. *Ethiopia: Neighbour, Friend and Peacemaker*

During the earlier war, Ethiopia was a major supporter of the SPLM/A, and the Blue Nile Front was a direct beneficiary. In the 1980s, Ethiopia's Marxist Derg regime strongly backed the then-Marxist SPLM/A, while successive governments in Khartoum replied by supporting Ethiopian rebels, including by providing training in Blue Nile, notably for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Benishangul People's Liberation Movement (BPLM).²⁵⁴ Sudanese and Ethiopian rebels sometimes fought each other. In 1990, as the Derg regime was overthrown, the TPLF and OLF supported the SAF in violently dispersing Blue Nile refugees in what is now Benishangul-Gumuz state.²⁵⁵

After the TPLF seized power in 1991, relations with its Sudanese backers gradually cooled, in particular since the failed 1995 assassination attempt on then-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, in which the Sudanese regime was implicated.²⁵⁶ In the early 1990s, Khartoum's new Islamist government reportedly managed to infiltrate the Benishangul-Gumuz government thanks to local radical Muslim elements.²⁵⁷ From Addis Ababa's perspective, this is the reason why the local government then demanded to have Arabic recognised as an official language and a referendum on self-determination according to the new Ethiopian constitution, a claim Addis Ababa saw as an attempt to unite that region with Sudan. Sudan also provided support and training in Blue Nile to both Ethiopian and Eritrean rebels, including a BPLM faction advocating self-determination for Benishangul-Gumuz.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁰ There have, however, been aerial bombings by Khartoum on South Sudan's territory bordering Blue Nile, notably between October 2011 and January 2012, and more recently in March 2013, including in al-Fuj, Guffa and Yafta, where SPLM-N troops have been based since the CPA period. “We can run away from bombs”, op. cit., p. 25; UNMISS confidential reports.

²⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum government delegates, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

²⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, April 2013; “Sudan Food Security Outlook”, op. cit., p. 8.

²⁵³ Opening statement, 24 April 2013.

²⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopian intellectual then close to the opposition, and SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Addis Ababa, February and April 2013; John Young, “Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier”, pp. 327, 331.

²⁵⁵ Blue Nile refugees only returned to Ethiopia in 1993. Douglas Johnson, *The Root Causes*, op. cit., p. 136.

²⁵⁶ John Young, “Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier”, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 26.

²⁵⁸ Again in 1996, the SPLM/A fought Ethiopian rebels in Blue Nile, alongside the Ethiopian army. Ibid, p. 26; John Young, “Along Ethiopia's Western Frontier”, op. cit., pp. 332-333; Douglas John-

To contain Khartoum's manoeuvres, a U.S.-backed regional bloc was formed, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda and to a lesser extent Kenya, all friendly with the SPLM/A.²⁵⁹ The coalition collapsed in 1998, with the outbreak of the Ethiopia and Eritrea border war. Since then, both countries started a rapprochement with the Sudanese regime, keen to break its isolation. This was made easier by the split between President Bashir and his Islamist mentor Hassan al-Turabi in 1999, and by Khartoum's quiet support to Washington's so-called war on terror after September 11.

Ethiopia was the first to benefit from the rapprochement with Sudan, obtaining access to Sudanese territory for its troops to attack Tesseney, in western Eritrea, in 2000.²⁶⁰ Asmara had to wait until 2006, and the peace agreement signed under its auspices between Khartoum and the Eritrea-backed Eastern Front rebellion, to improve ties with Khartoum.²⁶¹ Since then, Sudan has maintained good relations with the two foes.

While getting closer to Khartoum, Ethiopia has managed to maintain warm relations with Juba and the SPLM, including its Northern branch, and this has made it a main mediator between Sudan and South Sudan, as well as between Khartoum and the SPLM-N. Officially, Ethiopia has been using its current position as chair of the regional organisation, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), as well as its influence within the African Union. But Sudan was very much a personal file of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. His successor, Hailemariam Desalegn, has maintained the position of neutral mediator between Khartoum and its opponents, despite lacking the same personal ties with Sudanese and South Sudanese leaders.²⁶²

The strength of this policy is evidenced by the fact that several border incidents have not severed good relations between Ethiopia and the parties involved in the Blue Nile war. Among them was the SPLM-N's reported capture of Ethiopian mercenaries fighting alongside the SAF, who according to Malik Agar "still have a rebel agenda but have to fight us to get support from Khartoum and access to the Ethiopian border".²⁶³ These prisoners presented a dilemma for the SPLM-N: while maintaining good relations with Ethiopia is crucial, they took into account that the rebels/mercenaries had been trained by Eritrea and the Anuak among them are close to South Sudan – two other regional friends. "So we refused to hand those prisoners over to Ethiopia, and told so to South Sudan and Eritrea. Instead we proposed Ethiopia interrogate them in our area. This Ethiopia-Eritrea-South Sudan triangle is a difficult triangle for us ...", said Malik Agar.²⁶⁴

Benishangul-Gumuz was bombed several times by Sudanese Antonovs. Bombs fell on the Ethiopian side of Kurmuk in September-October 2011 (the Sudanese side was then under SPLM-N control) but also deeper into Ethiopian territory, in Gengen (Jinjin) area 20km east of the border, in December 2011, March 2013, and west of

son, *The Root Causes*, op. cit., p. 137; "Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier", op. cit., p. 26; John Markakis, op. cit., p. 349; Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian expert, May 2013.

²⁵⁹ John Young, "Armed Groups Along Sudan's Eastern Frontier", op. cit., p. 29.

²⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian official, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

²⁶¹ The Eastern Front was largely composed of men from tribes straddling the Sudan and Eritrea border (Beja and Rashaida Arabs). For more, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°102, *Sudan: Saving Peace in the East*, 5 January 2006.

²⁶² Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

²⁶³ Crisis Group interview, Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012. See above, Section IV.A.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

Geisan in April 2013. SPLM-N attempts to use these incidents, in which Ethiopian civilians were killed, wounded and displaced, to cool Addis-Khartoum relations did not succeed.²⁶⁵

In addition to its regional peacemaking ambitions, Addis Ababa is worried about a post-Bashir Sudan, and Bashir's possible succession by elements of the NCP or Islamic movement who, with support from Egypt or Gulf countries, would revive an anti-Ethiopian agenda.²⁶⁶ According to Ethiopian officials, though Bashir has accepted Addis Ababa's leading regional role through IGAD, possible successors could renege on this policy and thus undermine IGAD.²⁶⁷ In spite of past links with some groups, the Sudanese (armed or unarmed) opposition is not seen as an alternative in Addis Ababa – "opposition groups look [like] very poor candidates to put together any kind of coherent solution", says an Ethiopian official.²⁶⁸

Economic interests are also at stake: closer links between Bashir's potential successors and the current Egyptian regime are also worrying for Ethiopia, given the competition it has engaged with Egypt on the Nile waters. Warm bilateral relations with Khartoum are vital for the \$5 billion Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, a gigantic project on the Blue Nile River 20km west of the Sudanese border, that is seen with suspicion by Egypt. Addis Ababa, which buys fuel from Sudan below market prices, hopes to export to Sudan electricity produced by the dam.²⁶⁹ Labelled "black gold for blue gold" by an expert, the deal is seen in Addis Ababa as key to future regional stability.²⁷⁰

Good relations with Khartoum appear of paramount importance in Ethiopia's regional policy because they have implications for two major files in Addis Ababa: the Nile and Eritrea. Addis Ababa aims at avoiding Khartoum siding with Eritrea and

²⁶⁵ Ibid; Crisis Group interviews, international NGO sources, December 2012, April 2013; UN confidential document. Similar attempts by Juba, after Meles's death, to blame Khartoum for stirring up Muslim protests in Ethiopia did not bear fruits either. Luka Biong Deng, "After Meles: The Fate of South Sudan and Sudan Future Relations", *New Nation/Sudan Tribune*, 31 August 2012.

²⁶⁶ According to Ethiopian officials, Addis Ababa worries about the NCP "reformists" and "youth" who could have closer relations with Egyptian Muslim Brothers. It also worries about ambitions of older figures such as Vice President Taha, Nafie Ali Nafie and Salah Abdallah "Gosh", who Ethiopia considers were all involved in the 1995 attack against Mubarak in Addis Ababa. Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopian officials, February-May 2013.

²⁶⁷ Such a change could also involve a rapprochement of Sudan with Eritrea. Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Khartoum is reputed to be very positive about the project, which will allow Sudan to use its water less for electricity and more for commercial agriculture (see above, Section II.B). In May 2012, tripartite talks between Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt over the Blue Nile collapsed because the Egyptian delegation withdrew, but this reportedly did not prevent Khartoum and Addis Ababa from reaching a gentlemen's agreement. Dialogue will be crucial to ensure that the filling of the Ethiopian dam does not unduly impact the Roseires dam and the river's flow downstream. From the early 2000s to South Sudan's independence and the subsequent oil shutdown, Ethiopia was said to import 85 per cent of its fuel from Sudan. Ibid, and Crisis Group interviews, experts, Addis Ababa, March-June 2013. See Harry Verhoeven, "Black Gold for Blue Gold? Sudan's Oil, Ethiopia's Water and Regional Integration", Chatham House, June 2011, pp. 3, 10, 12.

²⁷⁰ An Ethiopian analyst described this as the "energy peace theory": "electricity means peace with neighbouring countries ... the economic link can serve [during] a transitional period to maintain peace until democracy spreads in the region". Melaku Mululem, "Democratic peace theory vis-a-vis 'energy peace theory'", *The Reporter*, 8 June 2013.

Egypt.²⁷¹ Its regional policy is not likely to change without a change in Asmara: reconciliation between Ethiopia and Eritrea, or an alliance between Eritrea and Sudan against Ethiopia, could break off the entente between Addis and Khartoum, but these prospects appear unlikely in the short term. A closer relation between Ethiopia and South Sudan would also damage the balance. In that sense, another major infrastructure project involving Ethiopia, a proposed oil pipeline from South Sudan to Djibouti, would be threatening to Khartoum.²⁷²

As for the SPLM-N, its leaders describe their relations with Ethiopia as friendly. But they make a distinction between the federal government and Benishangul-Gumuz state, which they consider as biased in favour of Khartoum since the 1990s.²⁷³ They blame Benishangul-Gumuz authorities for facilitating Sudanese agents' activities, notably through the Sudanese consulate in the state's capital Asosa, that allegedly include efforts to undermine Blue Nile refugees' support for the SPLM-N and to encourage them to return. When the conflict started, Khartoum reportedly feared Ethiopia would allow the SPLM-N to establish military camps. According to a Sudanese government official, after the fall of Kurmuk in November 2011, SPLM-N soldiers crossed to Ethiopia where they were disarmed by the local authorities and sent to the refugee camps, so that many refugees are former rebels, or SPLM-N supporters.²⁷⁴

Civilians and rebels also claim local Benishangul-Gumuz militias that have links with Khartoum reportedly harass civilians in the border area, notably over the control of gold-rich sites.²⁷⁵ In November 2012, a gold-digging camp in Akura, on the border east of Moguf, was attacked and destroyed by a 40-strong Ethiopian Berta militia.²⁷⁶ The settlement was reportedly on the Sudanese side but the water-point in which the gold was washed was in Ethiopia.²⁷⁷ In April 2013, the same militias were

²⁷¹ According to an Ethiopian expert, if this concern did not prevail, "Ethiopia would not tolerate" Sudanese bombings on its territory. Crisis Group interview, Ethiopian expert, Addis Ababa, May 2013.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, Blue Nile, December 2012, Addis Ababa, September 2012-April 2013.

²⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Sudanese government official, May 2013. In December 2011, when a Benishangul-Gumuz government delegation came to Tongo camp for a visit, a rumour spread among the refugees that it was a Sudanese government delegation. Fighting ensued between refugees opposed and favourable to the visit, during which a camp leader was assassinated. Sudanese officials confirm the rumour, saying Ethiopian authorities refused all Sudanese requests to visit the refugee camps. An official regretted this, saying Ethiopian authorities might have an economic interest in maintaining the camps, and thus in preventing Khartoum from pushing the refugees to return. However, he said this is not a conflicting issue with Addis Ababa, given in particular the fact that Ethiopian authorities provide Sudan with "useful information on what's happening in the camps". Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese officials, May 2013; Malik Agar, Addis Ababa, December 2012; SPLM-N Hashim Orta, Addis Ababa, September 2012; administrator, Moguf, December 2012; SPLM-N Bakri Abdelbasit, Addis Ababa, April 2013; humanitarian sources, April 2013; UN confidential document.

²⁷⁵ Crisis Group interviews, traditional leaders and local administrators, Moguf and Yabus, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Similar border incidents involving those militias also occurred before the war in Blue Nile. Ibid. Throughout Ethiopia, small numbers of government-controlled local militias, lightly armed and trained for only short periods, are in charge of basic security within their community, but in some areas they may act independently of the authorities.

reportedly involved in pressuring Blue Nile refugees living on the border to either relocate to refugee camps deeper in Ethiopia or return to Sudan.²⁷⁸

SPLM-N officers say even their troops avoid the border, because Ethiopian militias attempt to hand them over to government forces in Kurmuk in exchange for money.²⁷⁹ Ethiopian officials deny such actions are necessarily due to uncontrolled militias, and consider one of the founding principles of the relations between Sudan and Ethiopia is a mutual commitment not to harbour each other's rebels.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁸ See above, Section V. Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian sources, April 2013.

²⁷⁹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officers, Moguf and other border locations, Blue Nile, December 2012.

²⁸⁰ From Addis Ababa's perspective, both countries are still committed to a 1964 treaty on the extradition of criminals. This was initially aiming at fighting against *shifta* (road bandits in Amharic) operating along the border, but is now considered valid for rebels. Crisis Group interviews, Ethiopian officials and experts, May 2013.

VII. Toward a Peace Process

A. *Conflicting Agendas, Stalled Discussions*

Since the war resumed, talks between Khartoum and the SPLM-N have taken place in Ethiopia in parallel to the negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan, under the aegis of both Ethiopian prime ministers and the African Union, specifically the AUHIP. But while the North-South track has led to various agreements – though not all have been implemented – talks on the two areas have largely stalled since the stillborn June 2011 framework agreement.²⁸¹ By early 2013, the AUHIP apparently concluded that not much improvement could be made to the agreements between Sudan and South Sudan, except pushing implementation, but that the AU should re-engage more consistently on the North-North process, including the two areas. The AU, however, seems reluctant to engage the SRF as a whole.²⁸²

According to various observers, including from the AUHIP, internal political crises in both Sudan and South Sudan have been the main reason for reluctance (or inability) to implement the September 2012 agreements: as shown by Khartoum's decision to shut down the oil pipeline largely in reaction to the war in South Kordofan, peace in Sudan is needed to get the regime in Khartoum to fully commit to cordial North-South relations. The AUHIP's initial mandate, following the 2009 report of its predecessor, the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD), included "assisting the Sudanese parties" in the implementation of the CPA "as part of the democratic transformation of the Sudan", which the panel itself interpreted as "developing a national consensus".²⁸³ If the AU wants to resolve the conflicts in the two areas as well as Darfur, it should launch a long-awaited national process.

In the first months of 2013, AU deadlines for Khartoum-SPLM-N direct talks passed without consequence, mostly because of the government's reluctance.²⁸⁴ However, in late March, Khartoum showed a new readiness.²⁸⁵ Defence Minister Abderahim Mo-

²⁸¹ See above, Section IV.A. Crisis Group Report, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 18-19.

²⁸² Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Addis Ababa, February 2013.

²⁸³ The AUPD's main recommendation was a national solution for the Darfur crisis. In October 2012, the AU Peace and Security Council mentioned the "promotion of the democratic transformation in Sudan and South Sudan as part of the Panel mandate". See "Report of the AUPD", 29 October 2009; 207th meeting communiqué, AU Peace and Security Council, 29 October 2009; "Phase 1 Programme of Action", AUHIP, January 2010; 339th meeting communiqué, AU Peace and Security Council, 24 October 2012.

²⁸⁴ The SPLM-N also blamed the AUHIP for delaying the talks and prioritising the North-South negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N officials, March-April 2013. According to an AU official, there were also discussions within the AU about the legality of the AU Peace and Security Council's decision to impose deadlines and more general "final and binding" decisions. Crisis Group interview, AU official, February 2013. In February, the AUHIP proposed a four-step agenda to the parties for the next talks, including: 1. a humanitarian ceasefire; 2. direct talks on the basis of the June 2011 framework agreement, leading to 3. national dialogue; and 4. the involvement of a third party, both in the talks and to monitor the ceasefire. Mediators believe the latter could fall to an enlarged UNISFA (UN Interim Security Force for Abyei) composed of Ethiopian troops and already expanded to the demilitarised zone between Sudan and South Sudan. The force's role in the two areas could be one of "light monitoring", on the model of the Joint Monitoring Commission deployed in the Nuba Mountains after the 2002 ceasefire. Crisis Group interviews, AUHIP officials, February and April 2013.

²⁸⁵ This occurred within days after new arrangements with South Sudan finally allowed the implementation of the September 2012 deals, including restarting oil production and establishing a demilitarised zone along the border.

ammed Hussein said he was open to direct talks, and Vice President Ali Osman Mohammed Taha called on Malik Agar and Abdelaziz al-Hilu (Yasir Arman was not mentioned) to participate in the constitutional review process, stating “there is no way to continue with partial solutions”.²⁸⁶ Hussein and Taha also said that the talks with the SPLM-N would aim at completing the CPA and popular consultations in the two areas.²⁸⁷

The SPLM-N accused the government of seeking to isolate South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. The rebels consider the CPA and the popular consultations have lapsed and are too narrowly focused on the two areas to address the conflict’s national dimension.²⁸⁸ They reiterated future talks should be based on the June 2011 framework agreement, which advocates for an holistic national solution, and the May 2012 UN Security Council Resolution 2046, which sets this agreement as a basis for future negotiations. The SPLM-N called for a “national constitutional conference” including all political parties, armed movements and civil society representatives. It also reaffirmed its readiness for a humanitarian ceasefire in the two areas, and proposed to use the same model to stop the war in Darfur.²⁸⁹

Rebel fears that Khartoum aims only to address the conflict’s local dimensions, and may even seek to resolve Blue Nile separately from South Kordofan (given the difference in the SPLM-N’s military strength in both states), were fed by the appointment of a new Blue Nile governor from an “indigenous” tribe, Husein Abu Surwal in April 2013.²⁹⁰ A few days after his appointment, he phoned SPLM-N officials from Blue Nile and proposed local peace negotiations. The rebels reportedly demanded he lift the state of emergency and release political prisoners first, and reiterated their position that negotiations should be held at the national level.²⁹¹ The governor’s appointment might signal a new willingness to address local conflict dynamics, together with allowing humanitarian aid, in some selected government-controlled areas, and

²⁸⁶ “Sudan ready to talk with southern rebels: defense minister”, Reuters, 20 March 2013; “Sudan asks rebels to help draft constitution as tensions ease”, Reuters, 26 March 2013.

²⁸⁷ Taha also declared future pipeline revenues would now be invested in agriculture, addressing criticism that during the oil boom Sudan had neglected other resources. Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N official, April 2013; SPLM-N Secretary General Yasir Arman statement, 27 March 2013.

²⁸⁹ “The SPLM-N is ready to end the war and to go for a national constitutional conference”, SPLM-N Secretary General Yasir Arman statement, op. cit.; “Security Council calls for immediate halt to fighting between Sudan, South Sudan, resumption of negotiations, unanimously adopting Resolution 2046 (2012)”, UN press release, 2 May 2012; Crisis Group interview, SPLM-N official, April 2013; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁹⁰ According to a supporter of his predecessor Major-General al-Hadi Bushra, Abu Surwal, an NCP politician, was appointed because of the peace talks and to answer demands for a civilian governor for Blue Nile. In December 2012, al-Hadi had declared his “government imposes peace by using force” and promised he would never negotiate with the SPLM-N. His replacement by a “son of the state” triggered accusations of “tribalism” and further divisions within the NCP. Crisis Group interviews, NCP leaders, Khartoum and ed-Damazin, May 2013; al-Hadi Bushra’s statement quoted by *Al-Shorooq* (Crisis Group translation), 18 December 2012; “Interview”, *Al-Sahafa*, op. cit.

²⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N official, April 2013. The new governor publicly denied the existence of political prisoners in Blue Nile: “we keep detainees because of their participation to the war; one must differentiate between political prisoners and those arrested carrying a weapon”. “Interview”, *Al-Sahafa*, op. cit.

to convince refugees from those areas to return, while ignoring the broader political dimension of the crisis.²⁹²

On 24 April 2013, for the first time since the June 2011 framework agreement, negotiations resumed in Addis Ababa between the government and the SPLM-N. The day before, the North/South talks gave way to further, albeit minor, progress. The parties agreed to open some ten border corridors, clearly avoiding border areas where Northern rebels, in particular of the SPLM-N, are present (thus the planned corridor between Kurmuk and Maban, across a Blue Nile SPLM-N-controlled area, was replaced at the last minute by a more northern one).²⁹³ But talks on the two areas, presented as “preliminary” by the AUHIP, quickly collapsed on 26 April, with the parties unable to agree on the draft “Declaration of Common Intent” presented to them by the mediators. Both said they would have to consult their respective constituencies before returning to the negotiating table in May.

That NCP Secretary for Foreign Affairs Ibrahim Ghandour, known as a pragmatist, led the government's delegation signalled possibly more readiness from Khartoum.²⁹⁴ But the team also included some important figures from the two areas, indicating the government's will, as Ghandour admitted, to limit the talks to the local level.²⁹⁵ The government was worried because the SPLM-N delegation was led by Yasir Arman, who is from the centre and clearly symbolised the rebel's national agenda.²⁹⁶ The delegation also included members from Darfur and Eastern Sudan, as well as a strong “humanitarian” component, indicating humanitarian access is an SPLM-N priority.

²⁹² The new governor immediately declared negotiations should focus on the two areas and be held on the basis of the CPA, stating Malik Agar “is one of the sons of Blue Nile and he is concerned with the issues of Blue Nile, but if he comes with another agenda, we will not accept it and we will reject any foreign agenda”. “Interview”, *Al-Sahafa*, op. cit.

²⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, international observers, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

²⁹⁴ Ghandour previously played an important role in facilitating relations between the AUHIP and President Bashir. Both the AUHIP and SPLM-N welcomed this change, although they also hoped other powerful pragmatists, in particular South Kordofan Governor Ahmad Haroun and Nafie Ali Nafie, would also participate. In 2012, the government delegation on the two areas was led by Kamal Mohammed Obeid, considered a hardliner. President Bashir appoints the delegations and decides whether they should make concessions. According to government and international sources, political and military hardliners who believe military victory is possible are still influential. Pragmatists tend to be politicians or security officers who believe the conflict cannot be solved militarily, or who consider that brokering a viable deal with the SPLM-N can be crucial for them to remain in power in a post-Bashir era. (President Bashir promised he will not run again in 2015, but it is unclear whether he truly intends to step down, or if it is a tactic to assuage his critics.) Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese official, October 2012, Western diplomats, AUHIP officials, Addis Ababa, February-April 2013; SPLM-N official, April 2013. See “NCP removes Kamal Obeid as head of government delegation to talks with SPLM-North”, Sudan Radio (online), 26 March 2013; Crisis Group Reports, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 35 and 42-43; *Sudan: Major Reform or More War*, op. cit., p. 13.

²⁹⁵ Of the fifteen members, four are Blue Nile officials: Abderahman Abu Median, the *mak* al-Fatih, Brigadier-General Adil Tayeb, and ex-SPLM-N politician Siraj Ali Hamid. *Mak* al-Fatih also heads Blue Nile's political parties committee supporting the negotiations. Crisis Group interviews, representatives of the parties and the mediation, Addis Ababa, April 2013; *Al-Shoroog*, op. cit.

²⁹⁶ “We will negotiate with all Blue Nile citizens including SPLM-N members, but not with Yasir Arman because he has nothing to do with Blue Nile. We will only negotiate the Blue Nile [CPA] protocol”. Blue Nile governor Husein Abu Surwal on Radio Tamazuj, 12 April 2013 (Crisis Group translation from Arabic). Malik Agar and Abdelaziz al-Hilu did not come to the talks.

The agendas remained incompatible. “We’re here to discuss only the issue of South Kordofan and Blue Nile”, Ibrahim Ghandour said in his opening speech.²⁹⁷ Another NCP leader later said, “the failure of the talks was due to the fact SPLM-N was seeking a national solution, thus speaking in the name of the SRF”.²⁹⁸ In contrast, Yasir Arman stated the talks should be based on Resolution 2046 and relevant AU decisions, as well as on the June 2011 framework agreement, meaning they should aim at “an inclusive constitutional process ... and peaceful democratic change ... by adopting a wider holistic approach”. He also reiterated the SRF and New Dawn Charter commitment to build new relations with South Sudan that will eventually lead to reunification. In addition, the SPLM-N wanted to prioritise the humanitarian issue, while the government was willing to discuss all topics put forward by the AUHIP (humanitarian, but also political and security issues), but limited to the two areas.²⁹⁹

Since 2011, the AUHIP has repeatedly suggested linking the “two areas” process (including the unfinished popular consultations) and the national one, although a clear mechanism to do so is missing.³⁰⁰ While the popular consultations did not even start in South Kordofan, they were almost completed in Blue Nile; resuming the process where it was left could at least serve as a basis for local negotiations as well as national talks, but this is unlikely to solve even the Blue Nile conflict if the national dimension is not addressed in parallel.

The AUHIP’s draft “Declaration of Common Intent” presented to the parties on 24 April 2013 is close to its former (17 September 2012) draft agreement on the two areas, itself reminiscent of the June 2011 framework agreement. It includes “an immediate ceasefire”, but also reiterates the need for a “national process toward ... a democratic, inclusive state committed to unity in diversity”. It again asserts SPLM-N’s right “to operate as a political party” and its Sudanese character.³⁰¹

On 27 April, the day after the talks were suspended, the SRF (SPLM-N and the three Darfur rebel movements fighting all together for the first time) attacked Um Ruwaba in North Kordofan and captured and held for one week Abu Kershola in the northern part of South Kordofan, thus asserting again, this time militarily, its national agenda. It was not the first time that rebel forces were active far from their usual areas, but the raid on Um Ruwaba caused considerable alarm in Khartoum. Government sources said talks would not resume before the government wins a major military victory, and explained that retaking Abu Kershola will not be enough.³⁰²

²⁹⁷ “Opening statement”, op. cit.

²⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, ed-Damazin, May 2013.

²⁹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, April 2013; Ibrahim Ghandour’s and Yasir Arman’s opening statements, Addis Ababa, 24 April 2013.

³⁰⁰ Including the popular consultations into a national process aiming at drafting a new constitution was already suggested in 2011, before the war started, by Temin and Murphy, op. cit., pp. 1, 3, 12.

³⁰¹ “Draft Declaration of Common Intent between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North for the Resolution of the Conflict in Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan States”, AUHIP, 24 April 2013; “Draft Agreement between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement-North for the Resolution of the Conflict in Blue Nile and Southern Kordofan States and Related Issues”, AUHIP, 17 September 2012; Crisis Group Report, *Sudan’s Spreading Conflict (I)*, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

³⁰² If the army does not get this victory, officers will oppose negotiations and ask for Defence Minister Abderrahim Mohammed Husein to resign. According to a government official, the attack on Um Ruwaba has turned the conflict in South Kordofan into “a war of honour for the army and a survival battle for military and political leaders as well as the government negotiating team. President Mbeki must have understood it”. Crisis Group interview, government official, May 2013.

B. *Humanitarian Versus Political Priorities*

Beyond the gap between the positions, the AUHIP was looking for the right approach to resume the talks. The mediation's strategy, in particular since the collapse of the framework agreement, has been (and will likely remain) largely dependent on Khartoum's openness. In the months preceding the talks, the AUHIP indicated that, if the government would continue sending a delegation unwilling or unable to compromise, the mediation would limit its efforts to a humanitarian ceasefire. If, on the contrary, Khartoum would re-empower pragmatists such as Ibrahim Ghandour, political talks might directly start.³⁰³ However, since the April talks, most international actors, now including the AU and the mediation led by Thabo Mbeki, recognise that humanitarian access should remain a priority and should not necessarily be linked with political talks that may require considerable time.³⁰⁴ Most international players, in particular the U.S., and the SPLM-N pushed for this option because they did not believe the government had become suddenly ready to make political concessions.³⁰⁵

This does not mean the humanitarian crisis has to be resolved prior to political talks – those could start at the same time – but simply that the mediation will have to take care not to link them too much.³⁰⁶ Success on the humanitarian aspect could generate progress on the political track, but political delays should not prevent humanitarian deliveries.³⁰⁷ Inversely, if humanitarian access remains blocked, the mediation should still push for more rapid progress on the security and political tracks.

During the April 2013 talks, the government insisted that “cross-line” humanitarian operations from government-controlled to SPLM-N areas should take place under its supervision and presence, contrary to what it has permitted in Darfur since 2004. “We don't want the food aid to go to SPLM-N fighters, or it will strengthen their bodies and they will start fighting! We need government presence during assessments and distributions. If no government presence, no food!”, said Abderahman Abu Median.³⁰⁸

In the areas under its control, the SPLM-N prefers cross-border aid from South Sudan. Some rebel leaders believe Sudanese humanitarian organisations should not be allowed into these areas, and that even international organisations should not come with Sudanese staff from government-controlled zones.³⁰⁹

³⁰³ Crisis Group interviews, international officials, including AUHIP, Addis Ababa, February 2013.

³⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, international officials, including AUHIP, U.S. and UN, Addis Ababa, February-April 2013. “Sudan Food Security Outlook”, op. cit.

³⁰⁵ The humanitarian issue has often been seen as a fall-back when political talks stall. Some within the AU disagreed with this priority, and criticised the U.S. government's humanitarian pressure as being dictated by activists. They contend a humanitarian ceasefire would freeze the military situation and delay political progress. This can be debated, as arguably the military situation in the two areas has not evolved much since late 2011. It is also likely that if one of the parties sees possibilities of gains, a ceasefire might be violated, as has frequently happened in Darfur. Crisis Group interviews, international observers and mediators, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

³⁰⁶ The AUHIP proposed to have simultaneous talks on three issues (humanitarian, security and political) and thus to divide the delegations into three groups.

³⁰⁷ A second debate is whether humanitarian access has to be linked to a ceasefire, as government officials insisted. Ideally, it should, but if a ceasefire cannot be obtained in the short term, or if it is violated, humanitarian aid should continue with appropriate guarantees by all parties to the conflict.

³⁰⁸ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

³⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, SPLM-N, international officials, Addis Ababa, April 2013. Those dynamics already impacted the talks between the parties and the “tripartite group” composed of the AU, the League of Arab States (LAS) and the UN. Another reason the August 2011 memoranda signed by the

Government representatives insist that there should be a “permanent ceasefire” before cross-line access is allowed.³¹⁰ Abu Median also says SPLM-N soldiers have to be disarmed and integrated into government forces and civil service. On the political issue, he believes the only solution is for the SPLM-N to become a normal political party and compete in the 2015 elections; “we’re going to accept the result, but they need to disarm first”.³¹¹ Some within the NCP are reportedly open to some power sharing with the SPLM-N, including with Malik Agar as Blue Nile governor or federal minister, Abdelaziz al-Hilu as governor of (a reduced) South Kordofan, and even Yasir Arman at a high position in Khartoum.³¹² But others contend Malik “has to lay down arms and wait for the next elections”.³¹³

C. *International Role*

In addition to the AU, other international players are, or try to be, involved. The UN has been playing a role in humanitarian negotiations, and the Security Council has been regularly discussing the two areas. However, while Resolution 2046 indirectly called for a national process, in line with the June 2011 framework agreement, the council, like the AU, only mentioned the SPLM-N and failed to include the SRF. Furthermore, despite obvious links, the UN treats the two areas and Darfur as separate conflicts. In particular, the Security Council sanctions regime on Sudan, including an arms embargo and a prohibition on offensive military flights, concerns only Darfur.³¹⁴ In early 2013, the U.S. attempted to expand the embargo to the two areas, but could not find any support among the other four permanent council members.³¹⁵ Sudan recently has become subject of U.S. and Russian public disagreement and is likely to remain a divisive issue within the Security Council.³¹⁶

The AUHIP’s mandate expires on 31 July 2013, but it is likely the panel will be renewed. However, this might be for a short period, with the risk, once again, that the mediation will focus on the more urgent issues (the oil shutdown), rather than on the national dialogue within Sudan. With uncertainty on the AUHIP’s future in the long term, many hope the AU will put in place a more permanent and better staffed structure to guarantee past agreements and serve as an umbrella for greater

government and the SPLM-N with the tripartite partners was not implemented was Khartoum’s demand for the leading representative to be from the LAS, rejecting the UNOCHA, even though it is more experienced in humanitarian issues. In April 2013, some government officials were still pushing for a LAS leadership, but the AUHIP draft “Declaration of Common Intent” demanded OCHA “take the leading role”. The LAS has disengaged since mid-2012. Crisis Group interviews, international officials, Addis Ababa, April 2013; “Draft Declaration of Common Intent”, op. cit.

³¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, NCP officials, Addis Ababa and Khartoum, April-May 2013. SPLM-N officials criticised the fact that in the AUHIP draft “Declaration of Common Intent”, humanitarian access was only part III, after the ceasefire. Crisis Group interviews, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

³¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Addis Ababa, April 2013.

³¹² Crisis Group interviews, NCP members, Addis Ababa and ed-Damazin, October 2012, April-May 2013; Khartoum-based diplomat, February 2013.

³¹³ Crisis Group interviews, NCP members, ed-Damazin, April-May 2013.

³¹⁴ Claudio Gramizzi and Jérôme Tubiana, “Forgotten Darfur: Old Tactics, New Players”, Small Arms Survey Paper no. 28, pp. 41-43.

³¹⁵ Which means not only China and Russia, but also the UK and France, were not favourable. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, February 2013.

³¹⁶ Colum Lynch, “Rice, Churkin trade blows in Security Council”, Turtle Bay (turtlebay.foreignpolicy.com), 14 March 2013.

international involvement in both the North-South and the North-North peace processes. Some also hope for a leading role for IGAD and its members, possibly on a future Sudanese national process that would be de-linked from, but coordinated with, the AU-led process between Sudan and South Sudan.³¹⁷

³¹⁷ Some civil society actors, arguing IGAD, as a regional body, has legitimacy to deal with the relations between Sudan and South Sudan, suggest the AUHIP should focus on the Sudanese national process. However, the panel reportedly suggested IGAD (and Ethiopia) play a greater role in the talks on the “two areas”. Crisis Group interviews, February-June 2013.

VIII. Conclusion

Starting three months after the war in South Kordofan, the conflict in Blue Nile has followed a different trajectory. The rebel SPLM-N has been largely pushed by the better prepared government forces to the border with South Sudan. Khartoum hardliners and their local supporters think they can win militarily and are not ready to make many concessions, in particular since they believe South Sudan will not jeopardise recent cooperation agreements, including the reopening of the vital oil pipeline, for the sake of their former brothers-in-arms in the North. Indeed, the SPLM-N in Blue Nile has little hope of receiving significant support from South Sudan, Ethiopia – keen to remain a neutral mediator – or even rebel comrades in other parts of Sudan. However, the rebels can survive by using guerrilla tactics.

Although ill-documented because of lack of access, the fighting has exacted an horrendous toll. SPLM-N-controlled areas, as well as areas considered pro-rebel, have been largely abandoned by their population. Food security is likely to deteriorate to acute emergency during the next rainy season (July-September).

The international community, including the African Union mediation, has started to increasingly pay attention to the war and the humanitarian situation in the “two areas” of South Kordofan and Blue Nile. A major hurdle is the scope of peace negotiations: national for the SPLM-N and local for the government. Both sides suffer from internal divisions, with some within the regime understanding Sudan’s multiple conflicts cannot be solved without reform at the centre level, and some within the rebellion believing the bloodshed in Blue Nile should be stopped without waiting for other parts of Sudan to be ready for peace. What is certain is the longer the war lasts, the more political divisions, ethnic differences, tensions between “newcomers” and earlier settlers, and displacements make a lasting peace even more elusive.

To reach a durable peace, both the government and international actors should stop pursuing local piecemeal deals and abide by their repeated commitments to an inclusive, national process. Shallow democratisation will not be sufficient to solve Sudan’s conflicts and preserve its unity; the national dialogue should also fully address the root causes of the conflict in Blue Nile and other parts of Sudan, in particular the unequal relations between the centre and peripheries. Without a proper redistribution of wealth or devolution of power, calls for self-determination will increase, not least in Blue Nile. Unless the government and the international community engage with both the armed and unarmed opposition and achieve a comprehensive solution to Sudan’s multiple conflicts, there will be no end to the chronic warfare that has plagued the country for decades.

Nairobi/Brussels, 18 June 2013

Appendix A: Map of Sudan

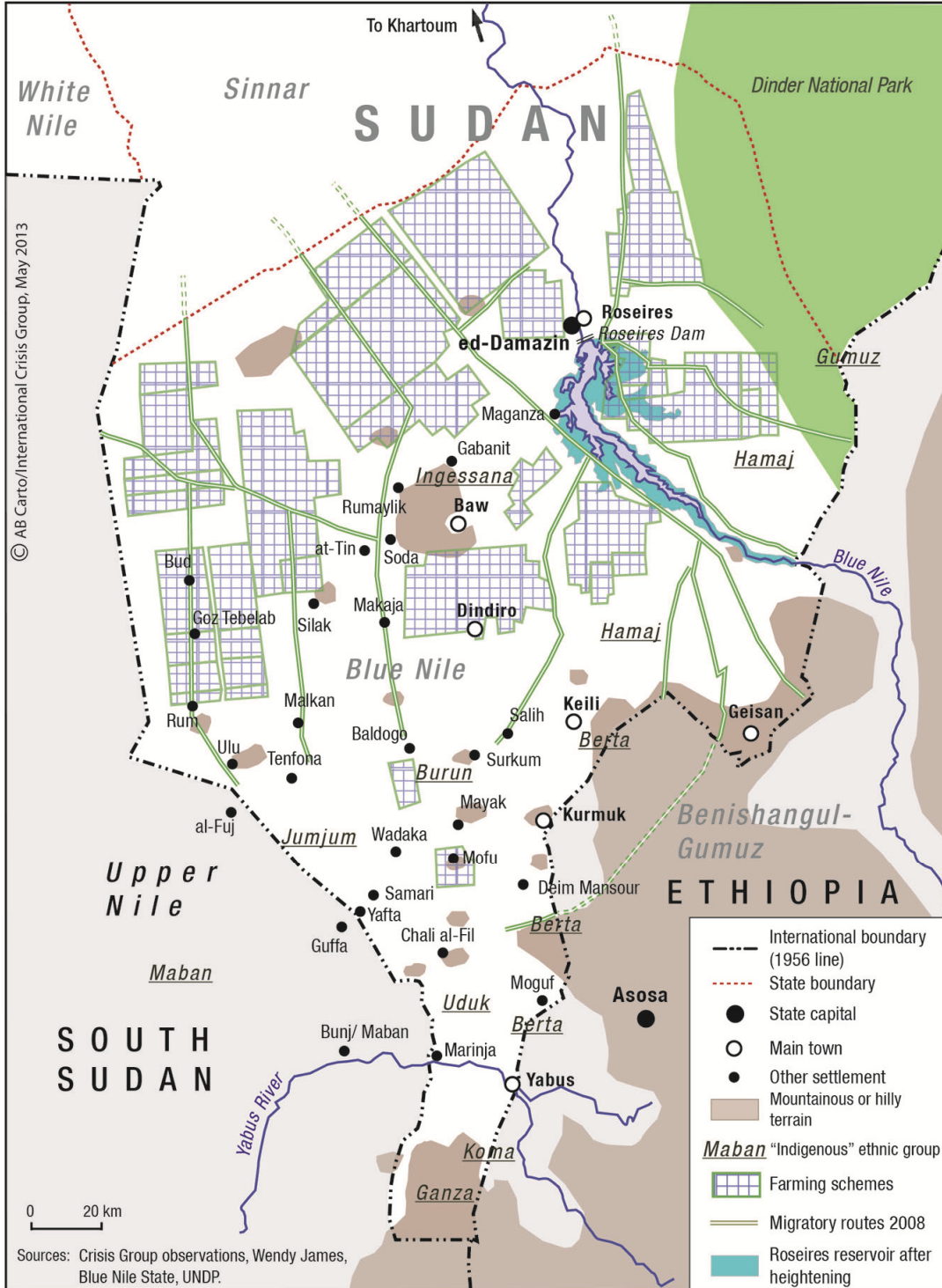


Map No. 4458 Rev.2 UNITED NATIONS
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Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

This map does not present the five recently created Darfur states (from the three depicted).

Appendix B: Map of Blue Nile – Land and Resources



Appendix C: Map of Blue Nile – Borders and Front Lines



Appendix D: Glossary of Personalities

Abdelaziz al-Hilu

SPLM-N and SRF deputy chairman and paramount SPLM-N leader in South Kordofan. Worked with NCP Governor Ahmed Haroun as deputy governor between 2009 and 2011, before he lost to him in the 2011 elections. Commanded the Blue Nile Front in 1986-1987.

Ahmed Mohammed Haroun

NCP governor of South Kordofan, defeated Abdelaziz al-Hilu in the 2011 elections. Indicted by the ICC for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Darfur when he was minister of state at the interior ministry.

Ali Osman Mohammed Taha

Vice president of Sudan. He negotiated and signed the CPA with former SPLM/A leader John Garang in 2005.

Husein Yasin Hamad Abu Surwal

NCP politician from the Rakabiya branch of the Berta, from Ora in southern Blue Nile. Appointed Blue Nile governor, the first civilian and the first from Blue Nile since the war started, in April 2013, in the wake of the resumption of the negotiations between the government and the SPLM-N.

Malik Agar Eyre

SPLM-N and SRF chairman, former governor of his native Blue Nile state. On 28 June 2011, signed a framework agreement with NCP co-deputy chairman and presidential assistant Nafie Ali Nafie.

Meles Zenawi

Ethiopian president (1991-1995) and prime minister from 1995 until his death in 2012. He was one of the main leaders, and since 1989 chairman, of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that seized power in 1991, in part due to Khartoum's support. Relations soured thereafter, until the Ethiopian-Eritrean War (1998-2000). The countries have cooperated since then. Meles was actively engaged in Sudan and South Sudan peace negotiations and was respected by both sides.

Omar al-Bashir

President of Sudan and head of the NCP. A military officer, he seized power in 1989. After the restoration of civilian rule, he remained president and has continued to centralise power in Khartoum. The International Criminal Court (ICC) indicted Bashir for crimes against humanity, war crimes and genocide in Darfur and has issued two arrest warrants. Bashir has said he will not stand for re-election after his term ends in 2015 and will also step down as head of the NCP.

Nafie Ali Nafie

Co-deputy NCP chairman and a presidential assistant, was in charge of the state security apparatus in the early years of the National Islamic Front regime. He signed a framework agreement with SPLM-N Blue Nile Governor Malik Agar in 2011 that was rejected by President Bashir.

Salva Kiir

First vice president in the Government of National Unity between 2005 and 2011, now president of South Sudan and chairman of the SPLM.

Yasir Arman

Secretary general of the SPLM-N, former SPLM's deputy secretary general for the northern sector. An Arab and a Muslim from northern Sudan (from the Jezira area south of Khartoum), he joined the SPLM in 1987 and was a supporter and symbol of a united "New Sudan" rather than of the South's separation. Arman was the SPLM's candidate for Sudan's presidency in 2010 against Omar al-Bashir but withdrew reportedly at Juba's demand.

Appendix E: Glossary of Main Parties, Movements and Agreements

AUHIP

African Union High-Level Implementation Panel for Sudan and South Sudan, led by former South Africa President Thabo Mbeki, the main mediating body in the post-CPA talks between Sudan and South Sudan as well as between Khartoum and the SPLM-N.

BPLM

Benishangul People's Liberation Movement. Ethiopian rebel movement composed of Berta from Benishangul-Gumuz, fighting against the Derg regime in the 1980s, with Khartoum's backing and rear bases in Blue Nile. The movement became part of the Benishangul-Gumuz government in the 1990s, but a dissident faction, supported by Sudan then Eritrea, remained active against the Ethiopian government.

CPA

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended the civil war with the South and aimed for the country's democratic transformation. It guaranteed Southern Sudanese a right to self-determination at the end of a six-year interim period; the agreement came to an end with the independence of South Sudan on 9 July 2011.

CRP

Central Reserve Police (Ihtihati al-Merkazi in Arabic), known locally by their nickname "Abu Tera" (those of the bird, due to their insignia). A paramilitary force that has been particularly active in Darfur and since 2011 in South Kordofan.

HAC

Humanitarian Affairs Commission, the Sudanese government's humanitarian arm.

IGAD

Intergovernmental Authority on Development, an East African regional organisation co-mediating the Sudanese peace processes. Its current chair is Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who has also chaired the African Union since January 2013.

Janjawid

Nickname given to road bandits, and later to proxy militias, recruiting mostly among Arab camel-nomads in Darfur. They were gradually integrated into official paramilitary forces such as the PDF, Border Guard and CRP. Many are also acting increasingly independently from the government.

JEM

Justice and Equality Movement, a Darfur rebel group founded by Dr Khalil Ibrahim Mohammed. The JEM is a key component of the SRF. Since Khalil Ibrahim's death in a government bombing raid in North Kordofan in December 2011, his brother, Dr Jibril Ibrahim, has chaired the movement.

JIUs

Joint Integrated Units, military units created by the CPA and composed of equal numbers of troops from the SPLA and the SAF. They no longer exist.

NCP

National Congress Party, the ruling party in Sudan, headed by President Omar al-Bashir. It is the successor of the National Islamic Front (NIF).

NIF

National Islamic Front. Based on the Muslim Brotherhood and the culmination of the Sudanese Islamic Movement's political work. Originally led by Hassan al-Turabi, it was committed to creating an Islamic state and overthrew the democratically elected government in 1989.

NISS

National Intelligence and Security Service, the major security and intelligence institution, headed by Mohammed Atta al-Moula. Formerly known as "Internal Security" (al-amn al-dakhili), it became a powerful security institution after the split between President Bashir and Hassan al-Turabi in 2000. Former director generals include Salah Abdallah "Gosh", Nafie Ali Nafie and Ibrahim al-Sanousi. After the split, the NISS cooperated with the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and exchanged information on terrorist groups and individuals in the region.

PDF

Popular Defence Forces, expanded in January 1991 by the Islamists' revolutionary council to help fight the war in the South and the two areas. The PDF was to have been dismantled under the CPA. They still play a major military role in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

SAF

Sudan Armed Forces – the national army. The majority of senior staff are committed Islamists. Very few are from the peripheries. The current defence minister, Abderahim Mohammed Hussein, is the president's personal friend.

SAF

Sudan Allied Forces, a Northern rebel movement led by Abdelaziz Khalid in the late 1990s. Member of the National Democratic Alliance backed by Ethiopia and Eritrea before their 1998-2000 border war, it briefly controlled an area of northern Blue Nile in 1997-1998.

SLA

Sudan Liberation Army, originally the main Darfur rebel group, it splintered into a number of factions; the main ones are SLA-MM led by Minni Minawi and SLA-AW led by Abdelwahid Mohammed Nur.

SPLM/A

Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, the Juba-based Southern rebel movement turned political party that signed the CPA in 2005; it is now the ruling party and army in South Sudan. President Salva Kiir is also the SPLM chairman.

SPLM-N

Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, formerly the northern branch of the SPLM/A; it is currently active in fighting against Khartoum troops in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. In 2011, the SPLM-N joined with the JEM and other rebel groups under the umbrella organisation SRF.

SRF

Sudan Revolutionary Front, an alliance created in November 2011 between the SPLM-N, JEM, SLA-MM and SLA-AW.

The "three areas"

Abyei, Blue Nile and South Kordofan, which were given special protocols in the CPA. Blue Nile and South Kordofan are now known as the "two areas".

Tripartite Proposal/Tripartite Group

On 9 February 2012, the UN, AU and the League of Arab States made a "Joint Proposal for access to deliver humanitarian assistance to war-affected civilians in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States", commonly known as the "tripartite proposal". Eventually signed by the SPLM-N and Khartoum in August 2012, but was allowed to expire by Khartoum in November.

Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD)-Fondamentale

Main Chadian Arab rebel group led by Abdelwahid Aboud Makaye, based in Darfur between 2007 and 2010.

UN Security Council Resolution 2046

Unanimously adopted on 2 May 2012, after the occupation of Hejjij by the SPLA, it calls for the "immediate halt to fighting between Sudan and South Sudan, and resumption of negotiations". On 27 September 2012, Sudan and South Sudan signed nine agreements, but they are yet to be implemented, and they left aside some of the most challenging issues, such as Abyei and the disputed border.

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

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