



# **Historical Grievances and Fragile Agreements: An Analysis of Local Conflict Dynamics in Akobo**

March 2015



Michael Arensen

## **Disclaimer**

The contents of this paper are based on perceptions of participants in this research and the impressions of the author, Michael Arensen. The arguments and conclusions do not necessarily reflect the views of any member of the South Sudan Humanitarian Projector agencies providing operational support to the research.

## **Role of South Sudan Humanitarian Project**

The South Sudan Humanitarian Project is an online platform for the humanitarian community in South Sudan to share information and analysis. The platform allows for the publication of materials that are written by prominent researchers and practitioners all with the goal of increasing awareness of the context and history in South Sudan. The South Sudan Humanitarian Project offers publishing opportunities to field research and analysis for independent analysis, while also sharing material published by NGO's, Agencies, Think Tanks and other established platforms.

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### **About the Author**

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## Summary

Conflict in other parts of the country has led to an increase in the number of Internally Displaced Person's (IDPs) migrating either to or via Akobo on their way to refugee camps in Ethiopia. With discussions on the movement of IDPs from the UNMISS base in Bor, the opportunity to unfold the wider dynamics and vulnerabilities in Akobo has presented itself. At the time of writing, the displaced population in Akobo East has reached 45,000 IDPs and Akobo West in 26,000, with 500 to 600 new arrivals coming per week. Some move on to Ethiopia, others absorbed into the host community and WFP hosts IDPs who have nowhere else to go.

Divided into 3 parts, the report charts the local relationships, the political context vis-à-vis the wider conflict and finally the humanitarian situation faced by Internally Displaced Persons. Mapping the relationships between the Lou Nuer and Anyuak (pp. 7-10), Lou Nuer and Murle (pp. 11-16) and Lou Nuer and Jikany Nuer (pp. 16-21), the report covers the progression of the relationship to how it stands as of April 2015, in the context of the protracted conflict in South Sudan.

The political context explores why Akobo is so important, politically and in relation to trade servicing SPLA-IO held areas, offering a draw to IDPs (p. 21 and p. 25) but also why it is an area of strategic importance as this conflict unfolds. Exploring the defection of Lul Ruai Koang (p. 23) indicates a potential trend that may emerge with the South Sudan Resistance Army (SSRA) an emerging opposition group within the Opposition itself.

These issues about point to why Akobo has been a point where IDPs have sought refuge, not just as a quick jump to Ethiopia but an important location for Lou Nuer. Describing how IDPs made their way to Akobo, including one family who had to float their children on the river in a plastic tub, what has influenced movement patterns is of critical importance to understanding the humanitarian operation in South Sudan. This overview (pp. 26-30) of IDPs and the challenges they face is an insight into potential future needs

## Introduction

Conflict in other parts of the country has led to an increase in the number of Internally Displaced Person's (IDPs) migrating either to or via Akobo on their way to refugee camps in Ethiopia. With discussions on the movement of IDPs from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) base in Bor, the opportunity to unfold the wider dynamics and vulnerabilities in Akobo has presented itself. At the time of writing, the displaced population in Akobo East was 45,000 IDPs and Akobo West in 26,000, with 500 to 600 new arrivals coming per week.<sup>1</sup>

Akobo town is based on a strategic location on the Pibor River, where it creates the international border between South Sudan and Ethiopia. The porousness of the border itself means that people move between the two countries in both directions as part of annual dry season migration patterns. Due to the isolation of Akobo the economy is primarily dependent on goods from Ethiopia, not the rest of South Sudan. In addition, national identity itself is fluid among the Nuer and Anyuak peoples living along the border, and since the colonial period people have frequently moved between the borders as part of dry season migration, trade, intermarriages, as well as to mitigate risks and benefit from the opportunities it may entail. Because of Akobo's proximity to an international border, and therefore its clear evacuation route if threatened, both IDPs and humanitarian actors perceive it as more secure than the rest of Jonglei state under SPLA-IO control. Humanitarian actors are more likely to base themselves in Akobo town creating the additional draw factor of services, along with the perceived security, for IDPs in the rest of the state. The current conflict has divided Jonglei State, and cut off the SPLA-IO areas from the national economy. This in turn has amplified the demand for goods coming from Ethiopia via Akobo, a supply chain which humanitarian actors also depend on.

The Lou Nuer of Akobo have a long history of major conflicts with their Anyuak, Jikany Nuer, and Murle neighbors. Fragile peace agreements are currently preventing conflicts with the Jikany and the Murle, but these could break down in response to the fluid political context. Meanwhile tensions between the Lou Nuer and Anyuak are rising, as illustrated by the alleged attack by Anyuak youth on Lou Nuer settlements in March 2015, where houses were burned to the ground and three people killed.

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<sup>1</sup> UN OCHA, 1 April 2015.

The longer the war between SPLA-Juba and SPLA-IO is prolonged the greater the chance political actors on both sides will attempt to manipulate local grievances for their own purposes. In order to ensure the ever-growing humanitarian response 'does no harm' in reigniting grievances and underlying tensions, an understanding of the historical conflict dynamics is vital. The aim of this report is thus to give a basic introduction to Akobo current and past conflict dynamics for humanitarian actors working in the region.

### **Methodology**

This report is based on qualitative research in Akobo town in 2015. Between March 3<sup>rd</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> dozens of interviews were carried out with a variety of sources. The information has been supplemented by former research carried out by the author under different capacities in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The methodology employed was primarily key informant interviews supplemented by focus group discussions and observation. Over the two-week period recently arrived IDPs were interviewed along with NGO staff, local administration, host community, traders, chiefs and youth leaders. Due to the sensitivity of the issues only a few key informants discussing historical conflicts are named in the text. A list of dates and names of those interviewed can be supplied if requested. It should be noted that the key informants for the Lou Nuer - Anyuak conflict section were all Lou Nuer as Anyuak civilians have fled Akobo town.<sup>2</sup> Further research among the Anyuak is recommended to ensure a balanced account of historical events between the two groups rather than a Lou Nuer centric one. In no way is this report meant to be a comprehensive overview. The opinions given as well as any errors are the author's alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Press releases released by Akobo Anyuak diaspora have been used to balance the narrative in parts.

## **Lou Nuer and Anyuak**

Despite assumptions of Akobo being Nuer, colonial records reveal that Akobo town was primarily Anyuak<sup>3</sup> territory in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nuer anthropologist Sharon Hutchinson explains that while the colonial conquest in 1929-1930 stopped the major Nuer expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Lou and Jikany Nuer continued to expand to the east into formerly Anyuak and Dinka territory.<sup>4</sup> Until the expansion into East Akobo the Lou Nuer did not have access to any permanent water points in central Jonglei, and needed to migrate to other territories in the dry season with their cattle.<sup>5</sup> This seasonal migration saw the Lou Nuer move into Anyuak territory along the Pibor River as well as cross it into Ethiopian territory. According to Hutchinson Lou Nuer oral history “recounts cattle payments made to neighboring Anyuak for the right to graze their herds and later settle more permanently south of Akobo.”<sup>6</sup> Former Lou Nuer chief Stephen Kenye Long claimed in an interview that he was born in east Akobo in 1932, revealing that at least some Lou Nuer had begun to permanently settle near Akobo town by the 1930s.<sup>7</sup>

Over the following decades the numbers of Lou Nuer in Akobo continued to increase until conflict arose between the Anyuak and Lou in 1981-1982, which saw the Anyuak defeated and pushed out of Akobo. The top Lou Nuer chief of east Akobo at the time, Stephen Kenye Long, recounted that there had not been any significant issues between the Lou Nuer and Anyuak until 1981.<sup>8</sup> Lou elders explained that the Lou population figures in Akobo by the early 1980s had begun to match those of the Anyuak. This likely led to grievances and a perception of Lou encroachment by the Anyuak host community, who would soon be the minority. Hutchinson believes the 1981-82 conflict arose over different cultural interpretations over what the Lou

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<sup>3</sup> Various terms are used for the Anyuak people, such as Anuak and Anywaa

<sup>4</sup> Hutchinson, Sharon. “A Guide to the Nuer of Jonglei State.” Presented at USAID Jonglei Conference, March 2012, Nairobi. p 4.

<sup>5</sup> Lou Nuer from West Akobo migrate north to Ulang along the Sobat River, those from Urur to the southeast along the Murle border to Nanaam, and west to Ayod and Dinka Nyarwang (Duk) grazing land, while Lou from Nyirol go northwest towards Canal. Lou in east Akobo migrate either north towards Wanding or cross the Pibor River to Romieri, in Gambella, Ethiopia.

<sup>6</sup> Hutchinson, Sharon. “A Guide to the Nuer of Jonglei State.” Presented at USAID Jonglei Conference, March 2012, Nairobi. p 4.

<sup>7</sup> Chief Stephen Kenye Long was the first generation of his family born in Akobo as his father was born near Padoi, in central Jonglei, leading one to surmise that the 1920s and 30s was the beginning of permanent Lou settlement in Akobo town.

<sup>8</sup> This is not the case between the Jikany Nuer and Anyuak. Lou elders could recall killings in the mid-1950s, but clashes could go back even further.

Nuer had purchased; either temporary access to land for grazing rights and residency or permanent ownership.<sup>9</sup> In a press release in 2013 Anyuak diaspora blame the former government of Sudan for the dispute.<sup>10</sup> The Anyuak claim the government gave the initial permission for Lou Nuer seasonal access to Anyuak land against their wishes. The county administration then annexed three villages in West Akobo into Akobo County, which increased the migration of the Lou Nuer to Akobo town<sup>11</sup>. Contrary to Chief Kenye Long's claims, they also state that there was violence between the two groups in the 1970s.

The Akobo Lou Nuer chief from 1975 through 1984, Stephen Kenye Long, claimed in an interview that the fighting in 1981 first arose from disagreements over stolen cattle.<sup>12</sup> In 1981 the vice-president of Sudan, and President of the High Executive Council of the Southern Sudan Autonomous Region, Abel Alier met with many of the top chiefs from around Jonglei in Gadiang to solve disputes between the various ethnic groups and return stolen cattle and children. These chiefs included men who would later become key players in the region, such as the Western Lou Nuer representative Simon Gatwech, the Murle representative Ismael Konyi<sup>13</sup> as well as the Eastern Lou representative Stephen Kenye Long<sup>14</sup>. Grievances between ethnic groups had been escalating in the 1970s, and raids between the Lou and Murle in 1979 were increasingly violent. Lou elders claim they killed twenty-seven perpetrators in one Murle attack against Dengjok. At the meeting Chief Stephen Kenye Long brought up the issue of the alleged forty stolen cattle by Anyuak. Chief Joak Joak denied that his people had stolen the cattle. The case was sent to the Anyuak King instead, who reportedly told the Anyuak Chief, Joak Joak, to return the cattle to the Lou, or deal with the consequences.

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<sup>9</sup> Hutchinson, Sharon. "A Guide to the Nuer of Jonglei State." Presented at USAID Jonglei Conference, March 2012, Nairobi. pp 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> "Lou Nuer Attacks Unarmed Anyuak Civilians in Akobo." The Anyuak of South Sudan Association in Diaspora Press Release, October 2013.  
[http://www.akobociro.net/assad%20press\\_release%20on%20akobo%20incident%2010-3-2013.pdf](http://www.akobociro.net/assad%20press_release%20on%20akobo%20incident%2010-3-2013.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Although this is not verified, if true this would also explain why Akobo County borders extend so far west to villages that have rare contact with those in the east.

<sup>12</sup> Dates of events often varied between respondents and sources, i.e. some elders believed clashes with the Anyuak were in 1981, while others thought 1982. Alternatively Anyuak press releases claim 1983. The years used in the report are the ones given by the Lou Nuer chief and youth leaders at the time, but should not be taken as definitive.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Gatwech is currently the top commander for the SPLA-IO and Ismael Konyi led the Murle Pibor Defense Forces (PDF) throughout much of the second civil war.

<sup>14</sup> In addition there were representatives for the Gawaar Nuer (Both Ninywen), Bor Dinka (David Mabar), Pigi Dinka (Rue Weng) and Akobo Anyuak (Joak Joak) at the meeting.

Instead of collecting the cattle the Anyuak Chief informed the Lou Nuer that they had to take the women and children and leave the area and return to Padoi (central Jonglei). The rising grievances over the alleged stolen cattle appear to have been the catalyst for both groups to clash over the underlying issue of land rights. Chief Kenye Long called the Lou Nuer youth and informed them to gather the women and children and take them west. The young men refused and mocked the chief for being a coward and frightened of the Anyuak. He then told the top youth leader for East Akobo at the time, Top Riek, to gather the young men for battle.<sup>15</sup> Top Riek explained in an interview that the next morning he took the youth across the Pibor River and burned down many of the Anyuak houses on the other side. Anyuak claim this attack caused the deaths of four hundred Anyuak civilians.<sup>16</sup> Top was consequently arrested by the local administration, while Chief Stephen Kenye Long was suspended from his post for his role in the violence.

Top was sent to Malakal and consequently Juba for trial where the Minister of Finance at the time, Peter Gatkuak, defended him.<sup>17</sup> The government eventually released Top and returned him to Akobo in 1982, which sparked outcry from the local Anyuak. They consequently attacked the Lou village of Mer and allegedly killed fifty people. This prompted the local government to lift the suspension on Chief Stephen Kenye Long. The Lou youth then revenged this attack in the fourth major battle between the two groups during that period and defeated the Anyuak and pushed them out of the region to Pochalla and Gambella. In the 1980s the Nuer continued to expand into Gambella, as the fledgling SPLA movement based themselves in the region, and refugees from South Sudan soon followed. Eventually the Nuer began to dominate the local government at the expense of the Anyuak.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> This early iteration of Nuer community defense forces had yet to take the moniker the “White Army.” For more on the White Army see Breidlid and Arensen, “Demystifying the White Army: Nuer Armed Civilians Involvement in the South Sudanese Crisis,” *Conflict Trends*, Issue 3, 2014, pp 32-39.

<sup>16</sup> “Lou Nuer Attacks Unarmed Anyuak Civilians in Akobo.” The Anyuak of South Sudan Association in Diaspora Press Release, October 2013. Find link under footnote 7.

<sup>17</sup> In his defense it was argued that the Anyuak killers of Jikany Nuer in the past would need to be arrested as well to ensure justice, otherwise they should release him. This defense was apparently successful, however, the referenced killing of twelve Jikany Nuer by Anyuak was actually 25 years earlier, in the mid-1950s.

<sup>18</sup> Meckelburg, Alexander. *Changing Ethnic Relations: A Preliminary Investigation of Gambella, Southwest Ethiopia*. Asien-Afrika-Institut der Universität Hamburg, 2006.

## **Post-CPA Lou-Anyuak Relations**

Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 the Anyuak returned to Akobo County, primarily settling on the eastern side of the county. However, according to Anyuak diaspora, 12,000 could not return as their land had been occupied by Lou Nuer.<sup>19</sup> Within a few years of returning the Anyuak claims to land rights in the region became an issue again. This was likely influenced by the nationalization of land on the other side of the border in Ethiopia. Major agricultural corporations were given land in Gambella by the Ethiopian government at the expense of the Anyuak, who were forcefully moved. Anyuak diaspora claim twenty-four civilians were killed by Lou Nuer in 2011 while traveling to Akobo.<sup>20</sup> During the 2012 Jonglei Peace Conference in Bor the Anyuak chief for Akobo, Chuol Odio Omot, called for the return of land in Akobo to the Anyuak.<sup>21</sup> Tensions peaked in October 2013 when the Anyuak Chief Chuol Odio Omot was killed by Lou Nuer youth in an alleged revenge attack along with two other Anyuak civilians. The Lou claimed he was guilty for the death of young Lou man found dead in the Pibor River, while the Anyuak claim he was drunk and drowned.<sup>22</sup> Three other civilians were wounded and houses and property of Anyuak were destroyed in the attack. The 2013 incident led to an estimated two thousand Anyuak fleeing to Ethiopia as well as consequent protests in Bor.<sup>23</sup> Not surprisingly, the December 2013 crisis saw the Anyuak side with SPLA-Juba and push SPLA Nuer troops out of Pochalla.<sup>24</sup>

## **Current Relationship**

On March 5<sup>th</sup> 2015 attackers burned down Lou Nuer houses in three locations in Gambella, Ethiopia. These were newly built houses, and Lou sources stated that they were built on traditionally Anyuak land on the other side of the Pibor River. Two attackers were killed along with one victim, and the Lou Nuer claim Anyuak were behind it. The Lou Nuer White Army

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<sup>19</sup> "Lou Nuer Attacks Unarmed Anyuak Civilians in Akobo." The Anyuak of South Sudan Association in Diaspora Press Release, October 2013. Find link under footnote 7.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> "Republic of South Sudan Report of the Presidential Committee for Community Peace, Reconciliation and Tolerance in Jonglei State," May 2012, pp 32-22.

<sup>22</sup> The evidence presented by the Lou of his guilt in the killing appears scant, at best. They claim the young man had died after jumping on a spear buried in the Pibor River near Akobo. Lou claim this method of killing is purely an Anyuak tactic, and therefore the local Anyuak must have been responsible, and so retaliated against the chief. Anyuak, on the other hand, claim the autopsy showed he had drowned.

<sup>23</sup> "Lou Nuer Attacks Unarmed Anyuak Civilians in Akobo." The Anyuak of South Sudan Association in Diaspora Press Release, October 2013. Find link under footnote 7. In a press release Anyuak diaspora further listed eight other alleged incidents of Lou Nuer attacking Akobo Anyuak the same year.

<sup>24</sup> As was the case in many parts of the country, local historical disputes likely played a significant role in which side communities supported in the current dispute.

quickly mobilized and moved to the area to look for the perpetrators, but they were unable to locate them. The local Ethiopian military were informed that they would need to respond to the attack within their territory, otherwise the White Army could potentially carry out a revenge attack against the Anyuak on either side of the border. The South Sudanese-Ethiopian border has little impact on the movements of the peoples in the region, who freely migrate between the countries.<sup>25</sup> Although the Ethiopian military is one of the most effective in the region the border area is very isolated and they would have difficulty preventing any major revenge attack by the Lou Nuer. While over one month has passed without any action, the situation should continue to be closely monitored.<sup>26</sup> Any escalation of conflict between the two ethnic groups could have major repercussions for the people and humanitarian actors on both sides of the border.

### **Lou Nuer and Murle**

The most devastating inter-ethnic conflict in Jonglei post-CPA took place between the Lou Nuer and Murle. Between 2009 and 2013 thousands of people were killed in raids and revenge attacks carried out by both sides. However, unlike the Lou Nuer conflicts with the Jikany Nuer and the Anyuak, there is not one particular year that is widely identified as the start of conflict between the two groups. Historically both groups have had more clashes with the Bor Dinka than each other, but over the past fifty years raids have led to revenge attacks, with periods of both peace and escalation. An entire history of Lou Nuer and Murle conflict is beyond the scope of this report, especially as other excellent reports and books exist on the post-CPA period of fighting between the Lou Nuer and Murle, as well as the political conflict of David Yau Yau and the resulting Greater Pibor Administrative Area.<sup>27</sup> This section will give a basic background of the conflict, but the main focus will instead be on aspects of the relations between Akobo Lou Nuer and Murle that are rarely discussed but are important to understanding the local dynamics.

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<sup>25</sup> Feyissa, Dereje. "Alternative Citizenship: The Nuer between Ethiopia and the Sudan." pp. 109-132 Chapter 6 in *The Borderlands of South Sudan: Authority and Identity in Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*. 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Lou Nuer revenge attacks against Murle occurred three months later, and local feuds can remain dormant for years before becoming violent again.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, Edward. "South Sudan: A Slow Liberation." Zed Books, London. 2015; International Crisis Group. "South Sudan: Jonglei- we have always been at war." Africa Report No 221, December 2014; Todisco, Claudio. "Real but Fragile: The Greater Pibor Administrative Area." Small Arms Survey, March 2015.

## **History of conflict**

While the last few years have been the bloodiest, raids and violence between the Lou Nuer and Murle are recorded as far back as the 1960s, when the Sudan government armed both Murle and Nuer communities in their fight against the southern rebel movement, Anyanya I. Lou Nuer from Akobo further discuss raids and counter-raids between the two communities in the 1970s, culminating in major attacks in 1979. Conflicts between the two groups also took place during the second civil war, when many Murle of Pibor were recruited into Ismail Konyi's Pibor Defence Forces (PDF) and Lou Nuer of Akobo fought for various rebel factions. Lou chiefs from the period claim the Murle carried out heavy attacks in 1984 and 1985, burning down at least seven villages. In the late 1980s the SPLA twice attacked PDF in Pibor, who had aligned with Khartoum. Raids and clashes continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s before the 2006 Juba Declaration led to the integration of Ismael Konyi and SSDF into SPLA and SAF. The post-CPA period saw an escalation of violence, and while some Lou and Murle will point back to clashes in 2002 or 2006 or even further back as the motivation for the last few years of conflict, major clashes have consistently occurred since 2009.<sup>28</sup>

Lou Nuer frequently blame frequent small-scale raids and abductions by the Murle as the instigation behind the post-CPA cycle of revenge attacks. In March 2009 the Lou Nuer carried out the first major revenge attack in years, which led to an estimated 450 Murle casualties as well as abductions of children and women. Murle retaliation was swift and in April and August the same year the Murle carried out two different attacks that combined led to a similar number of Lou Nuer losses. After a quiet 2010, the conflict escalated again in 2011, a year in which thousands of civilians were killed and which drew international media attention. Three major White Army attacks occurred against Pibor County, the last one leading to the burning down of the MSF hospital in response to a Murle revenge attack that also targeted the MSF hospital in Pieri. Combined an estimated 2000 to 3000 civilians were killed in 2011 alone.

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<sup>28</sup> 2010 is the obvious exception as inter-ethnic violence throughout Jonglei was significantly reduced. The election year created an anomaly as the voting and political campaign process created a major shift in priorities. Instead violence in 2010 was primarily political, not inter-ethnic, as those who lost elections started armed movements (George Athor, David Yau Yau). These movements played a major part in distributing arms to the civilian population, which were used in later inter-ethnic violence.

The government response to the crisis was to hold peace talks in Bor with the political elite in May 2012 and to carry out of a disarmament campaign throughout Jonglei. The peace talks, combined with the consequent widespread presence of the SPLA throughout Jonglei, drastically reduced intra- and inter-ethnic violence in the following months. However, the heavy-handed approach the SPLA used when disarming the Murle population in Pibor created significant grievances. These grievances were easily used as a means of mobilization for the movement of the recently defected David Yau Yau. The return of David Yau Yau in 2012 shifted the violence in Jonglei from inter-ethnic violence to primarily political. In December 2012 youth leaders from the Bor Dinka, Lou Nuer and Murle met in Pibor for peace talks.<sup>29</sup> However, in February 2013 an attack by Murle, assumed to be associated with Yau Yau, on the West Akobo seasonal migration to Ulang led to another hundred Lou Nuer casualties, including SPLA who were escorting the cattle. The White Army retaliated in July 2013, killing over three hundred Murle and capturing thousands of cattle.<sup>30</sup>

Although grievances between the Lou Nuer and Murle communities were widespread, there was significant frustration within the civilian populations due to the grave consequences of five years of conflict. Peace actors were not just able to convince the youth leaders to hold a dialogue, but women's leaders from around the state also met and consequently traveled around with a message of peace. Throughout 2012 and 2013 the political conflict between the SPLA and Yau Yau undermined inter-ethnic dialogues, but the crisis in December 2013 completely changed the dynamics. The conflict between SPLA-Juba and SPLA-IO pushed the government towards signing an agreement with Yau Yau and conceding his demand for a GPAA in order to ensure they did not face two fronts or a merger between Yau Yau and SPLA-IO.

Meanwhile, the Lou Nuer suddenly faced a much larger threat from SPLA-Juba, and did not want to come under additional attacks from the Murle while the youth were engaged on the frontline. As a result of the changing context, chiefs were able to negotiate a peace deal

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<sup>29</sup> CRS coordinated these talks, with logistical support from UNMISS. The author of this report was an advisor for this engagement. The major challenge was participation of Murle youth leaders, as the primary Murle peace spoilers were fighting with David Yau Yau and therefore could not attend the talks in government controlled territory.

<sup>30</sup> The figures for this attack were impossible to verify, as many of the dead were in David Yau Yau territory, which was inaccessible. The County Commissioner collected a list of names of the casualties, which was over three hundred.

between the Lou Nuer and Murle within months of the conflict breaking out. Although Yau Yau officially became part of the government, the Murle people have been able to take on a largely neutral role in the divide between Kiir and Machar. If SPLA-Juba pushes the Murle to fight alongside them, or uses Pibor as a launching point for aggression towards Akobo, they risk undermining the local peace agreement between the Lou Nuer and Murle chiefs which could consequently drive the Murle into the hands of SPLA-IO.<sup>31</sup> If the Lou Nuer attack the Murle they also potentially face the threat of Murle aggression, which among the local population creates more fear than the threat of the government.<sup>32</sup>

### **Current Relationship**

Over the past year the peace agreement between the Lou Nuer and Murle has been surprisingly resilient. Relations have improved to the point that some Murle are even accessing the market in Akobo to sell honey and cattle and purchase grain. Lou Nuer have returned to their villages in Nyandit, along their border with the Murle, after living in town over the past few years. Yau Yau is from the dominant Murle age-set, the Botonya, and so far has largely been able to control them and the competing age-set, the Lango, from raids. A couple of Murle raids of Lou Nuer cattle in Uror occurring in the past year have been settled quickly, with return of the stolen cattle and punishment of the perpetrators. While trust is still an issue among the general population, relations between the two groups were quite good during the period of research. The border communities are continuing to hold dialogues in order to build trust and normalize relations. Importantly, the chiefs from the border communities are leading the talks, not the chiefs and politicians from Akobo or Pibor towns, as was the case in previous conferences. The talks are further expanding from Murle chiefs in Lekuongole to include the chiefs of Nanaam, an area of Pibor which has previously acted as a peace spoiler due to frequent raids by Murle youth.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Certain people who disagree with the peace agreement with Yau Yau, though, could intentionally use this as a means of both undermining the agreement while also having easy access to Akobo.

<sup>32</sup> Even before the conflict the common rhetoric in Nuer cattle camps is that the Nuer are tougher fighters than the Dinka. The same goes for the Murle, but both groups recognize and fear the strength of each other.

<sup>33</sup> The Murle only first began to settle in Nanaam in the 1980s. Before that it was a dry season grazing location (shared with the Lou Nuer as late as 2010). Murle from Nanaam explained that some people had so many cattle they settled there permanently. Although they have many cattle, the lack of a river means the Nanaam Murle do not cultivate grain, like most Murle. This makes them highly susceptible to food insecurity if disease, raids or drought reduce livestock, and makes them more reliant on cattle raiding to replenish those herds.

Politicians among both the Lou Nuer and Murle blame abductions and lack of inter-marriage as part of the reason behind the conflict.<sup>34</sup> However, relations between the groups are more complex than the dominant political narratives acknowledge. Along the Nyandit and Lekuongole border (between Akobo and Pibor) the Lou Nuer and Murle have not only interacted through trade in the past, but also inter-married. A Nuer from Nyandit and translator of Murle language explained that he first interacted with Murle through the exchange of gifts in the 1970s. Eventually traders in Akobo asked him to take them to the Murle where they exchanged goods for cattle. Murle began to access Akobo market where they bartered cattle in exchange for grain and clothing. Bol's grandfather married one of his daughters to a Murle, while two of his own daughters have married Murle men. A major attack in 1979 by the Murle on Dengjok put a halt to the initial exchanges but relations occasionally continued.

Despite the ongoing conflict, there were also moments of cooperation. For example, when a controversial Lou Nuer prophet from 2002 was killed, his supporters were forced to leave Akobo. They moved to Lekuongole and settled among the Murle there. During the youth peace dialogues in 2012 the top Murle *red chief*, Barchoch, also discussed how around ten years earlier the SPLA in Akobo had met with the Murle on the border and demanded the return of cattle from a recent raid. Barchoch's son returned the stolen cattle to Akobo. However, a second Murle raid occurred while he was at a dance in Akobo. The local SPLA commander immediately arrested him and the other Murle youth, and later killed them. Murle in Lekuongole wanted to carry out revenge on the Lou Nuer who were staying amongst the Murle, but Barchoch says he denied them revenge and protected the Lou instead. As late as 2010 the Murle of Nanaam and the Lou Nuer youth of Uror would meet on the border and create land sharing agreements for the dry season. Although the conflict often dominates the narrative between the Lou Nuer and Murle, it did not exclude relations between the groups on various levels.

As long as both the Lou Nuer and the Murle people and political elites benefit from the peace agreement, it is likely the peace will hold. The fact that the chiefs and people along the border, those who are the most likely peace spoilers as well as the ones most at risk from a

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<sup>34</sup> For more on the role of abductions, see the South Sudan Humanitarian Project website: <http://southsudanhumanitarianproject.com/background/docb-1/>

reappearance of conflict, are leading dialogues speaks well for the sustainability of the agreement. However, much like the major shift in the national political context facilitated the agreement, other significant changes could undermine it.

Until now the government has failed to fulfill its financial commitments towards the GPAA. Keeping the GPAA stable with no funding will become more challenging the longer it goes on and increase pressure on the leaders. Potential fissures within the leadership, and the perception that there is more to gain from war than peace, could drive people to defecting. Furthermore those with individual agendas could easily manipulate competition between political elites, Murle age-sets, as well as the other minority groups in the GPAA.<sup>35</sup> Although there is peace both between David Yau Yau and the government, as well as the Lou Nuer and Murle, the agreements are very fragile. The international community should support these agreements, as the consequences of failure will be extremely costly, both financially and much more importantly, in human lives.

### **Jikany Nuer and Lou Nuer<sup>36</sup>**

While many outsiders perceive inter-ethnic divides as a main source of conflict in the region, throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s some of the heaviest fighting in the region was actually between Nuer groups. Before the Jikany and Lou conflict began in 1993, Jikany territory extended south to Kier.<sup>37</sup> Although by that time the Lou Nuer had permanently settled along the Pibor River, due to limited water and grazing land cattle camp youth would still migrate north to Jikany territory in the dry season. At the beginning of the season the youth leaders would meet and settle on a land sharing agreement, which is still being done today.<sup>38</sup> Despite the agreements cattle camp youth explained that raids still occur, but usually at the end of the dry season just before returning home. At the end of the dry season any potential escalation of

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<sup>35</sup> The Jiye, Kichepo and Anyuak are all part of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area, while the top government posts are primarily dominated by Murle.

<sup>36</sup> Findings from a previous study done by the researcher in another role in 2011 and 2012 along the Sobat River has been used to supplement research from Akobo town in 2015 for this section.

<sup>37</sup> Kier is found in Wanding, between Nasir and Akobo.

<sup>38</sup> While the Lou in East Akobo often moved east to Gambella and north to Wanding, those from West Akobo migrate north to Ulang County near the Sobat River. Most come to Nyanding and Baramach, where they split. Some go west and continue to Nyatew and Chuil. The rest go the to the east, and settle in Thulup, Toaloary and Makak. Most of these places are either along the southern side of the Sobat River, or are a little farther south on seasonal pools. Cattle raiding between the Jikany and Lou frequently started at these locations.

conflict due to raids, and the consequent hindrance of access to shared areas, will not have as significant consequences.

The violence between the Lou and Jikany Nuer began in 1993 at a seasonal pool called Dual Dap over fishing rights between two families, but quickly spread to include all Lou and Jikany. Three instigating factors leading up to 1993 raised tensions and increased the likelihood of conflict: 1) regime change in Ethiopia, 2) the split in the SPLA, and 3) drought. The fall of the Mengistu regime in 1991 in Ethiopia led to hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees fleeing back into Sudan in a matter of days.<sup>39</sup> The SPLA were benefactors of the Mengistu government, and when it fell the movement and thousands of Sudanese refugees in Gambella were targets for the new government's aggression and had to flee. Local food and land resources became highly strained due to the extra pressure of massive numbers of returning people. This was significantly exacerbated by a drought in 1992 and 1993, which led to a humanitarian crisis in the region.<sup>40</sup> Tensions escalated as people desperately tried to feed an increasing population with decreasing food stores. Competition over already limited resources intensified.

In August 1991 Riek Machar and Lam Akol declared over the radio a coup attempt to take over the leadership of the SPLA from John Garang which led to the establishment of their new movement the SPLA- Nasir faction (later SPLA Unity and SSIM).<sup>41</sup> However, weak administration by SPLA Nasir led to increased insecurity in the region, and a few months before the Dual Dap incident, a Jikany commander had been imprisoned. Upon the instigation of conflict in Dual Dap between the two Nuer groups, small arms and fighters quickly flowed from local commanders, further expanding the intensity of the fighting. Rather than protecting the civilian population, the lack of clear authority in the area exacerbated the conflict.

Different narratives regarding the initial fight in Dual Dap arise from Jikany and Lou respondents. Older members of cie (Nuer for family) Mach, the Jikany from the Makak and Dual Dap area, explained that traditionally a sacrifice is made before fishing begins. An offering of a local alcoholic beverage would be poured into the water at the beginning of each fishing season, in

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<sup>39</sup> A UNICEF OLS needs report from 1992 estimated the number at 285,000.

<sup>40</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Sudan: Civilian Devastation- Abuses by all parties in the war in Southern Sudan*. New York. 1994.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, Douglas. 2003. *Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars*. Oxford: Currey. pp 97.

order to give blessing. This was carried out by a descendent of the original Jikany family from the area, in this case cie Mach. In 1993, the Lou migrants began to fish in Dual Dap before the tradition had been carried out, and so the Jikany insisted the Lou stop fishing. The Lou deny this was the case and claim that the Jikany were purely jealous of their fishing success as they had better equipment and nets. The Lou perception was that the Jikany already had plenty of food, but wanted to deny the Lou access. Due to the increased food insecurity in the region at the time the varying narratives that have sprung up since are not surprising. It seems very likely that both groups were severely in need of food, and desperation over access to the limited pool of fish instigated the confrontation.

Both groups agree that the Jikany fired the first shot by a youth by the name of Bol Badit Paul. Three Lou were killed on the first day. Bol is actually a member of another family, cie Guandong, but had married into cie Mach and was visiting his family at the time. The Lou families who were involved in the first day were cie Bol and cie Jadol. Interestingly a Lou chief lost his sash in the first day of fighting and it was recovered by Jikany, who returned it in a lull in fighting on the second day. The second day the Lou fled and regrouped for a counter attack. On the third day the Lou attacked and killed twenty-four Jikany from cie Mach and took the cattle from the area. They also looted the houses and took the food stores of the Jikany. Despite attempts from two Lou chiefs, Gatluak Thoa and Kun Bol, to mitigate the conflict, the fighting spread to a second location in Nasir county, called Gai, and then expanded from there. It is worth noting that the family of the original attacker, cie Guandong, was the target for the retaliatory attacks in Gai. The involvement of Nuer commanders on both sides of the conflict further fuelled the conflict and exacerbated the Jikany and Lou divide. Machar attempted to negotiate a peace agreement in 1994 in Ulang, but fighting resumed only months later. A Lou chief named Chon Both allegedly refused the Machar peace agreement, and said that if the Jikany were cowards then the Lou should take their land and ensure greater access to river and grazing lands, which the Lou were desperately in need of. The Lou pushed the Jikany out of Wanding and settled there.

### **Post- CPA Relations**

The intensity of the conflict between the two sub-clans fluctuated greatly from 1993 until 2010. However, in 2009 two major incidents occurred, which still shape the grievances on both sides. First the attack on Torkej, and second the attack of World Food Programme (WFP) barges on the Sobat River, which was clearly connected to the Torkej incident. Similarly to the conflict in Dual

Dap, facts from interviewed respondents from both sides vary due to biases. In order to verify information, accounts from NGO staff involved in the response at the time have also been included in the narration.

In early May 2009 a Jikany village, Torkej, on the southern side of the Sobat River was attacked in the middle of the night by Lou Nuer youth. The village was surrounded on all three sides and armed youth walked through the village, reportedly killing over a hundred civilians and injuring another fifty. Victims reported Lou going from house to house and shooting people in their tukuls and beds. Most of the victims were women and children, many of which are believed to have drowned while trying to escape across the Sobat River. Some people survived by pretending to be dead. Reportedly most of the men were in the cattle camps while those behind were able to escape by swimming to the other side of the river. The explanation later from the Lou was that cattle had been stolen from a camp, and the tracks had led to Torkej, leading to a retaliation attack. However, reportedly most the Torkej cattle were in a camp nearby with the men, rather than in the village itself. Instead of targeting the men and stolen cattle, the Lou attacked a village with mostly women and children.

The attack took about two hours, at which point the Lou looted the belongings and went south again. The Jikany community on the southern side of the Sobat then migrated to the northern side of the river, due to fear of continued attacks. Before this incident the Gaajok Jikany were sparsely armed, but immediately purchased guns from the Gaajak (the more migratory Jikany outside of the peri-urban areas) at exorbitant cost. Guns were bought for as much as 1500 SSP, or 500 USD, each. The survivors from Torkej, and other Jikany people south of the Sobat River, were displaced to villages on the north side.

All this preceded an attack upon WFP food barges, also known as the Sobat River ambush in June 2009. Twenty-seven WFP barges of food aid were being sent to Akobo, for distribution to the Lou community, with an SPLA escort. An additional four barges were added to the convoy in Malakal by a government official. The convoy was stopped in Nasir by the local administration and held there for a week while negotiations occurred on the state and national levels. The additional four barges were suspected of carrying arms to the Lou. Three of the four barges were searched and no arms were found, but the Jikany still suspected the fourth barge. Interestingly this narrative has changed over time, as NGO workers based in Nasir in 2009

explain the root cause behind the incident was primarily the UN food aid being taken past Jikany territory to the Lou, not the suspected smuggling of guns. As it was a month after the Torkej incident tensions between the communities were very high, and those in Nasir were also in need of food. People working in Nasir reported the local Jikany population would not allow the food to pass through their territory in order to feed the Lou after their involvement in the Torkej incident.

Eventually after high-level negotiations the food was allowed to move. However, a few kilometers upriver the convoy was attacked by Jikany. It should be kept in mind that the Jikany who lived along the river were from the same family as those killed in Torkej. The SPLA escorting the barges fought back and it is estimated that over fifty people from both sides were killed in the ensuing violence. Several of the barges sank, and eventually the others turned back towards Nasir. The local SPLA base retaliated by burning down a village under the auspices of clearing the area so they could find the attackers. This was perceived by observers as an obvious attempt to instigate the youth to attack them so they could retaliate for their colleagues' deaths. The fighting between the SPLA and Jikany youth petered out after a week, as the Jikany youth were not intending on fighting the SPLA, but instead carrying out revenge on the Lou for Torkej. While smaller clashes occurred, there was, however, no immediate major revenge attack. It is assumed that this was partially due to the Jikany attack on the WFP barge and hence indirect "revenge" against the Lou. Both the Torkej and Sobat River incidents shape the mindset of the Jikany and Lou communities in the area, and must be considered when implementing and developing programs which include members of both communities.

After the Wanding peace agreement in 2010 the situation between the Jikany and Lou Nuer has been relatively peaceful. The conflict with the Murle between 2009 and 2013 shifted security priorities and a few Jikany youth even cooperated with the Lou in their attacks against the Murle. However, cattle rustling continued to be carried out with impunity by youth from both communities. In an attempt to reduce tensions and promote unity and military cooperation in the current warfare, Lou and Jikany chiefs held talks in Gambella in the beginning of 2014 to settle a number of cattle thefts.<sup>42</sup> Despite this there have been tensions between Lou Nuer and Jikany Nuer in the Ethiopian refugee camps. A Jikany Nuer respondent claimed that a Lou member of an NGO hit a Jikany girl with a car, after which the Jikany in the camp demanded all

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with PRIO researcher Ingrid Marie Breidlid.

the Lou to return to South Sudan. Tension partially existed due to a Jikany perception that NGOs have hired a disproportionate number of Lou staff, despite the fact that the Jikany are the host community. The camp chiefs were able to mitigate the dispute from escalating.

### **Current Relationship**

Currently peace between the Lou and Jikany is holding, but it should be remembered that a sustainable peace was finalized only five years ago. Most people remember vividly the conflict between the two groups over the past twenty years, especially the 2009 violence. As long as there is a perceived external threat by the government, internal disputes are likely to be mitigated amicably. But the longer the conflict between SPLA-Juba and SPLA-IO is prolonged the greater the chances of internal power struggles between the leadership and a subsequent fracturing along section and family lines. As stated earlier, the division among leaders, and consequent mobilization among extended family members was a primary driver in the Lou and Jikany conflict in the 1990s. Any divisions or breakaway factions within SPLA-IO could have similar devastating impacts on local security and dynamics in Akobo.

## **National Conflict Dynamics**

### **Importance of Akobo**

The market in Akobo is very active and traders are able to supply goods by river from Ethiopia. Strong relations between the former county commissioner, Koang Rambang, and his Ethiopian counterparts have ensured market access has continued despite the conflict. While some goods move through middlemen in Akobo town further west into SPLA-IO areas by vehicles, most of the commodities appear to be carried by foot directly from Ethiopia to central Jonglei via Akobo.<sup>43</sup> Currently Akobo town acts as the primary economic driver for the area under SPLA-IO control in Jonglei State. Its proximity to Ethiopia also means the town acts as the conduit for

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<sup>43</sup> The road between West Akobo and Akobo town was not completely open as of March. One location near Kaikuny was not passable by vehicle, so vehicles from both sides would meet there and exchange passengers or goods. Only about five private vehicles were observed in Akobo town, most which allegedly came from Bor when the SPLA-IO initially captured it.

SPLA-IO political or military elites in Jonglei moving to and from meetings outside of South Sudan. These factors combined makes Akobo town a major military target for SPLA-Juba.

Any attempt by SPLA-Juba to take Akobo would be met with staunch resistance, particularly by the White Army. The government has troops based in Ayod, Gariang and Pibor, although Ayod is too far to the west to be a threat to Akobo town unless Waat, Yuai and Walgak fall first. Gariang is the front line, and both sides have troops situated there in case of any offensives. Any move towards Akobo would be stalled and the White Army would have time to mobilize large numbers of youth to respond to any aggression.

Pibor is the most obvious route to Akobo, but the Murle population would be averse to the use of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA) as a launching point for an assault on Akobo. After years of heavy conflict, the current peace agreement the Murle chiefs have with their Lou Nuer counterparts would be completely undermined by any aggression. Although the Murle civilian population do not have the ability per se to stop any government use of the GPAA territory for offensives, any intervention by the government could bring the Murle into the greater conflict, which could further undermine the peace agreement between the government and David Yau Yau. After the outbreak of the conflict in December 2013 SPLA-Juba quickly made a peace deal with David Yau Yau to ensure his movement did not align with SPLA-IO. However, tension currently prevails over the failure by the government to provide the agreed upon financial support for the GPAA, and a government offensive via Pibor would instigate further grievances among the Murle.

## **Media**

Both the government and SPLA-IO use the media to release statements to push their agenda and undermine their opponent. Frequently the statements directly contradict each other as both sides dispute the truth behind media releases, like the recent counter-claims over who controls Ayod.<sup>44</sup> Two media releases about the South Sudanese/Ethiopian border region over the last couple months are of particular concern for the security dynamics in Akobo: 1) the

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<sup>44</sup> Sudan Tribune, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. "South Sudan denies Ayod capture by rebels." <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54429>

defection of Lul Ruai Koang from SPLA-IO, and 2) the alleged SPLA-Juba support for Thuwath Pal, leader of an Ethiopian rebel movement.

### **Defection of Lul Ruai Koang**

On February 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015 the former spokesman of SPLA-IO Lul Ruai Koang defected from the movement.<sup>45</sup> He arrived in Juba on the 19<sup>th</sup>, claiming he would negotiate for a separate state of Akobo and that he was joined by a number of senior politicians, commanders, and White Army soldiers. Later on March 8<sup>th</sup>, he claimed that he would use his newly established movement called South Sudan Resistance Army (SSRA) to ‘liberate’ the Lou Nuer areas from the SPLA-IO.<sup>46</sup> If Lul Ruai Koang was able to mobilize support for his defection the security dynamics in Akobo could drastically digress. However, so far there seems to be little popular support for his breakaway faction. Among those interviewed in Akobo in March, no one acknowledged any support for his defection among the general population. This can be seen in relation to his lack of military experience and support from his extended family or clan.

Historically when commanders defect and create new movements they rely on support from two sources, either men who have benefitted from their leadership throughout former conflicts, such as the second civil war, or extended family. However, according to local sources, Koang has never led soldiers in warfare and was still in the process of receiving his military training before the conflict began. Therefore he does not have any loyal troops that would automatically defect alongside him. The second primary means of finding support, among extended family, also does not appear to be a great means of support for Lul. Akobo respondents explained that Lul Ruai Koang is from the same family as the newly appointed SPLA-IO Deputy Governor Koang Rambang.<sup>47</sup> The Deputy Governor is extremely popular among most of the White Army and general population, and the extended family’s primary loyalty lies with him – not with Lul Ruai Koang. It is recognized that people are unlikely to admit any potential internal issues within SPLA-IO to outside researchers, but it does appear that Lul Ruai Koang does not currently have

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<sup>45</sup> Sudan Tribune, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015. “Former rebel spokesman arrives in Juba after defection.” <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54045>

<sup>46</sup> Sudan Tribune, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015. “Former rebel spokesman vows to reclaim Lou Nuer area.” <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54230>

<sup>47</sup> Sudan Tribune, March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2015. “SPLM-IO appoints deputy governor for rebel controlled Bieh state.” <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54468>

any significant support within the Lou Nuer of Akobo. The more significant risk lies in more influential commanders defecting- those who have loyalty amongst family and troops.

### **Thuwath Pal**

The SPLA-IO are also alleging that SPLA-Juba are supporting an Ethiopian rebel movement, which has been involved in attacking their positions in Upper Nile earlier this year.<sup>48</sup> The leader for this movement is named as Thuwath Pal, a Jikany Nuer. Thuwath Pal was the governor of the Gambella region in the 1980s, before the fall of Mengistu in 1991. He was close to the SPLA leadership and helped found Bilpam as well as the refugee camps in Gambella. During the 1980s the SPLA received support from the Mengistu regime of Ethiopia, and were essentially given administrative control over some of the camps in the Gambella region.<sup>49</sup> When the regime fell he fled along with the SPLA and South Sudanese refugees to Sudan.

Pal later began a movement known as the Ethiopian Patriotic United Front (EPUF) in the late 1990s and allegedly went for training in Eritrea where he was also given weapons. The movement later merged with two other groups to become the Ethiopian People's Patriotic Front (EPPF) and late in 2014 declared its intention to again merge with two other armed movements in Ethiopia.<sup>50</sup> It is not clear if the alleged SPLA-Juba support is for a new movement led by Pal, or the newest iteration of the old EPUF. Although the media statement by SPLA-IO cannot be corroborated, local media claims that the "relationship between Juba and Addis Ababa has hit its all-time low as president Kiir's government suspects Ethiopia to be supporting the opposition leader, Machar."<sup>51</sup> Any potential collaboration could have significant implications on the dynamics in the region and will need to be monitored closely by humanitarian actors and UN agencies.

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<sup>48</sup> Sudan Tribune, March 18, 2015. "S. Sudan rebels accuse government of backing Ethiopian rebels."  
<http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54329>

<sup>49</sup> Human Rights Watch. *Sudan: Civilian Devastation- Abuses by all parties in the war in Southern Sudan*. New York. 1994.

<sup>50</sup> Tesfa News, August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014. "Three Ethiopian Rebel Groups Heading for a Merger."  
<http://www.tesfanews.net/three-ethiopian-rebel-groups-heading-for-a-merger/>

<sup>51</sup> Sudan Tribune, March 18, 2015. "S. Sudan rebels accuse government of backing Ethiopian rebels."  
<http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article54329>

### **Internal Lou Feuds and Local Security Dynamics**

While inter-ethnic conflicts garner the most media attention, for many pastoralists in South Sudan internal feuds are actually the most common security concern. Among segmentary societies (e.g.. Dinka, Nuer) violence is often between families or sections, while among generation based societies (e.g. Murle) socially sanctioned violence between age-sets is common in order to establish dominance. Within Akobo ongoing blood feuds between Lou Nuer sections and families have been a significant security issue over the past few years. If a person is killed in Nuer society the family of the perpetrator will compensate the family of the victim in the form of cattle. According to Nuer anthropologist Hutchinson the number of cattle paid for *bloodwealth* has varied over the years, but chiefs interviewed in Akobo claim the payment is now fifty cattle. This acts as both a deterrent to potential murderers but also gives the victim's family the opportunity to use the cattle for *bridewealth*.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the payment of *bloodwealth*, if one side is unhappy with the settlement feuds will occasionally continue as family members seek justice in the form of revenge killings. Furthermore the newly established justice system in the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) period meant that murder cases were often very slow in being processed, and revenge killings would occur before cases were brought to court.<sup>53</sup>

The settlement of family feuds was a priority for Akobo County commissioner Koang Rambang when he first took over the position in 2013. He believes 80% of the feuds had been settled and compensation paid by the start of the crisis in December 2013. This must to a great extent be seen in relation to the involvement of a wide range of actors in the settlement of disputes, including youth leaders, chiefs and earth priest (*kuar muon* in Nuer). Moreover, the apparent strict adherence to the rule of law by the administration within Akobo, through arrests and settlements, has largely limited conflict spoilers from reigniting feuds. Despite this a revenge attack did occur in late 2014, but the family of the perpetrator eventually relented and turned him over to the police and paid the cattle compensation.

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<sup>52</sup> Bridewealth is the cattle payment for a wife. This will help to ensure the victim has "descendants" through the practice of ghost marriage.

<sup>53</sup> Deng, David. "Challenges of Accountability: An Assessment of Dispute Resolution Processes in Rural South Sudan." March 2013.

The former commissioner Koang Rambang's respect and influence among the youth and community at large and his insistence on enforcement of old laws can to a great extent explain the improvement of security in Akobo. In addition to settling old feuds, Koang and the military leadership have been able to enforce laws regarding drinking as well as bearing arms in Akobo town. Youth are not allowed to carry guns into town; an old rule to control feuding that was rarely enforced in the past few years.<sup>54</sup> In another attempt to reduce violence, which locals claim has been readily enforced, soldiers are not allowed to drink alcohol while in uniform or while carrying a weapon. Considering the context of war, the ability of the administration to enforce gun-carrying laws with both the White Army and SPLA-IO reveals the influence of Koang Rambang. However, his recent promotion to Deputy Governor could possibly have negative consequences if he is posted to another location, creating a gap in leadership.<sup>55</sup> For example, almost immediately after a new county commissioner was appointed at the end of March new revenge attacks occurred.<sup>56</sup> It will remain to be seen if the changes in SPLA-IO county and state leadership will maintain adherence to the rule of law, or if the changes will lead to a deterioration in local security.

### **IDPs - Challenges and Risks**

Since violence broke out in December 2013, the primary means for mitigating risk among civilians have been displacement.<sup>57</sup> Violence throughout the country led to an estimated 17,000 IDPs migrating to Akobo in the initial ten months. Some of the people with relatives in the Akobo area were integrated into the community, while most continued to refugee camps in Ethiopia.<sup>58</sup> Since November 2014 another 15,000 IDPs have arrived Akobo, with NGOs estimating another five hundred arrivals on a weekly basis.<sup>59</sup> Although the majority of the IDPs

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<sup>54</sup> The obvious exceptions were the disarmament campaigns such as 2006 and 2012, where any youth found with a gun would have it confiscated.

<sup>55</sup> Initially it was believed he would stay in Akobo, but recent reports state that he might be placed in Waat.

<sup>56</sup> Initial reports are that the attack was against cie-Yol by cie-Nyak. It is not known if the new violence is related to the most recent feud.

<sup>57</sup> Displacement has been one of the most common risk mitigation mechanisms for hundreds of years. Slavery raids, internal community disputes, and wars (to name a few risks) have all seen displacement used as a primary means of auto-protection.

<sup>58</sup> Initially some locals from Akobo also moved to the refugee camps before Akobo gained a reputation for being secure.

<sup>59</sup> The Sudan 2008 Census figures registered a total of 136,210 people in all of Akobo County.

are women and children, men also came with their families. The people who have arrived in the past few months have primarily stayed in Akobo and integrated with the host community. However, NGOs believe the host community has nearly reached its capacity in hosting and supporting any more IDPs.<sup>60</sup>

These IDPs are primarily fleeing from the government bombardment in Canal in late 2014 and are being displaced a second or third time. Displaced people from as far as Malakal, Bentiu, and Leer had initially fled to Canal.<sup>61</sup> Those from Unity State floated on rafts down the Nile River until they reached Canal.<sup>62</sup> One woman was initially headed towards Malakal, but the fighting there meant she stayed in Canal instead. Some lived off of fish along the way, while others begged food from those who lived alongside the river. Both along the river and walking people ate local fruits to sustain them, such as those from the balanite tree.<sup>63</sup> Some IDPs who had recently arrived in Akobo were still depending on the local fruits for survival. IDPs from Malakal fled south when violence first broke out in the city in December 2013, and were charged fifty pounds to cross the Sobat River to Canal by canoe. Later groups from Malakal used local rafts instead and were not charged. Some of the IDPs were at one time staying in the UNMISS base in Malakal. After the April 2014 attack on the UNMISS base in Bor the IDPs decided they would be safer in SPLA-IO controlled areas, and left during a period the SPLA-IO controlled Malakal. A family from Nasir had fled to Lankien via Ulang when the government captured the town, using plastic basins to float the small children across the Sobat River. Another woman from Nasir stayed in the area and came to Akobo with her wounded son after the failed attempt by the White Army to retake the town. The most common route to Akobo described by the IDPs is via Lankien, Waat, and Walgak. IDPs explained that traders move in the opposite direction with goods and spread the word that Akobo is both secure and has food. A woman from Ayod said she heard of no other safe places aside from Akobo. All the IDPs interviewed fled with no personal belongings.

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<sup>60</sup> Almost every host community member interviewed for this research had extended family staying with him or her.

<sup>61</sup> Other IDPs interviewed came from Koch, Rubkona, Mayendiet, Mayom, Guit, Ayod and Nasir.

<sup>62</sup> The rafts used were similar to those traditionally made to move goods down rivers- primarily reeds tied together and, if available, a plastic sheet around the raft.

<sup>63</sup> Balanite fruit is bitter but has some nutritional value. After sucking the little flesh off of the seeds inside, one can boil the seeds repeatedly to get reduce the bitterness. The seeds can then be dried and pounded into flour that can be used to make hard bread. While still bitter it is often used as a last resort for food in rural parts of South Sudan.

Normally the trade of goods by foot between Ethiopia and Central Jonglei is only profitable in the rainy season, when the area is inaccessible by vehicles. However, traders interviewed explained that the conflict has meant that significant profit margins still exist in the dry season for those willing to walk the distance. Rather than purchasing goods at inflated prices in Akobo town, the traders buy supplies in Ethiopia itself. From there the traders travel in groups from between four and seven days to areas as far as Lankien and Ayod to sell their goods. Interviews with some of these traders revealed that they were able to sell their goods for twice as much as they cost, while some items were sold for as high as four times the original amount.<sup>64</sup> The economic opportunity has seen an increase in the number of young men involved in the trade. Those interviewed were not involved in protecting the community through participation in the White Army, signifying the money they earned gave them enough status within society to remove themselves from the expectations normally associated with young men in times of war.<sup>65</sup>

Out of the dozens of IDPs that were interviewed all listed food and security as their primary concerns and motivations for moving to Akobo. The traders taking goods in the opposite direction tell IDPs that Akobo has both, which has created a significant draw factor. While Akobo was relatively secure during the time of my research, access to food is more challenging, with recent delays in food delivery to Akobo.<sup>66</sup>

The IDPs who are integrated with their extended family partially rely on them for food. Others have moved to the new refugee camps in Ethiopia, while a few hundred with no relatives have stayed separately in the former WFP compound. Collecting and selling wood is a primary source of income for the IDPs, although a full day's work can result in as little as four or five South Sudanese Pounds (SSP). While most IDPs in Akobo said they would prefer to stay, they are likely to move to Ethiopia if there are no food distributions in the near future.

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<sup>64</sup> The most common traded goods were salt, sugar, ouzo, clothing, rice and soap.

<sup>65</sup> For more on the expectations on Nuer men in times of conflict, see Breidlid and Arensen, "Demystifying the White Army: Nuer Armed Civilians Involvement in the South Sudanese Crisis," *Conflict Trends*, Issue 3, 2014, pp 32-39.

<sup>66</sup> Surprisingly IDPs claimed that a tin of sorghum in Yuai was slightly cheaper than in Akobo town (twenty SSP in Yuai while twenty-five SSP in Akobo town).

Movement to Akobo takes much longer time for IDPs, particularly those with children, than the traders. IDPs frequently told of weeklong stops along the way to give the children ample opportunity to rest, and that many more IDPs were still coming to Akobo. One family with children took eleven days from Lankien to Akobo, and walked at night to avoid bees and the heat. Others stopped for longer periods, with one group staying in Yuai for three months until the roads dried. They lived off what they could beg from the host community, and the collection of wood, as they had no family in Yuai. At the time many of the IDPs who had been staying at the WFP compound were making some money through the unloading of WFP food, the various groups rotating days to ensure everyone had an opportunity. The security and services offered in Akobo will continue to act as a draw factor for displaced in the SPLA-IO controlled parts of Jonglei State. Any conflicts in other parts of Jonglei state in the dry season will likely see a dramatic increase of IDPs coming to Akobo.

The former Akobo County commissioner, Koang Rambang, said there are plans for distributing land to the IDPs without relatives.<sup>67</sup> The IDPs are hoping the allocation of land will occur soon as fields and shelters will need to be prepared before the coming rain season. At this point it is not known where the IDPs will be located, but due to the huge sensitivities around land rights in the Akobo area locations should be carefully selected to ensure short-term needs do not exacerbate long-term disputes.

Although the primary draw factor among IDPs arriving in Akobo is improved food security the current responses, like general food distribution, are not sustainable.<sup>68</sup> Many of the potential activities that could improve food security are time-limited by the upcoming rainy season. Planting, which will require seeds and tool support for the IDPs, needs to be done before the rains arrive. Last year the rains came too late and too heavy, and therefore the harvest was poor for the host community- further increasing the strains of accommodating relatives. Fishing is a significant source of food, but equipment like nets and hooks are lacking and not currently available in the market. NGOs are preparing to distribute these items, but much of the fishing season has already passed. When the rains arrive the rivers and pools flood and the fish are

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<sup>67</sup> Koang Rambang was selected in March 2015 to be the new Deputy Governor for Jonglei under SPLA-IO.

<sup>68</sup> Save the Children is carrying out distributions among the host community, while WFP is responsible for the IDPs. The logistics of moving large quantities of food to Akobo are challenging, and at exorbitant cost. Finding alternatives to distribution is a must if the conflict continues.

much less concentrated, and therefore more difficult to catch. The last primary means of food security, cattle, are dying of diseases, and cattle keepers were in their desperation attempting to use medicines for humans on their livestock. All combined it is unlikely that food security will drastically improve in Akobo in the next year and distributions will continue to be relied upon.

#### *Entrepreneurship*

At least three women who have been displaced to Akobo have started small businesses of tea stalls and restaurants within the market. Of the three interviewed two had initially loaned basic utensils from local relatives in the startup stage, while the second was from Malakal and could speak Arabic, so she had been able to convince a Darfuri trader to open a credit line. The third woman had worked as an assistant in a tea stall until she saved up enough capital to invest in her own business. All three now independently own their own businesses, but rely on a credit line from local traders for daily costs that is paid back in the evening out of the profits. Profits were largely reinvested into the businesses, while a little was spent on buying food for family.

#### **Return of UNMISS PoC IDPs**

The local administration and host community in Akobo are positive about the possible return of the IDPs from the Bor UNMISS Protection of Civilians (PoC) site. Families who have been separated for over a year hope to be reunited, and after the attack on the UNMISS site in Bor in April 2014 it is not perceived as completely safe. However, there are some significant concerns that need to be carefully managed. Not only could IDP youth easily be recruited for the SPLA-IO, the government in Juba is likely to accuse the international community of supporting them. Further there are significant security risks, and the international community could be perceived as responsible for the returnees protection.

In addition to security concerns, the IDPs from the Bor PoC will have an expectation of services. NGOs in Akobo already face the needs of five to six hundred IDPs arriving every week. There is no IDP camp in Akobo, and IDPs face the choice of moving in with family, staying at the former WFP compound, or continuing to refugee camps in Ethiopia. The IDPs arriving from other parts

of the state have had to walk for weeks with few services along the way. Because of logistical and financial challenges some of these IDPs have had to wait for months with no food. The IDPs who choose to stay in Akobo will be registered along with those arriving from other parts of the state. The returnees from UNMISS bases are unlikely to accept any delays in services they have been receiving for over a year. However, with the large caseload the NGOs will not target them for special treatment due to their returnee status. It is likely any delay in services will result in a vocal response, particularly as the international community will be perceived as being responsible for the returnees welfare and will spend a huge amount of money in moving them back to Akobo. Land has not been assigned to IDPs by the administration yet and the former WFP compound is crowded and unsanitary. Any distribution of land will have to be sure to not exacerbate the already significant land right issues within Akobo. The dry season window is shortening by the week, and time is needed in order for IDPs to plant fields and build tukuls and toilets before the arrival of the rains. The closer the returns occur to the onset of the rainy season the more challenges humanitarian actors, as well as the returnees, will face.

### **Conclusion**

The people of Akobo have faced decades of conflict, be it with the Anyuak, Murle, Jikany Nuer, or as actors in political conflicts and various rebel factions. The local conflict dynamics in Akobo are likely to play a role in the national conflict, as elites attempt to undermine fragile peace agreements and manipulate simmering conflicts with neighboring groups for their own political goals. In the face of a dominating, national conflict local dynamics quickly become secondary and are occasionally ignored altogether by international actors too busy responding to immediate needs. However, the wider conflict is directly linked to these local dynamics. Historical grievances between ethnic groups, communities, families and individuals need to be understood for a comprehensive understanding of both local and national conflicts. Competition between political elites, fragmentations within movements, the alignment of certain communities to the warring parties, potential peace spoilers, as well as possible windows for reconciliation are usually only fully understood through a historical lens. Without proper contextual understanding international actors may not only fail to prevent further suffering, but can be the cause of it themselves. It is in this way that an understanding of local conflict dynamics becomes paramount to any humanitarian response.