

Introduction

The Republic of South Sudan is facing a renewed conflict not long after it emerged as a new entity on 09 July 2011 after five decades of civil war with the Islamist North. There were high hopes from the youngest nation of the world. On the day of its hard-won Independence, US President Obama remarked, "Today is a reminder that after the darkness of war, the light of a new dawn is possible." But merely after two years of Independence, the tribal fault lines again came to haunt this fledgling nation, plunging it into civil war. The Guardian, a prominent British newspaper ran a story calling it: 'South Sudan: The State that Fell Apart in a Week'. India has significant stakes in this predominately-Christian East African country. India is the largest troop contributor in the increasingly challenging peacekeeping operations in South Sudan under the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and has made significant financial investments in that country, particularly in the oil sector. Therefore, return of stability in South Sudan is an important priority for India. Peace in South Sudan is also vital for Africa as its neighbouring countries have plunged into a whirlpool of violence; for example, Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army operates in a wide area of Central and East Africa including South Sudan; in April 2015, 147 students were killed in Kenya's Garissa University College by Al Shabaab terrorists; Somalia is divided among competing warlords; Mali and Central African Republic are in flames and Boko Haram is increasing its area of influence in Nigeria.

African Crisis - Indian Impact

South Sudan is the second largest UN peacekeeping operation after the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2011, when a referendum to break away from Sudan was passed with 98.83 per cent of the vote resulting in the relatively peaceful formation of a new country - South Sudan, the peacekeepers were relieved. With no danger of North-South conflict, the UN focus could now shift to rehabilitation and economic development. But the relief was short-lived. On 09 April 2013, five Indian Army personnel including an officer were martyred after an INDBATT-II convoy was ambushed by the rebels between Bor and Pibor in the Jonglei State. The Indian troops led by Late Lieutenant Colonel Mahipal Singh fought bravely against a large number of rebels hidden in a dense jungle and prevented overrunning of the convoy. Sporadic incidents continued till another full scale civil war erupted on 15 December 2013. On 19 December 2013 the UN base at Akobo in Jonglei State was attacked by nearly 2,000 rebels armed with heavy weaponry. The 43 Indian peacekeepers stationed at the base gallantly repelled the attacks, preventing civilian casualties but in the process lost two JCOs; Dharmesh Sangwan (Rajputana Rifles) and Kumar Pal Singh (Army Medical Corps).

While many countries including Uganda and the US took actions to withdraw their personnel, the Indian peacekeepers continued to carry-out their mission and protected a large number of civilians who had taken shelter in UN compounds. On 21 December 2013 three US Air Force V-22 Osprey aircraft en route to evacuate US nationals from Bor came under rebel fire, injuring four Djibouti-based Navy SEALs of the ground security team.¹ The next day after negotiations with the rebel commanders, four UN and civil helicopters evacuated 380 officials as well as about 300 foreign citizens to Nairobi. The rebels reported that on 27 December 2013, Ugandan MiG-29 bombed their positions around Bor, the capital of the Jonglei state, complicating the situation by active participation of Uganda in the civil war; an intervention strongly opposed by Ethiopia.

The two Sudans are estimated to have the third largest crude reserves in Africa after Nigeria and Angola. Oil & Gas Journal has pegged that Sudan and South Sudan together have five billion barrels of proved crude oil reserves. According to British Petroleum's 2014 Statistical Review, approximately 3.5 billion barrels are in South Sudan and 1.5 billion barrels are in Sudan. The potential of Sudan in securing the energy security needs of India is well known. India had named a Special Envoy well before South Sudan became independent in 2011 and was among the first to open a consulate in Juba, four years before it formally became the national capital.² Many Indian corporates like Tatas, Kirolskar and Reliance are active in both countries and they have invested around US\$ 450 million in power plants, sugar industry and railways. The India-Sudan trade for the current year is expected to touch over US\$ one billion while the total Indian investments in Sudan are between US\$ 2.8 to 3 billion.

India's leading public sector oil company ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) has significant investments totalling US\$ 2.5 billion in Sudan in production and exploration. It has acquired 25 per cent of the shares of the biggest oil consortium, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC). Annually the OVL's blocks provide approximately 2.4 million tons of crude to India.³ In addition to the oil blocks, which are now mostly in South Sudan; the GNPOC has built a 741 km-long multi-product pipeline linking Khartoum Refinery to Port Sudan. The recent civil war in South Sudan has led to a near halt of oil production and other industrial activities. South Sudan's loss of 350,000 barrel of oil per day had affected India's annual crude supply. The Indian economic investments in Sudan have also become risky as Sudan has lost majority of its oil fields to South Sudan.

Another War Starts

The tribal tensions in South Sudan were visible after Riek Machar was removed from Vice President's post in July 2013 in a government reshuffle by President Salva Kiir Mayardit, who assumed the leadership of Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005 after the tragic death of the founding leader John Garang in a helicopter crash. All actions in South Sudan are invariably judged in terms of tribal divides. Salva Kiir is a Dinka, the largest tribe of South Sudan and yet constitutes only 11 per cent of the population wherein the deposed Vice President Riek Machar is a Nuer which is the second largest tribe with five per cent of the population. The rest 84 per cent population is divided into another two hundred tribes whose respective chief's orders often override those of the formally constituted government. Riek Machar had continued to retain the post after South Sudan became Independent and his presence was seen as vital to promote ethnic unity of Nuers with the Dinka majority.

Tribe remains a strong identity in most of Africa particularly in countries like South Sudan, where nation building

remains embryonic and a national identity still fragile.⁴ The presidential guard in the national capital Juba was a multi-ethnic unit called 'Tigers' that was meant to bind the diverse communities. The violence began at Juba after a fight between Dinka and Nuer soldiers in the presidential guard on 15 December 2013, igniting a political power struggle in the ruling party and sparking widespread ethnic killings. The army units loyal to President Salva Kiir were pitted against a loose alliance of ethnic militia forces and mutinous army commanders nominally headed by Riek Machar, who was also accused of plotting a coup by the President Salva Kiir.

Riek Machar is a seasoned guerrilla fighter and a wily operator who had switched sides on several occasions to strengthen his own position and that of his Nuer ethnic group. He was once married to a British aid worker Emma McCune in 1991 who died two years later in a car accident in Nairobi. Incidentally, Emma was born in India where her father ran a tea plantation in Assam and her story has been beautifully captured in a book titled, *Emma's War, Love, Betrayal and Death in Sudan* by Deborah Scroggins. The rebel forces loyal to Riek Machar soon captured Malakal, Bor, Bentiu and Akobo with nearly 14,000 civilians taking shelter in the UN compound in Bor. Riek Machar is being supported by another fellow-Nuer and his political ally General Peter Gadet, a skilled military leader who was commanding the Sudan People's Liberation Army's (SPLA) 8th Division in Jonglei. He defected from it and with troops loyal to him, mainly Nuers, attacked and took control of military installations in Bor.

The SPLA loyal to the government launched a counter-offensive to recapture Bor, Bentiu and Malakal which escalated the conflict and displaced thousands. But before the SPLA took the conflict to the bush, the Nuer community in the capital Juba was targeted. The Nuer neighbourhoods of Mangaten, Hai Referendum, Area 107 and Eden City in Juba saw massive ethnic cleansing with about 30,000 survivors taking shelter in the two UN compounds. The Nuer survivors recall being asked only one question "incholdi?" which means what is your name in Dinka language, failing which they were identified as Nuers and marked for reprisals. Similar fate awaited the Dinkas in the Nuer dominated areas of Jonglei and Unity States. Overall, more than 1,000,000 people have been displaced inside South Sudan and more than 400,000 people have fled to neighbouring countries, especially Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda.

An undefined ceasefire now prevails in South Sudan and sporadic fighting continues in Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei states. The January 2014 peace deal between the two factions has failed to halt the fighting and Bentiu, the capital of oil-rich Unity State, has changed hands several times in the recent months. Further talks, mainly in Ethiopia have not made much of headway. In March 2014, South Sudan's President Salva Kiir sacked the head of the army, General James Hoth Mai, who hails from the same tribe as that of former Vice-President Riek Machar. Several rebel forces opposed to the SPLM-dominated government have emerged, including the South Sudan Liberation Army of Peter Gadet and a force originally formed by a former SPLA general, the late George Athor.⁵ In a recent incident equivalent to being the Boko Haram of South Sudan, UNICEF stated that in February 2015, 89 young boys were abducted by an armed group in Wau Shilluk, a riverside town in Upper Nile state, by a militia aligned with the SPLA.⁶

Conflicts, Oil and China

South Sudan, apart from the current civil war has many other unresolved tribal conflicts. It is at war with at least seven armed groups in nine of its 10 states. Tribal clashes often erupt in Jonglei between the Nuer White Army of the Lou Nuer and the Murle. In addition, the Sudan versus South Sudan conflict continues to pose threat to the nascent oil infrastructure. The region of Abyei still remains disputed between Sudan and South Sudan and a separate referendum will be held in Abyei on whether they want to join Sudan or South Sudan. In April 2012, South Sudan troops temporarily occupied the oil field and border town of Heglig before being repulsed by Sudan. This was followed by Sudanese warplanes raid on Bentiu in South Sudan. In February 2012 Sudan shut down the South Sudan's oil export pipelines in a dispute over transit fee. Over 80 per cent of the oil is extracted in South Sudan while the pipelines, refineries and the export are through Sudan's Port Sudan facilities in Red Sea. South Sudan was forced to halve public spending as oil revenues constitute 98 per cent of South Sudan's budget.

In order to avoid its problematic dependence on the North, South Sudan has planned to build alternative pipelines through Kenya and Djibouti - a pipeline to the port of Lamu, and to Red Sea port respectively. However, these alternate pipelines can only be functional after three to four years considering the challenging terrain, limited finances and the security challenges. In March 2013, after over a year of nearly shut oil production, Sudan and South Sudan agreed to resume pumping out oil. There is a strong possibility that while the international community focuses its attention on South Sudan, Sudan will be emboldened to intensify its offensive in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states.⁷ The conflict in Darfur which had witnessed ethnic cleansing of African tribes by the government-supported Arab Janjaweed has already taken a heavy toll of human life with approximately 400,000 deaths.

While the Sudan versus South Sudan conflict has an incentive in terms of petrodollars for normalising relations, the civil war in South Sudan aims to control resources. The recent fighting witnessed attacks on oil companies, signaling that the brewing political struggle could mask a larger tussle for control over the country's resources. These attacks have taken place in South Sudan's Unity State, home to some of Asia's top oil majors.⁸ China is the largest investor in Sudan's oil industry as well as the largest consumer of Sudanese oil, apart from being the major supplier of arms like Red Arrow-8 and Weishi rockets to Sudan. China's investment in Sudan is an estimated US\$ 20 billion before the countries split and US\$ 8 billion separately in South Sudan after its independence. China's CNPC owns a controlling 40 per cent share in GNOPC. In 2015, for the first time in peacekeeping operations, Beijing announced that it would send 700 combat troops to join the UN peacekeeping mission in South Sudan, signaling an unusually robust intervention. The troops started arriving in South Sudan in April 2015.

All Hopes on the UN

Negotiations between delegations representing President Salva Kiir and Reik Machar started in Ethiopia under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an organisation of eight East African countries. On 23 January 2014 South Sudan's Government and rebels signed a ceasefire agreement, with South Sudan's Government expressing scepticism over whether the opposition will be able to control all the militias involved in fighting. The last round of talks in December 2014 failed and the gap between the two factions has in fact widened.

Meanwhile, the Tanzania hosted intra-SPLM dialogue in Arusha in 2015 has opened a parallel process that detracts from the IGAD effort.⁹

While the immediate trigger of the violence was a political power struggle within the SPLM, the root causes of the crisis are deeper and structural, such as poor governance, corruption, nepotism and tribalism. Lasting peace requires that these underlying causes be addressed within a comprehensive and inclusive framework. The SPLA should be transformed from a ethnic-based liberating force into a professional state army that represents and defends all citizens.¹⁰ There is a need to establish a hybrid court, administered by both national and international staff, similar to those employed in Sierra Leone, East Timor, Kosovo and Cambodia to restore the capacity, credibility and independence of the ethnically prejudiced justice system. Finally, an acceptable constitutional foundation must be laid with power rotations; and the tribes cannot be left out of the equation given their social leverage and military fuel in the current conflict.¹¹

Nine days after the first hostilities broke out in South Sudan, the UN Security Council voted on a resolution to send 5,500 additional peacekeepers to South Sudan, boosting its force to 12,500. The UNMISS is now expected to assume a greater role monitoring ceasefire and protecting civilians. However, UNMISS is a mild Chapter VI mission which can only 'monitor peace' unlike the stronger Chapter VII missions which have well armed military peacekeepers who can 'enforce peace', as in DRC, Somalia, Haiti or in the Gulf War I. Historically, under Chapter VII, UNSC was granted broad powers essentially as a reaction to the failure of the League of Nations, and it may impose measures on states that have obligatory legal force and therefore, need not depend on the consent of the states involved.

In spite of these complex circumstances, a lot is expected from the Blue Berets, the much-loved UN Peacekeepers of which Indian peacekeepers form the largest component. India must insist upon devolution of more powers to the UN peacekeepers and strengthening the mandate of the mission to ensure security of our peacekeepers as well as to enable the UN to carry out its role of ensuring peace. A Rwanda like situation cannot be allowed to develop in South Sudan wherein the weak UN mandate allowed the Tutsi-Hutu clashes to spiral into genocide. There is also possibility that the conflict will slip into an ethnically-charged civil war like Somalia, with the Dinka and its tribal allies perpetually fighting Nuer and its supporters. At this uncertain juncture, India cannot risk soldiers in a civilian-led mission that primarily conducts civilian tasks in a country with only limited force protection requirements.¹² A peaceful South Sudan, assisted by the efforts of a strong UN Mission, could be a stabilising factor for the entire Africa as well as a peacekeeping success story which would enhance the reputation of Indian peacekeepers in conflict zones across the globe.

Endnotes

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@Colonel Shailender Arya was commissioned into the Regiment of Artillery in Dec 1998. He was the winner of USI Gold Medal Essay Competition 2006 (Group B), runner up in 2007 Competition (Group B), winner in 2008 Competition (Group B) and runner up in 2011 Competition (Group A). The officer has served as a Staff Officer with the UN Mission in undivided Sudan during 2009-10. Presently, he is commanding an Artillery unit.

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