

United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNISFA) : A New Mission in the Hot Spot of Sudan

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Background

Sudan underwent a long period of civil war for decades between Sudan Armed Forces and Sudan People's Liberation Army. On 09 July 2005, both parties signed the "*Comprehensive Peace Agreement*" (CPA) to solve their problems. On 09 July 2011, history was written when a key aspect of CPA, the referendum in Sudan resulted in the country being split into Republic of Sudan (RoS) and Republic of South Sudan (RoSS). With separation both countries inherited their disputes; the conflict in Nuba Mountains and Kordofan, the Abyei dispute, Blue Nile conflict and disputes all along the 2200 km border; Abyei, being central to all these problems.¹

Abyei is considered as the bridge between RoS and RoSS, a historical link between the two states and its people. Strategically located on the border and in the middle of Sudan and South Sudan, it is the most contentious aspect in the implementation of the CPA. It is inhabited, in majority by Ngok Dinkas of South Sudan, and also witnesses its secondary population of Arab Misseriya pastoralists who migrate annually through it and spend a considerable time of the year in the grasslands of Abyei.

A simultaneous referendum on the future of Abyei provided for, by the CPA's Abyei Protocol was stalled as a result of dispute on the criteria for eligibility of voters and the border dispute. An agreement on the withdrawal of forces was overshadowed by escalating tensions, build up of armed forces from both sides, which finally resulted into a major SAF invasion in May 2011. This invasion led to widespread looting, damage to property and a large scale civilian displacement (IDP) into South Sudan. Abyei is currently heavily armed and its stabilization has become an urgent priority for the international community. Presently, command and control in both armies is tenuous at best and the potential for a local commander to initiate hostilities, which could quickly degenerate into general war, is still dangerously high.²

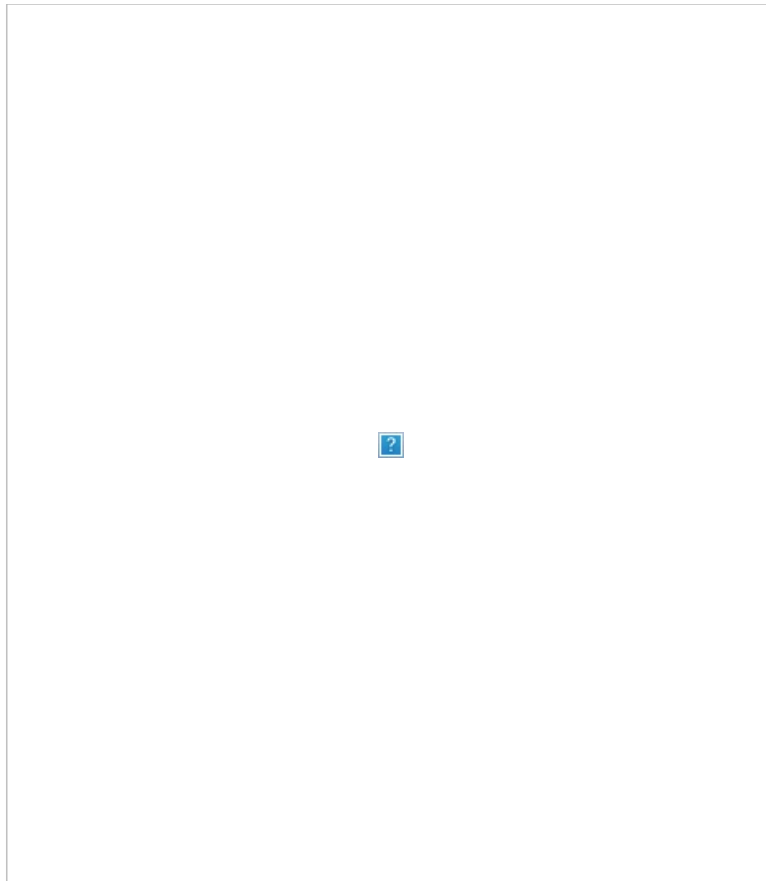
On 20 June 2011, with the assistance of the African Union High level Implementation Panel (AUHIP)³, the RoS and the SPLM signed an "*Agreement on Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security of the Abyei Area*".⁴ The Agreement provided for the establishment of an Abyei Area Administration which was to be jointly administered by an SPLM nominated Chief Administrator and a GoS nominated Deputy. The administration was to exercise the powers contained in the Abyei Protocol of the CPA, with the exception of the power to supervise and promote security and stability in Abyei, transferred to a newly established Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC). The Agreement provides for the total withdrawal of armed forces from Abyei and the full demilitarisation of the area. It requires the establishment of a Joint Military Observer Committee (JMOC), composed of observers from both parties who will report to the AJOC. The Agreement also stipulated the establishment of an Abyei Police Service to address issues related to nomadic migration in Abyei.

In support of these arrangements, and to provide security in the Abyei Area, the Agreement had requested for deployment of a United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) comprising of 4,200 Ethiopian troops, to be deployed immediately following Security Council authorisation - consequent to the same, UNISFA was established to implement the mandate.⁵

Historical Perspective of the Abyei Problem

Refer to **Map 1**. Historically, Abyei was known for a peaceful coexistence between the Ngok Dinkas, the agrarian settlers and the nomadic pastoralists, the Arabic Misseriya's, who migrate through Abyei in November-December, when summer dries up their land in Mughlad, Sudan (North of Abyei Area). Abyei town is the centre of gravity of Abyei Administrative Area (AAA) and is located on the North of River Kiir (referred by Arabs as Bahr el Arab). The lifeline of Abyei River Kiir, runs all along the adjoining provinces of Bahr El Ghazal, Darfur, Upper Nile and Kordofan states, all having a history of conflicts between states and the inter-tribal conflicts. South of river Kiir lies the world's largest swamp "*The Suds*" where the soil is clayey (fertile) and is characterised by thick tropical forests, bushes and vegetation.

Map Showing Abyei and Adjoining States



Map 1

After Independence of Sudan on 01 Jan 1956, which is unfortunately, also the name of its controversial boundary 1-1-56, civil war erupted in 1965. Both Misseriyas and Dinkas took up arms against each other and took sides of North and South Sudan. The civil war ended in 1972 after the Addis Ababa agreement, wherein it was decided that a referendum would be conducted to decide whether the population wanted to remain with the North or would like to be part of the autonomous Southern Areas. However, power struggle, control of oil and natural resources led to the second civil war in 1983.⁶ The Abyei Area is said to be at the geographical centre of this civil war, which is now the longest running conflict in Africa and has caused some two million deaths, significant economic destruction and untold suffering, particularly for the people of Southern Sudan.⁷

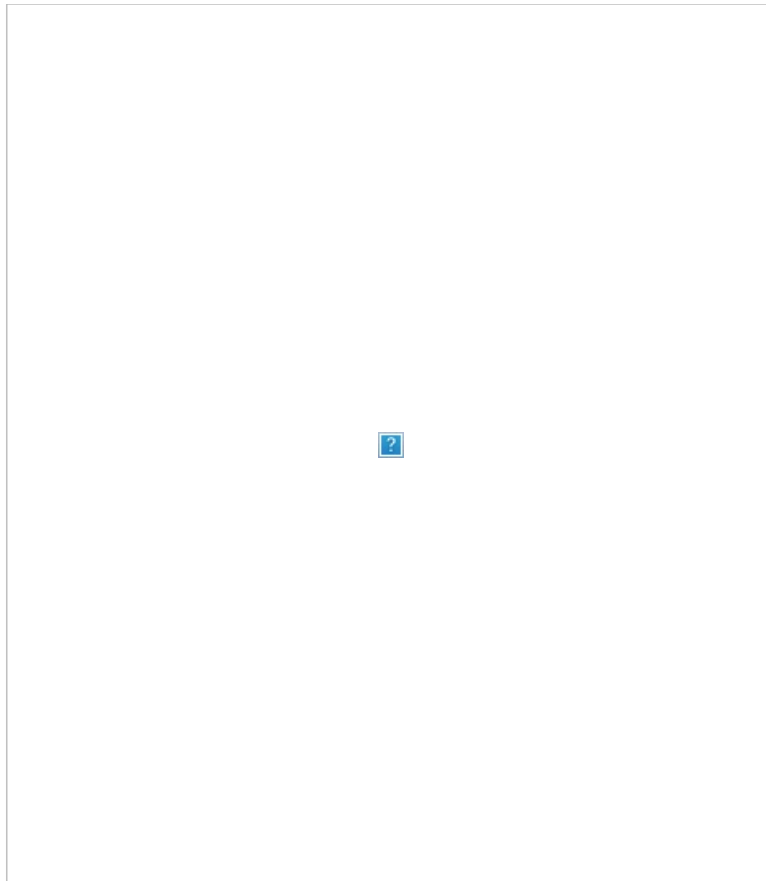
Protocols and Agreements

On 20 July 2002, the parties signed the '*Machakos Protocol*' to end the civil war. Subsequently in 2004 '*Abyei Protocol*' was signed on agreed principles of administering Abyei. The area was referred as the area of nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms transferred to Kordofan in 1905.⁸ The area was to be administered by Abyei council to be selected by the residents of Abyei. The residents were dual citizens of Bahr el Ghazal of South Sudan and Western Kordofan state of Sudan. They were but predominantly, Ngok Dinkas and the Sudanese residing in Abyei.⁹ An "*Abyei Boundary Commission*" (ABC) was formed to define and demarcate the boundary,¹⁰ it comprised of members from RoS, RoSS, Misseriya and Dinkas, who were assisted by experts from the USA, the UK and IGAD (Inter Government Authority for Development).

On 09 Jan 2005, '*Comprehensive Peace Agreement*' was signed by both parties¹¹ and they agreed to all previous agreements including the "*Machakos*" and the "*Abyei Protocol*". In July 2005, the ABC experts tabled their report saying that no historical evidence or maps were available to prove the existence of nine Ngok Dinka Chiefdoms in Abyei in 1905.¹²

Refer to **Map 2**. However, a binding decision was given by the ABC experts, identifying a legitimate area of Dinkas from Kordofan – Northern Bahr El Ghazal boundary north up to Latitude 10°10''. However, based on old records the Misseriya had a secondary right as well.¹³

Map Showing the ABC Experts Decision Plan



Map 2

The line 1-1-56 formed the boundary to the South, SE and SW (Details are given on Map 2). In June 2008, a road map of Abyei for the return of IDPs and implementation of Abyei protocol was signed for implementation. The so called “*Abyei Road Map*” further led to arbitration leading into the road map. However, subsequent to declaration by the ABC experts which was broadly objected by two parties specially RoS, which declared that the experts’ opinions were broadly based on insignificant proofs of the past and were beyond the mandate that was given to the experts.¹⁴

In the lead up to the referendum on the self-determination of Southern Sudan, tensions increased in Abyei at the end of 2010 leading to a series of violent incidents in the area in early January and a build-up of regular and irregular forces from the North and the South in response. In the absence of a final agreement on the status of the Abyei area, temporary security arrangements were agreed upon by the CPA parties, in the 13 and 17 January 2011 Kadugli Agreements, and the 4 March 11 Abyei Agreement.

Deterioration of Security Situation and the UN Response

The security situation in Abyei deteriorated further, when on 19 May 2011, an UNMIS convoy transporting a Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) was attacked in Dokura, an area controlled by Southern Police unilaterally deployed to Abyei in August 2010. In response, the SAF immediately deployed an infantry brigade to the Abyei area and bombed SPLA positions in several locations, taking control of Abyei town and the entire area North of the Kiir/Bahr Al Arab river. The SPLA remained in control of the area south of the river. On 21 May, following the takeover of Abyei town, the Government of Sudan unilaterally dissolved the Abyei Administration.

The security situation in Abyei resulted in the cancellation of then scheduled UN Security Council visit to Abyei. The Dinka Ngok traditional leadership met the Security Council in South Sudan. The Security Council strongly condemned the RoS for its unilateral action in Abyei. The Council called on the RoS to immediately halt looting, burning and illegal resettlement. The Council expressed grave concern about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Abyei, including food, health care, shelter and water, to those affected by the conflict. The Security Council also condemned the fact that two of the three main supply routes from the North to the South had been blocked, and that the critical Banton Bridge in southern Abyei was destroyed by the SAF which impeded trade and safe return of the IDPs. It reiterated that the continued military operations of the Government of Sudan and militia activities in Abyei constituted a serious violation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Kadugli agreements. The Council demanded that the Government of Sudan immediately withdraws all military elements from Abyei.¹⁵

In consequence to no change in RoS stance in Abyei, United Nations Security Council on 27 June 11 adopted resolution 1990 (2011) on Abyei leading to establishment of UNISFA with an aim to monitor, maintain and enforce peace in Abyei¹⁶ under the Chapter VII of the Charter of United Nations.

UNISFA: The Mission Begins

The UNISFA is a single troop contributing country (TCC) mission, Ethiopian, whose troops started arriving in Abyei on 16 July 2011. It is headed by the Head of Mission (HoM) and Force Commander (also the ASG) Lieutenant General Tadesse Werede Tesfay, a reputed General from Ethiopian Defence Forces.¹⁷ As of 01 November 2011, roughly three thousand troops were on ground. The Ethiopians brought heavy combat military equipment consistent with chapter VII requirements. UNISFA started deploying in Abyei, Diffra and Agok Company

Operating Bases (COBs) and commenced its patrols in its area of responsibility (AOR) on 24 July 2011.

However, on 02 August 2011, reality struck UNISFA first and hard, four Ethiopian soldiers lost their lives while seven others were critically injured, when one of the vehicles of Joint Military Team (JMT) Patrol was hit by a landmine in Mabok on their way from adjoining village Rumamier.¹⁸ All patrols were immediately ceased and these later recommenced on 23 August 2011, on identified safe and demined road stretches. UNISFA immediately asked for mobilisation of UN Mine Action Office (UNMAO) teams in Abyei to support UNISFA’s mine clearance activities. They also simultaneously commenced demining key lines of communications. However, till date no representative from UNMAO had reached Abyei because of the challenges Abyei posed and the restrictions the RoS imposed on all foreign aid agencies into Abyei. Till November end, UNISFA de-miners had already cleared the road to Rumamier and had unearthed and disposed a significant number of anti-tank mines and unidentified explosives (UXOs).

The civilians (IDPs) had also started crossing river Kirr in anticipation of UNISFA being there. However, UNISFA warned them of the grave risk of being hit by landmines/UXOs and also SAF action who were still in Abyei. There is high likelihood that both RoS and RoSS might not provide sufficient funding as envisaged in the Addis Agreement. It will, therefore, be important for the international community while advocating for RoS/RoSS budgetary support to do their best to support stabilization, humanitarian and recovery programmes for Abyei.

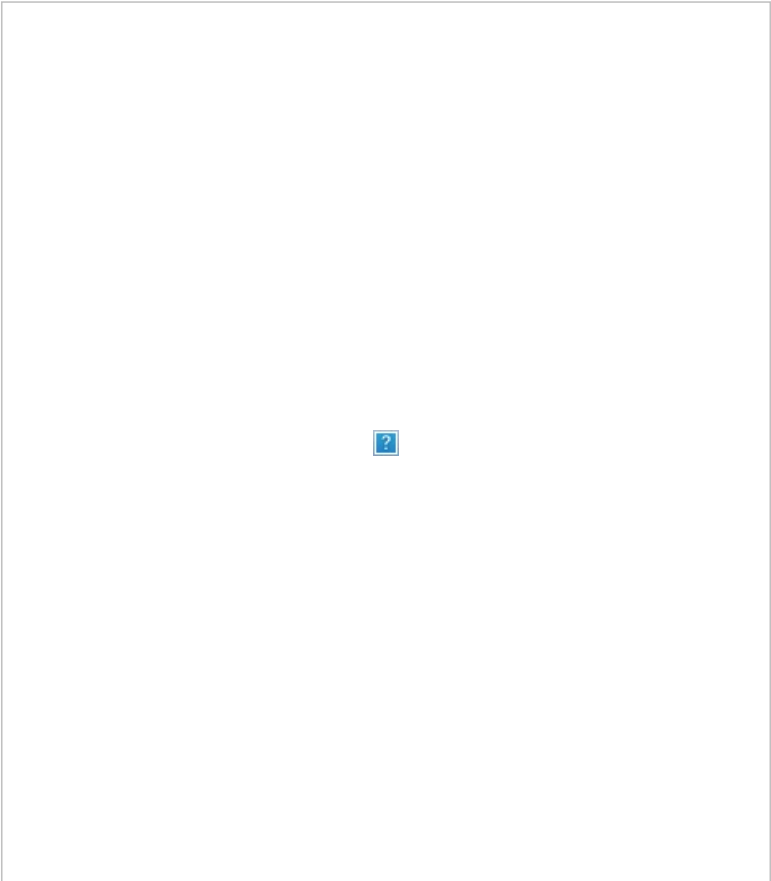
The UNISFA force composition is of a mechanised brigade comprising of three motorised infantry battalions, two tanks companies and two artillery companies as its force projection (strike) elements and other in supporting role like construction, demining, transport and logistics companies. In the initial phase their high level of professionalism was visible from their smooth convoy movements, fast deployment, rapid demining and quick construction of Bantom Bailey Bridge.

The Ethiopian contingent comes to Abyei with a reputation of being unbiased and neutral to both RoS and RoSS. Their soldiers are battle hardened, honest and professional. Though, initially operational momentum was lost due to mine accident, but it was soon overcome and with complete deployment by December end, UNISFA is looking for extended reach and domination of AOR to execute its mandate.

UNISFA Operations and Deployment

Initial deployment of UNISFA was seriously restricted by heavy rains and severed road communication. UNISFA had commenced its daily short duration patrols (SDP) from its positions in Abyei town, Diffra and Agok to the vicinity of these locations. Presently, adequate air effort is not available for air reconnaissance. The deployment in seven additional positions, Umm Khaer, Bantom, Rumamier, Todach (COB locations) and Noong and Tajalei (TOB locations) is planned in the coming months. Furthermore, UNISFA has deployed 42 military observers to Abyei. Preparations were already underway to form a two sector AOR, NORTHBATT and SOUTHBATT. The NORTHBATT will be based at Diffra with a company each at Diffra, Todach, Um Khaer and Umm Khariet. The SOUTHBATT will have a headquarters at Abyei with a company each at Abyei, Rumamier, Bantom and Agok. As the third battalion of UNISFA is likely to be absorbed in the border mission after the release of its mandate by the UN, it is likely that UNISFA will continue to have a two battalion deployment in Abyei in future. The present and planned deployment of UNISFA is shown on **Map 3**.

Present and Planned Deployment of UNISFA



Map 3

In Abyei, international military observers have been permanently deployed in Agok, Diffra and Abyei team sites and military officers will shortly be deployed to Khartoum and Juba to liaise with both Governments on operational and administrative issues along with UN substantive staff. UNISFA has also been reconfigured to take over the security at the UN base at Kadugli to be further used as a logistic base, but is awaiting confirmation from the Government of Sudan that this asset will be transferred from erstwhile UNMIS.

UNISFA Mandate

Security Council Resolution 1990 of 27 June 2011,¹⁹ established UNISFA for an initial period of six months, and comprises a maximum of 4,200 military personnel (military units, military observers and staff officers), 50 police and appropriate civilian support. The resolution gives UNISFA a mandate to:-

- (a) Monitor and verify the redeployment of any SAF or SPLA forces from the Abyei Area as defined by the Permanent Court of Arbitration.
- (b) Participate in relevant Abyei Area bodies as stipulated in the Agreement.
- (c) Provide de-mining assistance and technical advice.
- (d) Facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and free movement of humanitarian personnel in coordination with relevant Abyei Area bodies.
- (e) Strengthen the capacity of the Abyei Police Service by providing support, including the training of personnel, and coordinate with the Abyei Police Service on matters of law and order.
- (f) When necessary and in cooperation with the Abyei Police Service, provide security for oil infrastructure in the Abyei Area.

The Council also gave UNISFA Chapter VII authorisation²⁰ to undertake the following:-

- (a) Protect UN personnel, facilities, installations and equipment.
- (b) Ensure the security and freedom of the UN and humanitarian personnel and members of the Joint Military Observers Committee and Joint Military Observer Teams established by the 20 June Agreement.
- (c) Protect civilians under imminent threat of physical violence.
- (d) Protect the Area from incursions by unauthorised elements and ensure security.

Areas of Concern

Some of the major concerns for UNISFA in its set up phase are as follows:-

- (a) **Non-Cooperation by Sudan Government.** The initial deployment of UNISFA was initially marred by the closure of the El Obeid logistics base (in Sudan), Government denials of flight clearances and movement of civilian transport led to shortages of fuel and food, which was further aggravated by heavy rains. A discussion on the draft status of forces agreement (SOFA) is still an ongoing problem with both Governments. To manage such issues a consultative quadripartite mechanism has been put in place comprising of the United Nations, Governments of Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan.
- (b) **Demilitarisation of Abyei.** The absolute demilitarisation of Abyei Area is mandatory as per the agreement and is essential to coordinate the return of IDPs, management of migration and movement of humanitarian agencies into Abyei.
- (c) **Establishment of Governing Bodies.** The RoS has prefaced the withdrawal of the SAF on the establishment of the Abyei Area Administration (AAA) and of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC) mandated by the 20 June agreement. Early establishment of these bodies is essential and is challenge to UNISFA.
- (d) **Non-availability of Land.** Though the AJOC has formally agreed to allow UNISFA to establish its camps in land of own choosing, but, until a formal agreement is agreed to, it may become a bone of contention in future.
- (e) **Mission Support and Planning.** There is no significant civilian mission support established even after five months of the military component arriving in the mission area.
- (f) **Weather Constraints.** Incessant rains continue in the mission area from June to November every year, cutting Abyei completely from both Sudan's and the area remains flooded. UNISFA has to plan, live and survive with this reality in future as well. It needs to stock itself and for that create enough facilities to avoid the problems it faced in the last rainy season.
- (g) **Non-Availability of Air Assets.** UNISFA has presently no air effort of its own, it's two UH and two AH are still in Ethiopia. UNMISS has only provided one UH (MI-8) to UNISFA and is the only life line for any emergencies. All movement of aircrafts are borrowed or latched on to existing UNMISS resources and in case of emergency the availability of air assets is a serious problem.
- (h) **Presence of Armed Groups.** Presence of SAF/SPLA/ Police in Abyei will continue to remain and even if some of these elements withdraw they are most likely to inject militias or their proxies to continue domination of their

areas and interests. Hence, demilitarisation in Abyei will be a serious challenge for UNISFA.

(j) **Building Trust Amongst Locals.** UNISFA needs to continuously undertake key leadership engagement (KLE) with Dinkas, Misseriya, RoS and RoSS with the intent to reduce the trust deficit and continue the peace process. They already have the most dangerous scenario to manage in coming months i.e. the armed Misseriya migration has commenced, UNISFA is not fully deployed, SAF is still in Abyei and IDPs are fast losing their patience to return to their homes.

(k) **Shortage of International Staff.** UNISFA military and civilian staffing is not complete after six months of the mission, all previous ex-UNMIS staff were withdrawn due to pressure of RoS. This has resulted in a staff vacuum in UNISFA, affecting its operational capability. To further worsen the woes, RoS has conveyed that there will be no western military staff / UNMO in the mission area.

(l) **Very Limited and Erratic Connectivity with South Sudan.** RoS has refused the entry and exit via Khartoum for the UN personnel and the flights to Juba (capital of South Sudan) are erratic because of SAF reluctance to allow flight clearance for any flights to South Sudan from Abyei (Disputed Area) because of illegal cross border movements. The issue being more of a political nature is not likely to be resolved in the near future.

Way Ahead

Military Approach. Militarily, UNISFA needs to undertake following actions on priority to pace up its operations in Abyei:-

(a) UNISFA need to modify its concept of operations and make it more mobile and manoeuvre based, which it can achieve by conducting long duration patrols (LDPs) and establishment of more temporary operating bases near population centre for protection of civilians and area domination.

(b) UNISFA must immediately occupy all planned company operating bases on a green field deployment and enhance its footprints all over the Abyei box.

(c) UNISFA must establish company grids fast rather than just battalion grids to enhance accountability and increase area domination.

(d) UNISFA is presently undertaking KLE at macro level, micromanagement of local population also needs to be undertaken at company level. This will not only facilitate the information gathering process but also will enhance UNISFA capability to deter or avoid an adverse situation and be more proactive.

(e) UNISFA needs to have in place a *“Winning Hearts and Mind Strategy”* in its military concept of operations, to enhance confidence building amongst locals.

(f) A speedy and deliberate demining effort will extend UNISFA’s reach in the entire Abyei box.

(g) The UNISFA logistic chain is susceptible to the vagaries of weather and dependent on whims of the RoS and RoSS. This uncertainty severely hampers planning of military operations, UNISFA must plan redundancy in its logistic operations and solve government issues by finalising SOFA.

Humanitarian Approach. It is hoped that the Addis Agreement will hold ground to facilitate humanitarian, stabilisation and recovery programmes. This will also depend on cooperation of all state and non-state actors. The humanitarian approach must be driven by the Abyei Administration and the locals with the international community in support role. UN agencies and other NGOs must return to Abyei once UNISFA is completely deployed in Abyei. Abyei being a contested area, UN and NGO assistance for Abyei must commence from North as well as South.²¹

Political Engagement and Negotiating Deals. As per the Addis Ababa agreement both parties have nominated candidates for the Abyei Area Administration but agreement is outstanding on the candidacy of the Chairperson. The parties have, however, accepted each other’s nominations to the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC).²² After the engagement of basic body meeting of 1st AJOC, subsequent AJOC meeting continue to be marred by an unsupportive attitude of both parties. Based on the AJOC meeting, the decision on formation of Abyei Council, Administration and other Police services to ensure security of the Abyei still remains a big question.

UNISFA needs to undertake key leadership engagements with the Ngok Dinkas community in Agok, Misseriya in Mughlad, RoS and RoSS. These meetings must continue to focus on return of IDPs and community confidence building measures to manage the Misseriya movement.

At the macro level, a much greater effort and initiative is desired from AUHIP, IGAD, US and UK to impress upon a common understanding with regards to the Abyei issue. The Abyei Area Administration must be formed and set up in Abyei to manage the administration and reconstruction of Abyei.

Demilitarisation of Abyei. In the last five months, since the first UNISFA troops entered Abyei, Abyei town and areas North of River Kiir continue to be occupied by a SAF with increased presence of Sudan Police and Oil Police. On the South of river Kiir, where SPLA holds ground, troops have just redeployed south of the 1-1-56 line and leaving their proxies South Sudan Police Services behind. Engagement of both parties to completely remove all these authorised and unauthorised armed elements from Abyei is essential and must remain the primary agenda of all future negotiations and engagements.

Conclusion

UNISFA is a new mission and has perceivably being established as a consequence of unexpected exit of UNMIS from

Sudan in July 2011. Though UNMIS to UNMISS (South Sudan) transition was smooth, the international community did not want an unresolved Abyei to be left behind. In order to fill the resulting security vacuum, UN Security Council resolution 1990 authorised UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) on 27 Jun 2011.

Presently, there is very little change in the conflict drivers of Abyei. The issues like contestation of the Abyei and related border demarcation remains, the Abyei referendum is outstanding, migration issues and associated ethnic/tribal conflicts remain at the centre stage. Frustration levels for both the Misseriyas as well as the Dinka Ngoks remain high and the level of trust and readiness to cooperate is at its lowest ebb. It is hoped that SAF and SPLA will withdraw from the Abyei area completely as this would then facilitate the return of 1, 30,000 IDPs. The Abyei Administration and its bodies have not yet been put in place and its establishment will accelerate the return to some form of normalcy.

The developments in Abyei, including the fighting and destruction in 2008 and then in May 2011 might make it difficult for the international community to retain a neutral and sober perspective. On a long term, it can be predicted that because of issues like boundary demarcation, rights of local communities and oil wealth of Abyei, the area is likely to remain disputed and likely hotspot that can quickly degenerate into war. However, it must be realised that the Abyei problem requires a “*sustainable political solution*” which can be facilitated by key players in the region AUHIP, the USA, the UK and China. It is hoped that humanitarian, stabilisation and recovery support programmes along with UNISFA will build an environment to facilitate such a solution. UNISFA will however need to assert itself right from the start as neutral, impartial and rise to the challenges of Abyei.

UNISFA needs to keep its focus clear and for now must follow a three pronged approach. Firstly, make itself administratively self contained to cater for probable disruptions of weather and war, to maintain high operational momentum and deter all armed elements playing spoilers. Secondly, continue engaging all parties to maintain peace and lastly and least desired, tactfully use their chapter VII mandate to react to unauthorised armed groups which can be peace spoilers.

Endnotes

1. Abyei: Sudan's Next Test by Colin Thomas-Jensen and Maggie Fick
2. Sudan's Slide toward Civil War by Andrew S. Natsios
3. The African Union is a union consisting of 54 African states. Established on 9 July 2012, the AU was formed as a successor to the Organization of African Unity (OAU). The most important decisions of the AU are made by the Assembly of the African Union. The AU's secretariat, the African Union Commission, is based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
4. The agreement was signed in Addis Ababa and brokered by AU and UN.
5. Security Council resolution 1990 (2011) of 27 June 2011.
6. SPLM/A Memorial, paras.
7. CPA, Preamble, Page 11, Para 2.
8. Notably, Section 1.1.2 of the Abyei Protocol
9. Abyei Protocol, section 6.1(a)
10. Abyei Protocol, section 5.1
11. CPA, Chapeau, p. xii. Para 1.
12. ABC Experts' Report, Part 1.
13. ABC Experts' Report, Part 1.
14. RoS Memorial.
15. June 20 Agreement on Temporary Arrangements for the Administration and Security of the Abyei Area (S/2011/384) and the September 8 decision of the Abyei Area Joint Oversight Committee (S/2011/593).
16. SC/Resolution/1990(2011) dated 27 June 2011.
17. <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/unisfa/leadership.shtml>.
18. UN News Service dated 02 August 2011.
19. SC/Resolution/1990(2011) dated 27 June 2011.
20. SC/Resolution/1990(2011) dated 27 June 2011.
21. Guiding strategic paper for humanitarian, recovery and stabilization support for Abyei.
22. Addis Ababa Agreement of 20 June 2011.

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