

Conflict over Abyei: arms and recognition

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Despite the constant thorns on the path of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and the crises that hinder its implementation, the dispute over Abyei between the North and South, that is at the heart of the conflict, is the most sensitive issue since the signing of the CPA in January 2005.

Race against time

A few weeks before the ninth of July, the deadline set for the official announcement of the State of South Sudan, the conflict over Abyei has escalated because the disputants believe that whoever has control over it before the ninth of July, will have the political upper hand in the equation of the conflict. The government of the north was wary of this thinking, but it was clear in the behaviour of the SPLM, since the control of Abyei gives the State of South Sudan great significance. It will mean that it can claim ownership, particularly if it is accompanied by a positive response internationally, as expected, which will enhance the process of control and will lead to the establishment of a buffer zone north of Abyei between the two countries. This is a position the SPLM will be able to manoeuvre until the ninth of July. It has paved the way by taking a number of steps:

- 1- Including Abyei in the new constitution, on the basis of which the State of the South will be established, in an apparent contradiction with the current Constitution of the Republic of Sudan, according to which referendum was conducted, giving the south the right of cessation. The Republic's constitution is also based on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which determines the boundaries of the South as of 1 January 1956, on the eve of Sudan's independence from British occupation.
- 2- The SPLM surrounded Abyei with thousands of armed men in uniform, whether police or armed men from the SPLA. The SPLM completed its control over Abyei at the moment when two hundred members of the Sudanese army were leaving the area and were ambushed by SPLA, an ambush that sparked anger by the Sudanese army and pushed for the invasion of Abyei, hours after the incident.
- 3- The timing of the incident, coinciding with a visit to Sudan by UN's Security Council officials indicates that the Abyei issue will strongly top the priorities of the Security Council as a threat to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

However, Khartoum was not thinking far from what the SPLM was about to do, as it had been mobilising its elements to control the Abyei before the critical date. It seems that the ambush by the SPLA of Sudanese army troops which were leaving Abyei in the direction of the north on board the United Nations vehicles and accompanied by its soldiers, awarded the golden opportunity the SPLM had sought to take control of Abyei. Khartoum has completed its control of Abyei, following the decision by the President of the Republic to dissolve the Abyei management council, and sacking the officials of the administrative board.

This move by the Sudanese army on the Abyei region has received a strong reaction. The UN's Security Council issued a statement, one day after the incident, demanding the withdrawal of the Sudanese army. Britain, France and the European Union took similar steps. Yet the American response was the strongest. It said that the Sudanese move would jeopardize the US promises of normalising relations with Sudan, and to help ease the international debt and to remove its name from the list of states sponsoring terrorism. The US Ambassador to the International Security Council, Susan Rice, went as far as pointing to the possibility of using international forces against Sudan in accordance with Section VII of the United Nations Charter. However Khartoum paid no attention to the US threat, since such threats by Washington yielded no results.

The South reacted with anger and confusion. The SPLM condemned the Sudanese army's control on Abyei and considered it an occupation and demanded that the international community intervene to expel Sudanese forces. It has been uncertain about admitting the masterminding of the ambush which angered the Sudanese army, as it sometimes refuses to admit it, and at other times apologises for having targeted the United Nations forces which were in the company of the ambushed Sudanese forces. The level of anger was so high that the SPLM asked the Sudanese Minister of Finance to stop oil exports from the South through the only export line that passes through the north to Port Sudan in the east of the country. This is a clear expression of anger and confusion as it is impossible to do it that way, since the decision to stop oil coming from the South is in the hands of the southerners themselves, but it is technically impossible. Besides, stopping oil exports means stopping the financial artery which supplies the southern government's daily life, in other words; putting life on halt. This will be a quicker step to the fall of the South's government. However, one of the effective reactions by the Government of the South was its call to the international community regarding the immense human suffering that resulted from the control of Abyei by the north and displacement of tens of thousands of its people who fled towards the south.

Profit and loss calculations

It seems Khartoum, by taking control of Abyei, has found itself in a confrontation with the SPLM and the international community. Yet, the move represented an outlet for what it is facing in the North:

- 1- The step was welcomed in the north as response to what they regard as constant provocations against the north.
- 2- By doing so Khartoum has renewed its image as a protector of Northern interests in the face of unlimited Southern ambitions and was able to ease the feeling among the masses of the government's responsibility for the secession of the South.
- 3- With this development, the ruling National Congress in the North has found an issue of national consensus which diverts attention from looming political issues waiting to be addressed, such as the issues of democratisation and the economic crisis, the impact of the Arab revolutions and political reforms that are necessary for more freedom.

While the loss of Abyei is a heavy one to the SPLM on the eve of the birth of the State of South Sudan, it has consolidated sympathy from the West in a way that will manage the conflict over Abyei in the future and over other issues related to the disengagement between the two countries with relating to oil, borders, citizenship, international debts and other issues.

Future scenarios

We can recall a number of scenes and scenarios regarding the development of the situation:

Firstly: the success of the mediation efforts led by President Thabo Mbeki, chairman of the African mechanism assigned to follow-up the post-referendum issues. He was present in Khartoum and in Juba soon after the crisis erupted. Despite the hard line taken by the SPLM leader, Salva Kiir, against the negotiations before the withdrawal of the Sudanese army from Abyei, President Bashir does not want to withdraw but is open to negotiation on security arrangements according to a new agreement for security and civil administration in Abyei.

Then, both the SPLM army and the Sudanese army in Abyei can be replaced by joint troops under international supervision.

Secondly: The second scenario is to push for UN military intervention under section VII of the United Nations Charter. The agreement on the basis which the UN forces (UNAMIS) are operating in Sudan today, based on Security Council resolution 1590 of Section VI which requires the consent of the parties, while section VII does not require this consent. Section VI can be implemented on the pretext of protecting both civilians and international peace and security, especially after the declaration of the State of South Sudan, where confrontation is going to be between two independent states. This element will defuse claims by the government that it is exercising sovereignty within the borders within the framework of a united Sudan, north and south. International intervention may develop into international mandate over Abyei.

Thirdly: The probability of the evolution of events into an open war before or after the declaration of the Southern State. This scenario is not supported by present facts, unless the war is a pretext for evading internal challenges facing both parties. The two countries are passing through terrible security, economic and political circumstances in the North:

- 1- The security situation has seriously deteriorated, as the State has been facing an open war in Darfur for more than eight years. There are security disruptions in the East and sometimes in the middle which are volatile and are likely to escalate should war continue in the South.
- 2- The government in the North is facing extremely delicate political and economic conditions, as the winds of the Arab revolutions are blowing in the direction of political reforms, thus making the National Congress continuing in power fraught with much risk.
- 3- Militarily, the north is surrounded from the South by more than forty thousand militants from the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile affiliated to the SPLM. They may form a strategic reserve to support the SPLA in case of an outbreak of war with the North.

As far as the South is concerned, the situation is further deteriorated and fragile, which means that the outbreak of war might bring about the end of the SPLM and the dreams of the State of South Sudan will fade into oblivion. It means:

- 1- The Movement will suffer from dire economic conditions which will make it unable to provide a cash reserve to address critical issues of services such as health, education and living conditions in a complete absence of productivity in critical areas of economy to stop the bleeding.
- 2- Weakness of economic productivity makes the South depend on the North for approximately 80% of its daily needs, which means the spread of enormous famine once war breaks out, as commodity supply routes from the North will be closed. This situation involves huge displacement, security and humanitarian disaster beyond the capacity of the new South Sudan.
- 3- The South is already facing more than seven rebel movements along the northern border, through the states of Bahr el Ghazal and Upper Nile, from the movement of Sultan Abdel Baqi in the Bahr el Ghazal through to the movement of Peter Kadit which calls itself the Liberation Army of South Sudan in Mayom, North Bahr el Ghazal, and the movements of George Attor Gabriel in the Upper Nile

region. An outbreak of war means that these movements, with the support from the North, will move to crash the SPLA forces.

- 4- The Southern political structure is very weak, as there are a number of militarised political movements which are not happy with the way SPLM manages things in the South. To them, war will be a chance to pounce on the SPLM, to fill the political vacuum.

For all of this, the impact of the war in the south will be catastrophic for the SPLM and for the dreams of the birth of a new state.

However, the war will have broader repercussions in the region. Given the clear imbalance of power between the North and South, the SPLM will have to open the doors to international and regional intervention to assist the movement against its enemy in the north. In this context, we will find that the range of Israeli influence will extend to the Great Lakes region and the African plateau.

Fourthly: the strangest possibility is a suggestion by the Kenyan main mediator in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, General Lazarus Sumbeiywo, to establish an independent state in Abyei similar to the Kingdom of Lesotho in southern Africa as a solution to the current impasse on land ownership disputes between North and South Sudan. Although the proposal is funny, funny things in the game of nations sometimes become reality.