

## **Tensions Over Abyei Growing**

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Contested oil-rich region may trigger renewed conflict between north and south.  
For a few days in May, the remote town of Abyei, in southern Sudan, was a hellish war zone.

As Sudanese planes dropped bombs and artillery shells exploded in the town, heavily armed soldiers from the notorious Brigade 31 of the Sudanese Armed Forces, SAF, went on a shooting and burning spree, leaving the town in ruins.

“I heard the sound of guns,” recalled Dan Nyok Chan, a 26-year-old former resident of Abyei. “People were just running.”

Chan said he narrowly escaped death, “It was very dangerous. I ran with only the shirt I was wearing.” As he fled, he paused for a moment to look back and saw his house set on fire.

He didn’t stop for long, he said, because bullets were flying, forcing him into nearby bushes where he hid for the night with an uncle.

The next day, he learned of more tragedy. “My brother was killed,” he said. “Soldiers grabbed him [and] cut his throat.”

Chan explained that his brother was targeted because he posed a threat to those who’d taken over the town, “They know that if a man lives in Abyei, later he will fight with them.”

Although Abyei, which sits on the northern border of South Sudan, has been controlled by newly formed joint military units, made up of north and south Sudanese forces, few expect it to remain so.

Abyei is the main population centre in Sudan’s oil-rich region, which produces an estimated 500,000 barrels of crude oil per day, sustaining the Sudanese economy.

Abyei’s prized oil reserves, as well as untapped additional deposits in the region, have meant control of the town is contested by the Sudan’s government in Khartoum and semi-autonomous South Sudan.

A shipment of heavy weapons, including battle tanks and artillery, recently captured by Somali pirates, was reportedly bound for South Sudan, a claim that South Sudanese officials deny.

If full-scale fighting erupts, it would send the region back to a 20-year civil war fought between the SAF and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army, SPLA, that left an estimated million or more dead and an equal number displaced.

Such a conflict would further complicate the situation in western Sudan's volatile Darfur region – where fighting between rebels, government forces, and government-backed militias continues to flare – by creating a second front for the beleaguered Sudan government.

Unlike the sporadic fighting in the Abyei region, the fighting in Darfur has prompted the International Criminal Court, ICC, to issue indictments against a Sudanese government official and a former militia commander in Darfur.

Other indictments are pending, possibly against Sudan president Omar al-Bashir, for his alleged role in masterminding the Darfur conflict, and Darfur rebels, accused of attacking African Union peacekeepers.

The conflicts in Darfur and Abyei have also clouded next year's national elections, scheduled for July.

Fighting in Darfur has prevented an electoral census from being conducted. In Abyei, a census has been completed, but control of the town remains disputed.

Fought from the early 1980s until January 2005, Sudan's civil war ended with the January 2005 signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement that established a unity government with power and oil revenue sharing arrangements.

However, the agreement left open the question as to who controls Abyei and the nearby oilfields. The ownership issue was to be resolved by the Abyei Boundary Commission, which released its decision last year, saying the area belonged to the south.

Al-Bashir rejected the finding, which provoked a crisis in the unity government.

Then in May, SAF units, including Battalion 31, launched an assault on Abyei, driving the largely ethnic Dinka residents, who are aligned with the south, from the town and into refugee camps some 80 kilometres away in the town of Agok.

The Abyei boundary dispute, meanwhile, has been turned over to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague, which is scheduled to hear oral arguments in April from both Sudan and South Sudan. When a decision might be made is unknown.

Regardless, few think the fragile peace in the region will last, in part because the oil issue has been complicated by local land and grazing claims.

Abyei tribal chief Boing Achuil Bulabec told IWPR the SAF has armed the nomadic Misseriya tribesmen, who have moved their cattle south in search of water and grass during the annual dry season.

"What the government [wants] is to chase the people [of Abyei] away... and put the Misseriya people in ... to take advantage of the oil." Bulabec said.

Traditionally, the Misseriya, who are aligned with the Sudanese government, move their herds south for watering, and then return north when rains return in the spring, he said.

But this time, Bulabec fears the Misseriya plan to stay because they now tend their cattle while armed with automatic weapons.

“They are threatening,” he said of the Misseriya, and shootings have occurred recently, heightening tensions.

Then, less than two weeks ago, SAF and SPLA units clashed, forcing what few people remained in Abyei to once again flee.

“Tension has increased,” Bulabec said, adding that he had little confidence that the problems in the Abyei region will be resolved. “We will negotiate a peace. And, we will fight again. The hope for peace is very small.”

That sentiment was echoed by Nyanlvak Deng Ajup, 24, a former Abyei resident who now works for an aid group in Agok.

Ajup cannot forget the day in May when she was forced to flee.

“I heard airplanes coming,” she said. “Then I heard a big bomb, and ran out to see what was going on. It was very confusing. Everyone was running away.”

Ajup ran, she said, stepping over bodies of women and children who had been killed in the attack.

“I’m really upset,” she said. “I went back [to Abyei] two times.”

She said she left on both occasions because Abyei remains unsafe.

The problems facing the region, she went on, are “because of oil and land. The war will never stop until the oil is left to us (South Sudan)”.

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**Location:** Africa

**Topic:** Sudan

**Focus:** ICC - International Criminal Court

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/tensions-over-abyei-growing>