

UN Cautious About Abyei Intervention

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Security Council urged to deploy peacekeepers to stop escalating violence in oil-rich region. Yves Sorokobi, a United Nations spokesman, shrugged when asked why the UN doesn't intervene in the Abyei region of South Sudan, which in recent weeks has seen the worst fighting between Sudan's northern and southern governments in more than three years.

The fighting razed the town of Abyei and displaced an estimated 90,000 people in what many consider a looming humanitarian disaster which, unless tackled now, could rival the crisis in Sudan's western Darfur region.

Abyei town sits in the heart of the oil-rich region, and control of the area has been disputed despite the signing of a peace accord in January 2005 that ended a 21-year civil war in Sudan that displaced at least 4.5 million persons and left an estimated 2.5 million dead.

In addition to demands for UN intervention, the fighting has generated calls that the International Criminal Court, ICC, investigate the recent attacks as crimes against humanity. According to reports, the town was bombed indiscriminately.

In Darfur, an estimated two million have been displaced and some 200,000 killed as armed forces and militias known as the Janjaweed battle Darfur rebels. Unarmed civilians, however, have borne the brunt of the conflict.

"The situation in Abyei is not at this time at a level which requires particular attention of the [UN Security] Council," said Sorokob, spokesman for the UN Secretary-General. "We can't act on hypotheticals. That's the way it is."

But some in South Sudan say the deteriorating situation in Abyei - which straddles the border between north and south Sudan - is far from hypothetical.

South Sudan leader Salva Kiir has said Sudan's president Omar al-Bashir is pushing the region into war. "[Sudanese government] troops are coming to the Abyei area," said Kiir. "I have called him to intervene and order his military commanders to pull out his forces."

Kiir said South Sudan is not interested in another north-south war over Abyei. "We are not going to fight the [Sudanese government] forces in Abyei," he said.

Meanwhile, southern Sudan also wants the commander of Sudanese army units which attacked Abyei to be charged with crimes against humanity.

Ashraf Qazi, the special representative for the UN secretary-general in Sudan, agreed that there should not be impunity.

Sudan already has two men indicted by the ICC. Ahmed Harun, Sudan's minister for humanitarian affairs, and Ali Kushayb, a Janjaweed militia leader, remain at large, as Khartoum refuses to recognise the court.

Abyei is covered in Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement for the north-south conflict, signed in January 2005. According to the international commission formed to monitor the deal, the recent fighting there is the worst since it came into effect.

"It was imperative that the fighting be brought to a complete halt and that the parties allow freedom of movement to the United Nations," said Sir Derek Plumbly, the commission chairman. "The latest outbreak, the most serious in the area since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, underlined the urgent need for the parties to reach agreement."

Sudan's ruling party, the National Congress Party, has refused to accept the findings of the international commission which concluded nearly two years ago that Abyei belonged to South Sudan. Its decision was to be final, according to the peace agreement.

Al-Bashir's rejection of the findings has brought the two regions closer than ever to a renewal of civil war. Among other things, the Khartoum government has refused to recognise the South Sudan-appointed administrator to Abyei, Edward Lino.

To some people here, the fighting, coming two weeks ahead of a UN Security Council delegation's ten-day trip through Africa, was an opportunity for the council to take a stand on Sudan's festering problem in the Abyei region.

Instead, the council has remained cautious.

"We in the UN Security Council remain committed to seeing the CPA taken forward and implemented fully," said John Sawers, Britain's ambassador to the UN, who recently led a Security Council delegation to the region.

Meanwhile, South Sudan is determined to fend off any advances by northern forces.

"We need [our] forces in the Abyei area to be well equipped so that they are able to defend the civilians from any attack," said Paul Gathwek, a South Sudan lawmaker. "We are tired of seeing genocide in Darfur, and now it is being done in Abyei. So what are we waiting for?"

It is unlikely that the Security Council would approve additional peacekeepers for the Abyei region, most believe, since it already has a substantial force in Darfur and adding additional troops would require further negotiation with Sudan, which has been difficult.

Likewise, the ICC may not soon extend its net to cover those responsible for the humanitarian crisis in Abyei without a specific mandate from the Security Council.

“That is unlikely,” said Sorokobi. “The court’s current mandate in the Sudan is limited to Darfur.”

But without an agreement from both the north and south to withdraw forces, officials say the crisis in Abyei could worsen quickly.

“The fact that the rainy season has started brings additional threats of malaria and other diseases for the vulnerable displaced population, especially children,” said Ameerah Haq, the UN humanitarian coordinator for Sudan.

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