



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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WEEKLY REVIEW

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The Replacement of South Sudan Army Chief and its Implications

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After a very difficult week for the Sudan's People Liberation Army (SPLA) in the battle fields of Unity State, losing control of Bentiu, Leer, and Mayom and battling the rebels in Renk and other fronts in Upper Nile and Jonglei states, President Kiir announced in a decree on Wednesday, April 23, 2014 the removal of a long serving Chief of General Staff of the SPLA, Lt. General James Hoth Mai along with Maj. Gen. Mac Paul, Director of Military Intelligence¹. The move came also at a time when the international community is very concerned about the escalating violence after a widely reported massacre of civilians by the rebels in Bentiu and a mob of angry youth breaking into the UN compound in Bor and massacred unarmed civilians in UN custody. These events go to show that the conflict has reached a new height that borders genocide and make the resolution of this crisis a distant affair. The Sudd Institute analyzes the implications of this decision for the realization of peace in the country.

The changes in the military have drawn mixed public reactions. For some, the move has been received positively, citing different reasons. First, since the break out of conflict in December last year, the war has notably not been going well for the government and many people blame the failures on the top leadership in the army for not providing a strategic direction. Second, there are numerous complaints within the army quarters that the soldiers in Bentiu had not been given proper logistical support such as ammunitions, were not getting proper feeding, and have not been paid for over three months. These complaints are reported throughout the army across the country and those who are dissatisfied with this trend say somebody must answer for such lapses. Therefore, many of these people consider the removal of Gen. Hoth as an act of accountability coming from the President. Third, there was seemingly a growing dissatisfaction within the army following claims of disunity within the chain of command and regular soldiers were no longer taking orders from some generals. The unity of command was allegedly nonexistent, with some soldiers being directed by people who were not officially commissioned by the Chief of Staff, depressing institutional coherence. Fourth, talking to a number of regular soldiers and junior officers, they accuse some generals within the army of working for the rebels and claiming that the death of some SPLA generals in the frontline is blamed on an internal conspiracy. Finally, some military personnel believe

¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27137000> accessed on April 25, 2014

that part of the reason the SPLA has not been able to crush the rebellion has to do with the refusal of the military leadership to take the fight to the rebels for alleged fear of genocide. Given these allegations, it seemed necessary to bring a fresh blood at the helm in order to boost the morale of the army, and to rejuvenate institutional intelligence.

Lt. Gen. Paul Malong Awan, the new Chief of Staff of the SPLA, is seen as a good replacement for James Hoth Mai by some in the army for a number of reasons. First, Paul Malong is purported to have been responsible for the recruitment of a big chunk of the current fighting force for the government and he is therefore seen as someone in position to strengthen the SPLA's manpower. Second, Paul Malong is reportedly a decisive military leader and would be able to take decisive military decisions—a trait that is very important at a time of crisis. Third, Paul Malong is both an ardent supporter of President Kiir and he seemingly is someone that has the ears of the President. This is important because most of his decisions or complaints will have backing at the highest level of government. Finally, Paul Malong is believed to be a fierce fighter; hence, he can take the fight to the rebels. For those who support the President's move, his appointment marks a new beginning for the army and many in the military were reportedly celebrating this move both in Juba and the frontlines.

The decision to replace James Hoth was not received well, however, in many quarters. Those opposed to the replacement put forth a number of reasons. First, they believe that James Hoth Mai is a nationalist who has served the country well and deserves to continue in his role. Second, James Hoth Mai is the only high profile Nuer left in the army and his replacement is seen by the group opposed to it as an injection of ethnicity in the army and it serves to confirm the notion that the fight is between the Nuer and the Dinka. Third, the man who replaced him, Paul Malong, is accused of being behind the killing of innocent civilians in Juba this past December. Fourth, Paul Malong, according to his opponents, is a warmonger and his appointment will prolong the conflict by escalating the killing of innocent civilians. Finally, the appointment of Paul Malong as the the Chief of General Staff of the SPLA gives almost all the military powers to Bahr El Ghazal region, which does not bode well for equitable power sharing in the government, his opponents claim.

There is an element of truth in both views. However, before the outbreak of violence late last year, the relationship between the President and James Hoth Mai was reportedly shaky². It was widely rumored after the appointment of Lt. Gen. Kuol Manyang Juuk as Defense Minister that the Chief of General Staff was going to be replaced following reports that he did not approve the new Presidential Guards that were claimed to have been trained in Luri without his knowledge³. The same report alleged that the Chief of General Staff refused to back some of the President's decisions including the dissolution of the entire government. In light of these, the removal of the Chief of General Staff did not come as a surprise, implying that the decision was politically motivated.

² <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article48060> accessed on April 25, 2014

³ UNMISS Media Monitoring Report, October 16, 2013.

The appointment of Lt. Gen. Paul Malong Awan as the new Chief of General Staff of the SPLA did not come as a surprise either, because Malong seems to have been for three months following the break out of violence the shadow Chief of General Staff. Malong came to the scene when the fighting to retake Bor from the rebels for the last time was frustrated on numerous occasions. His arrival in the frontline seemingly boosted the morale of the army and finally led to a successful joint operation with the Ugandan forces and Bor was retaken. He was also instrumental in the recent operations that retook Malakal. His appointment was not necessarily a unilateral decision of the president; perhaps it was a result of serious pressure within the army that had demanded such changes. In our interaction with some junior military officials, there were even threats of mutiny if such changes were not realized.

One of the key implications for the peace process is that Malong's appointment may escalate and intensify the war. This is because some sources close to the rebels revealed that Dr. Riek Machar has instructed General Peter Gadet Yak, who is conducting military operations in Unity State, to go and basically destroy three states in Greater Bahr El Ghazal, namely Warrap, Lakes, and Northern Bahr El Ghazal, allegedly to bring them to the same level of destruction as Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity. This is on top of the odd belief within the rebel leadership that the rainy season gives them an upper hand and will try to control the oil fields and capture Juba. Perhaps, Malong's job is to ensure that the fight does not spread beyond the three states of Upper Nile region and may be bring it to the rebels instead.

These calculations from both sides suggest that the war will escalate and intensify before it is halted. Both sides seem to intend not to abide by the January 23rd Cessation of Hostilities Agreement. Given that the negotiations in Addis are moving at a snail's pace, each side will try to gain ground militarily hoping that such gains will make their positions stronger in the peace talks. As such, the months of May and June will see a likely surge in violence. The intensification of the war means more suffering, more deaths, and more displacement of civilians, which will make its resolution a lot more complicated.

In conclusion, under fitting circumstances, it should not be concerning when the President decides to make changes in the military, but the replacement of James Hoth drew strong public reactions because of its implication for peace in the country. This is equally true for the appointment of Paul Malong Awan. What is of great concern for the people of South Sudan is whether such changes will bring a speedy end to this crisis. The answer is definitely in the negative as illustrated above. The best way to end the crisis is through a complete cessation of hostilities, sincere dialogue and reconciliation. Both parties should commit to the peace process in Addis and speedily cease military confrontations and destruction of property and lives.

About Sudd Institute

The Sudd Institute is an independent research organization that conducts and facilitates policy relevant research and training to inform public policy and practice, to create opportunities for discussion and debate, and to improve analytical capacity in South Sudan. The Sudd Institute's

intention is to significantly improve the quality, impact, and accountability of local, national, and international policy- and decision-making in South Sudan in order to promote a more peaceful, just and prosperous society.

About the Author

Abraham Awolich is a founding member of the Sudd Institute and currently runs administration and finance department. Awolich is a policy analyst and his research interests are in public administration, development, decentralization, NGO and public management, budgeting and public finance, community development, organizational justice and all poverty related issues. Prior to joining the Sudd Institute, Awolich was a consultant for the Government of South Sudan conducting the Comprehensive Evaluation that looked at systems, structures, and government inter-linkages of the GoSS during the interim period.