



# THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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## Weekly Review

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### **The Recent Events in Wau: A Disaster Averted**

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**A**fter a harrowing period of violence that was witnessed in Wau town between December 8 and 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, the fighting, which had pitted the Dinka and the Fertit, finally ended just before Christmas, to the relief of all. The Sudd Institute's last weekly brief described those events and attempted to contextualize the clashes, which had been most shocking to everyone on account of how fast they escalated and because of their level of brutality and destruction. They were even more decried for the damage they created in ethnic relations, something that will be difficult to repair, and could continue to cause violence if not addressed sufficiently. This week's review is a follow up; a look at the aftermath and the way forward for the diverse populations that reside in the town, for they will still need to live in the same town, side by side, and must find ways to move beyond these tragic events.

As explained in the previous review, the sequence of the events in Wau was that a number of dead bodies were found in a location called Parajalla, southwest of Wau town. These bodies were eventually identified as Dinka and members of a small community of farmers who had been lured by the promise of peace and independence to venture far into the territory inhabited by the Fertit. It was also reported that 20 other Dinka were killed in the same location, but their bodies had been burnt and could not be found. An investigation into this incident is still ongoing, but anecdotal reports suggest that tensions had been simmering for sometime, reportedly fanned by some Fertit leaders, including one senior military officer, who is said to have been channeling arms to some Fertit youth. What followed the killing of Dinka individuals and the discovery of their bodies was a call by some Dinka residents of Wau to avenge these individuals. It was from there that the situation became easy to slide toward an all out violence pitting the two communities.

The state authorities intervened, ordering the security forces, including units of the nation's military to stand between the two sections. But the Dinka overwhelmed the Fertit and some sections of the Fertit neighborhoods were torched. Eyewitnesses said that the situation was prevented just in the nick of time from becoming a massacre of the Fertit by the Dinka, especially between December 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>. But it was brought under control to the relief of all. "It was a great Christmas gift that the clashes stopped when they did...it was really a miracle that stopped before too much blood was spilled...it could have been a disaster," said one eyewitness.

This incident had been triggered by a local government administrative decision to relocate Wau County administration from Wau town to a location called Bagari. The question many people asked in the aftermath was why the state authorities could not predict and preempt this situation, as there must have been signs that something was developing. But the authorities have informed us that they had, in fact, established a statewide committee some weeks before the clashes to begin a dialogue between the tribes for the purpose of identifying and resolving some of the issues of tribal misunderstanding that had begun to rear their heads, especially the suspicion among some Fertit leaders that the decision to relocate the county had been influenced by the Dinka in the state government. But it was too late for this committee to ameliorate a situation that had already reached a level where some leaders had given out firearms and many Fertit youth had been pumped with the language of a tribal war.

The decision regarding the relocation of the county had already become a pretext to some elements of the Fertit who had other tribal issues and political agendas. Whatever had been the cause of the conflict, it was certainly as surprising as it was disappointing to very many South Sudanese from across the country. But it could have been worse, given the sequence of events and the rhetoric of violence that accompanied them, especially what was said by some Fertit political and military leaders, some of which they aired in public rallies and is recorded by the local media. However, the clashes stopped and by far, the most important factor that rescued the situation was the actions of the state government leaders, who stood on streets day and night to manage the conflict and supervise the security forces that they put in charge of breaking up the clashes. The governor, his deputy and some members of the cabinet did their best to prevent what could have been a mass slaughter. Of course there are some voices in Wau that are talking about how the government could have done more prior to the events, as there were many signs that anti-Dinka sentiments were simmering for a while over issues of political office and perceived Dinka domination, but it would have been hard to preempt the killings in Parajalla, which triggered the retaliation by the Dinka.

Other factors that led to cessation of violence and destruction include the intervention of Dinka and Juluo community leaders, who had all through the violence been working hard to prevent the Dinka youth from the eastern part of the town, especially the large Dinka population that resides across the Jur River, from flocking into the center of town and the eastern parts that are predominantly inhabited by the Fertit. As there are many mixed neighborhoods, some Dinka families protected or hid their Fertit neighbors from Dinka attacks. One Fertit family we interviewed said that one of their neighbors ordered his children to come and stay with them so that when attackers came, the children spoke Dinka and the attackers dispersed, leaving the Fertit home and its residents unharmed. One Dinka man who protected the Fertit said “I had to think past the conflict, that if we kill one another, what would happen to my town once the clashes were over, and how we were going to be able to live together once again.”

Another factor was the decision by the state authorities to impose a very strict curfew all over town, announcing on radio and with mobile loud speakers on December 21 that no

one will be allowed to leave home or move on the streets for that entire day and that the security forces would be under strict orders to shoot at any group of more than two people who try to move about. It was very difficult to completely enforce the curfew, as Wau town is home to more than 500 street children, mostly Dinka from all over greater Bahr el-Ghazal, which includes Lakes, Warrap and Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. These children, in addition to their miserable and heart-breaking existence, are a serious security menace in Wau town. Much of the violence and burning of houses was done by these street boys.

However, the cumulative impact of these factors in halting the clashes was cemented by the arrival of the president of the republic, Salva Kiir Mayar, on Christmas Eve. He had traveled by road from Juba and personally witnessing the deteriorating security situation along the way and had been in near constant communication with the state government, urging them to do their best to prevent any mass killing and further burning of the town. In our last week's review we had stated and hoped that the president would go to Wau and stand witness to the events, as such a presence would project a sense of solidarity with the victims while strengthening the sense that the government will not tolerate actions of violence. His arrival in Wau and his speeches and appeals to the public were a welcome show of leadership and had a calming effect.

The real question, however, is what happens next? Do the events of Wau represent a lesson for the nation to prevent any repeat of such incidents, whether in Wau itself or anywhere else in the country? There were reported to be similar but minor events that took place in Yei, Central Equatoria, around the same time. There is no question Wau town starred history in the face during the events of late December 2012, as its thirty year history of wrecked tribal relations came to present the most difficult security challenge the state of Western Bahr el-Ghazal has faced since the end of north-south war in 2005.

What steps will the state and municipal governments take to help the communities to reconcile, rebuild their relations and avoid these kinds of incidents from occurring in the future? The first step is to sufficiently investigate the events and identify the people who may have inflamed the situation. This is already underway and there are reports that one senior military officer is assumed to have carried out arms distribution to civilians and inciting ethnic violence and is now in detention, awaiting investigation. The trick is that these investigations have to be professional, with diverse investigating teams, reflecting the ethnic mix of the state, with assistance from federal authorities and state and national parliaments and free of ethnic sentiments. People who are found to have links with conflict have to account for their actions, as the law should be allowed to take its course. The next step will be a reconciliation conference, to identify the sources of ethnic tensions, set up mechanisms of continued surveillance over the issues of security, movement of people and sharing of resources and political office. It might be necessary to identify the individuals and committees that will take up the role of dealing head on with the strained history of ethnic relations, surveillance and monitoring of these relations going forward. As well, there is need of increased nation-wide efforts toward reconciliation initiatives and honest, communal dialogues.

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### **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**

Jok Madut Jok is the Executive Director and a co-founder of the Sudd Institute. He is the author of three books and numerous articles covering gender, sexuality and reproductive health, humanitarian aid, ethnography of political violence, gender-based violence, war and slavery, and the politics of identity in Sudan.