



THE SUDD INSTITUTE

RESEARCH FOR A PEACEFUL, JUST AND PROSPEROUS SOUTH SUDAN

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Weekly Review

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Clashes in Wau

A Testament to Fragility of Ethnic Relations in South Sudan

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Recently, between December 8th and 21st, Wau town, the capital city of Western Bahr el-Ghazal and South Sudan's second most ethnically diverse state, witnessed tragic and shocking events of extreme violence between the Dinka and the Fertit. It should also be noted at the outset that Wau used to be the provincial capital of the whole Bahr el-Ghazal region, which was divided into the current four states of Western Bahr el-Ghazal, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, Warrap and Lakes. The events and the uncompromising level of brutality have been shocking and painful as they came after some years of calm and progress in terms of development, ethnic coexistence and service improvement since the inauguration of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA).

But these events were neither new nor surprising. The history of Wau is not entirely unique in terms of ethnic relations but it is slightly different in that during the north-south war, the town was home to a unique and relatively more successful counter-insurgency tactics that were employed by the government of Khartoum in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Such polarizing tactics were used against the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA), South Sudan's opposition force that is now the national defense force of the young state, and its sympathizers. To achieve the goal of fighting its anti-SPLA war by proxy, Khartoum established an ethnic militia that was based on pitting the Dinka, one of the major ethnic groups that backed the SPLA, against the Fertit, a conglomeration of more than 13 smaller ethnic groups that live around Wau and spread all the way to Raja, which borders Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state and South Darfur.

The anti-Dinka Fertit militia under the wings of Sudan Armed Forces commander, General Burma Nasir, was named al-Qwat al-Sadiqqa, "Friendly Forces" and commanded by Tom al-Nur, a Fertit militia leader. The force was disastrously unsuccessful against the SPLA in military terms but it worked very well in destroying ethnic relations in Wau town, with horrible things done by Southerners onto Southerners—all at the behest of Khartoum. So the events of this month have a precedent as that history still weighs down on the entire social fabric of the town and its ethnic relations. Whatever the root causes of this month's violence may be, this history most definitely inflamed the situation. These events were also

almost inevitable, as they fit into the general patterns of ethnic violence across South Sudan. The Wau violence was also predictable because of what appears to be unwillingness of the political leadership and civil society of this country to meaningfully deal with the past, as any society that has gone through such long and torturous history cannot simply wish away the impact of that past. New peace fostering initiatives should have far-reaching programs of reconciliation and helping the communities come to terms with such horrendous past. Part of these propositions is the nation's top leadership owning up to some of the mistakes that have restrained ethnic relations in the country. But in the wake of the events in Wau, many people asked as to why this history should cause the fatal and destructive mayhem that has just been witnessed. This weekly review attempts to put these events in the context of South Sudan's recent past, describes the human toll and what needs to be done to avoid the repeat of such events anywhere in the country.

Like all events of violence that have now engulfed so many communities throughout the country, the Wau debacle has a history, which is constantly written and rewritten to fit certain individual and group's goals, the new developments being taken out of the context, with hopes of political capital to be gained, and with the result being always the same everywhere, namely, the unbearable, unnecessary and avoidable human toll. That toll is often equal opportunity, so to speak, in the sense that no one, not even the perpetrators of this chaos can be said to have gained anything or spared by the violence. "We all lose, no matter what we think we gain," remarked one disappointed witness in a phone interview.

What is the story of what happened in Wau? There have been conflicting accounts of how the crisis started. The first story line talks of the state government's decision to relocate Wau County administration headquarters from Wau town to a village called Bagari, some twelve miles southwest of Wau. These were opposed by citizens from the Balanda ethnic group, and the events of violence happened as the issue was being debated, with the state government arguing that the idea of "taking the towns to the people" has been a central part of the SPLM vision. This relocation of county's headquarters had been planned for over a year, identifying the necessary resources to build it. This was meant to offer a rare chance for another area to have an opportunity to develop, demonstrating the importance of getting the county government closer to the rural areas, where majority of the people live. The opponents of the relocation, on the other hand, complained that the removal of county headquarters would shrink the dominance of the indigenous ethnicities in the politics of Wau town, potentially leaving it under the control of the Dinka. The opponents went as far as suggesting that the governor was influenced in his decision by the Dinka, whom he had to please in order to remain in his seat, something that is obviously unfounded, given that he was elected, in a state where the Dinka are a small minority, as all the Dinka from Warrap, Lakes and Northern Bahr el-Ghazal who live in Wau cannot vote in that town as the seemingly confused federal politics of this country dictate.

Still, how does political wrangling between the state government and the Balanda community end up being an all Fertit-Dinka affair? This relates to yet another story line, the discovery of bodies of a number of Dinka who were killed in a place called Parajalla close to Bagari, the

proposed location of Wau County Headquarters. When the governor ordered the bodies to be brought to Wau Teaching Hospital for investigation, it caused a public protest and demonstrations on the streets, which the authorities attempted to disperse by means of a police force, teargas and eventually the army got involved and unfortunately shot into the crowds, with scores of people killed or wounded. The protestors turned into a confrontation with the government, resulting in stone throwing in exchange for bullets. The situation gradually got out of hand after the soldiers had killed a number of people, according to eyewitness accounts. With the Dinka claiming that the dead of Parajalla were killed by the Fertit and the Fertit claiming that the protesting Dinka were preparing to attack the Fertit, the two communities succumbed to violence, with the consequences being tens of lives lost and property destroyed, including the burning of some neighborhoods belonging to the Fertit in parts of the main markets and areas adjacent to Bahr el-Ghazal University. The destruction was extensive, but the damage goes beyond the physical structures and extends to ethnic relations and the future progress of the whole town. It will take time and effort for this town to heal, in terms of mending ethnic relations, restoring the image of the town, and establishing mechanism to prevent any such events in the future.

The final line of story about the causes of violence in Wau is that all these events would have been contained earlier had it not been the efforts of individual political figures, including the former members of the state cabinet who were relieved in the last reshuffle by the governor and the former militia leaders who had gone dormant all this time, and now took advantage of a political row between the governor and the intellectuals of this state. These politicians and militia leaders fanned what had been a minor incident and escalating it into an ethnic confrontation in order to undermine the governor and his current cabinet, to make the case that the governor has been taking ill-advised decisions. They automatically begun to blame the state government for the violence, that it had tried to impose a policy of relocating Wau County government outside Wau town, stoked ethnic fire by bringing to Wau town the bodies of Dinka who were killed outside Wau, that the governor's composition of the current cabinet had been ethnically insensitive and that the governor has been influenced by forces outside the state.

The claims made against the governor may all be accurate, but advancing one's political cause through encouragement of ethnic violence surely does not go that far in achieving the goal, as it would not be possible to eliminate any ethnic group or create an entity out of a single ethnic group, even if that was the wish. Furthermore, falling short of exterminating others means that at the end of all of a politician's efforts, he or she will have to return to the reality of living in a diverse society. No state in South Sudan will ever become homogenous and we must all forget about dreams to create ethnic enclaves and instead, start working towards tolerance, coexistence and appreciation for the differences that exist in this country.

Whatever the causes, this kind of violence is tragic on so many accounts. Despite its checkered history, Wau remains one of the most diverse towns in South Sudan and had held the promise of showing that ethnic coexistence and tolerance is achievable in the country.

But with this, any national policies that are aimed at creating national unity are further more frustrated. Every calamity often ends up having something positive to present, and we had envisioned that the national government would seize this moment to make the case for the importance of ethnic coexistence. To do so, it may have been a chance for the top leadership of this country to converge in Wau town, in the midst of the crises, to appeal for calm and call upon the citizens to exercise restraint in situations like this. The absence of national leaders from the scene was all too ubiquitous. Having our top leaders in Wau talking to the victims and their families, with the president of the republic being a father figure for all of us in times of tragedy would have gone a long way in assuring the people that they are not left alone to deal with their crises. The events in Wau should function as a wake up call for all the citizens of this country, their civic associations and the government, specifically the top leadership in all its branches, to start a process of reconciliation, reckoning with the history, in hope that it is dealt with and offloaded, so to speak, instead of the assumption that it will go away on its own. Bitter histories such as what the liberation wars have left behind in South Sudan can only gradually be smoothed over through honesty and ownership of some of the pointed moments in that past.

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.