

# At an Impasse: The Conflict in Blue Nile

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# List of abbreviations

<b>AUHIP</b>	African Union High-Level Implementation Panel
<b>CPA</b>	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
<b>CRP</b>	Central Reserve Police
<b>FYDA</b>	Funj Youth Development Association
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Sudan
<b>GRSS</b>	Government of the Republic of South Sudan
<b>JEM</b>	Justice and Equality Movement
<b>JIU</b>	Joint Integrated Unit
<b>NCP</b>	National Congress Party
<b>PDF</b>	Popular Defence Forces
<b>RPG</b>	Rocket-propelled grenade
<b>SAF</b>	Sudan Armed Forces
<b>SPLA</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Army
<b>SPLM-N</b>	Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North
<b>SRF</b>	Sudan Revolutionary Front
<b>UNMIS</b>	United Nations Mission in the Sudan

# I. Introduction and key findings

In early September 2011, long-standing tensions between the Government of Sudan (GoS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N)—consisting of northern troops of the movement that fought for South Sudan's separation—pulled Blue Nile back into war.<sup>1</sup> The military escalation marked the conclusive failure of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) for the 'two areas'—South Kordofan and Blue Nile—and the emergence of yet another insurgency in the border area with the recently created state of South Sudan.

Following a path similar to the one taken three months earlier in South Kordofan, a skirmish between a contingent of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and a convoy of the SPLM-N Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) at the southern gate of Blue Nile's capital city, ed Damazin, quickly ignited a large-scale conflict involving the national army and paramilitary groups against the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division.<sup>2</sup> In only a few weeks, the conflict mobilized tens of thousands of troops, including locally recruited, government-equipped militias, significant military resources, and aerial bombardments. It resulted in a major humanitarian crisis in the southern part of Blue Nile, severely affecting some 250,000 people and generating immediate repercussions in neighbouring South Sudan and Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2013a–d; SRRA, 2012).

This *Working Paper* analyses the first two years of the renewed conflict—which took place from September 2011 to June 2013. It is largely based on field research conducted in southern Blue Nile and South Sudan in November and December 2012. The paper elaborates on trends that characterize the conflict, underlining similarities and differences with the war the SPLM-N is also fighting in South Kordofan; presents the primary armed actors; identifies the military hardware used by both camps; and describes the mechanisms established by the government to supply local militias and paramilitary forces.<sup>3</sup> The paper also reviews the evolution of the crisis in Blue Nile in terms of its devastating security and humanitarian impacts on civilians, as well as on the domestic and regional political landscape.

The following are among the key findings:

- Despite initial short-term gains by SPLM-N troops and some victories during the first half of 2013, the military balance of the conflict appears to be largely in favour of the government and its allied forces. SAF succeeded in confining the rebel movement to the southern part of the state and in re-establishing its authority over many of the strategically important locations that had been temporarily controlled by the SPLM-N.
- By combining aerial supremacy with SAF large-scale ground offensives in Blue Nile, often alongside locally recruited militias and paramilitary forces, the government replicated a counter-insurgency strategy that it had previously adopted in Darfur and South Kordofan.<sup>4</sup>
- In contrast to what has been documented in South Kordofan, the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division captured only limited stocks of military hardware from government and affiliated forces. The limited ability to obtain weapons through capture has significantly reduced the rebels' capacity to militarily challenge SAF and its allied forces.
- SPLM-N troops were able to divert materiel from GoS stockpiles in southern Blue Nile before the onset of the conflict.
- Hardware captured by the SPLM-N includes mainly Warsaw Pact-calibre weapons and relatively small stockpiles of ammunition. The materiel inspected was manufactured in different countries, including Bulgaria, China, the former Czechoslovakia, Iran, former republics of the Soviet Union, Sudan, and the former Yugoslavia.
- Most of the arms and ammunition seized by the SPLM-N were more than ten years old, with the exception of Sudanese-manufactured 82 mm mortar tubes (produced in 2007 and 2008), 82 mm mortar bombs (produced in 2006), 7.62 × 54R ammunition (produced in 2008 and 2009), and Chinese-manufactured 12.7 × 108 mm ammunition (produced in 2010).
- The SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division operates in complete isolation from the other components of the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), including the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division in South Kordofan.
- Direct support from the Government of the Republic of South Sudan (GRSS) and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) to rebels in Blue Nile seems



to have ceased a few weeks after the resumption of the conflict, although the rebellion still benefits from political sympathy among certain ruling elites in South Sudan.

- The recurrence of the conflict in Blue Nile has generated extended and continued food insecurity for civilians, as well as interruptions in the provision of almost all fundamental services, including education and health care. By November 2013, some 154,000 people had settled in refugee camps in South Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> In addition, between 80,000 and 100,000 individuals were internally displaced inside SPLM-N-controlled areas (SRRA, 2012).
- The crisis in Blue Nile is primarily an internal Sudanese conflict rather than an aspect of wider North–South tensions, even if the conflict that resumed in September 2011 has regional dimensions.

This *Working Paper* provides insight gathered through extensive interviews conducted in South Sudan and Sudan during several field missions in 2012 and, in particular, over the period November–December, when the author visited SPLM-N-controlled territories in southern Blue Nile. Interlocutors included political and military representatives of the SPLM-N, government officials from South Sudan, members of refugee and displaced communities in Upper Nile state of South Sudan and Blue Nile, and international aid workers and observers. The information presented in the report also reflects the available political, military, and humanitarian reporting on the Blue Nile conflict by non-governmental and humanitarian organizations, the United Nations, international and national researchers, analysts, and journalists.

Travel restrictions and logistical constraints limited field research in Blue Nile to SPLM-N-controlled areas (see Map 1). Nevertheless, the author was able to conduct physical inspections of a significant amount of military equipment under the control of the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and to visit all three sectors under the movement’s authority in Blue Nile.<sup>6</sup>

This report provides a snapshot of the situation in SPLM-N-controlled territories of Blue Nile as of the end of 2012. Information gathered since the first half of 2013—from correspondence with local stakeholders and literature available in the public domain—suggests that the context analysis and the primary trends highlighted here remained relevant as of late 2013. 📄

# Blue Nile with SPLM-N-controlled areas, as of December 2012



- Front line as verified by the Small Arms Survey in December 2012 in SPLM-N-controlled areas
- SPLM-N-controlled territory
- SPLM-N headquarters
- Demilitarized zone, 10 km each side of border
- SAF garrison
- Main refugee camp
- African Union High-Level Implementation Panel border
- International boundary
- State boundary
- State capital
- Town, village, or settlement

0 km 50



## II. Origins of the conflict

The conflict that erupted in September 2011 in Blue Nile, three months after fighting had also resumed in South Kordofan, should not be seen as a new war, but rather as a new phase of a previous, partially unresolved conflict. Many of the groups and key individuals currently engaged in the war were actors in the civil war (1983–2005). Similarly, many of the grievances underlying the current conflict were already present at the beginning of Blue Nile’s involvement in the SPLA military campaign in the 1980s. Ineffectively addressed by the CPA and unresolved during the six-year post-CPA interim period, these political, economic, and social grievances still represented the core of SPLM-N claims in mid-2013. For this reason, it is important to review the recent history of Blue Nile and the general context in which the latest manifestation of the conflict emerged.

### Historical background

Although modern Blue Nile reflects the diversity of Sudanese society, its current cultural and ethnic identity often exhibits characteristics inherited from the Funj Sultanate, under whose authority the northern part of the territory was administered from 1504 to 1821. The sultanate was brought to an end when Turko–Egyptian forces took control of most of northern Sudan.<sup>7</sup> The ‘indigenous’ people of Blue Nile, some of whom still identify themselves as Funj today, belong to more than a dozen different ethnic groups. The Ingessana, a tribe that comprises four sub-clans, is considered the most important indigenous ethnic group. The other tribes include the Berta, Burun, Gumuz, Hamaj, Jumjum, Koma, Ragarig, and Uduk, all of whose members speak Nilo-Saharan languages; the Ganza, who speak an omotic language; and smaller, indigenous communities that often speak distinct languages and live in isolated spaces (A. Ahmed, 2012; ICG, 2013b). The majority of tribes, sometimes grouped together under the broad term *Funj*, were agro-pastoralists who lived off sedentary farming (mainly cotton, hibiscus, okra, sesame, sorghum, and tobacco) and animal herding

(M. Ahmed, 2012). Although they partially converted to Islam and, more recently, Christianity,<sup>8</sup> a significant proportion of Blue Nile communities long maintained their traditional tribal beliefs and religious practices (A. Ahmed, 2012).

From the 1950s onwards, Blue Nile became the destination of successive waves of settlers, including different ethnic groups from the north as well as the Fulani pastoralist groups of West African origin. Grazing land drew pastoralist groups, while the possibility of developing large-scale agricultural schemes attracted investments from non-indigenous elites and, in more recent times, other countries (A. Ahmed, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

As a result of the migration waves of the 20th century, contemporary Blue Nile's population can be grouped into four main categories: indigenous tribes, meaning Arab or Arabized tribes from the North (such as the Ja'aliyin, Shaygiya, and Shukriya); Arabic nomadic groups (essentially from Rufa'a al Hoi and the Kennana tribes); West African tribes (both farmers and cattle pastoralist groups from the Fulani/Fellata and Hausa tribes, who settled in Blue Nile beginning in the 1920s); and 'mixed people' of mixed indigenous and newcomer ancestry, who are often referred to as a stand-alone tribe called Watawit (M. Ahmed, 2012; ICG, 2013b). Interviewed SPLM-N representatives all emphasized the rapid growth of the Arab nomadic and West African pastoralist groups, respectively estimated to represent 20 and 30 per cent of Blue Nile's overall pre-war population.<sup>10</sup>

Migrations and the resulting appropriation of land by new settlers, often referred to as 'land grabbing' and supported by the central government in Khartoum, accelerated in the 1970s, due to factors such as the completion of the Roseires Dam in 1966, the adoption of the 1970 Unregistered Land Act, and the 1971 Abolition of the Native Administration Act.

The Roseires Dam, initially erected to meet irrigation needs, was upgraded in 1971, when a power plant was integrated into the infrastructure. Most of the power generated in Blue Nile is reportedly channelled and consumed elsewhere in Sudan. By late 2012 the second phase of the elevation of the dam had been completed, resulting in the displacement of tens of thousands of local residents, whose homes were submerged by water (Reuters, 2013; *Sudan Vision*, 2012). Other waves of displacement also occurred, apparently with little or no consultation with local residents, for instance when the territory of the Dinder National Park was enlarged in 2010.<sup>11</sup>

The Unregistered Land Act, which granted the central government the right to appropriate land that was not registered, effectively applied to the greater part of agricultural land in Blue Nile. The Abolition of the Native Administration Act allowed the central government to allocate land to newcomers and investors, depriving the indigenous communities of their customary rights of possession and exploitation (Ahmed, 2008). The act aimed to exclude the native administration—which generally acted as the interface between the central government and local communities—from decision-taking mechanisms; it invalidated customary rules and practices regulating communities' access to grazing, water points, and land.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these significant changes, successive waves of new settlers progressively pushed indigenous groups towards the Ingessana Hills and other mountainous areas. This migration triggered competition over land and resources and created a general feeling of victimization among the indigenous communities, which saw themselves as discriminated against politically, culturally, and economically and exploited by the centre (A. Ahmed, 2012; M. Ahmed, 2012).

The unbalanced management of Blue Nile's natural resources extends beyond land and water to minerals—particularly gold—which had already been exploited during Turko–Egyptian times, and chrome, whose exploitation began in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Private actors emerged in this sector in the 1960s and became increasingly involved, although their extraction methods were never fully modernized. Nevertheless, the government promoted mineral extraction, granting operating licences to a number of Sudanese individuals from the northern regions and foreign enterprises, including, more recently, from the Gulf states. By the 1980s, gold and chrome exploitation by Chinese companies had begun in the Ingessana Hills, causing, according to SPLM-N representatives interviewed in November 2012, the displacement of several thousand people in the Roseires region.<sup>14</sup> The same sources said other communities were also forced to relocate with practically no compensation, particularly in the Geisan area, where the central government authorized extensive gold extraction.

Blue Nile communities reportedly felt further marginalized and excluded by the gold and chrome rush, spearheaded as it was by international companies and private Sudanese investors well connected with the political and military elite in Khartoum. While the local population may have benefitted somewhat

from employment opportunities, their grievances grew in response to two main developments. The first was environmental degradation, which resulted from the extensive use of chemical products in the extraction of minerals; the second was the extension of mining sites, which often encroached on land used for agriculture and herding.<sup>15</sup>

## The civil war period

The unfair relationship between the states of the Sudanese periphery—such as South Kordofan and Darfur—and the ‘centre’ has been evident in terms of development and wealth-sharing as well as in the central government’s attempt to impose a unique ‘Sudanized’ identity and the ruling elites’ unwillingness to recognize and peacefully manage diversity. These factors persuaded the SPLA to cross the boundary from Southern Sudan into Blue Nile.

By the end of the 1980s, largely because of the converging effects of continuing waves of new arrivals, the consequences of the government’s policies for the local communities, and the marginalization of Blue Nile, the state was finally dragged into the civil war between the government and the SPLA. Together with the Nuba Mountains of South Kordofan, Blue Nile stood for many years as the northern front of the conflict and as a strategic stronghold for the movement led by John Garang.

By the early 1980s, in the absence of means to defend their rights and press their claims, Blue Nile intellectuals and leaders had created the Funj Union, a political opposition platform in which most of the indigenous tribes were represented. In view of the Funj Union’s isolation, several of its members soon joined the SPLM/A, such that their grievances might also be heard.<sup>16</sup> For its part, the rebel group succeeded in mobilizing and recruiting additional members, almost exclusively from among the indigenous groups. Taking advantage of the support offered by Ethiopia, the movement gradually pushed the front line of the conflict into government-controlled territory. The drive, launched by the rebel force in 1987, contributed to the capture of Kurmuk town, which became the most important SPLA stronghold in Blue Nile. One year later, Malik Agar, a member of the Ingessana tribe who had joined the SPLA in 1985, was appointed military commander of the area.

Popular support for the rebel movement was more limited in Blue Nile than in Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. Yet, by the early 1990s, after political talks on the state's future with the recently installed Ingaz regime and Blue Nile's subsequent establishment as a federal entity of Sudan, the SPLA had consolidated its military presence in much of the southern part of the state.<sup>17</sup> Over the course of the civil war, the Blue Nile-based SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division, mainly composed of troops from Blue Nile and Southern Sudan, successfully extended control over significant portions of the southern and eastern parts of the state. This control remained intact until the opening of the peace negotiations that led to the signing of the ceasefire in 2002 and the CPA in 2005.<sup>18</sup>

In reaction to the SPLA's growing presence and influence, the central government, using a strategy that would become a common feature in all Sudanese internal conflicts, mobilized fighters from among nomadic Arab tribes and Islamist circles. Building its propaganda on religious rhetoric—by describing the SPLA as 'unbelievers' and the conflict as a holy war—Khartoum played on communities' fears of losing access to grazing areas and migratory routes for their cattle. It recruited several local militias, most of which would be incorporated into the paramilitary structure of the Popular Defence Forces (PDF), established in 1989 and provided with military supplies under the supervision of the regime's political and military leadership. The reliance on such militias, which operated alongside SAF or independently, according to the circumstances, helped to reinforce the tribal dimension of the conflict and to inflate the civilian toll of the war—especially for indigenous tribes targeted by the government as rebel supporters.

By the time the peace negotiations began in 2002, the conflict had produced a major humanitarian crisis. It had claimed thousands of lives and had left hundreds of thousands of people either internally displaced, especially those from the Ingessana and Burun Hills, or living in refugee camps in Ethiopia, particularly Jumjum and Uduk tribespeople (A. Ahmed, 2012).

## The CPA period

Peace negotiations, which culminated in the CPA, left the Blue Nile and South Kordofan wings of the rebel movement feeling stung, as both felt that the CPA

chapter containing the 'Protocol on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile States' failed to address all their claims and disregarded their roles in the war (Komey, 2011). According to one of the Western CPA mediators, many Northern rebels saw the agreement's provisions on the 'two areas' as proof that the government and the Southern leadership of SPLA were using Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains as bargaining chips; in particular, the provisions acknowledge that the states belong to the North and establish more restrictive governance and revenue-sharing arrangements than those granted to the South (Johnson, 2011).<sup>19</sup>

While the peace agreement paved the way for a popular referendum on independence for the South, it did little more than to grant the Blue Nile and South Kordofan populations the opportunity to take part in a popular consultation process, whose scope remained a vaguely defined 'democratic right and mechanism to ascertain the views of the people of Southern Kordofan/ Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile States' (GoS and SPLM/A, 2005, ch. V). The CPA also called for the withdrawal of SPLA forces from Blue Nile (which led to the relocation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Division's headquarters to Guffa, Upper Nile, a few kilometres from the Blue Nile border), the downsizing of SAF's presence in the state to the pre-war level of two battalions, and the establishment of JIUs composed of 3,000 men from each force (GoS and SPLM/A, 2005; HSBA, 2010).

Implementation of the political provisions of the CPA in Blue Nile, although difficult, generated a number of successes and faced fewer obstacles than in South Kordofan (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). After the signing of the CPA, Abdelrahman Abu Median of the National Congress Party (NCP) was designated state governor from 2005 to 2007; he was replaced by the SPLM-N's Malik Agar, whose mandate was subsequently renewed by popular vote in April 2010. Although the government initially called the election for the NCP candidate and the electoral commission was allegedly pressured to modify the result of the vote, the central government and the local NCP leadership finally accepted Malik's victory.<sup>20</sup> The NCP leadership, divided as to whether the elections should be won at all costs, eventually accepted the popular will, fearing a post-electoral crisis that might have degenerated into a violent conflict (ICG, 2013b).<sup>21</sup> Soon after Malik Agar had become the only non-NCP governor in all of Sudan, elections for the Blue Nile legislative assembly established an NCP



majority with 23 seats to the SPLM's 19. Overall, local stakeholders and international observers recognized both electoral processes as fair; their outcomes are considered reflective of Blue Nile's political allegiances.<sup>22</sup>

In January 2011, after long delays, a first round of public hearings kicked off the popular consultation process under the supervision of a 21-member parliamentary commission, composed of 13 NCP and 8 SPLM representatives. Consultations were conducted in an atmosphere of relative cooperation between the local NCP and SPLM, even though the process was tarnished by deep politicization, with both parties trying to influence, and sometimes even steer, individuals' statements. Indeed, one community leader who had taken part in the popular hearings and had issued a statement calling for substantial autonomy (*hukum al zati*) for Blue Nile admitted: 'I didn't know what it really meant, that's what SPLM leaders had instructed me to say.'<sup>23</sup>

During the nine-month consultation process, more than 70,000 individuals, about 45 per cent of whom were women, were given the opportunity to express their views and grievances in 112 hearings held across the state. As the beginning of hostilities in South Kordofan in early June 2011 severely affected the process in Blue Nile, an agreement to extend the timeline was endorsed by the NCP and SPLM-N and quickly ratified in Khartoum by the national assembly in July 2011 (Carter Center, 2011). Despite initial divergences between the two parties, in particular regarding the future form of governance of the state, local NCP and SPLM positions progressively moved closer; both sides acknowledged the need to review Blue Nile's relationship with the central government with the aim of making it fairer and more balanced.

As the process gained ground, however, the national NCP leadership regularly interfered with its local branch, pressing for a more intransigent stance and thus reinstating a more conflictive atmosphere.<sup>24</sup> In the meantime, the outcome of the hearings had been electronically recorded by an integrated team of clerks and the Blue Nile Parliamentary Commission had been tasked with drafting a report (Carter Center, 2011).<sup>25</sup>

If the CPA period was characterized by political progress, the implementation of the security provisions remained a work in progress, largely due to poor collaboration between the SPLA and SAF forces within the JIUs as well as the central regime's uncooperativeness.<sup>26</sup> Numerous interviews conducted for this

study reveal that the military contingent of the national security forces was never reduced to the pre-war level; instead, it was gradually reinforced, in particular from 2010 onwards, until it reached three times the pre-war level. As had been the case in South Kordofan in the run-up to the 2010 elections, local recruitment campaigns for militias were undertaken and several units of security agencies that had been posted in other regions of Sudan—including SAF, the National Intelligence and Security Service, the Central Reserve Police (CRP), national police, and paramilitary personnel—were deployed in Blue Nile.<sup>27</sup>

Long-standing tensions further escalated in May 2011, when the Sudanese authorities formally demanded that the SPLA forces, including those serving in the JIUs, fully disarm or withdraw from Sudan by the following month. A point of no return was reached in early June, when war broke out between the GoS and the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the Nuba Mountains (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). Hopes for peace definitively collapsed a few days before the proclamation of South Sudan's independence, when President Omar al Bashir rejected the framework agreement, which had been signed by SPLM-N Chairman and Blue Nile Governor Malik Agar and NCP Co-Deputy Chairman Nafie Ali Nafie in Addis Ababa on 28 June; in so doing, the president refused to pursue a negotiated solution, echoing the NCP hardliners' position and paving the way for sustained armed conflict (ICG, 2013b).

## Resumption of the conflict

On the night of 1 September 2011, SAF fighters guarding a roadblock at one of the southern gates of ed Damazin attacked the three-car convoy of Brig. Gen. Al Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman, the officer in command of the SPLM-N contingent of the JIU.<sup>28</sup> Although the convoy was able to force its way through without losses on the SPLM-N side, the incident was followed by skirmishes in the city. Indeed, the large-scale armed confrontations that had been raging between SPLM-N and government forces in South Kordofan—where the resumption of war had been triggered in a similar way—soon expanded into Blue Nile (see Table 1).<sup>29</sup>

The day after the incident in ed Damazin, government forces launched an assault on Governor Malik Agar's residence, killing an SPLM-N representative.

Quickly thereafter, the two sides engaged in a number of armed confrontations in Dindiro—which had been the front line during the civil war—as well as in Kurmuk, Roseires, Ulu, and Wadabok. In parallel, search operations in SPLM-N offices, arrests, and other forms of abuse were conducted against SPLM-N officers and supporters throughout the state. The most violent acts of repression reportedly occurred in Baw, Ulu, and Wadabok, where 17 members of the SPLM-N secretariat were murdered (SRRA, 2012).<sup>30</sup> A host of factors had helped to stoke renewed rebellion in Blue Nile, not least the ban on the SPLM-N, the establishment of the Emergency Law regime in the state, Governor Malik’s removal and replacement by the state’s SAF commander, Maj. Gen. Yahya Muhammad Kheir,<sup>31</sup> and the first waves of aerial bombardment on Kurmuk on 2–3 September. Sudan was unmistakably on the warpath with its ‘new south’.<sup>32</sup>

As a consequence of the resumption of fighting, the SPLM-N leadership and troops gathered south of the Ingessana Hills, capturing Ab Garin (15 km southwest of ed Damazin) on 2 September. It took SAF two days to expel them from Ab Garin and another two to drive them out of Khor Maganza, site of one of the most significant early battles. Simultaneous aerial bombardments and armed clashes were reported in the Dindiro, Geisan, Kurmuk, Menza, Ulu, Um Darfa, and Yabus areas (HHI, 2013). Additional armed confrontations occurred south of the hills, with the SPLM-N launching an offensive over Dereng (on the road between ed Damazin and Dindiro) and pushing back SAF units before the government forces mounted a successful counter-offensive. In the meantime, SAF personnel were reportedly expelled from JIU garrisons in Dindiro, Geisan, Kurmuk, and Ulu. Yet GoS troops succeeded in re-establishing their authority in Geisan by 9 September and subsequently consolidated their presence in the whole area of Dindiro.<sup>33</sup> Satellite imagery corroborates testimony collected for this report from SPLM-N officers and representatives regarding the government’s use of military means, including battle tanks, artillery-launching units, and aerial assets, in particular Mi-35-type gunship helicopters and Antonov planes (HHI, 2013).

The month of September saw the front line sliding southwards, with SAF troops pushing the SPLM-N to Kukli, which the rebels held for a few days before continuing their retreat to neighbouring Salih, from where they were finally expelled on 20 October. As they retreated, SPLM-N units captured equipment

from government stores; they maintained temporary control over Khor Ahmar and then gathered the bulk of their force at their headquarters in Kurmuk. In parallel, an SPLM-N force posted in the Ingessana Hills took control of the Gabanit area and started guerrilla operations against government positions.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the first month of war, a dozen battles had been fought in the southern part of the state, claiming dozens of civilian casualties. The humanitarian impact on the population grew serious; by mid-September, the conflict had displaced more than 100,000 persons, who slowly made their way towards government-controlled areas, to SPLM-N-held areas, and across the borders into South Sudan and Ethiopia (UN, 2011).

## Two years into the conflict

In October 2011, SAF aerial operations and military activity remained intense, with several armed confrontations, the most significant one taking place in Salih, where government forces expelled SPLM-N troops. During the same period, the SPLM-N reportedly conducted a number of ambushes on SAF convoys, allowing the rebel force to reduce military pressure on their positions and to secure supplies in the form of equipment and vehicles.<sup>35</sup> On 3 November, however, the government forces re-established their authority over the town of Kurmuk, which SPLM-N troops had abandoned to preserve their strength and arsenal. As recognized by many SPLM-N officers and observers, such a step represented a major setback for the SPLM-N, not only in view of the symbolic value of the town and the negative impact it had on the morale of the troops, but also because of its strategic importance, since the SPLM-N thus lost its only remaining road connection with Ethiopia. As they left their positions in Kurmuk, SPLM-N troops scattered and many of them only returned into the ranks several weeks later, after having settled their families in refugee camps in Ethiopia.<sup>36</sup>

With Kurmuk lost, the rebel troops—with the exception of those operating in the Ingessana Hills—regrouped in Deim Mansour. Reinforcement came from the remaining contingent of former SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division units, which had been positioned in Marinja (east of Yabus, along the border with South Sudan), Samary, and Yafta, a few miles inside Blue Nile territory, as well as in El Fuj and Guffa,

**Table 1 Chronology of main events in Blue Nile, 2011–13**

2011	
January	Public hearings are held in Blue Nile, starting the popular consultation process, in conformity with the provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement related to the ‘two areas’.
23 May	The Sudanese government demands that the SPLA chief of staff in Juba withdraw all forces from South Kordofan and Blue Nile by 1 June.
5 June	War breaks out between the SPLM-N and the government in South Kordofan.
28 June	In Addis Ababa, SPLM-N Chairman Malik Agar and NCP Co-Deputy Chairman Nafie Ali Nafie endorse a framework agreement for peace. The deal is quickly reneged upon by the Sudanese president, Omar al Bashir.
9 July	The Republic of South Sudan proclaims its independence.
1 September	Brig. Gen. Al Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman’s convoy is attacked at a SAF checkpoint at the southern gate of ed Damazin.
2 September	The Emergency Law is promulgated for Blue Nile. Governor Malik Agar is dismissed by the central regime and temporarily replaced by Maj. Gen. Yahya Muhammad Kheir. The SPLM-N is banned and its property seized, while armed clashes between SAF and SPLM JIUs break out in ed Damazin, Geisan, Ulu, Wadabok, and other garrisons. Arrests, harassment, and abuses against SPLM-N members and supporters are reported throughout the state.
First week of September	The SPLM-N and government forces clash south and south-west of ed Damazin, progressively enlarging the scale of the conflict to the whole of southern Blue Nile. SPLM-N consolidates its presence throughout the state.
9 September	SAF launches a counter-offensive on Geisan, where some of its units have been taken under siege after the initial push by the SPLM-N.
20 October	SAF launches a successful offensive on Salih. As a result, SPLM-N forces reposition themselves southwards, withdrawing troops to Khor Ahmar.
November	Kamal Loma’s militia launches an offensive on Rum but is pushed back by the SPLM-N.
3 November	SAF re-establishes government control over Kurmuk town, which was previously intensively bombed by Antonov aircraft and abandoned by SPLM-N forces.
12 November	The Sudan Revolutionary Front is established as an opposition platform, uniting the SPLM-N, the main armed movements of Darfur, and factions of the political opposition.
22 November	With a 4,000-man contingent, SAF launches a major offensive over Deim Mansour, where it establishes its southernmost garrison in Blue Nile.
November–December	The SPLM-N resists offensives on Deim Mansour and maintains the front line.

2012	
10 February	In Addis Ababa, talks between Sudan and South Sudan produce the Memorandum of Understanding on Non-Aggression and Cooperation.
February–April	PDF groups launch several attacks on SPLM-N positions in the Wadaka area.
March	SAF conducts two unsuccessful attacks on Rum.
End of March	The repatriation process of troops from Blue Nile who previously served in SPLA divisions is completed.
April	SPLM-N forces in Rum repel an attack staged by Kamal Loma’s militia.
April–May	Several clashes occur in the Kurmuk area, particularly south and west of the town.
7 May	SAF and PDF groups defeat SPLM-N in the Gabanit area, the most important base of the rebel movement in the Ingessana Hills. As a result, hundreds of civilians try to reach the SPLM-N-controlled area in the El Fuj region, while the SPLM-N command issues the order to withdraw troops. SAF and PDF forces target some members of the convoy and prevent them from proceeding; that group temporarily settles in Kampo in the Jebel el Tin mountainous region.
August–mid-October	The SPLM-N conducts a raid on Keili and captures equipment from SAF stockpiles. Waves of fighting also erupt in the Surkum area.
27 September	In Addis Ababa, the governments of Sudan and South Sudan endorse a set of agreements, including security arrangements related to the demilitarization of border areas by March 2013.
4 October	At a press conference in Kampala, Uganda, the SRF presents its political agenda as part of a document entitled ‘Re-structuring of the Sudanese State’ (SRF, 2012).
Mid-October	The SPLM-N retreats from Surkum after having established control over the area for a couple of months.
Last week of November	SPLM-N units in the Ingessana Hills launch two unsuccessful attacks on Khor Maganza and Khor Jidad, before withdrawing troops from the Hills.
Early December	The SPLM-N conducts a rescue operation in the Ingessana Hills. On 4 December, civilians and SPLM-N units that previously operated in the Hills reach Malkan locality, south of the front line.
2013	
5 January	The SRF and National Consensus Forces sign and release the New Dawn Charter, advocating a four-year transitional government of national unity obtained through peaceful civil work and revolutionary armed struggle.
19 February	Armed confrontations between SAF and the SPLM-N in Mofu, west of Kurmuk, result in military success for the rebellion.

1 March	The Sudanese government announces the deployment of the 931st infantry battalion in Blue Nile and its intention to intensify military pressure on SPLM-N forces in the state.
8 March	Sudan and South Sudan endorse implementation modalities as an integral addendum to the security arrangements signed in September 2012.
10 March	Arnu Ngutulu Lodi, the SPLM-N spokesperson, announces a successful raid on Surkum and the capture of SAF equipment.
24 April	Under the auspices of the African Union, GoS and SPLM-N delegations meet in Addis Ababa to reactivate direct talks for the resolution of the conflict in the 'two areas'. In view of the diverging positions of the parties, talks are adjourned indefinitely.
27 April	SRF troops (SPLM-N 1st Division and the Justice and Equality Movement) launch an attack on Um Ruwaba and Abu Kershola, in north and south Kordofan, respectively; they temporarily control both localities.
19 May	In response to allegations that the GRSS is providing support to the SRF, President al Bashir declares the government's intention to terminate the transportation of South Sudanese oil through the pipeline to Port Sudan by June. As a result of diplomatic efforts, in particular by China and the African Union, the effective shutdown of the pipeline is postponed to early September and subsequently dismissed.
23 July	South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, dissolves the government and proceeds to reshuffle its composition to tackle corruption and to improve good governance.
29 August	The SPLM-N signs the 'Geneva Call Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation on Mine Action' to ban the use, production, and transfer of anti-personnel landmines.
22–30 September	A wave of popular protest sweeps through Khartoum and across Sudan after the government announces the discontinuation of gasoline subsidies. According to the national authorities, violence between protesters and security agencies during street demonstrations leaves 34 dead and another 500 injured. At the same time, human rights activists record more than 200 deaths, hundreds of people injured, and 700 arrests.
1 October	The United People's Front for Liberation and Justice, an opposition group from eastern Sudan, joins the SRF.
27 October	Following a request by the UN Security Council, the GoS announces its intention to cease hostilities in South Kordofan and Blue Nile on 1–12 November 2013 to allow a polio vaccination campaign in rebel-held areas. Almost simultaneously, the SPLM-N declares its willingness to respect the cessation of hostilities and requests bilateral talks with the government to agree on the technical aspects of the vaccination campaign.
4 November	GoS and SPLM-N representatives fail to attend a scheduled meeting in Addis Ababa, where they were to discuss the technical arrangements related to the military truce in the 'two areas' and to launch a polio vaccination campaign. The meeting is cancelled.

south of the border, during the pre-war military build-up. Nevertheless, it took several weeks for SPLM-N troops in Guffa to enter into a fully operational phase, revealing a low level of alert among the ranks before the war started.<sup>37</sup> On 8 November 2011, presumably to prevent the reinforcement of SPLM-N troops, SAF reportedly launched an aerial attack on Guffa in South Sudan, about 4 km south of the border with Blue Nile; the area was home to an informal refugee settlement that was in the vicinity of an SPLM-N military camp. The offensive claimed the lives of seven civilians (HHI, 2013).

At the end of November 2011, the first phase of the conflict ended with unsuccessful offensives conducted by SAF and affiliated groups on Rum and Deim Mansour. The resulting front line would remain largely unchanged for the following two years, despite some fighting in the Baw and Kurmuk areas (see Table 1). From August to October, the SPLM-N launched successive attacks on Surkum, including a major offensive on 16 September.<sup>38</sup>

In February 2012, after having taken control of Kurmuk and Baw, SAF continued to conduct aerial bombing operations across rebel-controlled territory, while reducing the number of ground operations. As in Darfur and South Kordofan, the Sudanese Air Force was deployed in Blue Nile and operated on a regular—almost daily—basis. In military terms, the effectiveness of these aerial strikes appears to have been limited, as bombardments often targeted empty areas or uninhabited buildings; nevertheless, they produced harmful psychological effects in the communities, creating a state of terror and vulnerability among the civilian population and aggravating the humanitarian situation in the rebel-held areas.

While it is beyond the scope of this report to provide comprehensive figures on the number of bombardments conducted and on the resulting casualties, available data suggests that most of the bombings were conducted randomly and did not reach any target of strategic importance. The author of this report witnessed a number of aerial operations that hit civilian-populated areas and buildings, such as a health care centre and a mosque in Chali al Fil during a 28 November 2012 attack.<sup>39</sup>

By the end of the year SPLM-N forces were losing their grip on the Ingessana Hills. Initially present in the Hills with a force equivalent to two battalions, the SPLM-N had consolidated its presence and increased its ranks—up to



nearly three battalions—through local recruitment in the early stages of the war.<sup>40</sup> As the conflict drew on, however, the Hills-based units suffered from isolation, becoming more vulnerable to pressure from SAF and local PDF groups, especially after mid-April 2012, by which time government forces had captured Makaja and taken control of the main road connecting the Ingessana Hills with both ed Damazin and Kurmuk (HHI, 2013).

In addition, deployment in the isolated mountainous area created severe challenges for supply delivery, not only for the SPLM-N, which grew short of ammunition and military equipment, but also for the population living under rebel authority. Civilians who were displaced from the Hills in late 2012 reported that SPLM-N fighters secured most of the supplies for the population through small-scale smuggling and raids on local markets. Yet the SPLM-N contingent in the Hills began to shrink in size, as many of the rebels who had been involved in operations to secure the exit of civilians from the government-controlled area did not return after accomplishing their assignments.<sup>41</sup>

In May 2012, after having repelled a first attack, SPLM-N units in the Hills could not prevent a second offensive, nor could they keep the government forces from taking control of Gabanit, the main village under SPLM-N authority since the fighting had resumed. The bulk of the SPLM-N force and several hundred civilians tried to find a way out of the Hills to seek refuge south of the front line. While marching, however, one group of the convoy was attacked by government forces in the Jebel el Tin mountainous areas; they scattered before gathering again, together with several dozen SPLM-N fighters. Reluctant to move back for fear of reprisals or forward because of the beginning of the rainy season, the group finally settled in Kampo, an abandoned village south of Gabanit. By the end of November 2012, a couple of SPLM-N platoons—mainly composed of fighters who had previously been posted in the Hills—launched a rescue operation in an attempt to open a corridor from Jebel el Tin to Kubra. On 4 December 2012, after a four-day walk, the convoy was able to cross the front line, reaching Kubra and, subsequently, the Malkan SPLM-N garrison (see Image 1).

The precise number of civilians who reached Kubra remains unknown, although those who took part in the operation referred to figures of between 450 and 800 individuals. According the *sheikh* (traditional leader) in charge of



**Image 1:** Civilians and SPLM-N fighters reach Kubra after the rescue operation conducted in the Ingessana Hills, 4 December 2012. © Claudio Gramizzi

the community that settled in Jebel el Tin, a registration exercise undertaken on the night before the convoy arrived in Kubra was interrupted after more than 600 individuals had been listed.<sup>42</sup>

Similar rescue operations were reportedly conducted before the final retreat, the first on 6 November 2011. Some of the previous convoys, however, were attacked by PDF groups before they could reach SPLM-N-controlled territory. Numerous civilians lost their lives in such incidents, notably 11 during one attack in October 2012 and another 10 and 29 in two separate assaults in November 2012.<sup>43</sup>

The December 2012 operation proved to be a successful effort by the rebel movement to protect civilians under threat, even if interviews suggest that the number of civilians who had been willing to gather in Khor Jidad was 10–20 times larger than the number of those who actually arrived there. In fact, local PDF and SAF patrols seem to have prevented many civilians from reaching the meeting point; meanwhile, individuals who might have slowed down the march, such as ailing and older persons, were left behind.

In addition to the humanitarian dimension, the rescue operation also had a military one, as it marked a consistent disengagement of the SPLM-N force from the Ingessana Hills—if not its conclusive withdrawal—and the confinement of the rebellion south of the front line.<sup>44</sup>

Military activity remained intense in the first months of 2013, although it did not result in significant changes in the balance of forces or the front line. Several battles were fought near Kurmuk and Deim Mansour, and in Mofu, where SPLM-N troops resisted SAF incursions and captured military equipment from the enemy.

## **SPLM-N forces in conflict in Blue Nile and South Kordofan**

The civil war and the CPA period had analogous effects on Blue Nile and South Kordofan, such that their recent history may be viewed as shared.<sup>45</sup> In the same vein, the conflicts that broke out in 2011 in the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile may be seen as two overlapping components of a single phenomenon.

The socio-economic, political, and cultural roots of the conflicts are among the most apparent commonalities, with respect to not only South Kordofan and Blue Nile, but also other Sudanese peripheral states.<sup>46</sup> In the run-up to the 2010 elections and South Sudan's independence, the 'two areas' both experienced a radicalization of Khartoum's position towards the SPLM-N, the government's chief political opposition. Despite significant differences in the outcomes of the gubernatorial elections and in the handling of the popular consultations in the two states, SAF and government security agencies militarized Blue Nile and South Kordofan in parallel and following an identical pattern. After the resumption of large-scale conflict in 2011, the populations of both states suffered severe humanitarian consequences of the fighting; meanwhile, on the

military level, the SPLM-N branches in each state faced serious difficulties in obtaining regional and international support. A final element of convergence between the two states concerns the tactics adopted by the Sudanese government in its military response to the rebellions, such as the extensive use of aerial assets, the deployment of significant military means from the rest of the country, and the support provided to locally enrolled and trained militias.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to revealing such similarities, a comparative analysis of the two conflicts also highlights local specificities, not least with regard to the different types of war theatres. Specifically, the SPLM-N in Blue Nile proved to be less of a match for government forces than the movement in South Kordofan. Despite initial success, the territory under SPLM-N control gradually shrank southwards and remained restrained to a small portion of Blue Nile. One reason for this trend may be linked to the fact that the movement's leadership did not interpret the military build-up of government forces as a clear precursor of the slide back to war; in fact, they attempted to negotiate a political solution until a military confrontation became inevitable.

Unlike the SPLM-N in Blue Nile, the movement in South Kordofan has captured enough military hardware from government stockpiles to secure a constant supply, particularly in terms of ammunition, and to reduce the need to identify foreign procurement channels. The limited equipment that Blue Nile's SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division was able to capture from SAF and security stores is not sufficient to guarantee the movement's autonomy and does not represent a sustainable alternative to direct supplies.<sup>48</sup> As a consequence, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's capacity to sustain long-term military operations has been limited; its troops have been forced to avoid armed confrontations as much as possible and have hitherto adopted a conservative tactical approach. In addition, many observers—including SPLM-N representatives—consider the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's capacity weaker than the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's, particularly in terms of human resources.<sup>49</sup> This perceived weakness has had a negative impact on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's military readiness and has further isolated the movement from local and international support.

This perception has also undermined the effectiveness of the SPLM-N chain of command in Blue Nile and the troops' trust in their own hierarchy. A number of SPLM-N officers serving on the Blue Nile front said they recognized that troop morale had been high in the beginning but had been dropping over time,

especially since the movement had proven itself incapable of seriously challenging the government militarily and since support had become difficult to obtain, even from regional and international actors who had provided assistance in the past. A few of the officers who were interviewed for this study elaborated on how difficult it was to improve the SPLM-N's position in the conflict and identified a weak chain of command as one of the major weaknesses of the movement. Some also criticized the fact that promotions in the SPLM/A-N structure were often based on seniority rather than competence or personal skills.<sup>50</sup> It should also be noted that, in comparison to the strong sense of affiliation among troops in the Nuba community, which represents a major asset for the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, cohesion within the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division is weak because of the lack of a common identity among its ranks.<sup>51</sup>

Another significant difference between South Kordofan and Blue Nile concerns the amount of international interest the conflicts generated. While large numbers of journalists, researchers, and aid workers visited SPLM-N-controlled areas in the Nuba Mountains after the war broke out, the conflict in Blue Nile has attracted limited international attention since September 2011. In addition, the SPLM-N in Blue Nile has not had the capacity to monitor the humanitarian situation in the areas under its authority. The discrepancy in the visibility of the two fronts on the international scene may help to explain why humanitarian actors and international aid agencies adopted different approaches in the two conflict-affected areas, particularly in terms of their levels of engagement and timing.<sup>52</sup>

A final noteworthy difference between the two states relates to the involvement of the SPLM-N in the unified opposition platform of the Sudan Revolutionary Front. Although Malik Agar was appointed president of the SRF, SPLM-N officers and troops interviewed in Blue Nile rarely referred to the opposition platform and showed more interest in Blue Nile-oriented (and even tribal) claims than in the SRF struggle for regime change in the whole of Sudan.<sup>53</sup> In contrast, most of the SPLM-N officers and fighters interviewed in South Kordofan in 2012 referred to themselves as SRF members.<sup>54</sup> These diverging approaches might reflect the fact that, in the Blue Nile theatre, the SPLM-N force operates in complete isolation from other components of the SRF, including the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, whereas the South Kordofan front line—where the SPLM-N had operated in

coordination with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and SPLA troops— appears to serve as a bridge uniting the struggles of the SPLM-N and Darfurian movements.<sup>55</sup> Interviews held with representatives of South Kordofan’s branch of the SPLM-N, however, suggest that practical and logistical challenges were among the main reasons behind the isolation of the Blue Nile front. That said, observers posited that the movement would require much time to reverse the trend and garner the political will necessary to mobilize support for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division in the Nuba Mountains.<sup>56</sup> 🗨️

### III. Armed actors

As confirmed by the field research conducted for this report, several armed groups are involved in the Blue Nile military terrain. While the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division is the only anti-government force engaged in the conflict, SAF and Sudanese security agencies are backed by a number of local paramilitary groups, mainly referred to as PDF, and militias, especially those recruited from among Arab, Arabized, and Islamized tribes. Interviews revealed that, in addition to these local groups, several foreign actors were also active in the state. A number of testimonies pointed to the presence of a force led by Kamal Loma, a South Sudanese from the Mabaan tribe; while the force officially claims to fight the South Sudanese government, it is known to operate exclusively in Blue Nile. Some interviewees claimed foreign fighters had been recruited into the ranks of government forces. In particular, they mentioned Chadians who had previously been active in Darfur and served as a reserve unit for SAF, and Ethiopians, some of whom had settled on the Sudanese side of the border long ago and had been recruited into the different Sudanese security agencies (see Box 1).<sup>57</sup> This section presents what is known about each of these actors in greater detail.

#### Box 1 **Foreign fighters in the government forces**

Ethiopian nationals from the Berta and Gumuz tribes reportedly took part in different SAF operations conducted after September 2011, including the offensive that enabled the central government to re-establish its authority over the town of Kurmuk. While their numbers are not known, these fighters appear to have been recruited and trained after 2005, under the supervision of Abdelrahman Abu Median, an NCP leader from Kurmuk.<sup>58</sup> SAF's Ethiopian component is reportedly based in the Aroma camp, situated between Agadi and ed Damazin, west of the state capital. Before the war resumed, the contingent was equipped with regular military hardware.<sup>59</sup> Their presence among the government forces was confirmed in late 2012, when the SPLM-N arrested a few Ethiopian fighters involved in SAF operations (ICG, 2013b).

According to interviews with SPLM-N officers conducted in southern Blue Nile in November and December 2012, SAF troops and affiliated paramilitary forces also include combatants from Chad, Eritrea, and Somalia. These assertions could not be verified, however, and it should be noted that the officers may have based their observations on the troops' physical characteristics or their accents in Arabic.

## Government and allied forces

Government military and security forces engaged in the conflict in Blue Nile have continued to employ large-scale aerial capacities. Simultaneously, they have mobilized local communities to reactivate PDF and other groups that took part in the civil war against the SPLA, or to create new ones. Testimonies gathered during the field research and reports from the conflict-affected areas indicate that SAF allocated significant resources to the Blue Nile campaign—in terms of both equipment and troops.

In early 2012, SAF downgraded the level of engagement of its ground forces, particularly after the force captured Kurmuk and consolidated its control over the roads between ed Damazin, the Ingessana Hills, and Kurmuk. In parallel, however, government forces increased their reliance on PDF and local militias, which maintained constant military pressure on the rebellion (HHI, 2013). Simultaneously, the Sudanese Air Force continued to conduct extensive aerial operations, in particular with Antonov aircraft in several areas of southern Blue Nile, affecting civilians, limiting SPLM-N movements, and protecting its monopoly over the air space.<sup>60</sup>

### *SAF and GoS paramilitary forces*

The central government's non-compliance with the security provisions of the CPA is one of the major reasons for the resumption of the conflict. Although no exact estimates of the SAF presence in Blue Nile during the CPA period are available, most observers and local actors interviewed for this report argue that the government not only refused to reduce the size of its military apparatus, but also increased the contingents of the different national security branches in Blue Nile. The military build-up started on the eve of the 2010 electoral period; by the onset of the war, the militarization process had allowed the number of government troops in Blue Nile to swell to several times its pre-CPA size.<sup>61</sup>

SPLM-N representatives interviewed for this study said they observed different waves of deployments of troops and military hardware from other regions of Sudan—including Darfur, Khartoum, Kosti, Port Sudan, and other garrisons in northern and central Sudan—to Blue Nile between 2010 and 2011. While military units were brought in as reinforcement for the SAF's 4<sup>th</sup> Division, Central Reserve Police contingents and an estimated two battalions of militias



referred to as 'janjaweed' (as the troops had allegedly been engaged in the conflict in Darfur) gathered for military training in the al Dissa SAF camp, near ed Damazin.<sup>62</sup> Rotations of SAF contingents reportedly continued until early March 2013, when the 931st infantry battalion deployed from northern Sudan to ed Damazin.<sup>63</sup> One high-ranking representative of the SPLM-N branch interviewed in December 2012 underlined that, after the endorsement of the CPA, the government deployed up to 15 officers of the *shurta al metamahiya* (community police) per village.<sup>64</sup>

Similar accounts were provided by two defectors who joined the SPLM-N military and political branches in July 2011 and April 2012, respectively. According to the first defector, who had joined SAF in 1995 and had served as a security officer in the SAF JIUs, the SAF contingent in the JIUs had exceeded the 3,000-man limit established by the CPA in 2005. In fact, the SAF JIU 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade alone was composed of more than 2,200 fighters, although only half of them were declared to the monitoring mechanism supervised by the United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS). According to the testimony, UNMIS could not establish the correct number of troops, as official lists provided by the government were deliberately left incomplete. In addition, since UNMIS used to announce inspections in advance, SAF personnel who were not mentioned in the official list would spend the day locked in their rooms or wearing civilian clothes outside of SAF facilities while monitoring missions were conducted.

Well before the 2010 elections, the central government informed the SAF JIU command in Blue Nile of the planned deployment of three additional SAF brigades, which had originally been posted in the Gedaref, Khartoum, and Shendi garrisons; the deployment was finally undertaken a couple of months before the elections. Corroborating the information provided by the SPLM-N command, the defector also indicated that several rotations of CRP troops had been deployed in ed Damazin since 2009.<sup>65</sup> Noting that a small proportion of these troops was from Blue Nile while the rest hailed from other regions of Sudan, he said that they were provided with the same training and equipment generally provided to military personnel, but that they were instructed to wear police uniforms and use police facilities to avoid attracting suspicion from the SPLA and international observers.<sup>66</sup>

The second defector, who had become an active NCP member in Blue Nile in 1992, confirmed the significant increase in different government security forces through redeployment of units serving in other regions of Sudan—including some previously located in South Sudan—particularly between December 2009 and April 2010. Upon arrival, and before final assignment, most of these troops reportedly transited through the Abu Na’ama military base, in Sinnar state, which harboured between six and seven brigades (roughly 21,000–24,500 men). An estimated 1,500 ‘janjaweed’ from Darfur were among the troops, including an undetermined number of combatants from Chadian Arab tribes. The witness underlined that, contrary to official claims by the central government, these men were transferred to Blue Nile to support SAF and not simply to be trained, as the majority of them were already experienced fighters.<sup>67</sup> Although this force had no proper legal status, its fighters were operating directly under SAF’s chain of command and were wearing SAF ground forces uniforms.

The government also deployed CRP units from Darfur to serve in ed Damazin and elsewhere in the state. Overall, nearly 7,000 CRP members were allegedly serving in Blue Nile at the onset of the September 2011 conflict; 4,000 had been deployed from Darfur, while the remaining ones were recruited locally, in particular among Fellata and Hausa groups (approximately 2,000 men) as well as the Berta and Hamaj tribes (roughly 1,000 men). While recalling the escalation of tensions that preceded the conflict, the defector also suggested that government security forces and the NCP used the 2010 elections to map popular support for the SPLM-N; once the war had resumed, such mapping proved useful in the identification and targeting of the movement’s strong constituencies.<sup>68</sup>

Although the author of this report has not been able to verify the accuracy of the abovementioned information, it appears consistent with the extent of SAF ground operations conducted between September 2011 and March 2012, many of which involved several thousand men. It also seems to confirm that, although reinforcements might have arrived in the early stages of the conflict, SAF had the capacity to readily react to the outbreak of fighting right from the beginning of the hostilities. While it remains impossible to determine whether SAF deliberately triggered the conflict, it was fully prepared to respond.

An analysis of satellite imagery released in May 2013 confirms that SAF relied on consistent military resources, consolidated its presence in a number of garrisons, and established new military camps in southern Blue Nile between

September 2011 and mid-2012 (HHI, 2013). Indeed, the government seems to have enjoyed a position of strength, as substantiated by several SPLM-N officers interviewed for this study, who indicated that only a very small number of SAF and PDF personnel—probably fewer than a dozen—defected from the ranks to embrace the rebels’ cause, and that they did so almost exclusively in the very early stages of the war.<sup>69</sup>

### *PDF and local militias*

It was during the civil war that the central government introduced the strategy of mobilizing local militias; more recently, it replicated the approach in Darfur and South Kordofan (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2012; 2013; AI, 2012). Beginning in the 2010 pre-electoral period, Khartoum created new militias but also reactivated old ones that had been engaged alongside SAF during the previous conflict—often referred to as PDF, *Kopaji*,<sup>70</sup> or *mujahideen*.<sup>71</sup> During nearly all interviews conducted for this report, local militias were interchangeably called PDF or *mujahideen*; however, a former NCP member stressed that some fighters had been recruited from Islamist circles in central and northern Sudan and had engaged in the Blue Nile conflict to take part in what they saw as a religious war (*jihād*) against non-Muslims and apostates.<sup>72</sup> A number of official statements delivered by SAF commanders and government officials also attest to the presence of such armed actors.<sup>73</sup>

Information available on local militias indicates that:

- Although it started well before the war resumed, PDF recruitment accelerated in the early stages of the conflict and helped to establish a force of several thousand men.
- Several PDF units were established in Blue Nile, especially among non-indigenous groups (mainly the Fellata and the Hausa tribes), which the central government viewed as more loyal and reliable. Some units were nevertheless largely composed of Berta and other indigenous groups.
- PDF units have operated in different areas of southern Blue Nile, reportedly under the authority of the state’s PDF coordinator and Blue Nile’s PDF military commander.
- The government provided direct assistance to the PDF through military training and the distribution of weaponry and ammunition (see Box 2). Vehicles

have generally been provided to selected leaders only; troops engaged in military operations alongside SAF have been transported in government vehicles.

- On several occasions, PDF forces were deployed as auxiliary units under the SAF chain of command; nevertheless, they have benefited from a relative degree of liberty, particularly since March–April 2012.
- PDF troops have reportedly been on the SAF payroll and have received a monthly salary of SDG 250 (USD 55). While troops assigned to the ed Damazin area used to collect their wages directly at the PDF head office, salaries allocated to those deployed in remote areas have been collected by each group’s leader, who is responsible for the distribution among the troops.<sup>74</sup>

### Box 2 **Distribution of arms to PDF units**

Interviews conducted during the field research in Blue Nile shed light on the central government’s methods for equipping PDF forces and local militias with weapons and ammunition.

In particular, one interviewee who had attended several arms distribution ceremonies revealed that major deliveries of equipment for PDF groups and other militias were conducted from early September 2011 onwards. They were handled in the PDF coordination office in the Munasiqiya compound of ed Damazin, often in the presence of SAF military intelligence officers and NCP members, including some who had travelled from Khartoum for that purpose.

Describing the ceremonies he personally attended between early September and late November 2011, the interviewee explained that, after each combatant had filled out a registration form to ensure payment of a salary, several groups were equipped with uniforms, AK-type assault rifles, SG-43 Goryunov and PKM-type machine guns, rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, grenade launchers, and ammunition (150 rounds per combatant). The equipment was generally handed over to the fighters as they shouted slogans—such as *Allah Akbar*, *jihad*, ‘kill them all’, and ‘let’s clean the state’—while speakers broadcast music and songs referred to as *madiya* and calling people to join in the *jihad*. Between September and December 2011, an estimated 3,500 fighters were provided with individual weapons and ammunition through similar ceremonies.

The interviewee disclosed details regarding three specific ceremonies:

- 6 September 2011: The equipment was transported to the coordination office on 14 Hino-type trucks and a few cars, including some rented from private owners. It was distributed in the presence of high-ranking officials, including Ahmed Bilal Osman, a presidential adviser, and Abdallah al Jeili, the PDF general coordinator for the whole of Sudan.<sup>75</sup>

According to estimates made during interviews in Blue Nile, PDF units in the state represent an overall force of more than 10,000 men and operate under the authority of some influential and Khartoum-trusted leaders, including:

- Kamal Meisara from Roseires leads a 1,500-men force called *Kopaji*, composed largely of SPLM-N defectors;
- Abdelrahman Hassan ‘Jirewa’, head of the Fellata Union in Blue Nile and Blue Nile Fellata militia coordinator, is also known as a tribal leader and for having armed his community;
- Abbakar Musa replaced Saleh Bank at the command of the Katiba Mabinom (‘Sleepless Battalion’), a Fellata PDF force created during the civil war; and

- 15 September 2011: Food, ammunition, and weapons loaded on 30 Ural trucks were handed over to the Mabaan group led by Kamal Loma and other groups in the cotton factory compound of ed Damazin (known as Mahalej). This ceremony was attended by several SAF officers, including Maj. Gen. Yahya Muhammad Kheir and military intelligence Maj. Abu Obeida. More than 1,500 combatants were provided with weapons and ammunition.<sup>76</sup>
- 26 November 2011: Almost 40 trucks carried fighters from localities north and east of Roseires to ed Damazin, where they were to be equipped. Members of the Katiba Mabinom were among these men; they were re-armed although they had already been equipped by the government.

In addition to these major ceremonies, other distributions to smaller or less important PDF units (mostly composed of fighters from the Fellata and other Arab tribes) were reportedly undertaken behind closed doors. Interviews conducted for this report also revealed that members of the Blue Nile branch of the NCP were armed during a ceremony chaired by the PDF officer Lt. Col. Ismail Jufun a few days before the 2010 elections. This event drew 300 party members, including Welfare and Social Security Minister Amira Fadil Mohamed Ahmed. Following the central government’s instructions to the local PDF command, each party member reportedly received an AK-type assault rifle and 60 rounds of ammunition. Before being handed over, weapons were displayed in their boxes; the interviewee underlined the fact that all looked brand new and had a bayonet and a foldable shoulder stock.

While this data is limited to a few distribution ceremonies, it illustrates the sophistication of the mechanisms established by the GoS to enhance its counter-insurgency capacity. It also substantiates the argument that the regime has been directly responsible for the provision of support to non-state and partially independent armed actors.

**Sources:** author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012, and with SPLM-N officers and civilians, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012

- Al Fateh Yusif al Mak Hasan Adlan is the son and deputy of the Funj paramount traditional leader.<sup>77</sup>

### *Kamal Loma's militia*

The spectrum of armed actors fighting alongside government forces in Blue Nile contains at least one foreign group whose leaders are from South Sudan. In November 2011 and April 2012, a militia operating under the command of

#### **Box 3 The Rum offensive: inside Kamal Loma's militia**

The following account relies on an interview with a former member of Kamal Loma's militia. The ex-combatant had been recruited by abduction in Bud locality by armed fighters wearing uniforms similar to the ones used by PDFs. After being captured, he went through three days of basic military training—including physical exercise, marching, weapon handling, and shooting—in Goz Tebelab camp, after which he was sent to attack the SPLM-N position in Rum in April 2012. Several dozen individuals who had been recruited in a similar manner were transferred, on four Ural trucks, to the same military facility.

Before the attack, the recruits were told they were about to fight the SPLM-N and promised that they would receive a monetary reward if they could defeat the enemy and reach Bunj in South Sudan. As the convoy prepared to leave the camp, each fighter was provided with a uniform (similar to those previously used by JIU's), an AK-type fully loaded magazine and ten additional rounds of ammunition, and an AK-type assault rifle with scratched-off serial numbers, much like those observed among Khartoum-backed rebels in South Sudan (HSBA, 2013b). The leaders of the militia reportedly explained to the troops that serial numbers had been deliberately removed from the weapons to prevent the enemy from determining their origin (see Images 2 and 3). About 15 fighters also received PKM-type machine guns, RPGs, and hand-grenades.

Weapons provided to the troops gathered in Goz Tebelab camp were transferred from ed Damazin on six double-platform trucks, while ammunition, contained in wooden boxes that had been painted green and bore white inscriptions in the Latin alphabet, were offloaded from ten SAF-operated Land Cruiser technical vehicles. Weapons were personally distributed to each recruit by Kamal Loma, who informed the troops that the equipment had been provided by the government and transferred from Khartoum.

The offensive was launched with a contingent of 1,000 fighters who had previously trained in five different SAF camps—in Bud (two camps), Goz Tebelab, Gule, and Wadabok—under the command of Brig. Gen. Kamal Loma himself, Lt. Col. Awad Loma (Kamal's brother), and 1st Lt. al Hadi Ibrahim, all Mabaan tribesmen.<sup>78</sup> The majority of the troops were Mabaan, while the remaining combatants comprised roughly equal numbers of Dinka, Fellata, and Nuer, and fewer members of Arab tribes, including some from Darfur.

**Sources:** author interview with a former combatant of Kamal Loma's militia, South Sudan, December 2012; ICG (2013b, p. 21)



**Image 2:** Assault rifles reportedly captured by the SPLM-N after the attack launched by Kamal Loma's militia on Rum in April 2012. In the course of the offensive, SPLM-N forces allegedly captured 96 weapons identical to the one shown in this picture.

**Image 3:** The weapon's serial number has been removed.

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Kamal Loma reportedly attacked the SPLM-N force deployed in Rum locality, Baw county (see Box 3). Kamal Loma, a former SAF master sergeant in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade, is the son of the Mabaan *omda* (local community leader) of Guffa. His armed group, created at the onset of the conflict in September 2011, has never targeted SPLA garrisons across the border and has conducted military operations exclusively against SPLM-N forces in Blue Nile.<sup>79</sup>

The force is led by officers of South Sudanese origin who previously served with SAF. They have recruited in both Blue Nile and Upper Nile states among Southerners and Northerners, in particular the Dinka, Mabaan, Nuer, and Shilluk (tribal groups from South Sudan) as well as Fellata and different Arab tribes.<sup>80</sup> The permanent structure, reportedly limited to a few dozen men, is reinforced through recruitment before operations; this strategy reportedly allows the group to grow to a size of 800 to 1,500 men. While the militia is not formally integrated into SAF's structure, SAF provides it with direct support in the form of military supplies, transportation during military operations, and access to military facilities for gathering and training purposes.

## SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division

Prior to the conflict, SPLM-N forces in Blue Nile included the bulk of the former SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division and the movement's contingent serving in JIUs in the state; the latter comprised 3,000 troops, a company of police personnel, and two dozen police officers.<sup>81</sup> During interviews conducted in southern Blue Nile, SPLM-N military leaders stated that large-scale mobilization of troops in preparation for a possible resumption of the conflict had started by late May 2011, by which time the armed confrontation with the government had resumed in South Kordofan. Consequently, part of the force had been deployed from Guffa (in Upper Nile state of South Sudan) across the border, a few miles inside Blue Nile territory, as well as in the Marinja, Samary, and Yafta areas.<sup>82</sup> When Brig. Gen. Al Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman's convoy was attacked at the southern gate of ed Damazin on the night of 1 September 2011, part of the force was already positioned in southern Blue Nile, although some observers suggest that troops' positioning was not permanent, as many fighters kept moving back and forth from their camps in Blue Nile to Guffa to collect salaries and visit their relatives.<sup>83</sup>



SPLM-N military command also noted that when war resumed the movement's military capacity was further undermined by the presence of Southerners in the ranks (equivalent to roughly two battalions). These men had served in the SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division before South Sudan gained independence; in the SPLM-N, their level of commitment was perceived as inadequate.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, an estimated 1,000–1,500 fighters who hailed from Blue Nile were still deployed in SPLA divisions in South Sudan, notably in Jonglei state.<sup>85</sup> The SPLM-N's top leadership ordered their repatriation to their respective armies. This shift further weakened the Blue Nile front, largely because the huge majority of Southerners had left the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division by early November 2011, but the return of Northerners only started in early 2012 and was not completed until the end of March. According to one SPLM-N officer, who served in SPLA ranks until March 2012, the last contingent of troops from South Kordofan and Blue Nile (758 men in total) had not left South Sudan until 25 March 2012. Delays in the repatriation process were reportedly caused by logistical challenges and by SPLA commanders who held up the release of certain fighters from duty.<sup>86</sup>

Accurate estimates of the size of the SPLM-N's military force in Blue Nile are elusive, as figures provided by the different actors vary significantly. According to the majority of SPLM-N representatives and international observers interviewed between November and December 2012, the SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division comprised 7,500–17,000 men, the majority of them from Blue Nile, at the time the CPA was signed. The current state of the movement in Blue Nile is also difficult to assess, with estimates ranging from 7,000 to 20,000 men.

Estimating force strengths has become even more challenging as a result of two competing trends. On the one hand, the SPLM-N has reportedly been engaged in mobilizing support from communities and recruiting new fighters since the conflict resumed. These efforts seem to have produced positive results, especially in the Ingessana Hills, where troops nearly doubled in number over the first six months thanks to the presence of local pro-SPLM militias that had emerged in the CPA period.<sup>87</sup> Although interviewed SPLM-N representatives insisted that recruitment was purely voluntary and strictly limited to adults, unverified reports suggest that forced recruitment was, in fact, employed, especially in refugee camps in South Sudan.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the author of this report

observed the presence of some children in SPLM-N ranks during his research visit in Blue Nile in November and December 2012.<sup>89</sup> On the other hand, the movement reportedly suffered defections, mainly during the very early stages of the conflict, in September 2011, and after Kurmuk was captured by government forces. In the early days of the conflict, between 50 and 100 SPLM-N members (including 10–20 senior officers) reportedly defected to join the government forces or to return to civilian life. At the time of writing, the defection figures remained undetermined.<sup>90</sup>

The tribal composition of SPLM-N in Blue Nile is relatively diverse, although the bulk of the ranks comprises fighters from indigenous tribes of Blue Nile, especially the Berta, Ingessana, Jumjum, and Uduk. While their presence is marginal, non-indigenous tribes, including Fellata and Arab groups, are reportedly equally represented among the combatants and the officers.<sup>91</sup> In addition, a few commanders from the Nuba Mountains—who had served in the SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division before the proclamation of South Sudan’s independence—also remained in the force; the most influential ones included Gen. Gasim Umbasha Shashai, former commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, and James Tiya Kuku, head of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division medical unit.<sup>92</sup>

As briefly discussed in the previous section, no other components of the SRF platform engaged in the war theatre of Blue Nile and no military support was provided by the Nuba wing of the movement, increasing the degree and sensation of isolation of the rebellion.<sup>93</sup> During the field research conducted in SPLM-N-controlled territory, however, the author interviewed an officer from South Kordofan who said that the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division command had deployed him to Blue Nile in December 2011 to supervise the political training delivered to new recruits, local leaders, and youth and women’s organizations. He noted that several thousand new recruits underwent such training.<sup>94</sup> At the end of 2012, the commander of the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division, Abdelaziz al Hilu, pointed out that the movement intended to change this approach by planning joint military training for troops of both the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions, with the aim of merging the divisions.<sup>95</sup>

The SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division’s chain of command was reshaped in November 2012, when its head, Gen. Ahmed al Omda Boda, was replaced by his deputy, Maj. Gen. Joseph Tuka Ali; Brig. Gen. Al Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman,

who was formerly in charge of SPLM-N JIUs, was appointed deputy force commander; and Brig. Gen. Steven Amad Dicko was named head of military intelligence. The reshuffle was intended to counter the troops' increasing dissatisfaction with the leadership, to restore obedience, and to enhance the tribal balance among the highest-ranking officers.<sup>96</sup>

These changes in the military chain of command did little to improve discipline or address insubordination, however. During the field research conducted between November and December 2012, the author witnessed a few



**Image 4:** Gen. Abdelda'im Dafallah, from the Jumjum tribe, the commanding officer of SPLM-N 3rd Brigade, in the Wadaka sector, December 2012. © Claudio Gramizzi

cases of indiscipline in the troops (such as refusals to follow officers' instructions, fighting between soldiers, and drinking); in addition, a number of reports revealed that troops did not always fully implement orders issued by the division command. One case took place in the Ingessana Hills, where 50–60 SPLM-N fighters reportedly refused to withdraw; another concerned the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, whose commander reportedly refused to review the brigade's chain of command, as ordered by the division command in November 2012. During interviews, many SPLM-N fighters revealed that, despite Maj. Gen. Joseph Tuka Ali's appointment, tribal tensions and distrust among different communities had not been resolved and continued to undermine the movement's internal cohesion.<sup>97</sup>

As of November 2013, rebel-controlled territory was divided into three military sectors:

- the El Fuj sector: the area of responsibility of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, under the command of Col. Ebeed Khawaja;
- the Yabus sector: the area of responsibility of the movement's 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, under the command of Gen. Abdelqader Mohammed Shaban; and
- the Wadaka sector: the area of responsibility of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, under the leadership of Gen. Abdelda'im Dafallah (see Image 4).

Until early December 2012, the force also operated in the mountainous areas of the Ingessana Hills, under the command of 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Jibril Issa (until May 2012) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Jaffar Jadam (until the withdrawal of the force).<sup>98</sup> According to the top brass, the rebel force actually maintained a presence in the Hills—in both the Rumaylik and Jebel el Tin areas—into late December 2012, under the command of Col. Bel Wayfa, in addition to some small enclaves along the border with Ethiopia (ICG, 2013b). 🗿

## IV. Military equipment

This section presents an overview of the military equipment controlled and used by the belligerents since the onset of the conflict and is based on reports released by various sources, including media and research organizations. The section also reflects information gathered through physical inspections of SPLM-N stockpiles, which the author undertook during the field research conducted in southern Blue Nile between November and December 2012.

### Government forces

SAF's deployment of military hardware in Blue Nile contributed to the military build-up of government forces from the CPA period until the first stages of the 2011 war. Available reports hold that SAF transferred significant stockpiles to the state, starting a few months before the April 2010 elections. The hardware included 30–75 battle tanks, new six-wheel armoured vehicles, several hundred Land Cruiser technical vehicles (the majority with mounted machine guns), anti-tank weapons, different types of artillery systems, and a constant supply of medium- and small-calibre infantry equipment. Supplies served the double purpose of equipping the regular forces and sustaining the engagement of newly created militias and PDF units.<sup>99</sup> Most of these items were reportedly delivered to SAF military facilities in ed Damazin—in particular, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters and the Aroma training camp—and Dindiro, where a new storage facility was reportedly built in the first half of 2010 to shelter newly delivered equipment; the items were subsequently distributed to units serving in other parts of the state.<sup>100</sup>

Reports from the early phase of the conflict suggest that aerial assets were used as of the first confrontations, presumably after being transferred to Blue Nile upon the renewal of the fighting. Indeed, testimonies gathered in Blue Nile refer to the immediate deployment of the air force, including Antonovs and Mi-35-type combat helicopters. Analysis of satellite imagery by the Harvard

Humanitarian Initiative subsequently confirmed the presence of such aircraft on the ed Damazin airstrip in September 2011 (HHI, 2013).<sup>101</sup> Photographs showing remnants of S8 air-to-surface rockets, reportedly taken after fighting in Mofu in February 2013, also suggest that SAF Sukhoi Su-25 planes were involved in some of the offensives over southern Blue Nile.<sup>102</sup> The use of these rockets by the Sudanese Air Force was documented in Darfur, Unity, and Western Bahr al Ghazal states of South Sudan between 2011 and 2012 (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2012; 2013).

The Small Arms Survey has also identified WS-1 302 mm Weishi long-range rockets for multiple-launch rocket systems—similar to those used in South Kordofan—among the equipment deployed and operated by SAF from mid-October to mid-November 2011 (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). Remnants of these rockets, fired from the Kurmuk area on 16 October and in early November 2011, were inspected in Mayak and Wadaka in early December 2012; the use of this equipment was also reported in Moguf, Yabus sector, although the author was unable to verify the information.

The Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's recent analysis of satellite imagery from the last quarter of 2011 corresponds with testimonies gathered during field research for this report, illustrating that SAF was capable of rapidly deploying large contingents of armoured vehicles and battle tanks—including previously undocumented Type 59 tanks—and that it relied on robust aerial capacity (HHI, 2013). The Sudanese army's readiness to establish its military superiority, based largely on the immediate availability of troops and equipment, gave it an important tactical advantage over a rebel movement that was forced to step into the conflict fairly unprepared.

The majority of the weapons observed during the field research conducted for this study<sup>103</sup> or explicitly mentioned by actors from Blue Nile are consistent with the standard type of equipment known to be used by the Sudanese military.<sup>104</sup> As in other Sudanese conflict theatres—namely Darfur, South Kordofan, and some contested areas on the border with South Sudan—weapons inspected in Blue Nile were mainly Soviet- and Chinese-designed weaponry, whose technological integration is generally poor; there was a prevalence of small- and medium-calibre artillery and some weapons and ammunition were domestically produced in Sudan. South Sudanese rebel groups have reportedly used similar weapon types and models.<sup>105</sup>

In contrast to what was documented in South Kordofan, government forces do not appear to have used cluster bombs or incendiary bombs during operations in Blue Nile; nor is there any reason to assume that stockpiles of landmines had been transferred to the state in the period immediately preceding the conflict. During the inspection of an SPLM-N-controlled weapons storehouse in December 2012, the author of this report observed what appear to be Iranian copies of Type 4 landmines,<sup>106</sup> which are similar to those observed in South Kordofan in 2012; yet all of them had reportedly been captured from the government by the SPLA during the civil war. In fact, when asked about landmines, interviewed combatants mentioned only anti-vehicle landmines, which they said had been used by the SPLM-N in January 2012.<sup>107</sup> On 29 August 2013, however, the SPLM-N signed the 'Geneva Call Deed of Commitment for Adherence to a Total Ban on Anti-Personnel Mines and for Cooperation on Mine Action' in Geneva, Switzerland. With this endorsement, the movement agreed to prohibit the use, production, and transfer of anti-personnel mines and to dismantle stockpiles currently owned.<sup>108</sup>

Interviews held with the SPLM-N medical staff revealed that some combatants had presented symptoms similar to those caused by organophosphate poisoning; they were treated after the battles in Kurmuk (November 2011), the Ingessana Hills (May 2012), and Surkum (September 2012).<sup>109</sup> Given the lack of evidence and the small number of incidents reported, however, the types of weapons and ammunition responsible for these symptoms cannot be identified with any accuracy.

The weakness of monitoring mechanisms and media coverage in Blue Nile preclude definitive assessments of the number of aerial bombardments and casualties caused by government air operations.<sup>110</sup> Yet the majority of SPLM-N officials and civilians from Blue Nile, all of whom were living in SPLM-N-controlled areas or in refugee camps in South Sudan, referred to the systematic presence of SAF Antonov aircraft and to regular, almost daily, bombardments of SPLM-N-administered territory.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, reports on the first months of fighting also mentioned the deployment of Mi-35-type gunship helicopters, in particular during the battles of Dindiro, Kurmuk, and Salih.<sup>112</sup>

Reminiscent of the trends observed in the conflicts in Darfur and South Kordofan, the government's use of aerial assets in Blue Nile has resulted in:

- a significant number of indiscriminate bombardments, often targeting civilian-populated zones and infrastructure (see Image 5);
- an unchallenged tactical advantage for government ground forces in the major offensives of the first months of the war;<sup>13</sup>
- the government's strict monopoly on the use of air space over Blue Nile, further increasing the isolation of the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and of the areas under the movement's control; and
- deep psychological repercussions among the civilian population, causing the interruption of farming activities, thousands of displacements, and a major humanitarian crisis.

During the first phase of the war in particular, a number of high-ranking SAF officers publicly declared that SAF and PDF troops had succeeded in capturing military equipment from SPLM-N units, either during military confrontations or simply by collecting stockpiles the rebels could not transfer before



**Image 5:** Effects of the aerial bombardment conducted over Chali al Fil on 29 November 2012 on the local health care centre, built in 2008. Bombs also fell in the immediate vicinity of the mosque, setting fire to the building.

© Claudio Gramizzi



withdrawing from locations they had temporarily held (HHI, 2013; *Sudan Vision*, 2013). While it is possible that some equipment was seized from the movement, these statements could not be verified by the Small Arms Survey and none of the interviewed SPLM-N representatives spoke about cases of lost or stolen equipment. If the government accounts are indeed correct, the volumes captured would not have been sufficient to modify the GoS military force in any significant way and would probably have represented a small fraction of pre-existing government stockpiles.

## SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division

In 2008, the SPLA reportedly allocated an arsenal to the 10<sup>th</sup> Division that included a dozen T-55-type battle tanks, four 130 mm cannon, an undetermined quantity of 23 mm anti-aircraft twin-barrelled cannon, 14.5 mm KPV heavy machine-guns, 12.7 mm DShK machine guns, and 7.62 mm PKM machine guns, in addition to large stockpiles—6,000–7,000 units—of AK-type assault rifles.<sup>114</sup> At the time South Sudan gained independence, most of this equipment was located in the Guffa region in Upper Nile, under the control of what had become the SPLM-N; consequently, at the onset of the conflict in Blue Nile, this stockpile represented the bulk of the armoury in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division's custody.<sup>115</sup>

SPLM-N military assets do not appear to have grown significantly since the current conflict erupted. As noted above, the rebel force faces severe challenges resulting not only from its isolation on the international scene, but also from its own inability to benefit from the government's deployment of military hardware. If SPLM-N troops have in fact taken control of some stores of SAF or affiliated groups, the spoils are not likely to have made a noteworthy contribution to its stockpiles, nor to generate a shift in the military balance of the conflict. Indeed, as evidenced by the physical inspections undertaken for this study and confirmed by interviewed SPLM-N commanders, weapons were seized with limited, if any, corresponding ammunition, drastically limiting the tactical advantage generated by captures.<sup>116</sup>

Furthermore, the movement suffers from the absence of external military support, in particular since October 2011, when the last supply of military aid

from South Sudan was reportedly undertaken, with 4,000 AK-type assault rifles and related ammunition air-delivered to Yabus.<sup>117</sup> In fact, several of the SPLM-N officers interviewed during the field research identified the lack of external military assistance as one of the major obstacles facing the movement, and one of the main differences between the current conflict and the civil war fought by the SPLA. These difficulties have had a direct impact on the tactical approach adopted by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division command, which aimed to avoid direct confrontations with enemy forces to the greatest extent possible so as to preserve both troops and materiel.

In November and December 2012, the author was able to conduct physical inspections of stockpiles under the control of the three brigades of the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division (in the El Fuj, Wadaka, and Yabus sectors), which had captured the weapons from SAF and affiliated groups. The inspections revealed that the central government's arsenal in Blue Nile before the war was essentially composed of artillery hardware compatible with Warsaw Pact standard calibres. The majority of the items observed appeared to have been produced more than a decade earlier; therefore, they presumably arrived in the state before or during the CPA period. The weapons were manufactured both in Sudan and in other countries, such as the republics of the former Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and, to a much smaller extent, the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as Bulgaria and other Eastern European countries.

The inspections revealed the presence of the following materiel:

- two Sudanese-manufactured 82 mm mortar tubes<sup>118</sup> and rounds (0-832 series);<sup>119</sup>
- one Iranian-manufactured 60 mm mortar tube;<sup>120</sup>
- one Iranian-manufactured 120 mm mortar tube;<sup>121</sup>
- three Chinese-manufactured 120 mm mortar tubes;<sup>122</sup>
- eight 1963-type 60 mm mortar tubes (see Image 6);<sup>123</sup>
- nine 73 mm SPG-9 anti-tank recoilless guns and ammunition;<sup>124</sup>
- eight 82 mm anti-tank B-10 recoilless guns (type 65)<sup>125</sup> and ammunition (see Image 7);<sup>126</sup>
- one 35 mm QLZ-87 automatic grenade launcher;<sup>127</sup>
- two 100 mm ShK-type anti-tank ammunition;<sup>128</sup>
- W-85-type 12.7 mm heavy machine guns;<sup>129</sup>
- T56-2 assault rifles;<sup>130</sup>



**Image 6:** 60 mm mortar tubes displayed for a weapons inspection by the SPLM-N 2nd Division on 30 November 2011. All mortars were reportedly captured in Ulu in early September 2011. © Claudio Gramizzi



**Image 7:** 82 mm B-10 recoilless guns (type 65) under SPLM-N 2nd Division custody, reportedly captured on 1 September 2011 in Ulu. © Claudio Gramizzi



**Image 8:** This BM-21 multiple-launch rocket system was reportedly captured from SAF in July 2012.

© Claudio Gramizzi

- one G3-type assault rifle bearing Farsi markings;<sup>131</sup>
- several hundred rounds of 7.62 mm ammunition, including Sudanese-manufactured and unmarked ones;
- hundreds of rounds of 12.7 mm ammunition, including from China, Iran,<sup>132</sup> and the former Yugoslavia; and<sup>133</sup>
- one truck-mounted BM-21 Grad 122 mm multiple-rocket launcher (unserviceable; see Image 8).<sup>134</sup>

The inspections also revealed that seven Land Cruiser technical vehicles had been captured from SAF and GoS police forces. SPLM-N troops allegedly seized more than seven, although some were abandoned and burned because of a lack of drivers.<sup>135</sup> The seven Land Cruisers observed in Blue Nile had been transferred to Sudan by three different private traders in Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. At the time of writing, it was not possible to determine whether the Sudanese Ministry of Defence was the first consignee of the transfers, as queries sent to the relevant companies remained unanswered. It may be relevant

to note that the Omani company—Saud Bahwan Automotive LLC—which had supplied three of the observed Land Cruisers between 2009 and 2012, was also the exporter of nine vehicles shipped to Sudan between 2010 and 2011 and subsequently captured from SAF in South Kordofan.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to the inspections, the author reviewed photographs taken in late February 2013, reportedly after the movement's successful battle in Mofu. These show additional equipment captured by SPLM-N troops, including half a dozen RPG launchers, one B-10 82 mm anti-tank recoilless gun, 120 mm mortar rounds, two dozen assault rifles (AK-47 and Type 56-1), several boxes of ammunition (mainly 7.62 × 39 mm), 30 mm VOG-17M grenades for AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers, and two trucks (type MAN and Ural). Due to the poor quality of the photographs, it has not been possible to trace the exact origin and chain of custody of these items; however, some items and boxes bear codes identical to those used by the Sudanese and Russian defence industries.<sup>137</sup>

According to the SPLM-N, more military equipment was captured from SAF in November 2013, after a successful attack on a convoy in Baw county. Military hardware seized included three Land Cruisers mounted with machine guns, two machine guns, three RPG-7 rocket launchers, and 23 assault rifles (Radio Dabanga, 2013c). 🗨️

## V. The humanitarian dimension

Access restrictions and a dearth of reliable data continue to hamper efforts to assess the humanitarian repercussions of the conflict in Blue Nile. Yet, although such an assessment is beyond the scope of this report, the research undertaken in numerous locations under SPLM-N's control serves to shed some light on the war's deleterious effects on the local population. The findings clearly show that the undeveloped areas of southern Blue Nile have been severely affected by the military campaign that started in September 2011.

A few days after large-scale fighting resumed, thousands of displaced persons flooded into South Sudan and Ethiopia looking for assistance, providing an indication of the magnitude of the deadly impact of the conflict on civilians. Population movement continued for several months, as military offensives and food insecurity jeopardized life in the rebel-controlled territory. In October 2013, the UN Refugee Agency estimated that the overall community of Blue Nile refugees had exceeded 121,000 registered individuals in South Sudan<sup>138</sup> and approximately 32,000 in Ethiopia;<sup>139</sup> meanwhile, between 80,000 and 100,000 people remained inside SPLM-N-administered areas—the overwhelming majority of them displaced, with waves of internal movement reported as late as early October 2013.<sup>140</sup> Other displaced communities moved into the government-controlled territory, mainly in ed Damazin and other localities of Blue Nile, but also Khartoum and Sennar state (SK–BN Coordination Unit, 2013a; 2013b).<sup>141</sup>

Food insecurity emerged as a result of interrelated factors; while sustained government aerial bombardments interrupted the harvest, stores were below average due to a meager harvest in 2010, when insect infestations had destroyed crops, resulting in a shortage of seeds. The situation was further aggravated by the failure of diplomatic efforts to secure humanitarian access to rebel-held territories, which severely limited food and other supply routes to those linking Blue Nile to South Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>142</sup> From April 2012 onwards, many civilians had to rely on wild plants and animals to survive, while many others who had initially decided not to abandon their land finally settled in refugee camps across the border.

At the time the field research was conducted, health problems related to water scarcity had drastically increased within the communities. Hundreds of people—mainly young children and older persons—had reportedly died of starvation throughout SPLM-N-controlled areas (SRRA, 2012). In contrast, traditional leaders who were interviewed for this study between November and December 2012 referred to several dozen deaths.

In November 2012, the local Funj Youth Development Association (FYDA) conducted the first food distribution programme in selected areas of southern Blue Nile, including Tenfona, Wadaka, and Yabus.<sup>143</sup> The author observed several phases of the programme in Wadaka, where only sorghum was distributed, after having been bought at a South Sudanese market and transported from Upper Nile by road (see Image 9). Overall, 1,060 75-kg bags were distributed among the displaced communities, only partially responding to the needs.<sup>144</sup> FYDA staff in charge of the distribution programme could not provide the exact number of beneficiary households, nor the overall figure of the displaced households in the area targeted by the distribution programme, as registration and



**Image 9:** Women wait for food assistance during the distribution programme undertaken by FYDA in Wadaka, late November 2012. © Claudio Gramizzi

distribution were conducted in parallel. According to a traditional leader interviewed in December 2012, however, only about 60 per cent of the expected beneficiaries had received food assistance.<sup>145</sup> FYDA expected to conduct additional distribution programmes in the future, depending on the organization's capacity to procure additional stocks.<sup>146</sup>

In addition to food insecurity and violence, the conflict in Blue Nile deprived the civilians living under SPLM-N's authority of almost all basic services. All schools and medical centres that had operated in the southern part of the state were forced to close because of the lack of qualified staff and means to work, particularly in hospitals, where stocks of pharmaceutical goods had not been replenished since September 2011.<sup>147</sup> Simultaneously, most of the revenue-generating activities conducted by the local communities had to be interrupted because of insecurity; as a result, many civilians, especially in the Yabus sector, turned to alternative activities, including fishing and artisan gold extraction.<sup>148</sup>

Despite the severe humanitarian crisis in SPLM-N-controlled areas and the diplomatic pressure by the international community—in particular the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League, which submitted a 'tripartite agreement' to belligerents (see below)—no political agreement for the delivery of humanitarian assistance to war-affected zones could be brokered, and each party blamed the other for the failure of the mediation. 📌



## VI. Political dimensions

As of the 2010 electoral period and the acceleration of the government's militarization of the state, avenues for politically negotiated solutions for the Blue Nile crisis appeared to be shrinking. They definitively collapsed with President al Bashir's rejection of the framework agreement signed in Addis Ababa in late June 2011.<sup>149</sup> The Blue Nile branch of the SPLM-N had seen this agreement as the last chance for peace, even if the South Kordofan wing viewed it as an attempt by Khartoum to divide the movement. The failure of the peace process, the establishment of a state of emergency in Blue Nile, and the ban on the SPLM-N as a political party irreversibly pushed the SPLM-N Blue Nile branch back to armed insurgency—and the state into a new phase of war.

First and foremost, the resumption of the conflict in September 2011 signals the failure of the CPA process as a political mechanism for responding to claims in the 'two areas'. As a component of the first set of repercussions of South Sudan's secession, the war in Blue Nile embodies both a Sudanese and a regional dimension.

### The conflict in Blue Nile: a Sudanese crisis

While the central government may be approaching the war in Blue Nile as a stand-alone issue, the state's long-standing, unaddressed grievances are indisputably an expression of a broader crisis in the whole of Sudan. In recognition of the gravity of the threats to the stability of the whole country, consistent diplomatic efforts have been dedicated to the 'two areas' since the very early stages of the war in South Kordofan. These talks have sought to avoid the spread of the conflict to Blue Nile and to guarantee humanitarian access to conflict-affected areas under the authority of the rebel force. Political talks between the government and the SPLM-N—through the mediation of the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) and the Ethiopian government—progressively merged with negotiations on humanitarian access in rebel-held areas, but they failed to generate any concrete outcome.

In February 2012, the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League proposed a ‘tripartite agreement’ to the belligerent parties in an effort to enable the delivery of humanitarian assistance to the war-affected populations. By August 2012, the SPLM-N and the government had separately signed bilateral memoranda of understanding with the ‘tripartite initiative’, but due to contradictions in the two documents the provisions were not implemented.<sup>150</sup>

The radicalization of both the regime and the rebellion—particularly as of March 2013, when the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division began to extend its military activity into North Kordofan state—further reduced the space for political negotiations and effectively excluded the SPLM-N from the AUHIP-led mediation process. In April 2013, after the round of talks convened by the AUHIP was repeatedly delayed, the government refused to recognize the SPLM-N as a legitimate party for negotiation and conditioned further participation in the talks on the demobilization of the SPLM-N. Similarly, the government immediately rejected the SPLM-N’s June request for a temporary truce to allow vaccination campaigns to be conducted in rebel-controlled areas (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013n). In parallel, the SPLM-N was willing to consider a cessation of hostilities only for humanitarian purposes and expected its humanitarian branch, the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, to be entrusted with the management of the humanitarian assistance. As a result, by the end of the month, the AUHIP deemed divergences between the negotiating parties’ positions irreconcilable and instead focused its diplomatic efforts on normalizing the bilateral relationship between Sudan and South Sudan (AUHIP, 2013).<sup>151</sup>

Concerned about the possible spread of polio in the ‘two areas’ and in the whole region, on 11 October 2013 the UN Security Council urged the GoS and SPLM-N to reach an agreement to enable a vaccination campaign to target 165,000 children in the first half of November (UNSC, 2013). While both parties quickly announced their commitment to cease hostilities in order to allow the campaign to be conducted, the government refused to engage in bilateral talks with the rebel movement regarding the relevant technical modalities. Although a meeting had been scheduled to take place on 4 November 2013 under the auspices of the AUHIP in Addis Ababa, it was finally cancelled, not unlike previous planned talks; while the government claimed that no formal invitation had been received in Khartoum, the SPLM-N accused the regime of using the

humanitarian aid issue as a weapon with which to fight the war in the 'two areas' (SMC, 2013; *Sudan Tribune*, 2013t; 2013u; 2013y; 2013z). Soon after, the Sudanese Minister of Defence publicly announced the launch of simultaneous military operations in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile, with the aim of bringing the rebellion to an end (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013aa; SRRRA, 2013b).

The war in Blue Nile can be pictured as one dimension of a broader struggle, particularly since the creation of the SRF platform on 12 November 2011.<sup>152</sup> Having engaged the SPLM-N, the three main Darfurian armed movements,<sup>153</sup> and dissidents from opposition parties (the Democratic Unionist Party and the National Umma Party), the SRF presented its political manifesto in early October 2012, under the title 'Re-structuring of the Sudanese State'; in January 2013, it endorsed its second political agenda—the New Dawn Charter—together with another political opposition platform, the National Consensus Forces (SudanJEM.com, 2013). Both documents were released in Kampala, Uganda, and called for the establishment of a transitional government. While the SPLM-N involvement in this initiative further reinforced the national dimension of its struggle, the appointment of Malik Agar as the platform's chairman helped to put Blue Nile at the forefront of the SRF leadership.<sup>154</sup>

The establishment of the SRF coalition represents a significant evolution in the Sudanese context, even if coordination on the battlefield remains limited to that between South Kordofan (JEM and SPLM-N) and Darfur (Abdul Wahid and Minni Minawi's factions of the Sudan Liberation Army). Indeed, the platform has allowed the armed groups operating in the three conflict areas to unify their objectives although they have not merged at the operational level. This development stands in sharp contrast to the separate approaches taken by the SPLA and Darfurian rebellions, which never converged despite some ideological affinities. Moreover, as has occurred in the past, when the SPLA and Darfur struggles were effectively in competition with each other for the attention of the government and the international community, both Khartoum and the external actors engaged in the diplomatic mediation process continue to treat the 'two areas' and Darfur conflicts as completely distinct. In addition, in October 2013, the SRF enlarged its constituency with the membership of an armed group operating in eastern Sudan—the United People's Front for Liberation and Justice<sup>155</sup>—and consolidated its links with political opposition parties,

in particular the National Umma Party, led by former prime minister Sadiq Al Mahdi.<sup>156</sup>

To survive as a meaningful platform, however, the SRF will not only have to identify a point of entry in the Sudanese political landscape, but also need to obtain full recognition as a legitimate interlocutor from the GoS and Sudanese civil society as well as the international community, and especially the African Union.<sup>157</sup> These goals may prove difficult to attain, as evidenced by several episodes reported in the first half of 2013. A few days after the signing of the New Dawn Charter by the SRF and the National Consensus Forces in January 2013, for instance, the central government threatened to ban all parties and organizations that form alliances with the rebel movement. Only a few days later, Sudanese human rights monitors denounced a wave of arrests targeting politicians of the opposition gathered under the National Consensus Forces platform; the politicians had been travelling back to Khartoum from Kampala, where they had attended talks with the SRF in advance of the adoption of the New Dawn Charter (ACJPS, 2013; *Sudan Tribune*, 2013a).

The SPLM-N has reported that, overall, political repression continued even after the early days of the conflict. More than 700 people were arrested in government-held areas for their alleged support of the movement; in addition, cases of torture and death sentences have also been reported since the beginning of the war in the Nuba Mountains (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013c). In parallel, leaders on both sides continued to use fierce rhetoric and exhibited little interest in dialogue. In late May 2013, for instance, after SAF had restored government authority in Abu Kershola (at the border between South and North Kordofan), President al Bashir publicly reiterated the government's refusal to engage in negotiations with the SRF, describing the platform as a group of 'mercenaries [of South Sudan] and terrorists'. The presidential declaration was subsequently saluted by Ahmed Ibrahim al Tahir, the speaker of Sudan's national assembly, who called for the 'total annihilation' of the rebellion. A few days later, the SPLM-N declared its readiness to resume talks with the government over the cessation of hostilities and access to conflict-affected areas under its control by humanitarian actors; soon thereafter, however, the movement called on the Sudanese population to rise up against the government to force a regime change (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013f; 2013i; Radio Dabanga, 2013a).

In July 2013, the national assembly voted on an amendment to the domestic legislation on the army, leaving no doubt as to the central government's intention to give full priority to a military solution to the conflicts affecting the peripheries of the state and to isolate any form of insurgency from their constituencies. In fact, the new legislative framework not only allows the defence minister to summon all citizens aged 18–60—including civil servants, private citizens, and retirees of the army and regular forces—to join the army reserves, but also authorizes the military justice system to prosecute civilians for crimes such as harbouring a fugitive, undermining the constitutional order, and dealing with an enemy state (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013o; 2013p; Radio Dabanga, 2013b).

The prospects for a politically negotiated solution have been systematically undermined, not least through the continued military campaigns of the government and SPLM-N on the three front lines throughout 2012 and 2013, continued delays in direct negotiations, and government reprisals in response to any form of support for the SRF (or any other form of opposition to the regime, as illustrated during the popular uprising of September 2013). As a consequence, the resolution of the conflict in Blue Nile—as well as in Darfur and South Kordofan—seems increasingly unlikely, especially in the short term. Moreover, none of the belligerents appear to have the capacity to obtain a conclusive and sustainable military victory, and the current political context in Sudan does not provide any room for a constructive political debate on a renewed relationship between Khartoum and its peripheral areas, including the 'new south'.

## The conflict in Blue Nile: a regional crisis

Just as the crisis in Blue Nile cannot be fully appreciated without a consideration of its national political context, so too should it be viewed through a regional lens. The SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division did not conduct joint operations with the SPLA in the Sudanese territory—such as occurred in the Hejlij area of South Kordofan in April 2012—and there is no significant border dispute pitting Khartoum against Juba at the border between Upper Nile and Blue Nile states. Rather, the story of the SPLM-N struggle in Blue Nile is marked, on the one hand, by the privileged relationship between the rebel movement and the ruling regime in South Sudan and, on the other, by the repercussions of ongoing North–South tensions.

Representing the Northern constituency of the SPLM, the SPLM-N movement still maintains a close connection with the Southern ruling party. As a result, the eruption of war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile only a few weeks before and after South Sudan's independence—at a time when the separation of the two branches of the group created by John Garang had not yet been concluded—drew the newly born state into the Sudanese wars. As described above, several hundred Southern soldiers were still deployed in the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division at the onset of the war in September 2011; meanwhile, some fighters who were originally from Blue Nile were serving in SPLA divisions, and the last men to be repatriated did not join the Blue Nile force until March 2012.

In addition, as mentioned above, arrangements were reportedly made in South Sudan for the air delivery of weapons and ammunition to SPLM-N-controlled areas in Blue Nile during the first month of fighting. While this research has not been able to find any additional evidence that Juba provided the SPLM-N with military support, it is nonetheless likely that the proximity of forces and the shared ideological and historical background—as well as the shared fighting experience—predisposed the SPLA to provide various forms of logistical support, even if it may not always have been authorized by the Southern government (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013l).

Although the field research conducted for this study was able to gather several reports on logistical support provided to the SPLM-N—especially regarding transportation, vehicles and spare parts, travel documents, and the payment of salaries—none could be verified independently. In Blue Nile, however, the author routinely observed the SPLM-N troops using vehicles bearing SPLA headquarters licence plates or uniforms displaying the South Sudanese national flag (see Image 10), although the origin and chain of custody of these items could not be determined. According to some observers interviewed throughout 2012, these items may have been offered as assistance prior to South Sudan's independence; alternatively, they may have been supplied more recently, through support channels that continue to be activated by SPLA division or brigade commanders, without prior consultation with the hierarchy in Juba.

It should also be noted that the Sudanese government has repeatedly insisted on the existence of a direct-assistance relationship between the SPLA and the SPLM-N (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013j). In June 2013, Khartoum publicly complained

about the provision of medical assistance to 175 wounded troops who were transported and treated in medical facilities in Bentiu, Juba, and Wau (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013k).



**Image 10:** An SPLM-N fighter wears a uniform bearing the national flag of South Sudan during a military parade held in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division general headquarters, late November 2012. © Claudio Gramizzi

The links between the conflict in Blue Nile and tensions between Sudan and South Sudan may have become further entrenched between October 2011 and January 2012 as well as between March and June 2013, when SAF reportedly conducted aerial operations targeting areas in Upper Nile state (HHI, 2013; AI, 2013; *Sudan Tribune*, 2013e). According to South Sudanese authorities, operations launched on 15 and 16 June 2013 included not only aerial strikes but also temporary incursions by ground forces in Gonbar *payam* (district) in Renk county.<sup>158</sup> It is difficult to determine the objectives of these attacks and whether they aimed to target SPLM-N positions or to force the withdrawal of SPLA troops from the 10-km demilitarized zone along the border, which was established by an agreement signed on 27 September 2012 (see below). Regardless of the motivation, the extension of military activities into Upper Nile further entangled the conflict in Blue Nile with border tensions between Sudan and South Sudan.

Like some of its military officials, SPLM-N politicians benefit from close ties with the SPLM and certain influential figures in South Sudan's institutions, although different positions exist in Juba with regard to the moral duty to support the cause of the Sudanese opposition (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013). That reading was echoed in interviews conducted with SPLM senior officers in Juba in November 2012. The officers acknowledged that political sympathy and support for the SPLM-N was a moral obligation for South Sudan, notably because of the two areas' contribution to the liberation of the South. They also insisted that the GRSS could not engage alongside the SPLM-N, as war in the North was not beneficial for Juba, especially in view of South Sudan's fragile internal stability and the volatile security environment of the region.<sup>159</sup>

Indeed, the GRSS seems to be gradually disengaging from Sudanese internal affairs and increasingly refraining from providing military support to the SPLM-N, both for internal reasons and due to international pressure. This trend appears to have taken hold in the wake of the Hejlj operation, when the international community severely condemned the SPLA's involvement alongside SPLM-N and JEM troops and threatened to impose sanctions against the GRSS. Nevertheless, South Sudan's government remains among the strongest pillars of political support for the SPLM-N and, more indirectly, for the SRF (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013).



As evidenced in recent diplomatic talks, the SPLM-N's privileged relationship with South Sudan and the group's control of some territory along the North–South border have linked the conflict in Blue Nile (and South Kordofan) to the broader North–South dispute. In fact, one of the nine agreements signed by Khartoum and Juba on 27 September 2012 addresses border security by establishing a 10-km demilitarized zone on both sides of the 1956 border, thus covering areas controlled by the SPLM-N (GoS and GRSS, 2012). In November 2012, Sudan's government made a direct connection between the two crises by requesting that its counterpart in Juba provide names of Northern citizens who wished to join the Southern army, disarm the SPLM-N, and arrest the three main leaders of the movement, Malik Agar, Abdelaziz al Hilu, and Yasir Arman. Khartoum imposed these requests as prerequisites for the implementation of the security arrangements agreed under international mediation. Media coverage of the talks held in Addis Ababa in May 2013 suggests that the Sudanese government subsequently added to its demands, requesting that Juba ban all forms of business activities controlled by the SPLM-N and authorize SAF to pursue rebels in South Sudan.

Tensions increased further in mid-May 2013, following SRF offensives along the border between North and South Kordofan. Specifically, Khartoum threatened to close the pipelines that transfer South Sudanese oil through Sudanese territory if the GRSS continued to support the opposition coalition. The Sudanese government had initially announced that it would shut down the pipelines in early June, but it agreed to postpone the deadline to 6 September in view of Juba's gradual implementation of the September 2012 agreement and of diplomatic efforts, particularly by China and the African Union (*Sudan Tribune*, 2013q; 2013r; 2013s). Finally, as the bilateral relationship improved, the threat was abandoned, and trade borders reopened at the end of September 2013 (GoS and GRSS, 2013).

As many observers have suggested, the inclusion of the SPLM-N struggle in the framework of the international mediation did not actually enlarge the scope of the talks to cover the 'two areas'. On the contrary: the SPLM-N was further marginalized as the Sudanese government refused to consider the group as a legitimate counterpart in the talks. Moreover, Khartoum employed a tactic similar to the one that drove the CPA negotiations, using the SPLM-N

as a bargaining tool in the talks with Juba rather than as an interlocutor in the negotiations (*Sudan Tribune*, 2012; 2013e). The strategy proved to be fairly successful for Khartoum as it imposed severe delays on the implementation of the provisions agreed with South Sudan and prevented a full consideration of SRF demands in the negotiation process.

Two additional factors are key to understanding the regional dimension of the Blue Nile crisis and its ramifications beyond South Sudan. First is the continued presence of many SRF leaders in Kampala, which Khartoum views as clear evidence that the Sudanese insurgency benefits from direct Ugandan support (Xinhua, 2013). Second is the importance of Blue Nile's resources—especially hydropower production—and geographical location, not only because of its proximity to another regional power, Ethiopia, but also, and more importantly, because of its strategic position along the Blue Nile River, which provides up to 80 per cent of the Nile's stream. Management of the river's flow is a major issue for all regional players, particularly since the launch of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam construction project; in this context, regional actors are keeping a close eye on possible repercussions of the war in Blue Nile (Hayeb, 2013). Indeed, Addis Ababa's sustained efforts to ensure a sustainable negotiated solution to the conflicts between Khartoum and the Sudanese armed opposition effectively highlight the importance of the regional dimension of the wars in the two areas. 📌

## VII. Conclusions

Much like in South Kordofan, the resumption of large-scale war in Blue Nile may be seen as an extension of the civil war that pitted the SPLA against the central regime and as an illustration of the failure of the CPA to shape political responses for areas that remained part of Sudan after July 2011. During the interim period, the implementation of the political provisions of the peace agreement—especially with respect to the outcome of the 2010 elections and the popular consultations—offered room for more optimism in Blue Nile than in South Kordofan. Nevertheless, tensions and distrust between Khartoum and the SPLM continued to escalate, especially after the NCP refused to recognize the outcome of the popular consultations or to grant more concessions to the peripheries once the separation of the South had become unavoidable.

Through its refusal to engage in political negotiations with the SRF and the inclusion of the ‘two areas’ in the framework of the diplomatic talks with South Sudan, the GoS showed its partiality towards a military solution. Indeed, it aimed to divide the different components of the opposition and to achieve its goals on the battlefield rather than to agree to simultaneous talks with the SPLM-N and the Darfurian movements. That approach has already proved partly successful in Blue Nile, where the SPLM-N operates in complete isolation from the remaining branches of the SRF and with severely limited external support. Having lost hope for political solutions after the rejection of the June 2011 framework agreement and being virtually excluded from the negotiations under the auspices of the international community, the SPLM-N leadership in Blue Nile came to view armed insurgency as the only avenue for pursuing the movement’s ambition of a regime change in Khartoum and greater autonomy for the state within a federal system.

The war in Blue Nile does not reflect the national dimension of the SRF struggle to the same extent as do the Nuba Mountains, nor is it likely to produce a decisive effect on the Sudan-wide military balance. Yet the SPLM-N’s position within the broader alliance hinges on its ability to maintain military

pressure on the government in Blue Nile. A conclusive military defeat of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division would inevitably reduce the movement's legitimacy in the SRF leadership, undermine the SRF's political weight in the domestic political landscape, and allow the government to shift more resources to South Kordofan and Darfur. Keeping the Blue Nile front active, however, depends on the SPLM-N's capacity to overcome the challenge of securing supplies of weapons and ammunition, its ability to maintain morale among its forces, and the SRF's aptitude at reinforcing political and operational coordination among its different components.

Given the conflation of the Blue Nile conflict with the two other wars in South Kordofan and Darfur, the inclusion of the 'two areas' issues into the framework of the North-South talks, the difficulties encountered by the belligerents in establishing sustainable military supremacy, and the international community's inability to elaborate effective solutions for the whole of Sudan despite the potential repercussions for the region, Blue Nile is likely to remain an unpredictable and volatile environment in the long term.

The future of the Blue Nile conflict is as unpredictable as that of the larger Sudanese and regional political environments. If the SRF proves incapable of securing a consolidated popular constituency in Sudan—let alone forcing a regime change by military means—the platform could nevertheless weaken the GoS by keeping it engaged in an unsustainable resource-consuming conflict; that would require efficient coordination among the different SRF components, such that military activity could be sustained on the three fronts of Blue Nile, Darfur, and South Kordofan. Yet, two years after the resumption of the conflict in Blue Nile, the likelihood of success of such a strategy remains an open question, especially since carrying the burden of the war does not seem to represent a vital or immediate threat for the NCP. Indeed, despite its substantial financial and exorbitant human costs, the military option remains Khartoum's priority. 🗑️

# Endnotes

- 1 Sudan's Blue Nile state is located between latitudes 9.30 and 12.30 north and longitudes 33.50 and 35.50 east, in the border zone between the Ethiopian highlands (in the east) and the plains of South Sudan's Upper Nile state (in the west). The last census, conducted in 2008, recorded some 850,000 residents. Blue Nile's capital city, ed Damazin, lies 550 km south of Khartoum.
- 2 The SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division (known as the SPLA 10<sup>th</sup> Division before South Sudan's independence) is the military force of the movement deployed along the Blue Nile front line. SPLM-N's military force in South Kordofan (previously known as the SPLA 9<sup>th</sup> Division) is currently called the 1<sup>st</sup> Division.
- 3 For recent analyses of the conflict in South Kordofan, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013) and ICG (2013a).
- 4 For more information on these aspects of the conflict in Darfur, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2012); on South Kordofan, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013) and ICG (2013a).
- 5 According to United Nations data, more than 121,300 people settled in Upper Nile (South Sudan) refugee camps, while approximately 32,000 settled in camps located in Ethiopia (UNHCR, 2013a–d). See Section V of this *Working Paper*.
- 6 Three SPLM-N brigades control territory in Blue Nile: the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, with its headquarters in El Fuj, is in charge of the western sector; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, whose headquarters is in Yabus, is in charge of the eastern sector; and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, whose command is posted in Wadaka, is in charge of the central sector.
- 7 Little is known about the early history of the Funj Sultanate. Some historians argue that Funj people were neither Arabs nor initially Muslim. Throughout the whole history of Funj rule, the southern and eastern borderlands of the territory were a backyard for slave raiders from both the Funj and Ethiopian kingdoms. During the Turko–Egyptian regime (1821–85), the current territory of Blue Nile was also regularly exposed to raids launched to capture slaves.
- 8 In particular, the Uduk community, in the southernmost regions of the state, were evangelized by US missionaries who had been expelled from Ethiopia in 1938.
- 9 The first foreign companies to invest in the agricultural sector in Blue Nile in the 1980s were from Saudi Arabia. During the following decade, the number of lots distributed to and exploited by foreign companies increased significantly. Before the eruption of the conflict in September 2011, different companies, in particular from Gulf states, were reportedly still operating in the state. Osama bin Laden also invested in a farming plot in Blue Nile in the 1990s. After his departure from Sudan, however, the land was left abandoned. Author interviews with two SPLM-N political officers, South Sudan, November 2012. See also ICG (2013a).
- 10 Author interviews with SPLM-N political officers, South Sudan, November 2012, and in Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 11 Separate author interviews with an SPLM-N representative and an international NGO worker, South Sudan, November 2012.

- 12 The native administration system was re-established in 1990 but was effectively sidelined, as the majority of the local leaders were appointed by the central government with little or no consultation with the communities they were meant to represent.
- 13 Several extraction areas are located in Blue Nile, including in the Ingessana Hills and the Geisan, Kurmuk, and Yabus areas. Before the eruption of the conflict in 2011, small-scale gold extraction was also under way in the Wadaka area.
- 14 One of the largest waves of displacement before the civil war was caused by the construction of the Roseires Dam in 1966. According to an official in the political branch of the SPLM-N, more than 70,000 people were displaced for more than 30 years within Blue Nile as a result of the government's policy of developing large-scale farming schemes. Author interview, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 15 Separate author interviews with two SPLM-N political officers, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 16 Among the most popular individuals in the Funj Union was al Hadi Tenjor (from the Berta tribe), whom the SPLM/A later appointed a member of the federal parliament in Khartoum. Author interview with an official from the SPLM-N political branch, previously a member of the National Congress Party, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 17 The Ingaz regime was established on 30 June 1989 by the military coup d'état led by Col. Omar al Bashir (who was appointed president in 1993). Separate author interviews with SPLM-N political officers and international observers, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 18 Separate author interviews with a senior SPLA officer and an international South Sudan analyst, South Sudan, November 2012. On the evolution of the front line in Blue Nile, see ICG (2013a, p. 51).
- 19 Hilde F. Johnson, a Norwegian politician and diplomat, was personally involved in the mediation process that led to the CPA. In July 2011, she was appointed the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan.
- 20 Several SPLM-N political officers interviewed between November and December 2012 claimed that the electoral commission was asked by NCP leaders to adjust the result of the vote in favour of their candidate. The head of the commission, however, refused to follow such instructions.
- 21 Author interviews with SPLM-N political officers, South Sudan, November 2012, and with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 22 This assessment was confirmed by numerous interviews conducted in 2012, though isolated cases of irregularities were also reported. Author interviews with several representatives of the political and military branches of the SPLM-N, a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, and international aid workers and observers with direct experience in Blue Nile, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November and December 2012.
- 23 Author interview with a community leader, Blue Nile, December 2012. See also Carter Center (2011) and ICG (2013b, p. 12).
- 24 By the time political tensions escalated into armed confrontation in September 2011, some more progressive members of the NCP leadership in Blue Nile—including the party's candidate at the 2010 gubernatorial elections, Farah Agar—had been dismissed from the party. Author interview with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 25 The Commission officially started its mandate on 30 June 2011.
- 26 Separate author interviews with Sudan analysts, South Sudan, November 2012, and a SAF JIU defector, Blue Nile, December 2012.

- 27 Author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012; with an international NGO staff member, South Sudan, November 2012; and with a SAF JIU defector, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 28 Author interview with Brig. Gen. Al Jundi Suleyman Abdelrahman, location withheld, November 2012.
- 29 For additional information on the onset of the conflict in South Kordofan, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 30 Separate author interviews with an SPLM-N political officer, South Sudan, November 2012, and with four SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 31 Maj. Gen. Yahya, commander of the SAF 4<sup>th</sup> Division, was posted in ed Damazin at the time the conflict started; he was quickly replaced by NCP member and SAF retired Brig. Al Hadi Bushra. Bushra served as governor until Hussein Yassin Hamad’s appointment in 2013. Author interview with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 32 Separate author interviews with several SPLM-N officers, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012, and with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 33 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 34 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers and with an SPLM-N soldier who served in the Ingessana Hills until January 2012, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 35 Separate author interviews with several high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 36 Separate author interviews with several high-ranking SPLM-N military officers and international observers and analysts, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 37 Separate author interviews with an international South Sudan analyst and with a high-ranking SPLM-N military intelligence officer, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November 2012.
- 38 Separate author interviews with several high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 39 The author conducted a field visit on 30 November 2012. He also witnessed the presence of Antonov aircraft in several circumstances during the field research conducted for this *Working Paper* and at least two bombings, on Chali al Fil and Yabus, on 7 and 9 December 2012, respectively. His inspection of shrapnel from the Antonov-dropped bombs, however, did not yield any useful information, neither on their type, nor on their origin.
- 40 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, including one officer who served in the Ingessana Hills until May 2012, and an SPLM-N soldier who was posted in the Ingessana Hills until January 2012, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 41 Separate author interviews with an SPLM-N officer who served in the Ingessana Hills until May 2012, an SPLM-N soldier who was posted in the Ingessana Hills until January 2012, and civilians who were rescued by the SPLM-N in December 2012, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 42 Separate author interviews with several civilians who took part in the convoy, including the *sheikh*, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 43 Separate author interviews with an SPLM-N officer who served in the Ingessana Hills until May 2012 and civilians rescued by the SPLM-N in December 2012, Blue Nile, December 2012.

- 44 According to Malik Agar, however, the December 2012 operation did not represent a definitive withdrawal from the Hills. See ICG (2013b, p. 23).
- 45 For additional information on the conflict in South Kordofan, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 46 The roots of the conflicts in South Kordofan and Blue Nile are identical to those that led Darfur into war in 2003. Similar claims could also apply to other peripheral states, such as Eastern Sudan.
- 47 The analogy with respect to the government's support for militias also extends to the conflict in Darfur. See, for instance, Gramizzi and Tubiana (2012).
- 48 Author interviews with SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. See Section III, below.
- 49 Author interviews with SPLM-N officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. Some of the officers provided concrete illustrations to support this position; one of them reported that some of the technical (Land Cruiser-type) vehicles SPLM-N troops captured after fighting the government forces had to be burnt in the battle camp due to a lack of drivers.
- 50 Separate author interviews with SPLM-N officers and soldiers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 51 Author interviews with a high-ranking SPLM-N military officer, Blue Nile, December 2012, and with a humanitarian aid worker, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 16 December 2012.
- 52 In Blue Nile, food distribution operations did not start until the end of November 2012, more than 14 months after the war had started. In South Kordofan, food distribution began slightly faster, by April 2012, ten months after the beginning of the conflict (Gramizzi and Tubiana, 2013).
- 53 None of the Blue Nile SPLM-N representatives interviewed between November and December 2012 mentioned an affiliation with the SRF, nor the SRF political programme or strategy. The majority of these interviewees were members of the Ingeessana, Jumjum, and Uduk tribes, and many of them appeared deeply engaged in the struggle to defend their own community. In sharp contrast, during the author's research in South Kordofan a few months earlier, many of the interviewed rebels gave statements as though they were talking on behalf of the SRF. See Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 54 See Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 55 JEM, a Darfuri armed movement engaged in operations in South Kordofan since July 2011, conducted several operations in coordination with SPLM-N forces. Some divisions of the South Sudanese army, the SPLA, also fought alongside SPLM-N and JEM units, in particular in the Jaw area, at the border of Unity and South Kordofan states, in February 2012, and during the operations in Hejlj in April 2012. For additional information, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 56 Author interviews with SPLM-N representatives from South Kordofan, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 57 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012, and with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 58 According to information provided by the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division command during an interview held in December 2012, military training used to be provided in both Sudan and Eritrea when the unit was created. This claim could not be independently verified. For additional information on Adelrahman Abu Median's role, see ICG (2013a).
- 59 Author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012, and with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, December 2012.



- 60 Separate author interviews with SPLM-N representatives and civilian leaders, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 61 Observers reported a swelling of 3–15 times the 2005 size. Author interviews with SPLM-N political and military officers, international NGO workers with experience in Blue Nile, and a Sudan analyst, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012. See also HSBA (2010).
- 62 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 63 See *Sudan Tribune* (2013b).
- 64 Author interview with a senior SPLM-N political officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 65 Author interview with the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division command, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 66 Author interview with a SAF defector, Blue Nile, in December 2012.
- 67 Some ‘janjaweed’ elements were nonetheless provided with specific training, much like that of other SAF personnel in Blue Nile, in al Dissa training facilities.
- 68 Author interviews with an NCP defector, location withheld, November 2012. See also ICG (2013a).
- 69 Author interviews with a representative of the SPLM-N political branch, South Sudan, November 2012, and with an SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, November 2012.
- 70 *Kopaji* generally refers to militia groups composed of SPLM-N defectors. See ICG (2013a, p. 20).
- 71 *Mujahideen* typically refers to ‘those who fight in the path of Allah’ and Islamist militias. In Blue Nile, however, the expression appears to encompass both fighters recruited for the ‘holy war’ and armed nomads who are not systematically integrated into the PDF structure and chain of command.
- 72 Author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012.
- 73 Several examples of such statements are quoted in HHI (2013).
- 74 Author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, SPLM-N military officers, and civilians, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012. See also HHI (2013).
- 75 See also ICG (2013b, p. 21).
- 76 See also ICG (2013b, p. 21).
- 77 Author interviews with a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, location withheld, November 2012, and with an SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012. See also ICG (2013b, p. 20).
- 78 Ranks refer to the militia structure, not the SAF chain of command.
- 79 Separate author interviews with two SPLM-N political officers, South Sudan, November 2012, and with two SPLM-N military intelligence officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. See also ICG (2013b, p. 21).
- 80 Author interviews with one SPLM-N political officer, South Sudan, November 2012, and one SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 81 Author interviews with an SPLM-N political officer, South Sudan, November 2012, and with a high-ranking SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 82 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 83 Separate author interviews with two international observers, one international NGO worker, and one South Sudan specialist, South Sudan, November 2012.

- 84 Separate author interviews with an SPLA senior officer, South Sudan, November 2012; with a South Sudan researcher, South Sudan, November 2012; and with several high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 85 Author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. One of the officers served in the SPLA ranks until March 2012.
- 86 Author interviews with a South Sudan specialist, South Sudan, November 2012, and with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. For additional information, see ICG (2013b, p. 34).
- 87 Author interviews with a political officer of the SPLM-N, South Sudan, November 2012; with a high-ranking officer of the SPLM-N military force, Blue Nile, November–December 2012; with an international observer specializing in South Sudan, South Sudan, November 2012; with an SPLM-N officer who was posted in the Ingessana Hills until May 2012, Blue Nile, December 2012; and with civilians rescued by the SPLM-N in December 2012, Blue Nile, December 2012. See also HHI (2013) and HSBA (2010).
- 88 Some of the alleged cases of forced recruitment might actually relate to fighters who did not return to the front line after having been granted permission for temporary leave. Author interviews with staff members of humanitarian NGOs running programmes in refugee camps located in Mabaan county, South Sudan, November 2012.
- 89 See also AI (2013).
- 90 Author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 91 Author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 92 Author interviews with the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division command, Blue Nile, November 2012.
- 93 For additional information, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 94 Author interview with an SPLM-N officer from South Kordofan, border area between Upper Nile and Blue Nile states, 28 November 2012. This information was partially confirmed by Abdelaziz al Hilu, the SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division commander, who stated that only three political commissioners were temporarily sent to Blue Nile from South Kordofan to supervise political training. Author interview with Abdelaziz al Hilu, SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division commander, Ethiopia, December 2012.
- 95 Author interview with Abdelaziz al Hilu, SPLM-N 1<sup>st</sup> Division commander, Ethiopia, December 2012. See also ICG (2013b, p. 30).
- 96 Gen. Ahmed al Omda Boda is a member of the Ingessana tribe, as is the political leader Malik Agar; Maj. Gen. Joseph Tuka Ali belongs to the Uduk community. A number of SPLM-N officers and combatants interviewed between November and December 2012 underlined Gen. Ahmed al Omda Boda's unpopularity among the ranks, noting that his leadership was influenced by a tribal approach.
- 97 Author interviews with several SPLM-N officers and troops, Blue Nile, December 2012. In addition, in December 2012, the SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division command provided a vivid illustration of this issue in the form of a three-page background paper drafted by the Maj Gen. Joseph Tuka Ali himself and entitled, *The Brief Uduk History and Their Painful Road to Freedom* (Tuka Ali, n.d.). The document is on file with the Small Arms Survey.
- 98 Separate author interviews with an SPLM-N military officer who was previously posted in the Ingessana Hills, Blue Nile, December 2012, and with civilians rescued by the SPLM-N, Blue Nile, December 2012.

- 99 Separate author interviews with high-ranking SPLM-N 2<sup>nd</sup> Division officers, a senior representative of the SPLM-N political branch, a former member of the NCP Blue Nile head office, a former member of the SAF JIUs, and a civilian who left ed Damazin in December 2011, South Sudan and Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 100 Author interview with a SAF JIU defector, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 101 Another confirmation of the presence of helicopters in Blue Nile was provided by an accident that occurred in June 2013, when a SAF-operated gunship crashed in the ed Damazin region, reportedly while conducting training exercises. For additional details, see *Sudan Tribune* (2013h) and HHI (2013).
- 102 The author received the photographs in June 2013; they are on file at the Small Arms Survey.
- 103 The weapons were either captured by SPLM-N troops or remnants of used equipment found by the author (such as cartridges of ammunition, unexploded bombs, and shrapnel).
- 104 For documentation of weapons captured from SAF in South Kordofan, see HSBA (2012a; 2012b; 2013b).
- 105 For additional information on the military hardware used by SAF in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the contested areas between Unity and South Kordofan states, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2012; 2013). For examples of equipment in use by South Sudan rebel groups, see HSBA (2013b).
- 106 The landmines bore Farsi markings.
- 107 Author interview with SPLM-N soldiers, Blue Nile, November 2012.
- 108 See Geneva Call (2013).
- 109 Symptoms included total or partial temporary paralysis, partial blindness, temporary deafness, an inability to speak, breathing problems, nausea, bleeding, and diarrhoea. The limited number of incidents reported and the short duration of the effects suggest that the contamination may have been caused by the presence of toxic chemical products in the detonation system of the weapons. Separate author interviews with SPLM-N medical staff, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 110 SRRRA monitors only provide figures for the first half of 2013, when a total of 120 bombings were recorded throughout the SPLM-N-held territory of Blue Nile. These aerial operations reportedly killed 15 persons and injured seven. See SRRRA (2013a). The Small Arms Survey could not independently verify the accuracy of this data.
- 111 Reports note a slight decrease in bombardments as of September 2012. The absence of efficient monitoring mechanisms, however, precludes a comparative analysis.
- 112 For comparisons with Darfur and South Kordofan, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2012; 2013).
- 113 According to high-ranking SPLM-N military officers and medical staff interviewed in Blue Nile in November–December 2012, major SAF ground offensives were supported by aerial operations. The majority of the 600 SPLM-N combatants wounded in September–December 2011 and treated by the SPLM-N medical units were reportedly injured by aerial attacks.
- 114 Author interview with an SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 115 During that period, however, five of the ten tanks had already become unserviceable. Author interview with an SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 116 Separate author interviews with six high-ranking SPLM-N military officers, Blue Nile, November–December 2012.
- 117 Author interview with an SPLM-N military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 118 Bearing the serial numbers 1127 (manufactured in 2007) and 1413 (manufactured in 2008).
- 119 For pictures of Bulgarian-manufactured ammunition, see HSBA (2013a).
- 120 Bearing the serial number 2-67-1180.

- 121 Bearing the serial number 6-67-1288.
- 122 Bearing the marking codes in Chinese characters.
- 123 Bearing the serial numbers 180505, 180507, 180530, 180589, 180662, 180682, 180686, and 6190053.
- 124 For pictures of Bulgarian-manufactured ammunition, see HSBA (2013a).
- 125 Bearing the serial numbers 110140, 153307, 153434, 153460, 153752, 153774, 153782, and 7008056.
- 126 For pictures of ammunition, see HSBA (2013a).
- 127 Bearing the serial number 141010 and company code 9656. The launcher was reportedly captured in Surkum area in September 2012, with only five rounds of ammunition, which were used soon after the weapon was seized. For pictures, see HSBA (2013a).
- 128 Identified as manufactured in 1957 in the former Czechoslovakia.
- 129 Four bearing marking codes in the Chinese alphabet were inspected; several others had reportedly been distributed to troops in different locations.
- 130 Three were inspected (bearing the following serial numbers and company codes: 406593 and 9336; 2703342 and 313; and 6006746 and 386), while several others had reportedly been distributed to units deployed in different locations.
- 131 Reportedly captured in Keili area in July 2012.
- 132 Additional information and pictures of Chinese and Iranian ammunition are available in HSBA (2013a).
- 133 12.7 mm armour-piercing ammunition (type B-32), identified by the Small Arms Survey as manufactured in 1987, by the Igman Zavod factory, located in Konjic (current Bosnia and Herzegovina).
- 134 Bearing the serial number 6269. The launcher was reportedly captured—without ammunition—in Rum area in July 2012. On the way to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division headquarters, however, an accident occurred and the truck could not be repaired.
- 135 Author interview with a military intelligence officer, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 136 Author correspondence with Toyota Motor Corporation, September 2012 and June 2013.
- 137 On one small-calibre box, it is possible to read the contact numbers of the Sudanese Technical Centre (tel: 002499183442037; fax: 002499183442038), while boxes for mortar bombs and grenades suggest a Russian origin. Marking codes on the 30 mm VOG-17M grenades indicate the ammunition was manufactured in 1985.
- 138 As of November 2013, the majority of the refugees who reached Upper Nile state in South Sudan settled in the camps of Doro (also referred to as Bunj) (roughly 46,800 individuals); Yusuf Batil (38,800); Gendrassa (17,000); and Kaya (18,200). In the meantime, the Jamam camp, which had hosted more than 1,000 persons until mid-June 2013, was closed (UNHCR, 2013d).
- 139 Accurate estimates of the number of refugees who settled in Ethiopia are difficult to come by as many of them did not settle in formal refugee camps. At the end of May 2013, much of the refugee population was settled in the camps of Sherkole (9,470 individuals), Bambasi (12,780), and Tongo (10,000), all of which are located in the Benishangul-Gumuz region. See UNCHR (2013a-c). In addition, several thousand people are living in informal settlements along the border with Blue Nile, though a first wave of 3,000 returnees from Ethiopia arrived in the Geisan and Kurmuk areas between September and October 2013. See also British Red Cross (2013), ICG (2013b, p. 25), OCHA (2013), and *Sudan Tribune* (2013d).
- 140 Author interviews with local and traditional leaders of different sectors under SPLM-N administration, Blue Nile, November–December 2012. In July 2013, the SRRA estimated that close to 119,000 people were displaced in Blue Nile. See SRRA (2013a) and SK–BN Coordination Unit (2013b).

- 141 The South Kordofan–Blue Nile Coordination Unit works with local civil society organizations and international humanitarian actors to monitor the humanitarian situation and related needs in the two conflict-affected states.
- 142 Supply roads from South Sudan (Upper Nile state) mainly serve the Wadaka and El Faj sectors. Most of the markets in these sectors were nevertheless closed because of security concerns. Prices applied to emergency commodities are generally prohibitive for displaced communities. Markets held in the Yabus sector are supplied exclusively by Ethiopian traders.
- 143 FYDA is supported by an international humanitarian NGO.
- 144 Separate author interviews with the two FYDA staff members in charge of supervising the distribution in Wadaka and in Tenfona *payams* (districts), Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 145 Author interviews with FYDA staff in charge of the food distribution programme conducted in the Wadaka area and with a traditional leader, Blue Nile, December 2012. For additional information, see ICG (2013b, p. 28).
- 146 Separate author interviews with the two FYDA staff members in charge of supervising the distribution in Wadaka and in Tenfona *payams*, Blue Nile, December 2012.
- 147 These facilities were not numerous in the first place; most of them had been refurbished or built during the CPA period.
- 148 Gold is sold during market days to Ethiopian traders. According to figures provided by traders interviewed in December 2012, between 30 to 40 grams are traded at the main border market every week.
- 149 For some background on this agreement, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013).
- 150 For additional information, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013, ch. 2).
- 151 See, in particular, AUHIP (2013, paras. 26–35).
- 152 For more information, see Gramizzi and Tubiana (2013, ch. 3).
- 153 The movements were JEM and Abdul Wahid and Minni Minawi’s factions of the Sudan Liberation Army.
- 154 Malik’s appointment was the result of a lack of unity among the Darfurian movements, which failed to agree on a single candidate. According to the agreement reached by the different parties of the platform, a representative of the Darfurian branch had to be appointed to take over the chairman’s position after the one-year term of Malik Agar. Again, the lack of consensus among the three groups resulted in a tacit renewal of the mandate of the Blue Nile leader. It is also worth underlining that some SPLM-N representatives interviewed in Blue Nile between November and December 2012 said they regretted Malik Agar’s appointment as the head of the SRF, noting that this role was preventing him from taking on a full leadership position on the Blue Nile front.
- 155 The United People’s Front for Liberation and Justice, led by Sayed Ali Abu Amna, is a dissident faction of the Eastern Front, a coalition of armed groups operating along the border with Eritrea that signed the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement in October 2006, in Asmara. See *Sudan Tribune* (2013x).
- 156 See *Sudan Tribune* (2013v; 2013w).
- 157 Strengthening internal cohesion within the opposition platform remains a major challenge, as recently illustrated by the refusal of Abdul Wahid’s faction of the Sudan Liberation Army to endorse the SRF proposal for the cessation of hostilities, in June 2013. For additional details, see *Sudan Tribune* (2013m).
- 158 Confidential reports produced by the UN Mission in South Sudan and reviewed by the author.
- 159 Author interviews with senior SPLM officers, South Sudan, November 2012.

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**Claudio Gramizzi** is an independent researcher who focuses on weapons, arms flows, and conflicts. In addition to experience gathered while working at European non-governmental organizations, he served until 2011 as an arms expert and consultant on UN Panels of Experts in Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan. Together with Jérôme Tubiana, he co-authored *Forgotten Darfur: Old Tactics and New Players* (Small Arms Survey, 2012) and *New War, Old Enemies: Conflict Dynamics in South Kordofan* (Small Arms Survey, 2013). He is a regular contributor to the HSBA Arms and Ammunition Tracking Desk project.

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The Small Arms Survey is an independent research project located at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. Established in 1999, the project is supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and current contributions from the Governments of Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Survey is grateful for past support received from the Governments of France, New Zealand, and Spain. The Survey also wishes to acknowledge the financial assistance it has received over the years from different United Nations agencies, programmes, and institutes.

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