An Analysis of the History and Causes of the Current South Sudanese Refugee Crisis

On the 9th of July, 2011, South Sudan became the world’s youngest country. After over 50 years of conflict and hostilities between the southern and northern regions of Sudan, the brokered peace agreement and ensuing independence referendum were heralded as promising steps towards regional stability. However, only four months later, conflict had erupted in several South Sudanese states and less than two years later the country had entered the civil war which embroils it to this day.¹ Along with its distinction as the world’s youngest country, South Sudan is also one of the world’s top sources of refugees. As of October 2016, there were 1.26 million South Sudanese refugees and almost 1.9 million internally displaced persons.²,³ For a country with a population of little over 12 million people, this represents a crisis of a monumental scale. More than a quarter of the country has been uprooted and UNHCR


projections predict there will be 1.89 million South Sudanese refugees by the end of 2017.\textsuperscript{4} With any crisis of such proportions, there is not one singular cause, but a patchwork of interlocking threats, that have led to this level of displacement. The most prominent of these threats are armed conflict, ethnic violence, and natural disasters - all of which are exacerbated by the widespread presence of poverty and disease.\textsuperscript{5}

Armed Conflict

When Sudan achieved independence from Britain in 1956, the First Sudanese Civil War had already been in progress for almost a year. Conflict has plagued Sudan for over a half century, and even with hopes that South Sudanese independence would put an end to the fighting, the country cannot escape the history violence. Now, in 2017, the South Sudanese Civil War rages like the civil wars before, leading to massive displacement through violence and fear.

The current civil war comprises of a conflict between two major armed groups, as well as some other, smaller factions. The main belligerents are the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), headed by the current president Salva Kiir Mayardit, and the military wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In-Opposition (SPLM-IO), headed by the ex-vice president Riek Machar. The SPLM, also referred to as the SPLM-Juba, is the main political party

\textsuperscript{4} “UNHCR South Sudan Situation”

in South Sudan and was founded as the political wing of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the central actor in achieving South Sudanese independence following the Second Sudanese Civil War. The SPLM controls the overwhelming majority of the South Sudanese legislature, as well as the presidency, and so exercises effective control over South Sudan’s government forces. SPLM-IO represent a splinter group of the SPLM, created in response to growing tensions between president Kiir and, the then-vice-president, Riek Machar.

Shortly following independence, rumors emerged that Riek Machar planned to overthrow Salva Kiir Mayardit. Kiir is a member of South Sudan’s largest ethnic group, the Dinka, while Machar is a member of the second largest group, the Nuer, and so these rumors stoked political as well as ethnic tensions. These tensions were further intensified by Machar’s announcement that he would seek to run against Kiir in the next election. The situation finally boiled over into civil war when Kiir made the sudden decision to dismiss Machar, along with the rest of his cabinet, a move that many saw as a steps towards dictatorship. With this decision, the army began to fracture along ethnic lines and soon, with a brief fire fight in the capital of Juba and Machar’s formation of the SPLM-IO, the country was once again at war.

The ethnic and political divides that helped to fracture South Sudan did not appear overnight. Much of the distrust present within the country’s political and military systems are products of the country’s difficult and protracted fight for freedom, distrust that primed South

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Sudan for its state of conflict. Deep factionalism was the defining feature, as well as the enduring obstacle, of the South Sudanese independence movement. Independence was only made possible through the co-optation of many regional military commanders, all who had organized their militias on a local, and therefore heavily ethnic, basis.\(^7\) When South Sudan gained independence the militias either integrated into the government forces, or stayed dormant in their respective regions. This meant that those with arms, those with military training, were organized on almost entirely ethnic lines and with allegiances to their ethnic group first and the new nation second. Therefore, when Kiir and Machar needed to rapidly mobilize forces against each other, they relied on their opposing ethnic identities to do so. This reliance on ethnic identities as a form of political identity allowed for the civil war to erupt with such haste as well as allowing for its continuation by stoking ethnically based narratives of fear and hatred.

The war has also combined with famine to create further displacement. Cattle herding and subsistence farming form the basis of food production in South Sudan.\(^8\) Both of these practices are highly susceptible to small changes in weather patterns or available resources, a weakness that has been growing ever more visible. Poor rainfall and other climatic changes have reduced the amount of viable agricultural and grazing land in much of East Africa, leading to great strains on food supplies and plunging certain regions into famine. The civil war has

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contributed to food instability through the increased violence and lack of faith in the protection of the government. This situation has allowed for increased crime, specifically cattle theft, as cattle represent financial stability as much as a food source.\textsuperscript{9} With cattle being such a central store of wealth in South Sudan as well as food, loss of cattle can result in ruin for a family, pushing people away from areas with increased lawlessness and violence created by the war. South Sudanese displacement due to food insecurity, caused by both natural and human forces, is further exacerbated by the burgeoning water crisis. There are few clean water pumps in the country and those that exist are only available to those who can pay.\textsuperscript{10} Decades of conflict have left the country’s infrastructure in a state of disrepair, even in the capital of Juba, resulting in the lack of access to potable water.\textsuperscript{11} Since gaining independence from Britain, the Arab-majority government of Sudan had done virtually nothing for the Christian south, leading to the gross level of underdevelopment that South Sudan experiences today. Additionally, the current conflict has put a strain on what limited infrastructure the country has, and in many cases resulted in its destruction. Without water to irrigate crops, give to animals, or consume themselves, many South Sudanese are being pushed out of their homes in search of greater stability. With the majority of civilian deaths as a result of disease and starvation, it is no wonder that the current food and

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid
water crises play such an integral role in the creation of displaced persons and refugees.\textsuperscript{12} Though this type of movement would be considered by many to constitute displacement due to “economic factors”, the way in which these crises are compounded by the current conflict raise questions about how apt this strict categorization continues to be.

The effects of conflict do not only cause immediate displacements, but also deeply effect social institutions that help to further deepen the current crisis. The declining economic situation as a result of conflict and corruption, has made it increasingly difficult for young men to meet dowry demands.\textsuperscript{13} Dowries demands continue to grow because young women and girls are increasingly seen by their families as an economic tool in times of such instability. The inability to raise the necessary dowry to marry leads many young men to join militias, become cattle raiders, or leave their homes entirely in search of a wife elsewhere. This increase in young, unmarried men, has further helped to weaken the country’s already fragile state. Firstly, it fuels the civil war by providing a steady influx of soldiers to both sides. Secondly, it contributes to the food crisis by increasing the prevalence of cattle raiders and general lawlessness. Finally, it creates further internal displacement by uprooting many young men from their home villages and sending them to other regions or countries in search of a bride.


Internal displacement has also been exacerbated by the return of refugees in the years leading up to the independence referendum. With the end of the Second Sudanese Civil War in 2005 and talks of an independent South Sudan, the region began to experience large inflows from surrounding refugee host countries like Kenya and Ethiopia. Arriving back in their home country with little in the way of support, many of the refugees resettled in internally displaced persons camps, adding to the growing strain on the little resources that exist to support the displaced within South Sudan following decades of conflict. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) have also played a central role in the continuing power jockeying between the two Sudans. After partition, Sudan treated South Sudanese IDPs as Sudanese citizens and not as refugees from a foreign country. This use of refugees to make a political statement, specifically to delegitimize South Sudan as a nation, is reminiscent of Cold War foreign policy and is just another way that conflict continues to define the relationship between the two Sudans.

The South Sudanese Civil War along with the legacy of previous armed conflict have played a central role in creating the South Sudan’s current refugee and internal displacement crisis. Some factors may play a more direct role than others, but they all contribute to the general destabilization of the country and the insecurity that has led to many to flee their homes in search of a better life. Though touched on briefly, the role of ethnic violence is inexorably tied up in the


role that the civil war has to play in the crisis. These two forces are difficult to separate and one cannot be analyzed without the context of the other - the next section further elaborates on the link between these two forces.

Ethnic Cleansing

The conflict in South Sudan, while on its surface being a political struggle, contains inescapable ethnic undertones. Ethnic difference is nothing new for South Sudan, the region was sometime before the 10th century by at least seven different tribes and ethnic groups creating the heavily multi-ethnic region that exists to this day. Even with this diversity, conflict between the Nuer and the Dinka has been the one of the main fixtures of regional relations. There is a popular folktale told, and in some ways accepted as a fact, throughout the region of how the animosity between the Dinka and Nuer came about.

[The] Dinka and Nuer were two brothers living together, and one day their father summoned them and explained to them that since they were old enough to go their separate ways, he decided to divide his two cattle, a cow and a bull between them. Their father further explained that he decided to give the cow to Nuer and the bull to Dinka. He concluded that both of them will take what belong to them the next day and go their separate ways. Dinka was disappointed because he felt that his father favored his brother Nuer by giving him a cow which will produce

more cows while he is given a bull which doesn’t reproduce. Being very clever, Dinka devised a plan overnight to still the cow from his brother Nuer. He woke up at dawn and took the cow from the band and went his way while both his father and his brother Nuer were still sleeping. When Nuer and their father woke up in the morning, they found out that Dinka took the cow leaving behind his bull. Both the father and Nuer were very disappointed with Dinka and the father gave his son Nuer powers and told him that he will always return what his brother Dinka stole from him by force.\textsuperscript{17}

This story speaks to the, almost normalized, attitude of distrust that exists between the Dinka and the Nuer. Until political unification, the Dinka and the Nuer had relatively separate political structures, and so had little need to create inter-group trust.\textsuperscript{18} This lack of a foundation in trust was further exacerbated by the British colonial government that ruled Sudan from 1899 until 1956.

Similar in structure to the British’s system of control in India, governing of Sudan comprised of certain powers being vested in local Sudanese ethnic and religious leaders who


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid
were then overseen by a colonial British government. This allowed the British to use existing religious and ethnic distinctions to effectively “divide and conquer” the multi-cultural communities that comprise modern-day Sudan and South Sudan. Similarly to India, these identity based power structures helped to create an idea of inherent difference between ethnic as well as religious groups, magnifying existing prejudices and forming new hatreds - many of which define the nature of South Sudan’s current civil war.

These ethnic anxieties have been exploited by ruling elites to mobilize soldiers and create motivations for conflict beyond their own self-serving power jockeying. Ethnic violence has been present on all sides of the conflict and, while Kiir and Machar both have repudiated the charges of ethnic cleansing being leveled against their soldiers by the UN and others, it is evident that both militaries have been given a carte blanche to act as they wish. The killings seem to follow an “Action and Reprisal” pattern, with each act of ethnic violence against once group being subsequently matched by ethnic violence against the other and so on and so forth. Each village is made to wonder if it will be the next in a seemingly endless string of ethnic killings which seem to be carried out with random capriciousness.

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21 Ibid
Throughout the conflict there have been stories of individuals trekking through crocodile-infested swamps to escape roving militias, mass murder of civilians by suffocation in shipping containers, and people hiding in wells as they watched their village be destroyed - all of this to say, the fear of ethnic violence can be almost as powerful in creating refugees as the thing itself. With both sides of the conflict carrying out war crimes with seeming impunity, the ever present fear of ethnic violence has become a fixture of South Sudanese life.

One of the most troublesome aspects of the conflict, though there are many, is the normalization of rape as a weapon of war and mechanism of fear. Rape, and sexual violence in general, has been a disturbingly common experience among those fleeing the violence of the war. Rape has been used several times as a weapon of ethnic warfare, whether to destroy the reproductive ability, break the spirit of, or ruin ethnic purity of an opposing ethnic group. Given recent UN reports, it appears that all of these aspects are factors in the war crimes being perpetrated in South Sudan. The pervasiveness of sexual violence in the conflict can also be viewed in the context of anxieties around reproductive access. With more and more young men unable to marry due to rising dowries, rape, bride capture, and other forms of sexual violence


23 “New Report Identifies Causes of South Sudan’s Famine and Potential Genocide”


25 Ibid

26 Ibid
serve to alleviate these anxieties and serve as an effective recruitment tool. All of these factors have led to further fear of, if not of death, then sexual assault by anyone wearing a uniform. The pervasive presence of sexual violence as it relates to ethnic identity can help to explain why the majority of refugees in recent years have been women.

All combined, this persistent threat of ethnic violence has led to refugees of all ethnic identities leaving the country to escape the fear which has engulfed the country. But even outside of South Sudan’s borders, the fear still remains and ethnic biases still exist. There have been ethnically-motivated acts of violence within refugee camps, mostly targeting Dinka refugees. This also speaks to another element to South Sudan’s ethnic violence: the victims are overwhelmingly Nuer. The Dinka comprise the majority ethnic group as well as the group with the most political and military might. This has resulted in the Dinka having greater power to commit crimes against their enemies, specifically the Nuer. This is not to say that Nuer soldiers are blameless, but that the civil war contains an inherent power imbalance that has driven much of the violence, ethnic and otherwise, to disproportionately target Nuer South Sudanese.

Perhaps even more so than the presence of war, the threat and perpetration of ethnic violence, has created an atmosphere of fear within South Sudan which has contributed heavily to


refugee and IDP crisis. Given the current situation, it appears that as long as the conflict continues, ethnic difference will define the identity of those seeking to flee the embattled country.

Natural Disasters

Seasonal rainfall, linked the the wet/dry season cycle, has been a constant for South Sudan, but in recent years the amount of flooding that results from this seasonal rainfall has increased dramatically. The White Nile, which cuts through the heart of South Sudan, is incredibly sensitive to changes in rainfall and will readily swell its banks. Though several flood control measures, such as dams, have been implemented to prevent Nile flooding, the White Nile and other tributaries are still prone to these seasonal threats. In addition, much of South Sudan’s northern region is comprised of swamplands which can flood easily, engulfing whole communities. Flooding not only causes new displacements, but it can also affect those currently displaced. As of August 2014 “over 68 per cent of the estimated 1.3 million people displaced within South Sudan were sheltering in flood-prone sites”. This represents an absolutely momental amount of people and a number that only continues to grow. The lack of


31 “South Sudan: Floods - Aug 2014”
any adequate flood control also represents a significant obstacle to humanitarian intervention and infrastructure development that could help to alleviate the current refugee and displacement crisis. Beyond the threat of flooding-induced displacement, the increase in displaced peoples living in flood prone areas has led to a rise in the presence of disease, specifically malaria. Living conditions in internally displaced person camps provide little in the way of disease prevention and so the threat of mosquitos and other waterborne vectors further stifle relief efforts is a pressing one. Natural disasters, though perhaps less visible than civil war and or rampant war crimes, still provide another interlocking threat that has driven and worsened the current humanitarian crisis.

The causes of the South Sudanese are as varied as they are complex. They spring from social structures, historical tensions, and natural phenomena. While there are many direct causes and effects, many pressures forcing South Sudanese to flee their homes and their country are more insidious. They are the fear, the disease, the hopelessness that accompanies the vicious cocktail of horrors that unfortunately defines South Sudan’s present. Many pressures make one question what truly constitutes “violence” and how that violence should be responded to. The crisis in South Sudan is a dire one, created of interwoven causes and effects, and to which there are no easy answers.
Bibliography


