



Kiir Consolidates Power through Border Deal with Khartoum

RVI Field Update #1: South Sudan and Sudan

BY RIFT VALLEY INSTITUTE

Key points

- In August 2019 a series of armed clashes occurred in Aweil East state (formerly Northern Bahr el-Ghazal), on the Sudan - South Sudan border between militias aligned to Paul Malong's South Sudan United Front (SSUF) and the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF).
- These clashes were one consequence of a new border deal made between Khartoum and Juba in June 2019, after President Kiir visited the Sudanese capital and met with the country's transitional administration.
- The deal saw militia forces allied to Malong expelled from their bases in Sudan near Meiram town and the Kerior refugee camp in South Darfur. In return, Kiir agreed to help mediate with Sudanese armed groups from Darfur and the Two Areas (SPLM-N) and the new Khartoum government.
- The deal was strengthened by visits to Juba in early September by the new Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok and Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himedti', head of the Rapid Support Forces militia, who met with Sudanese armed groups and agreed the Juba Declaration for Peace in Sudan as a framework for further negotiations.
- The Sudanese delegation also accompanied Riek Machar on his first visit to Juba since October 2018, which may prompt progress of the stalled Revitalised Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), towards the establishment of a new Transitional Government in November.
- The deal is also likely to have positive domestic implications for Kiir. It will aid the president in his efforts to reconstruct the pro-Kiir SSPDF as part of wider efforts to consolidate military and political power before the Transitional Government is established.
- As well as satisfying the security interests of both Khartoum and Juba, the new arrangements may improve security in the region, which could stimulate the local economy, easing the passage of goods and people across the border. In the September Juba meetings, the two governments agreed that several border posts would be reopened.

Kiir's Deal with Khartoum

South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, visited Khartoum in late June 2019 where he met with senior political and security figures in the new Sudanese government. The removal of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, replaced by a Transitional Military Council (TMC), and latterly a 3-year transitional military-civilian government, has resulted in a reworking of relations between the neighbouring states, particularly with respect to their borderland regions. In parallel with this is the implementation of Revitalised Agreement for the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS), which was brokered by senior figures in the Khartoum regime prior to the removal of Omar al-Bashir. Continued cooperation from Khartoum is likely to be a significant factor that determines whether R-ARCSS is ever successfully implemented.

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Soon after Kiir's visit, militias associated with ex-SPLA Chief of Staff Paul Malong's South Sudan United Front / Army (SSUF/A) were given a few days to leave areas outside of Meiram town and the Kerior refugee camp in South Darfur. According to locals in the Meiram area, the primary motivation for expelling the militias was economic. Militia activity has hampered the free flow of trade and movement of people across the border. Improving local security through the expulsion of militias may help to ameliorate the local effects of economic crises gripping both countries.

The move also fulfils the security priorities of the two sides: In return for Khartoum's expulsion of the Malong-affiliated militias, Juba agreed to mediate between Sudanese rebel groups from Darfur (JEM, SLM-MM and SLM-AW) and the Two Areas (the two SPLM-N factions), and the Khartoum government. In early September, Sudan's new prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok (on his first international excursion) and Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Hemedti'—a powerful member of the new government and leader of the Rapid Support Forces militia—visited Juba and held meetings with Sudanese rebel groups. This culminated with the signing of the Juba Declaration, which outlines a framework for further negotiations.

Expelling the Malong-affiliated militias is also part of the military-security reorganisation of the Kiir government. The Northern Bahr el Ghazal – South Darfur border region has traditionally been a productive recruitment ground for the SPLA (SSPDF's precursor) and South Sudan government. Kiir's tried and tested military reform strategy is focused on integrating larger militias into his military coalition, after which he then seeks to eradicate smaller militias whose commanders are seen as being a threat to his power.

Destroying Malong's threat

Paul Malong has had a long and successful career in the SPLA. He was SPLA military commander (1996-2005); governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal (2008-2014); and Chief of General Staff (2014-2017). His *Mathiang Anyoor* forces (Dinka, meaning Brown Caterpillar) were originally recruited as a *dut baai* (protect the homeland) force between 2010-2013, when the government sought to mobilise against incursions by the Sudanese military and allied militias. They played a role keeping Kiir in power during the December 2013 Juba crisis, but have subsequently been implicated in ethnic cleansing and mass killings during the conflict.

Despite his influence within the SPLA hierarchy, in 2016 Malong's financial and military power were judged to have become a liability to Kiir (Malong was widely thought to have coveted the presidency). Also, his strategic utility was depleted as the *Mathiang Anyoor* forces had been exhausted by battle in Greater Equatoria in 2017. Malong was replaced as Chief of General Staff of the SPLA in May 2017 and was put under house arrest in Juba. Kiir also began the process of taking over Malong's financial systems (most notably the tax points and markets on the border with Sudan), eradicating his core backers from the region, particularly in his heartland of Aweil East, and installing Warrap-origin (his home region) loyalist National Security leads across the region.

Malong's release from house arrest was negotiated in December 2017 and from Nairobi he declared a rebellion in January 2018 as the South Sudan United Front (SSUF), which was excluded from the military reintegration processes devised under the R-ARCSS. A few Malong-loyalists rebelled with him. These included Chan Garang Lual (Brigadier in the SPLA); Kuol Athuai (former SPLA Major General, Aweil North county commissioner and advisor to Kiir on border relations) and Malong's former bodyguard General Manut Yel, whom he had previously given the lucrative job of managing the Warawar / Majok Yithau border revenues. The latter took with him a force of around 1500 SPLA soldiers.

Manut Yel and Kuol Athian took their forces—the largest of the pro-Malong group—northwards into south-east Darfur, where they set up bases around Meiram. Kuol moved to the area around Kerior camp where he recruited among displaced young people, particularly from Aweil East (Malong's home area). Over the last six months he also recruited, sometimes forcibly, young male migrants on the Meiram road between Darfur, Khartoum and their home areas across the border.

August border clashes

In early August, armed groups affiliated with Malong's SSUF/A were flushed out of their bases around Meiram town and Kerior refugee camp by Sudanese government and pro-government forces. On 16 August, the largest group, under the command of Manut Yel and Kuol Athuai, moved south across the border to War Ayen—a small barracks that controls the border post at Majok Yithiau. They informed the War Ayen SSPDF brigade commander that they intended to go to the SPLA-IO cantonment site at Pantit in the far west of the Aweil area. They were asked to put down their arms, but Manut's forces surrounded and captured the post, briefly controlling it before retreating into local villages.

At the same time, Santino Deng Wol (Deputy Chief of Defence Forces for Administration) and Butrus Bol Bol (SSPDF 3rd Division commander) arrived at Pantit to formally open the SPLA-IO cantonment centre. They travelled to Warawar, south of War Ayen, on 17 August and organised a peace committee composed of chiefs and elders from Manut and Malong's clans, as well as some Pachong clan members (maternal cousins to Manut) and a *beny both* (spearmaster) clan with spiritual authority in the area. The Warawar paramount chief Atak Awan, the brother of Paul Malong, headed the committee.

Despite this, Manut Yel refused to negotiate unless Santino Deng Wol directly approached him, or until he was allowed to move to Pantit with his arms. Most locals believe that Manut was aiming to get to Pantit with his guns so that his group could then fight their way across the border with the Central African Republic (CAR) and ultimately in to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where they hoped to link up with other armed groups. The SSPDF reinforced the military checkpoints at bridges across the River Lol, which Manut would need due to the high level of the river due to the rainy season. On 22 August, Manut's forces arrived at Kubri bridge and were forced to a stop by the SSPDF stationed there. Fighting broke out. Manut was killed and Kuol Athuai was injured and fled. He was later intercepted by SSPDF military intelligence attempting to walk to Aweil.

By 25 August, militias in south-west Darfur were also forced out. They crossed the river and began walking towards the CAR border. By Saturday 31 August, Malong's other forces moved from Kerior camp and crossed the river at Majong Dengdit and the SSPDF was dispatched to stop them heading west.

Rebuilding the SSPDF

The aggressive approach taken by Juba to Malong's SSUF/A contrasts with that used with Hussein and Agany Abdel Bagi Ayii's South Sudan Patriotic Army (SSPA), which has been based close to Meiram since 2016. While the SSUF/A is in the process of being eradicated, the SSPA is included within Kiir's military reshuffle, intended to shore up his control over the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal – South Darfur region.

Agany was formerly an SPLA officer and, subsequently, a member of the late Peter Gadet's South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), which rebelled against the SPLA and received support from Khartoum. He rebelled again in 2016 in protest at not being awarded the position of General in the reformulated SPLA (now South Sudan People's Defense Forces). He recruited around Meiram, particularly from defecting pro-Kiir Mathiang Anyoor militia fighters. Agany is trying to grow the numbers of his forces before bringing them to Pantit for cantonment under the peace deal—unlike Malong's group, they were included in R-ARCSS. Both Agany and Hussein have repeatedly visited Aweil and Juba in recent months and the SSPA is ready to move to Pantit now that Riek Machar, head of the SPLA-IO, has finally visited South Sudan.

SSPA continues to recruit migrant young men in Sudan and on the road to Meiram. It is understood locally that recruitment will resume in South Sudan during cantonment, under the new loyalist commanders and local government he has imposed since breaking Paul Malong's power structures in the region. This will help to reconstruct a pro-Kiir SSPDF using manpower from a region long used as a catchment area for military labour.

This is also a strategy for rebuilding Kiir's popular authority and trust in the region, which suffered economic crisis and thousands of conflict-related deaths during South Sudan's civil war. Recently, residents

were impressed by the fact that Kiir’s military and security forces turned first to local chiefs and elders for mediation with Manut. During research, Pachong clan elders emphasised that they had enough dead young men from the previous war (2013-2018) and that they blamed Manut for the deaths in these clashes as he had refused peace.

Kiir used his recent tour of Greater Bahr el-Ghazal in March 2019 to provide grain to frustrated barracks and injured soldiers and widows of Mathiang Anyoor. Renewed recruitment, under the guise of R-ARCSS cantonment, will provide much needed employment for local young men, and in return new military capacity for Kiir’s government.

Conclusion

In recent months, Salva Kiir’s government has deployed a range of tactics to achieve its objectives in the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal – South Darfur borderland, using the opportunity of Sudan’s transition to either neutralise or bind-in transnational military actors and fiscal resources, to strengthen its position in advance of the establishment of a transitional government in Juba:

- First, the deal with Khartoum over armed groups has assisted Juba in neutralising the threat posed by militias affiliated with former SPLA strong-man Paul Malong.
- Second, improved security in the border region, in part due to the expulsion of armed groups, is intended to enable more border posts to be re-opened, thus stimulating the local economy.
- Third, the approach taken with Agany’s SSPA—integration, rather than eradication—shows a different tactic at work, which will increase the government’s military strength in the region.

In these ways, Juba is attempting to reassert its control of the borderland, which it sees as integral to its wider governance strategy in South Sudan.



This is a rapid response note written by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) for HMG. RVI is a partner of the X-Border Local Research Network, with a focus on Sudan and South Sudan, a component of DFID’s Cross-Border Conflict – Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program. Members of the research network, formed under the project, have contributed to this note.