

Sudan-South Sudan

Background:

Tensions between the government of Sudan and southern Sudanese had existed since the time of Sudanese independence and focused on resources, religion, and the right to self-rule. A separatist movement emerged in southern Sudan in 1955, and tensions eventually escalated into a civil war between the Sudanese government and southern rebels. The Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972 ended the civil war and granted significant autonomy to southern Sudan. However, the Sudanese government canceled these arrangements, and a second civil war began in 1983 that was led by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), a southern rebel group. Negotiations on the status of southern Sudan were abandoned when Omar al-Bashir took over in a military coup in 1989.

The second civil war ended with the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and SPLM/A. This granted significant autonomy to southern Sudan and created a six-year interim period, at the end of which the South would be able to vote on secession via referendum. In March 2005, the United Nations Security Council established the United Nations Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) peacekeeping mission, which was tasked with helping the parties implement the CPA. In 2009, the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) was established with a broad mandate to promote the resolution of conflict and democratization in Sudan, headed by former South African president Thabo Mbeki.

PRE-CRISIS:

On 9 January 2011, the people of southern Sudan voted for the creation of an independent South Sudan. Independence was set to go into effect on 9 July. The CPA also granted the people of Abyei, a disputed region claimed by both South Sudan and Sudan (Khartoum), the right to vote in this process in a separate referendum. The AUHIP tried to mediate the modalities of a referendum in Abyei but was unable to do so over disagreements about who counted as a registered voter in the region. In the following several months, a low-level rebellion against Sudan (Khartoum) began in Abyei. These rebels were supported by South Sudan. The unresolved status of Abyei became the most important source of continued conflict between southern and northern Sudan that did not end once South Sudan became an independent state.

Summary:

On 19 May 2011, a crisis began when several Sudanese troops taking part in a joint patrol in the disputed region of Abyei were killed in clashes with South Sudanese-aligned rebels. This triggered a crisis for Sudan. The most important part of Sudan's major response occurred on 22 May, when it seized nearly the entirety of the Abyei region. This triggered a crisis for South Sudan, which was not yet an independent state. The most important part of South Sudan's major response was to send its Vice President to Khartoum to negotiate on May 26. South Sudan also appealed to the international community to get Sudan out of Abyei, while it and South Sudanese-aligned rebels in the region continued to clash with Sudan. However, Sudanese troops remained in place. On 1 June, Sudan attempted to disarm all armed groups operating in Abyei, an act which constituted the remainder of Sudan's major response to its perceived crisis trigger.

With the initial outbreak of crisis and hostilities, there was a flurry of mediation activity by the AUHIP, a continuation of the effort that it began prior to crisis outbreak. The United Nations also tried to get involved as a peacemaker in late May but was rebuffed by Sudan. Around this time, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon proposed a new peacekeeping mission to replace (UNMIS). After a month of escalating tensions, the African Union on 20 June managed to mediate an agreement in which both parties agreed to allow a new UN mission to monitor Abyei. Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi played a lead role in securing the agreement, including offering to supply peacekeepers for the proposed UN force.

South Sudan officially became an independent state on 9 July. The UN peacekeeping mission, known as the United Nations Interim Security Force in Abyei (UNIFSA), was deployed later that same month. Ethiopian peacekeepers comprised the entirety of UNIFSA in its early stages. Tensions between Sudan and South Sudan decreased slightly for several months, though they remained at crisis level.

Renewed fighting occurred in December 2011 with airstrikes conducted by Sudan. Sudan also imposed an embargo on South Sudanese oil transiting its territory. Fighting continued throughout 2012. The most severe fighting occurred near Heglig, a town in the Sudanese state of South Kordofan, in which Sudan managed to stall a large South Sudanese offensive aimed at capturing the town.

In the meantime, negotiations continued with little progress. The AU Peace and Security Council gave the two sides a deadline of 2 August 2012 to reach an agreement and threatened that it would adopt a “final” proposal on the Abyei dispute and refer the issue to the UN Security Council if a deal was not reached by then. The deadline passed without an agreement.

The leaders of Sudan and South Sudan met in Addis Abba under the auspices of the AU in early September, with the Mbeki-led AUHIP urging both of them to adopt previous frameworks to resolve the dispute. The AUHIP tried to get a deal on the status of Abyei, offering proposals for resolution that included a referendum. The AU Peace and Security Council even adopted another deadline of 22 September for the two sides to reach agreement, but it was not met as well. Sudan was steadfast in its determination to not allow a final resolution of the status of Abyei to occur or to promise a referendum without first getting guarantees that nomadic groups that pass through the region would also be included in the referendum.

Recognizing that negotiations would likely fail if the focus remained on Abyei, the AUHIP shifted the discussions to peripheral issues such as oil and demilitarization of the two sides’ common border—issues on which they had reached agreement earlier in the crisis but had not followed through on implementation. An agreement on these peripheral issues was eventually reached on 27 September, mediated by the AUHIP. This terminated the crisis for both Sudan and South Sudan. The agreement did not resolve the status of Abyei, leaving the area still technically part of Sudanese territory but mostly unoccupied, with the exception of a marginal presence of Sudanese military “police.”

By helping to bring about the final agreement that terminated the crisis, the AUHIP’s mediation effort had a minor positive effect on crisis abatement, particularly through its facilitative tactics

of bringing the parties together to talk. In addition to its role as a mediator, the AU adopted numerous resolutions demanding a cessation of hostilities during the crisis. The UN, United States, and European Union also made statements demanding that both sides end the fighting, allow humanitarian access to the region, and resolve the Abyei dispute. None of these statements had a discernible impact on the crisis proceedings.

Intermittent clashes continued after the crisis terminated. The Mbeki-led AUHIP mediation effort aimed at resolving the Abyei issue continued as well.

References:

BBC; Congressional Research Service; Enough Project; Global Peace Operations Review (Center on International Cooperation); International Crisis Group; New York Times; Sudan Tribune; United Nations.