



5.23.2011

SUDAN Thousands flee burning and looting by North Sudan forces in Abyei

Thousand of civilians have been displaced following the occupation of Abyei Town by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) at the weekend. Reports from the area indicate that 20,000 desperate civilians have fled across the river Kiir, and are sheltering under trees from the rain.

The UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) reports burning and looting by northern forces in Abyei Town, and members of the UN Security Council have demanded that North Sudan withdraws its 5000-strong force from the area.

Oil-rich Abyei is a disputed region, with both northern Sudan and newly-formed South Sudan staking a claim for the area, although the area is inhabited permanently by nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms. Tensions have continued to rise since a plebiscite to determine whether Abyei remains part of the northern state of South Kordofan, or is returned to Warrap in Greater Bahr el Ghazal that was due to take place in tandem with the southern vote on self-determination was postponed. The Abyei plebiscite is a key part of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which brought an end to the civil war that had ravaged the country since 1983.

The death toll in the recent fighting is yet to be determined, as many civilians are thought to have died in the indiscriminate bombing of the Abyei area on Friday, when the northern army attacked with long range artillery shells and Antonov aircraft, hitting several civilian areas.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) has received reports of at least one case in which a child was so terrified by the bombing that she ran into the bush and has now disappeared. One of the targets hit was a luak (a cattle byre) at Marial Achaak, north east of Abyei Town.

The shelling was in apparent retaliation for an incident on Thursday at Dokura, situated eight miles north of Abyei Town. A shot was fired at a UNMIS car as they accompanied northern troops within the Joint Integrated Units (JIU) out of the area. Although the incident has yet to be investigated, the north blamed the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and launched its attack, "It was a planned thing – they were just looking for a reason to start the war and found a reason", one source informed CSW.

Former politician and prominent Abyei elder, Dr. Zachariah Bol Deng, said, "The UN force is mandated under Chapter VII to protect civilians, and must do so as a matter of urgency. It is a terrible situation, very bad indeed. We really need help. We don't know what to do. We urge the international community to come to our aid."

In 2008 over 20,000 people were displaced when northern forces attacked and occupied Abyei Town. "All of the Ngok people are being displaced and forced to move south".

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "The indiscriminate attacks on civilians by the northern army and its occupation and looting of Abyei Town are unacceptable actions that threaten to reignite war and should be condemned in the strongest terms. While appreciating the Security Council call for northern withdrawal, it is clearly time for words to be translated into effective action. UNMIS must become far more proactive in protecting Abyei's civilians, in enforcing peace in the area, and in ensuring that the future of Abyei is decided not by force of arms, but in accordance with international rulings."

Notes to Editors:

1. CSW's sources report that the SAF had earlier killed four policemen at Dabolyia (Dakjur) 30 miles North of Abyei, and that Radio Omdurman had broadcast SAF threats to bombard the area in response to the alleged killing of members of their forces.