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SUDAN Abyei elder deeply concerned at deteriorating situation in the region

A senior elder from Abyei has expressed deep concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the contested region, which has been occupied by the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) since May 2011.

Dr. Zechariah Bol Deng, a senior elder of the Ngok Dinka tribe who are resident in Abyei, said, "Currently, people are still suffering, there are thousands living under trees near the river, unable to return to their homes due to the presence of the SAF in Abyei, and with very limited resources. The presence of the troops means that people are afraid to return to Abyei, and their situation is getting more and more desperate. Children are dying of preventable diseases and only a limited number of relief agencies are able to reach them."

Abyei is in a protracted political and military stalemate. A referendum on self determination, stipulated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) of 2005, was meant to have occurred in tandem with South Sudan's own plebiscite on January 9, 2011. However, it was postponed due to ongoing disagreements between Khartoum and South Sudan over voter eligibility. Attempts at finding a political solution were halted in May 2011, when the SAF took the area by force. At least 130,000 Ngok Dinka residents fled the fighting, the majority of whom are still unable to return to their homes.

A UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), composed of Ethiopian troops, has been mandated to establish peace in the area. Under the agreement, both the SAF and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) were to have left the region by September 2011. However, while the SPLA has fully withdrawn from Abyei, SAF troops continue to occupy the area.

On the anniversary of the postponed referendum, the Ngok Dinka people of Abyei filed formal complaints before the N Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism and to six UN special rapporteurs about the Sudanese Government's refusal to admit its violations to date, remedy the situation in cooperation with the Government of South Sudan, and withdraw its troops from their traditional lands.

In addition, Jonglei State in South Sudan, where severe inter-tribal warfare has caused an estimated 3,000 deaths and displaced over 100,000 people in the last two weeks, has been declared a disaster zone by President Salva Kiir. Tensions over cattle-raiding are common between tribal groups. However the violence in Jonglei constitutes the worst internal violence since South Sudan gained its independence.

Mervyn Thomas, Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive, said, "It is unacceptable that SAF continues to occupy Abyei despite the UN agreement. It is even more unacceptable that over 100,000 people continue to eke out an existence in such lamentable conditions due to this occupation. The international community must press the Government of Sudan to honor the agreement to withdraw from Abyei and allow the postponed referendum to take place. It is also vital that UNISFA becomes more proactive in securing peace in the area so that the civilians of Abyei can finally return to their homes."