



## **SPLM/A–Shilluk Conflict in Upper Nile**

The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) has recently been engaged in a conflict with elements in the Shilluk kingdom of Upper Nile state that it fears threaten SPLM hegemony within the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS). The conflict began with the SPLA suppression of four victorious parliamentary candidates from Lam Akol’s opposition SPLM–Democratic Change (DC) party following the April 2010 elections. Subsequent armed Shilluk banditry in Fashoda county was met with severe SPLA counter-measures that have hardened—and possibly expanded—Shilluk resistance to the Southern army and the GoSS. At the same time, only parts of the Shilluk community have embraced the militarization of pro-SPLM–DC elements, heightening divisions within it.

### **Pre-election period**

The recent history of the Shilluk, a minority tribe residing almost exclusively in Upper Nile, is closely related to the exploits of wartime Shilluk leader Lam Akol, who has played a central and divisive role in the community. Lam was a former high-level SPLA commander who split with the rebel army in 1991, forming SPLA–Nasir together with Riek Machar. He then separated from Riek to form SPLA–United in 1993 and signed the Fashoda Agreement with Khartoum in 1997. He remained on the government side until rejoining the SPLM/A in October 2003. Following the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 he became the movement’s appointed minister of foreign affairs (2005–07) in the Government of National Unity but then split from the SPLM once again. He launched the opposition SPLM–DC in June 2009 on a reform platform. Though some traditional leaders and elites supported him, other key Shilluk figures, including the *reth* (king), endorsed the mainstream SPLM. When Lam ran against Salva Kiir for the presidency of Southern Sudan in April 2010, divisions between his supporters and his opponents deepened.

From its inception the SPLM–DC has been met with open hostility from the SPLM/A, which fears Lam’s ongoing Northern connections, his public complaints about Southern corruption and lack of democracy, and the threat he could pose to the party’s control of the Southern government. Lam’s support for unity with the North has also undermined the SPLM’s increasing public calls for separation. In the months following the SPLM–DC’s establishment, the SPLA disrupted its events, detained and reportedly beat its representatives, denounced the party as an illegitimate organ of the National Congress Party (NCP), and tried to ban it from taking part in the elections (Sudan’s constitutional court rejected the ban). The SPLM/A has repeatedly accused the SPLM–DC of being an armed militia—dressed up as a political party—under the control of both Lam and the NCP.

### **SPLM–DC electoral victories, suppression, and subsequent violence**

The April 2010 elections proved to be a watershed moment both for Lam and the Shilluk. When four Shilluk SPLM–DC candidates for parliamentary positions in the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly (SSLA) were elected in Upper Nile, the SPLM/A refused to accept the outcomes and instead arrested and detained them in



late May. It was not until 31 August that the SSLA voted to restore their immunity as elected members of parliament. By that time, however, local Shilluk violence had erupted and SPLA counter-repression had led to a wave of deaths and injuries.

In May and June 2010, banditry increased in the Nile river corridor north of Malakal, particularly in Fashoda county. Then, on 25 June, unknown armed elements attacked a barge near Kodok (the capital of Fashoda) that was carrying Southern Sudan Police Service officers who were protecting a sizeable sum of money from the Constituency Development Fund (a decentralization and local development initiative created by the GoSS in 2008 and funded by Southern oil revenues, but accused of being a vehicle for corruption). The funds were intended for delivery farther up the river. When the SPLA engaged the attackers of the barge, three soldiers were killed and three others wounded.

The SPLA was quick to blame supporters of Lam and the SPLM–DC under the command of Robert Gwang, who is reportedly a former Upper Nile prisons officer. The army then deployed Division 7 infantry to, in the words of SPLA spokesman Kuol Deim Kuol, ‘clear the area of the Lam Akol militia’ in Fashoda county, particularly the Kodok area, where the river banditry was concentrated.

But the SPLA appears not to have discriminated between SPLM–DC supporters and others when deliberately retaliating against the Shilluk as a group. Human rights observers reported the army engaging in summary executions, rape, destruction of property, and looting—all accusations the SPLA rejects. For its part, the SPLA says that Shilluk youths led them to Robert’s hideout, where the army acknowledges killing 11 armed supporters. The sharp contrast between these differing accounts calls for more investigation.

The events of May–July have furthered divisions within the Shilluk community. Upper Nile Governor Simon Kun has offered to support reconciliation efforts at the political level; initial discussions between Shilluk traditional leaders began with the state government in Malakal in early September on both internal issues and ongoing land conflicts between the Shilluk and Dinka communities. Political discussions may not succeed in calming local tensions and resentment among the Shilluk, however, as there has been little follow-up at either the higher political or local community levels on the reconciliation talks held nearly three months ago.

While a conference of Southern political parties convened by the SPLM in October 2010 seems to have succeeded in rallying Southern political leaders around the common cause of the referendum, it may not alter the charged dynamics on the ground in Upper Nile.

Less than a week after the conference in Juba concluded, there were rumours in Malakal that young soldiers formerly loyal to Robert Gwang had agreed to join the SPLA and were to be transferred by river to Malakal for reintegration. What followed remains disputed. Officials in Malakal believe the troops did not stop in Malakal, but were instead transported farther south on the river in the direction of George Athor’s

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former base in the Fangak region near Doleib Hill. Suspicions that Robert's former forces may have joined George's men have raised serious concerns in Malakal and elsewhere.

In November, the United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) described the situation in Upper Nile as a 'low-level' threat, but one that could require the intervention of state security officers or other armed officials to prevent a rapid escalation of local conflict. According to UNMIS, there is 'a lack of clarity' over the current status of the ceasefire between the SPLA and Robert Gwang's militia, and chronic land disputes between Shilluk and Dinka could heighten existing tensions if no action is taken to resolve grievances on both sides.

Furthermore, the potential return of former Southern militia leader Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan ('Tang-Ginye') to the SPLA following an amnesty offer from President Salva Kiir in September 2010—the modalities of which have not been finalized—could increase tensions in Malakal, where fighting broke out in 2006 and 2009 when Tang-Ginye arrived in the town. Given that he reportedly still controls the majority of the troops in the Sudan Armed Forces Joint Integrated Unit in Malakal, these men could become vulnerable should his return to the SPLA become official.

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