

The Crisis in South Sudan and Its Implications for Ethiopia

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Since 15 December 2013, soldiers loyal to the deposed Vice President, Dr. RiekMachar, have fought against President SalvaKiir's loyalists in Juba in the vicinity of the Presidential palace. Emboldened by the rebels' success in controlling Bor, the capital of Jonglei State under General Peter Gatdet, Dr. RiekMachar announced his wish to be the next leader of South Sudan after deposing the incumbent President; a move that further increased tensions in the country. As the conflict continued between the warring forces, it was reported that thousands of civilians had been killed and that hundreds of thousands had been displaced.

The international community and regional organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and other concerned authorities, have been calling on the warring factions to show restraint and come to the negotiation table. Shortly after the conflict broke out on 19 December 2013, an IGAD ministerial delegation led by Ethiopia visited South Sudan to seek an end to the fighting. Signifying the grave nature of the crisis and possibly due to the challenges the ministerial mediation effort has faced, on 26 December 2013, the Ethiopian Prime Minister HailemariamDesalgne and the President of Kenya Uhuru Kenyatta travelled to Juba. The delegation of the ministers and heads of states met President SalvaKiir and urged both sides to engage in a dialogue. On 24 December 2013, Reuters News Agency reported that DrMachar had requested PresidentKiir to release his 'comrades' who were under detention

so that they could be evacuated to Addis Ababa as a precondition. Dr. Machar added that if the President met his demand they could begin their dialogue straight away. Rejecting the proposal for a meeting in Addis Ababa, the Juba government immediately insisted that dialogue needed to take place in Juba.

President Kiir has been encouraging and sometimes demanding the Republic Sudan to hold dialogue in Addis Ababa with the rebels fighting Khartoum. It is not clear why President Kiir would reject the same process being commenced in Addis Ababa. This seems to be the first challenge for IGAD and Ethiopia as chair of IGAD. The request by DrMacher for the transfer of detainees in order to commence dialogue in Addis Ababa and the precondition by President Kiir for the renunciation of revolt by his opposition should serve as a basis to defuse the tension. Despite Entebbe's initiative; Addis Ababa should be the most acceptable venue for the dialogue as Ethiopia is the current chair of IGAD and AU. But to avoid unnecessary tension and perceptions, Nairobi could also become an alternative venue. IGAD heads of state and government summit is scheduled on 27 December 2013.

Ethiopia's active mediation role in the current crisis is commendable and justified. While IGAD under the leadership of Ethiopia provides the best vehicle for dialogue, Ethiopia has a very high stake in this crisis due to a number of factors. A peaceful region, the two Sudans at peace with each other and at peace within themselves would benefit Ethiopia's peace and development efforts enormously.

First there is the issue related to the refugee flow from South Sudan to the bordering Ethiopian regions of Gambella and Benshangul-Gumuz. Currently close to 40,000 refugees are registered in Ethiopia while there are more than 50,000 internally displaced persons. Apart from Ethiopia's humanitarian responsibility to grant asylum to so many refugees, insurgent rebel groups may use the resultant instability to destabilise the border regions. The spill over effect of the crisis may also extend beyond refugee flows to the destabilization of Ethiopia's peripheral areas where kin communities such as the Nuer reside. With the vulnerability of porous borders, and the natural mobility of the Nuer in gaining access to the neighboring regions of Ethiopia, the consequences the crisis will not be limited to South Sudan. The long-term effect on Ethiopia's federal structures that rely on a delicate balance between numbers and power could be significant given previous historical experiences. In 2003, refugee camps in Ethiopia were at the centre of violent conflict due to the impact of large-scale migration on the regional state of Gambella with a population of about 160, 000. In Ethiopia's federal system, regional administrative power is allocated in direct proportion to the population of the country's ethno-cultural communities. The relative numerical superiority of a certain ethno-cultural community would therefore entitle it to more seats than the other. With a region that is known for cross-border migration (of the pastoral Nuer as well as refugees fleeing the conflict in South Sudan) where the national identity of the inhabitants of bordering areas is very fluid, the balance in terms of power sharing between ethno-linguistic communities in neighboring regions could easily become destabilized. Prior to 2003 changes in Gambella, an outcome of such demographic change due to influx from South Sudan has been the creation of what has been termed by one of the writers the 'minority in power but

majority innumber' situation. An influx of tens of thousands of refugees could create similar imbalance in the regional states bordering South Sudan again.

Composed of entirely Ethiopian troops numbering slightly more than 4000, the mission of the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) could be easily affected by the spread of the current conflict in Unity and Warap and the encirclement of Abyei. Facilitated by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, chief of the AU-High-level Implementation Panel (HIP), the Addis Ababa Agreement on Abyei was signed by the SPLM forces and the Government of Sudan (GoS) on 20 June, 2011. The main objective of the Addis Agreement on Abyei is to ensure that this border area remains demilitarised until proper demarcation is undertaken. The same agreement provided for the deployment of the United Nations (UN) peacekeeping mission from Ethiopia. The UN Security Council Resolution 1990 authorized a UNISFA under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. In response to the current crisis, the UNSC has approved the appropriate transfer of troops, force enablers and multipliers from other UN Mission including those in the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Nevertheless, Ethiopia may need be wary of any redeployment of UNISFA troops inside South Sudan as that could lead to a dreadful confrontational situation that requires siding with one of the factions. This will certainly affect its relations with both South Sudan and the Republic of Sudan,

seriously undermining the mediation efforts between the two.

Another diplomatic burden for Ethiopia is to keep UNISFA from implicating in the South Sudanese internal crisis. Deployed to help the mediation and prevent a border war between the Khartoum and Juba, UNISFA needs to enjoy the full support of the two states. If implicated in the internal crisis of South Sudan, the negative impact of a civil war between with in South Sudan will not be limited to the Ethiopia but also to the mediation effort by President Mbeki. Thus, Ethiopia has to tread carefully to ensure its fair-handed role of peacemaker and mediator.

Moreover, Ethiopia as the current chair of IGAD and the AU has to discharge its mandate effectively on behalf of the region and Africa. Thus, an additional diplomatic burden for Ethiopia remains the usual balancing role it plays within IGAD and the divergent interests of its member states, particularly Sudan and Uganda, who might lend support to different factions in this crisis. Here close assistance by the AU and the UN will be critical to ensure unison of messages to the warring factions, and their external supporters.

The long-term interest of Ethiopia in the region will only be ensured through democratic states that are peaceful within themselves and with their region. Support and encouragement for internal democratic reform of SPLM and SPLA is the best place to start with.

But above all, IGAD, AU and the UN need to note that at the heart of the current crisis lays SPLM; the current ruling body of South Sudan, which was formed as a liberation movement, is unfit to offer an effective leadership to transform a new war-torn country into a democratic state that could make

use its resources for the wellbeing of its population. Thus, solving the current crisis in South Sudan requires resources, a concerted effort and sustained pressure on the political leadership of SPLM and the military leadership of SPLA to kick-start a genuine transformation from a liberation movement and fighters to a Democratic Party and state army respectively.

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