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The United States Should Be More Assertive in South Sudan

Charlotte Florance and Brett D. Schaefer

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, is embroiled in a conflict that began as a political dispute but has been intensified by pre-existing ethnic tensions. The number of casualties and refugees is straining government and international humanitarian efforts. If the situation deteriorates further, investments made by the U.S. and the international community will be squandered. Pressure must be applied to both the government of South Sudan and the rebel faction to reconcile peacefully.

The U.S. has a key role to play in the mediation efforts underway in Addis Ababa. South Sudan is one of the largest recipients of U.S. bilateral aid in sub-Saharan Africa, and the U.S. was instrumental in helping the young country gain independence and stand up its government. Fundamentally, the current conflict is a political problem and requires a political solution. The U.S. should focus now on ending the conflict, political reconciliation, and humanitarian assistance. In the long term, the U.S. should foster in South Sudan a more robust multi-party system (in advance of the country's scheduled 2015 election), security sector reform, and improved governance and accountability.

Competition for Power and Resources. South Sudan is ruled by the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which is headed by President Salva Kiir. The SPLM and its military force, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA), along with other militias, conducted a lengthy rebellion against the Sudanese government. The SPLM has considerable political strength and credibility after it, assisted by international pressure and support, forced Sudan to agree to a referendum on succession and establishment of South Sudan as a nation in 2011.

The SPLM has struggled to transform itself from a liberation movement into a genuine democratic political party. South Sudan is a de facto one-party state with the SPLM controlling most of the government. However, the SPLM's political dominance has concealed considerable internal disputes among political and ethnic factions that extend back decades.¹

Political elites in South Sudan in the 2000s were united by their animosity toward Khartoum, but after the honeymoon of independence was over, competition for power and resources emerged. Donors have criticized corruption and opacity in government finances, particularly with regard to oil revenues that comprise roughly 80 percent of gross domestic product and nearly all government revenues.

Political Crisis Erupts. Tensions erupted in July 2013 after Kiir dissolved his cabinet and dismissed vice president Riek Machar. Ostensibly, this was done to downsize the government and address corruption, but the purge was also seen as Kiir solidifying his power and influence prior to the 2015 election.

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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Leadership turmoil in the SPLM coupled with Kiir's increasingly undemocratic behavior fomented strong resentment. Contentious meetings of SPLM party leadership in December 2013 culminated in open conflict between soldiers loyal to Kiir and Machar. Violence quickly spread to the streets in the capital, Juba, and to the oil-rich states in South Sudan. Although not absolute, the conflict also had a strong ethnic aspect with the Dinkas, the largest ethnic group, mostly siding with Kiir and the Nuer, the second largest ethnic group, predominantly siding with Machar.

Estimates of casualties since the violence broke out on December 15 range from 1,000 to 10,000 people.² More than 400,000 refugees have been internally displaced, and over 75,000 refugees have fled to neighboring countries.³ Humanitarian efforts to address these problems have been stymied by the conflict and the generally poor condition of South Sudan's infrastructure. In response, the U.N. Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2132 on December 24 that called for "cessation of hostilities and the immediate opening of a dialogue." It also demanded that parties cooperate with the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) in protecting civilians and facilitating delivery of humanitarian assistance and temporarily increased force levels for UNMISS up to 12,500 troops and 1,323 police—possibly through transfer from other peacekeeping operations.⁴

Peacemaking Efforts. The U.S., the African Union, and the U.N. have encouraged mediation of

the crisis and supported the peace talks in Ethiopia led by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)—a group of East Africa governments that fostered peace negotiations between Sudan and South Sudan in the early 2000s. Negotiations on a ceasefire and a political settlement continue, but with few tangible results thus far.

Kiir continues to characterize the dispute as an attempted coup d'état. Machar denies this, but did declare his rebellion openly on December 21. Kiir arrested and continues to detain politicians believed to be sympathetic to Machar, and Machar has demanded their release. Kiir has pledged to release most of them as a goodwill gesture, but has yet to follow through.

Both sides share blame for the crisis, but the U.S. has made clear "neither the United States nor the international community will countenance the armed overthrow of the democratically elected government of South Sudan."⁵ Kiir is supported by Uganda, which has committed troops to assist the government.⁶

Although the conflict is fluid, pro-government forces have been more successful thus far. However, control of Unity and Jonglei states remains disputed. South Sudan's government and armed forces are still in the formative stages and, with arms and veterans accustomed to irregular combat plentiful, a quick or complete victory is unlikely for either side. Nevertheless, Kiir seems reluctant to agree to reconciliation as long as he believes his position could improve.

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1. For instance, Riek Machar, who is ethnically Nuer, split from the SPLM and the SPLA, whose leaders were predominantly Dinka, in the 1990s and, after allying with the Sudanese government, attacked SPLM/A forces. He later reconciled with the SPLM/A and worked with the former SPLM leader John Garang and Kiir to help establish the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 that paved the way for an independent South Sudan. Until this past summer, Machar served as vice president in the government of South Sudan. Lauren Ploch Blanchard, "The Crisis in South Sudan," Congressional Research Service, January 14, 2014, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43344.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2014).
 2. Nicholas Kulishjan, "New Estimate Sharply Raises Death Toll in South Sudan," *The New York Times*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/10/world/africa/new-estimate-sharply-raises-death-toll-in-south-sudan.html> (accessed January 17, 2014).
 3. Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Assistant Secretary of State, "South Sudan's Broken Promise?" testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, January 15, 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20140115/101645/HHRG-113-FA00-Wstate-Thomas-GreenfieldL-20140115.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2014).
 4. U.N. Security Council, Resolution 2132 (2013), S/RES/2132 (2013), December 21, 2013, <http://unscr.com/files/2013/02132.pdf> (accessed January 17, 2014).
 5. Thomas-Greenfield, testimony.
 6. "Yoweri Museveni: Uganda troops fighting South Sudan rebels," BBC, January 16, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-25759650> (accessed January 17, 2014).

What the United States Should Do. The U.S. should:

- **Seek to end the conflict as quickly as possible.** Ongoing instability is not in the interest of the South Sudan, the U.S., or neighboring countries. The U.S. has stated it will not recognize the “violent overthrow of a democratically elected government,”⁷ but it has been reluctant to actively support the government in the current conflict. If this is actually U.S. policy, the Administration should explicitly endorse the current government and provide support designed to more quickly secure victory or pressure Machar to end his rebellion.
- **Implement sanctions on those interfering in the peace process.** The Obama Administration testified that it is “exploring” pressuring “individuals on both sides who interfere with the peace and reconciliation process in South Sudan or are responsible for serious human rights abuses.”⁸ Congress and the Administration should jointly announce that targeted sanctions will be employed against such individuals, including high-ranking members of the current government like Kiir if warranted.
- **Ensure all factions remain committed to free and fair multi-party elections by 2015.** The U.S. and other stakeholders should press South Sudan to finalize and adopt a permanent constitution through democratic means.
- **Make greater accountability and transparency a condition of economic assistance.** Those found complicit in corruption should be subject to travel sanctions and asset freezes.

- **Right-size UNMISS.** The Security Council has authorized troop and police increases for UNMISS. Although it is unclear how quickly this may occur, some of these forces are expected to come from other existing operations, which could compromise their mandates. Given the size of South Sudan and its challenging infrastructure, UNMISS has a limited capability to protect civilians there. Moreover, its mandate specifically places UNMISS second to the SPLA in order of responsibility for protecting civilians. Worryingly, Kiir recently criticized UNMISS as acting like a “parallel government” and demanded that government troops be allowed to search U.N. refugee camps for weapons.⁹ The U.S. should carefully monitor the situation to ensure that UNMISS is expanded with purpose and prudence, not impulsive reaction that might aggravate the situation.

The lassitude of the U.S. over the past year and belated reaction to worrying leadership trends, worsening corruption amid poor accountability, and reemerging ethnic tensions in South Sudan is concerning. America’s unique history and heavy involvement with South Sudan demands a more assertive U.S. role.

—*Charlotte Florance is a Research Associate for Economic Freedom in Africa and the Middle East in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies and Brett D. Schaefer is Jay Kingham Fellow in International Regulatory Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a department of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

7. Thomas-Greenfield, testimony.

8. Thomas-Greenfield, testimony.

9. BBC, “South Sudan President Salva Kiir hits out at UN,” January 21, 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-25826598>.