

The Shilluk Kingdom in Southern Sudan is Going up in Flames

Eric Reeves

The perversity of the irony could not be greater; even as the international community is finally finding its voice in condemning Khartoum's massive crimes against humanity in Darfur, the regime is cynically using this new focus of attention to resume and accelerate its scorched-earth military campaign against civilians in the south, particularly the Shilluk Kingdom of oil-rich Upper Nile Province. Using both regular troops and allied militia groups, Khartoum has killed many hundreds of innocent civilians, displaced tens of thousands, and has put additional tens of thousands of civilians beyond the reach of humanitarian aid. Indeed, just yesterday Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa) reported on the highly alarming suspension of relief efforts into a huge part of the Upper Nile region of southern Sudan:

"Humanitarian aid workers operating in the Upper Nile region in southern Sudan have been ordered to stop humanitarian activities immediately and leave amid increasing tension, it was stated Thursday. ... We have evacuated all NGO staff from mid-western Upper Nile region yesterday,' Abdalla Akece, an officer with Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SRRC) told Deutsche Presse-Agentur. Akece said the offensive is concentrated in the Nyigier, Aboroce, and Orenyngo [and] that Khartoum's policy is to clear the area of SPLA presence." (Deutsche Presse-Agentur, April 1, 2004)

This comports all too well with a series of extremely alarming and highly authoritative reports reaching this writer from numerous well-placed regional sources. Indeed, there is growing concern that Khartoum's brazen acceleration of military activities in Upper Nile is a means of derailing negotiations in Naivasha, which have already been severely stressed by the difficulties of reaching a peace agreement even as Darfur endures a holocaust. Khartoum has still not signed onto the US compromise proposal addressing the key issue of Abyei, more than a week after the SPLM has done so, and progress seems to have ground to a halt.

Khartoum knows perfectly well that a Presidential determination on the regime's "good faith" in the Naivasha peace talks is due April 20, 2004. The regime also knows that this deadline implies the drafting of a determination and report by about April 10, 2004---roughly a week from today. The regime clearly believes that the present stalling pattern can be

continued for at least this length of time, and that a "passing mark" can somehow be secured. It is for this reason that the US compromise proposal on Abyei hasn't been signed---but hasn't been rejected either: the expedient calculation is that by holding a decision on Abyei in abeyance, the regime will receive the benefit of the doubt.

The Bush administration and its diplomatic team has badly fumbled the diplomatic situation if it had any hope of using the leverage of the Sudan Peace Act. Charles Snyder, Acting Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, testified on Sudan before the House International Relations Committee on March 11, 2004 and explicitly invoked the Sudan Peace Act. At the time, he gave clear indication that the administration viewed the deadline imposed by the Sudan Peace Act as real---and a meaningful source of leverage. But how much leverage is provided if a Presidential determination and a State Department report to Congress are issued in the presently ambiguous state of affairs in Naivasha?

Certainly whatever diplomatic ambiguity has been allowed to remain unresolved, there can be no ignoring Khartoum's present military offensive in Upper Nile. These brutal actions must inform, and in a deeply consequential way, the assessment now being readied by the State Department for President Bush. That we don't have more publicly available information than we do is clearly the responsibility of the Civilian Protection Monitoring Team (CPMT), based in Rumbek and Khartoum. Extremely reliable sources have confirmed that the CPMT is simply not doing an adequate job of investigating reported attacks on civilians, and in particular the ongoing civilian destruction and displacement in the Shilluk Kingdom of Upper Nile.

The CPMT has this mandate for investigation as of a March 2002 agreement, brokered by the US, between Khartoum and the SPLM/A. But for a year now, the CPMT has been failing miserably in its responsibilities. Particularly disgraceful were a series of highly deficient reports on reported civilian attacks in the Longochok/Liang areas of Easter Upper Nile.

But the consequences are not only for the civilians who are threatened by the ongoing failure of the CPMT to fulfill its mandate. Lack of adequate reporting has highly unfortunate consequences for our broader and more particular understanding of the attacks, reported by humanitarian aid officials with responsibility for this part of Upper Nile Province and by other highly authoritative regional sources. Let us also bear in mind that some of these reports have been put emphatically in the public domain. The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks (Nairobi) recently reported:

"Clashes involving a number of government-backed militias and government forces in the Shilluk Kingdom region of southern Sudan are resulting in an increasing number of deaths and displacements. On 11 March, militias and government forces from Malakal attacked villages west of Awajwok including Alaki, the village of the Shilluk king, according to the Fashoda Relief and Rehabilitation Association (FRRA). The FRRA is the humanitarian wing of [Lam Achol's] Sudan People's Liberation Movement-United (SPLM/U), which realigned with the SPLM/Army (SPLM/A) in October 2003."

"In Alaki, houses were set on fire and cattle driven away by attacking forces, Gabriel Otor Marko, the FRRA executive director, said on Thursday. The militias were reinforced by government forces in gunboats on the River Nile, who then attacked Nyilwak, where they dispersed a large civilian population. 'An unknown number of people were killed or

wounded, houses set on fire and properties looted,' he said. On 10 March militias had also attacked the villages of Adodo, displacing its civilians." (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, March 19, 2004)

These attacks have been reported as occurring in specific places and on particular dates; this should provide the CPMT with ample reason to investigate: "Between 5 and 7 March civilians in Dinyo and Nyijwado were reportedly attacked by militias and government forces. Many of them had already been displaced to the area in January from Nyibanyo in similar attacks.

About 3,000 fled to Nyilwak, while others were killed and wounded, the FRRA reported." "On 7 March Obay and Pakang were also reportedly attacked by army and militias, killing nine civilians and wounding nine others. A dispensary and school were looted, a headmaster killed, cattle driven away and civilian houses set on fire. The populations of the two villages reportedly fled."

"On 4 March government and militias abducted eight women from Dinyo, taking them to New Fangak, where they are still being held; some of them were lactating and had left behind their babies." (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks, March 19, 2004)

Why has there been no urgent CPMT investigation of these highly credible reports? Why, for example, has the CPMT not reported on Malakal (on the edge of southern part of the Shilluk Kingdom), where a highly reliable humanitarian official reports an influx of 13,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs)? Why aren't these IDPs being interviewed? The government contractor for the CPMT, PAE Government Services, Inc., has an enormously lucrative contract for this work, courtesy of the US State Department: why is the State Department not holding PAE Government Services and the CPMT accountable? Why is this outrageous dereliction of duty, at this most critical moment in Sudan's history, not being addressed?

This same dereliction of duty was evident in February of 2004, when Khartoum-backed militia groups attacked humanitarian workers in Nimne (also Nimnim), very near Bentiu, epicenter of the oil region of Western Upper Nile. The UN's Integrated Regional Information Networks reported at the time (February 27, 2004): "Paramilitary forces in Nimnim, western Upper Nile, deliberately attacked eight aid workers working in the area last week, according to the UN.

The early morning attack on 20 February was specifically directed at the aid workers' temporary compound outside the village of Nimnim, where they had been staying for three days distributing food and other relief items, said a statement issued by the UN Humanitarian Coordinator. The relief workers came under rifle, machine-gun, rocket-propelled-grenade and mortar fire from 'unidentified militia forces' for 20 minutes, before the workers fled from the scene on foot. The gunfire was directed at the aid workers' enclosure, avoiding the local village, and targeted the relief workers even as they were fleeing." (UN Integrated Regional Information Networks [Nairobi], February 27, 2004)

At the time the UN urgently called for an investigation and despite this urgent plea there as no investigation by the CPMT: "The United Nations Friday called for an investigation into a recent attack on aid workers delivering assistance in the Western Upper Nile area of southern Sudan. The spokesman for the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator for Sudan

says unidentified militiamen used machine guns, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades to fire on eight aid workers during a relief operation in the Western Upper Nile town of Nimnim.

“The aid workers were not injured. They were bringing supplies to more than 13,000 people in Nimnim when they were attacked Friday, February 20. The spokesman, Ben Parker, says relief operations have been suspended in the area, affecting about 30,000 people. ‘This was a very targeted military attack from the ground, and in that sense, it’s something we’ve very, very rarely seen before.’” (Voice of America, February 27, 2004)

All later evidence of responsibility for the attack would point clearly to Khartoum and its militia allies. That such an extraordinarily brazen and vicious attack on humanitarian workers should go uninvestigated by CPMT, with the consequence that 13,000 civilians were precipitously denied all humanitarian access, is an utter disgrace, and one that does far too much to explain the CPMT’s current failure to investigate the civilian destruction and displacement in the Shilluk Kingdom, further east in Upper Nile.

Authoritative reports also indicate that there is massive forced conscription of young civilian boys and men by Khartoum and its militias in Rubkona, as well as Nhialdiu, Mayom, Wangkei, and Mankien (all in Western Upper Nile): why is this not being investigated by the CPMT?

There are far too many questions and not nearly enough in the way of answers---answers that should have been provided by virtue of the CPMT mandate and PAE Government Contractor, Inc.’s contractual arrangement with the State Department. These failures are not bureaucratic matters, or somehow a sideshow to the peace talks in Naivasha.

Indeed, Khartoum’s sense that it can act with impunity in Upper Nile augurs extremely poorly not only for the peace process but any meaningful implementation of the Agreement on Security Arrangements (September 2003). It is the obligation of the US to ensure that Khartoum understands clearly that there will be a fully informed Presidential determination about the regime’s “good faith” in the peace talks as well as its obligation to provide unfettered humanitarian access – currently non-existent in the Shilluk Kingdom and of course throughout Darfur.

This determination must, in turn, be made honestly and with a resolute sense of what the consequences will be if Khartoum is found not to be “engaged in good faith peace negotiations,” or is judged to be “unreasonably interfering with humanitarian efforts” (language of the Sudan Peace Act).

There is no room for hesitancy, disingenuousness, or omission- hallmarks of the State Department report of April 2003 in supporting the Presidential determination on Khartoum’s performance. The time for a full and honest reckoning is upon the world – and US the must speak first. To do so requires urgent, responsible reporting on the situation in Upper Nile Province.