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### **Five Years of War in Blue Nile State: Hope and Despair between the Two Sudans**

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Blue Nile State, located in south-eastern Sudan, is one of two areas in which the Sudanese government is currently at war with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-North (SPLM-N). The SPLM-N is a banned Sudanese political party with an armed wing. It was previously part of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which was established in 1983 and led South Sudan to its independence. In 2011, just before the two Sudans separated, those SPLM politicians and fighters that were expected to remain in Sudan, broke away from the movement to form the SPLM-N. The second area in which fighting between the SPLM-N and the Sudanese government is taking place is South Kordofan State, famous for the Nuba Mountains that lie at its centre. The conflict in these "Two Areas" (as they are known collectively) is also not isolated, politically or militarily, from the conflict in Darfur in western Sudan, where the Sudanese government faces other armed opposition groups that have allied with the SPLM-N.

This short essay aims to bring Blue Nile's history to the fore. It will clarify the dynamics of the current conflict in Blue Nile by primarily focusing on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) interim period - the period between the signing of the CPA by the SPLM and the government of Sudan in 2005, and the outbreak of the current cycle of violence in September

2011. This was a period of political progress and relative optimism, but also of mounting tensions. It is therefore central to understanding the root causes of the conflict in Blue Nile.

### **The CPA Interim Period in Blue Nile State**

Like other areas in Sudan's periphery, Blue Nile has a long history of marginalisation. Since Sudan's independence, land grabbing for commercial use, exploitation of natural resources, such as minerals and the Blue Nile River, and underdevelopment of the state have all been sources of tensions between local populations and the government in Khartoum, and were some of the main reasons Blue Nile populations joined the SPLM during Sudan's second civil war. During the interim period of the CPA, there was hope that such grievances would finally be addressed, and that a more equal society would be built in Blue Nile State.

Blue Nile State was an important theatre during the second Sudanese civil war, and the SPLM enjoyed the support of many of the local Funj (the "indigenous" African communities of Blue Nile). However, like South Kordofan, Blue Nile was excluded from the arrangement that allowed the South Sudanese to vote for secession in January 2011. The CPA brought Sudan's second civil war to an end, and allowed the South Sudanese to choose between unity and separation after an interim period of six years. The division between north and south in the agreement followed the line that divided Sudan's Northern provinces from its southern ones at the time of independence in 1956, with both Blue Nile and South Kordofan located to its north.

In July 2007, as agreed in the CPA, the SPLM's Malik Agar was named governor of Blue Nile, replacing Abdelrahman Abu Median of the National Congress Party (NCP, Sudan's ruling party). Agar, at the time the only opposition governor in northern Sudan, enjoyed strong support among African Funj as well as Arab communities.<sup>1</sup> To Khartoum's dissatisfaction, he won the state elections of 2010, and therefore remained governor until the outbreak of the war in 2011, when the Sudanese government dismissed him and banned the SPLM-N. As Governor, Agar

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<sup>1</sup> Traci D. Cook, "Losing Hope: Citizen Perceptions of Peace and Reconciliation in the Three Areas," *National Democratic Institute for International Affairs* (March 31, 2009): 30, accessed September 3, 2016, [https://www.ndi.org/files/Sudan\\_LosingHopeReport\\_2009Mar.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/files/Sudan_LosingHopeReport_2009Mar.pdf).

tried to address the old tensions in Blue Nile, which revolved predominantly around land and development.<sup>2</sup> He was also appreciated for traveling throughout the state and consulting with different communities.<sup>3</sup>

While Blue Nile and South Kordofan were not granted the right to a referendum on their independence as had South Sudan, the CPA provided the two states with the right to a “popular consultation.” The popular consultation was a vaguely defined mechanism. Its purpose was to ascertain the views of the states’ populations on whether the CPA had met their aspirations. In South Kordofan, the popular consultation was constantly delayed as state elections were postponed.<sup>4</sup> In Blue Nile, however, a Popular Consultation Commission was established. Between January and July 2011, it held public hearings in different locations across the state, with the participation of more than 70,000 people. According to international monitors, the hearings were “generally conducted in a peaceful atmosphere,” but the NCP and SPLM were both criticised for coaching civilians and attempting to influence the process.<sup>5</sup>

During the popular consultation, one of the most contentious conflicts between Khartoum and the SPLM leadership in Blue Nile was the question of Blue Nile’s autonomy. Throughout the process, the SPLM advocated, through its supporters, for “self-rule” (*al-hukm al-zati*) for Blue Nile State, meaning a larger degree of autonomy. This led NCP politicians to accuse the SPLM of trying to promote secessionism, in an attempt to follow South Sudan. Thus, the popular consultation, a democratic mechanism in its essence, also became a source of friction. Despite

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<sup>2</sup> International Refugee Rights Initiative, “A Crisis Normalised: Civilian Perspectives on the Conflict in Sudan’s Blue Nile State,” (September 2016): 16, accessed September 13, 2016, <http://www.refugee-rights.org/Publications/Papers/2016/A%20Crisis%20Normalised.pdf>, and Cook, *Losing Hope: Citizen Perceptions of Peace and Reconciliation in the Three Areas*, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Cook, *Losing Hope: Citizen Perceptions of Peace and Reconciliation in the Three Areas*, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Aly Verjee, “Unfinished Business: The May 2011 State Elections in South Kordofan”, *Sudan Tribune* 31 (March 2011), accessed September 3, 2016, [http://www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/Unfinished\\_Business-South\\_Kordofan\\_s\\_State\\_Elections-3.pdf](http://www.sudantribune.com/IMG/pdf/Unfinished_Business-South_Kordofan_s_State_Elections-3.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> The Carter Center, “Carter Center urges political parties and Blue Nile Popular Consultation Commission to ensure genuine dialogue on key issues in Blue Nile State,” (March 21 2011), accessed September 3, 2016, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/sudan-032111.html>.

its relative progress, it reached stalemate by August 2011 and was not finalised before the outbreak of the war.<sup>6</sup>

While tensions increased in Blue Nile around the popular consultation and South Sudan's independence, war broke out between the Sudanese government and the SPLM-N in South Kordofan State, and many realised that it was a matter of time before the violence spreads to Blue Nile as well. Despite the political progress made during the interim period, or as many argue, because of it, forces on the ground were already preparing for war. A Framework Agreement signed in late June 2011 by Malik Agar, the Chairman of the SPLM-N, and Nafie Ali Nafie, the Co-Deputy Chairman of the NCP, was rejected by President Omar al-Bashir. Consequent attempts by Agar and late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to prevent further escalation of violence proved fruitless. On the night of September 1, 2011, fighting broke out once more in Blue Nile State.<sup>7</sup>

### **Protracted War, Humanitarian Crisis, Political Impasse**

Access restrictions and the ongoing conflict prevent both international and local humanitarian actors from conducting comprehensive assessments of the situation in Blue Nile. However, it is more than clear that the war has had a tragic impact on local populations - in particular on those living in and around the frontlines, and the areas controlled by the SPLM-N. Food insecurity is widespread, health and education services are extremely limited, and an uncounted number of individuals have lost their lives as a direct result of the violence and as a consequence of the war and the humanitarian crisis. Displacement figures indicate how acute the situation is: some 172,000 people have fled Blue Nile State to South Sudan and Ethiopia since the beginning of the war, and a similar, though probably slightly larger number of people

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<sup>6</sup> The Carter Center, "The Carter Center Calls for a Peaceful Resolution of the Stalemate in the Blue Nile Popular Consultations," (25 August 2011), accessed September 3, 2016, <https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/sudan-082611.html>.

<sup>7</sup> James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce* (London: Hurst & Company, 2014), 150.

have been displaced within Sudan. In total, these numbers amount to some 40% of the state's population.<sup>8</sup>

During the last five years, fighting and peace negotiations continued simultaneously, achieving little progress. In the first stages of the war, the SPLM-N lost territories in Blue Nile, but proved capable of maintaining its control over some areas, mostly near the border with South Sudan and in the Ingessana Hills, in the centre of the state. In addition, despite the catastrophic impacts the war, local populations in Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains have not relinquished their political aspirations or their support for the SPLM-N. On the contrary, the war and the political impasse have encouraged uncompromising resilience and determination, strengthened by a local political agenda shaped by decades of conflict and further crystallised since and during the CPA interim period.<sup>9</sup> The uncomfortable implication of these processes is that the longer the war persists, the more difficult it becomes – politically, ideologically and financially – to bring it to an end.

Moreover, as the interim period and the failure of the CPA demonstrated, ending the conflict in Blue Nile requires much more than stopping the war. The current war in Blue Nile broke out five years ago, but its root causes have a much longer history. These root causes drove conflict in the area during Sudan's second civil war, and the attempts made during the interim period to address them eventually failed. Civilians in Blue Nile are not simply waiting for the aerial bombardments or the shelling to stop. They are expecting fundamental changes to take place in the Sudanese political landscape, and the interim period has already provided them with few examples of what the beginning of such a change may look like.

However, civilians in Blue Nile also know that the future of their state is tied to, and remains as unpredictable and volatile as, the futures of South Kordofan and Darfur. With the recent signing

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<sup>8</sup> Estimates of the numbers of internally displaced persons and the total population of Blue Nile State are disputed. See International Refugee Rights Initiative, "A Crisis Normalised: Civilian Perspectives on the Conflict in Sudan's Blue Nile State," 16.

<sup>9</sup> See also, Alex De Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 88-90.

of a Roadmap Agreement for peace talks and national dialogue, negotiations between the Sudanese Government, the SPLM-N and other armed opposition groups (operating in Darfur) seemed to have entered a new stage.<sup>10</sup> The full significance of this development will only come to light in the future. Meanwhile, expectations remain low.

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<sup>10</sup> The armed groups that operate in Darfur and participate in the negotiations are the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army–Minni Minawi (SLM/A-MM) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). See AUHIP, “Press Release: Statement by African Union High-Level Implementation Panel on the Cessation of Hostilities Negotiations” (15 August 2016), accessed September 3, 2016, <http://www.peaceau.org/en/article/statement-by-african-union-high-level-implementation-panel-on-the-cessation-of-hostilities-negotiations>.