



Sudan Field Dispatch: Refugees Provide Details of Attacks in Isolated Blue Nile State

Enough Team

July 2012



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The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

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The names of some of the refugees interviewed have been changed for security reasons.



Batil Refugee Camp, South Sudan

“They were shooting everyone. Women, men, children, and the old,” said Omer, a 28-year-old refugee from the town of Maganza in the Sudanese state of Blue Nile.

“I was in the market,” he recalled, selling goods harvested from his farm. “I saw the soldiers coming and shooting and I heard the Antonovs.” Immediately, he ran from the market back home to find his family. But in the chaos, Omer left his three-year-old son. “The war was too much,” he said quietly. “There was not time to look for him.”

In June 2011, conflict broke out in South Kordofan state between Sudanese government forces, or SAF, and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North, or SPLM-N, over government attempts to disarm SPLM-N forces following disputed state-level elections. Three months later, in September 2011, the fighting spread to Blue Nile state, where SPLM-N soldiers were also stationed. The SPLM-N in South Kordofan and Blue Nile are composed of forces that fought alongside southern rebels during Sudan’s second civil war.

Since the outbreaks of violence, the government of Sudan has severely limited independent observers’ access to the two states and categorically denied international humanitarian aid organizations access to populations that remain in SPLM-N-controlled areas.

After going through the registration process, a group of refugees move toward a selected site in Batil camp.

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A batch of refugees just bussed into Batil camp line up to collect a bucket, cookware, and a mat before they settle in their temporary homes.

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"They kill everybody if you are SPLA supporters, even civilians, women, and children," said Fatima from Jam, who said she saw SAF soldiers and militias enter her town. Fatima, who was pregnant when she was displaced, gave birth two months ago to a baby boy named Ibrahim. She her children had just arrived in Batil camp the day before.

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This denial of access continues today, despite recent reports that Sudan accepted the United Nations-African Union-League of Arab States tripartite proposal for the delivery of humanitarian aid to South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The United Nations reports that approximately 205,000 people have fled the conflicts in South Kordofan and Blue Nile to refugee camps in Ethiopia and South Sudan. A further 700,000 are severely affected or have been internally displaced by the fighting in the two states and remain trapped with little or no access to outside humanitarian aid or medical assistance.

In late June 2012, the Enough Project conducted over a dozen interviews with refugees in the Batil refugee camp, located in Upper Nile state, South Sudan. The interviewees all recently crossed the border from Blue Nile state into South Sudan. In light of restrictions on access to Blue Nile, interviews such as these are among the few sources of information on the conditions inside Blue Nile state. They provide insights into the government of Sudan's military tactics, as well as indicate the causes underlying the influx of nearly 35,000 refugees into Upper Nile state during a three-week period in late May and early June.

Sudan's Military Tactics: The Indiscriminate Targeting of Civilians Continues

Interviews with refugees suggest that the Sudanese government's military tactics in Blue Nile continue to be characterized by the indiscriminate bombing, shelling, and shooting of civilian populations and the destruction of civilian property. Refugees also described instances in which government forces detained and tortured civilians. These refugee testimonies cannot be independently verified, but they underscore the civilian toll of continued war and the need for access and investigations into the conflict areas.



A woman from Blue Nile carries her belongings to settle down in the camp.

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A number of refugees interviewed lived in villages where SPLM-N soldiers were also present. All said that the SAF did not distinguish between civilians and the SPLM-N in ground assaults by the SAF and government-supported militias. “[The soldiers] were shooting with guns, they set houses on fire. They did not differentiate between civilians and soldiers. They shot everyone,” said Mustafa, a 25-year old man from the village of Taga.

“They kill everybody if you are SPLM supporters, even civilians, women, and children,” said Fatima from Jam, who said she saw SAF soldiers and militias enter her town. According to refugees from Jam, the town did not have any SPLM-N soldiers stationed there but was surrounded by villages where rebel soldiers were present. “They are shooting everybody, the army, the community, the cows, the animals,” said Sinar, a 40-year-old woman also from Jam.

Mohammed, a 25-year-old refugee from Jam, said he saw Sudanese soldiers “collect old people in a building” and set the building on fire. “There were many [people], but I don’t know how many.” Magdi, a 39-year-old cattle-keeper also from Jam said he witnessed the same thing. He returned to the town after the SAF attack and said that he saw remains in the building. “You cannot identify anybody, all the bodies were burnt.” He did not have time to count the number of bodies. “It was difficult to count,” he said. “The Antonovs could come back. Many people died.”

A number of refugees also said Sudan government forces are abducting, detaining, and committing acts of violence against civilians. “When I heard the guns shooting, I ran, but the SAF had already surrounded the place. Wherever I went, SAF was everywhere,” said Magdi of the attack on Jam in September. He was captured by government soldiers and was taken to a village a two-hour walk away called Derang. “They tied my hands behind my back and forced me to lie on the ground in the sun,” he said. He was beaten with a stick for 10 days, with about 10 other men, most of who were elderly, Magdi said. He said everyone was a civilian.

Sidiq, a 25-year-old donkey cart driver, said government soldiers abducted him and his family in May from the town of Khor Gidat, where SPLA-N soldiers were stationed. He was hit on the back of the head with the butt of a gun, bound, and his upper arms were burned, Sidiq said, showing marks left on his inner and upper arms, as well as the back of his head. “They told me they would kill me when we got to Damazine,” he said, saying that the SAF accused him of being a rebel soldier. Sidiq said he was taken to a prison in the state capital, which has been under central government control throughout the conflict. “In the middle of the night, they came with cold water and threw it on me.” He was beaten every day, Sidiq said, and interrogated for intelligence on SPLM-N movements and supplies.

After being detained for one week in Damazine, Sidiq said he was moved to a town called Maganza, where he and an estimated 100 other people were kept in an outdoor camp where “SAF said you could move freely but you were watched closely.” Sidiq said that, every week, he was given enough food for three days, and that a water borehole was accessible. The population held in the camp varied in gender and age, he said, but a number of abandoned children lived in the camp after their parents escaped, leaving them behind. Sidiq said he escaped after 17 days. “All of my family was taken. They are still with the jallaba,” he said, using the colloquial term for Sudanese of Arab heritage.

Hajiba, an elderly woman, and her son, Jabril, from the town of Khor Gidat, said government soldiers abducted three women from their family, among others from their town. “I did not see the jallaba coming, but you hear the guns. I was lying on the ground, then I ran. I was afraid,” Hajiba said of the government attack. “They came at night and took people from the community.” “I don’t know if they are alive or dead,” Jabril said of the three sisters who were taken.



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Women and children climb down from trucks that transported them from transit points closer to the border to Batil refugee camp.

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A Dramatic Influx of Refugees into Upper Nile State

In late May and early June, 35,000 refugees poured into the South Sudanese state of Upper Nile. Most of the refugees are from the Ingessena Hills, which lie in the center of Blue Nile state. Unlike communities from other parts of the state, the Ingessena refugees with whom the Enough Project spoke did not experience fighting from the previous civil war; the current conflict was their first. The refugees interviewed were all initially displaced when the conflict began in September 2011. During the nine months that lapsed between the start of war and their arrival in South Sudan, most refugees described fleeing to the bush and mountains nearby for refuge from the fighting. Some returned to their villages and other towns when the bombings and shelling abated to retrieve food and other goods. Most described constant movement.

“I am moving from place to place. All this time I stayed in the jebel [the mountains] and in the bush, from the jebel back to the bush,” said Amna, a woman from Jam. On the journey to South Sudan, Amna had to leave her grandmother. “She could not move one day. We had to leave her.” She said they were still searching for her among the refugees.

“If you go back home to bring back some food, the [SAF] do not give you a chance. They start shooting and you have to go back to the bush. You don’t see them, but they see you,” said Issa, a 20 year-old refugee from Derang.

When asked why they had stayed inside Blue Nile for nine months following the conflict, most refugees pointed to the unpredictability posed by constant bombings and shelling by government forces. “The problem is bad security on the roads. When you walk in the daytime, the Antonovs could bomb you. Maybe you can stay in one place for one or two weeks,” said Kuol, a refugee from Jogom village with 10 children. “When I find a good place, I sleep, I find food for the children.”

One factor contributing to the recent influx of refugees into Upper Nile appears to be the opening of a corridor by the SPLM-N stretching from the Ingessena Hills to el-Foj, one of the main entry points into South Sudan through SAF positions. The majority of refugees interviewed said they ran through, or near, the village of Magaja on their way to the North-South border, suggesting this was a main thoroughfare secured by the SPLM-N. Some said they were told by SPLM-N to leave because the area would become unsafe.

“We stayed [in Blue Nile] because SAF blocked the place; nobody could go out to South Sudan,” said Jaffar, a 55-year old refugee. “SPLM[-N] and SAF fighting opened the road at Magaja.”

Awat, a 20-year old from Ferrie payam in Bau, said he left in March when the SPLM-N told his community that “the enemies are coming, we are not enough to fight with the jallaba.” Awat said the SPLM-N also warned the community that the SAF had a presence in Magaja and in the neighboring town of Silak and instructed the civilians to leave for el-Foj at night. Some SPLM-N soldiers ran with them from outside of Magaja to el Foj, he said.

Other factors contributing to the influx in refugees appear to have been an increase in fighting in the Ingessena Hills in April and May and the onset of the rainy season, which ensures that civilians have access to water during the journey.

When asked why the refugees had chosen to flee to South Sudan, as opposed to Sudanese government-controlled areas to the north, refugees expressed a deep skepticism about how they would be treated. “I refuse to go with the jallaba, and to places like Damazine. They may kill me, do bad things with me,” said Fatima. “[The SAF] look at us like animals,” said Awat.



Awat, a refugee from Blue Nile, said he left in March when the SPLM-N told his community that “the enemies are coming, we are not enough to fight with the jallaba.” He fled with his two wives and four children to South Sudan.

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Defending the Rights of Sudanese from Blue Nile and South Kordofan

The stories of refugees conveyed to Enough indicate that the government of Sudan continues its brutal campaign of terror against civilian populations in Blue Nile. Refugees from South Kordofan state have likewise conveyed similar reports of the indiscriminate aerial bombardment of civilian populations, ground attacks against these populations, and the denial of international humanitarian aid.

These actions constitute violations of the rights of Sudanese from Blue Nile and South Kordofan as provided for in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other international human rights and humanitarian law conventions to which the government of Sudan is a party, as well as international law. However, Sudanese victims of Khartoum's violations of international law in South Kordofan and Blue Nile are unable to seek recourse against the government before domestic or international bodies, as these civilians are either in refugee camps or trapped within on-going hostilities in the two states.

Enough therefore submitted a communication before the African Commission on Human and People's Rights against Sudan in April 2012. The communication requests that the commission declare that Sudan has violated the rights of Sudanese civilians provided for in the African Charter, alert the African Union to the actions of the government of Sudan, and take all measures within its powers to "avoid irreparable damage being cause to the victim[s]," among other requests.



"We stayed [in Blue Nile] because SAF blocked the place; nobody could go out to South Sudan," said Jaffar, a 55-year old refugee from the village of Jam. "SPLA and SAF fighting opened the road at Magaja." During the journey down, Jaffar said, there was no food and "the planes came to bomb" the fleeing civilians. "Still [Blue Nile] is not good, there are still bombings and shelling even now," he said.

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Enough anticipates that the commission will review its communication during its upcoming session, scheduled to begin later this month. To this end, Enough encourages the commission to accept immediately its case and initiate the required proceedings against the government of Sudan. Members of the international community should explore further mechanisms to ensure that the rights of Sudanese citizens in South Kordofan and Blue Nile are protected, and that violations of those rights are appropriately addressed. Diplomatic efforts on the part of the United States, the United Nations, the African Union, and others must continue in earnest to guarantee that the government of Sudan extends international humanitarian aid organizations full and unhindered access to all civilian populations throughout the two states, including those residing in SPLM-N-controlled areas. Khartoum's delaying tactics and disingenuous declarations concerning the delivery of aid to South Kordofan and Blue Nile must no longer distract the international community from what matters the most: the protection of vulnerable Sudanese populations in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, South Sudan, eastern Congo, and areas affected by the Lord's Resistance Army. Enough conducts intensive field research, develops practical policies to address these crises, and shares sensible tools to empower citizens and groups working for change. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

