Africa Summary

Division and Conflict in South Sudan: Challenges to the Humanitarian Response

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5 February 2014
INTRODUCTION

This document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 23 January 2014, which focused on the challenges to the humanitarian response in South Sudan.

Conflict in South Sudan has claimed thousands of casualties and displaced over half a million people since violence erupted in December 2013. Eric Marclay discussed the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict and challenges confronting humanitarian operations. He discussed the impacts of the politics of the crisis and views on international options to engage for a sustainable return to peace and stability.

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ERIC MARCLAY

The speaker expressed his belief that it was clear that the political tensions within the leadership of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) were increasing. He stated that the international community failed to detect certain aspects of the tensions in the months leading up to 15 December and should have been able to implement certain policies that would have prevented violence from breaking out. While political conflict was predicted, nobody could have predicted the scale of the violence that has erupted in South Sudan.

There have been violent incidents in the country recently, including the outbreak of ethnic violence in Jonglei in the last few years. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) subsequently increased its presence in Jonglei. The likelihood of ethnic violence in South Sudan was something that the ICRC and the international community were already aware of but the sheer level of violence in the country since 15 December has taken the entire international humanitarian community by surprise.

The current crisis has its roots in political differences but there is also a personal dynamic at play. The speaker stated that, as a result of visiting South Sudan, and through speaking with a number of interlocutors on both sides of the conflict, he has become aware that the crisis has transformed into a deep, ethnical divide. It is important to keep the ethnic dimension of the
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conflict in mind when considering how best to deal with the humanitarian situation.

There have been a number of vocal claims from both sides in the conflict concerning the events that occurred in Bor in 1991, when at least 2,000 Dinka were massacred by a group of SPLA-Nasir fighters. These fighters were mainly Nuer and were commanded by Riek Machar. However, these ethnic difficulties were largely put aside during South Sudan’s struggle for independence.

The speaker noted that he is fearful for the future of South Sudan. Only two years after gaining independence, the country is dangerously fragmented. The international community must do everything in its power to assist the fledging state in the difficult task of nation-building, and, considering past examples from neighbouring countries, find a way to maintain peace in the new state. Further political and societal fragmentation must be halted and South Sudan must find a way to secure a common vision for the future of the state.

The speaker stated that the ICRC has also been surprised by the roles played in the conflict by South Sudan’s neighbours. It is too early to tell whether these roles will be positive or negative. The alliance connecting Khartoum, Juba and Kampala is very surprising and, as such, the regional perspective needs to be taken into consideration when discussing humanitarian responses. Kampala seems to be playing the role of the regional police; Addis Ababa seems to be the regional peacemaker and Khartoum claims that it is only interested in protecting South Sudan’s vital oilfields. The ongoing SPLM-North situation in Blue Nile and South Kordofan states must also be considered.

The speaker stated that humanitarian organizations are normally needs-based. When a conflict arises a humanitarian team is deployed; this team evaluates the situation, makes an assessment and then answers to the perceived needs of the region. However, this scenario does not apply to what is happening in South Sudan. The country requires a capacity-based operation, as opposed to a needs-based operation. Capacity in logistics, human resources and financial resources are all urgently needed. Indeed, South Sudan was in dire need of these types of assistance even before the current outbreak of violence.

There are currently around 800,000 internally displaced persons in South Sudan. As a result, the country needed a huge level of emergency
assistance, early recovery and developmental and structural support. The United Nation’s current development initiative in the country is their second largest operation in the world, and South Sudan is the ICRC’s third or fourth largest global operation.

The political complexity and ethnic fragmentation of South Sudan means that the international humanitarian community is still a considerable way off from fulfilling its mission. The speaker stated that he hoped that negotiations between the rival factions of the SPLA continue, that the ceasefire holds and that a solution to the conflict is found. However, the humanitarian crisis will remain long after the violence ends.

The entire humanitarian community must work in an emergency mode in order to answer the pressing needs of the population of South Sudan. The community must also consider the future construction of the country. Satellite photographs of the country show that extensive damage has occurred. Furthermore, in less than six months time, South Sudan will enter the wet season. It is a very complex, multi-layered humanitarian situation and the ICRC and other organizations must think ahead and anticipate further obstacles.

In terms of a practical response to the humanitarian crisis, the speaker stated that, prior to the outbreak of violence, the ICRC had already been deploying all possible means to certain parts of the country. It is now expanding its operations across the country and will continue to anticipate future problems by planning at least six months in advance. Before the crisis, there were two surgical teams in the country, this has now been increased to five teams, four of which are mobile and will be able to react quickly in times of need. Water, sanitation and other programs will also see similar increases.

The speaker stressed that the current situation for the ICRC in South Sudan is difficult. The organization was forced to withdraw from certain locations for security reasons but has not so far been politically blockaded from certain areas. The ICRC has been able to travel freely throughout the country. Through the ICRC’s extensive communications network, it was possible to contact the relevant political actors in the crisis. Although the ICRC does not know the location of Riek Machar, it has been possible to contact him. While both the Machar-aligned leadership and the government in Juba have promised the ICRC freedom of movement in South Sudan, both sides have warned that they do not have total control of all of their troops on the ground.
While South Sudan has been relatively unstable for many years, the fact that a strategically important town like Bor has been captured and re-captured five times in the past few weeks is a new phenomenon. However, the ICRC has remained in Juba throughout the conflict and there is a surgical team situated in Malakal. The ICRC hospital in Bor has sustained less looting than might be apparent from media reports on the town and an ICRC surgical team in Bor is expected to be operational in the coming days. The ICRC is also working closely with the South Sudanese Red Cross in places where the UN and other NGOs are not present.

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Questions

There have been various humanitarian organizations present in South Sudan for decades. The problems, although complex, are usually always the same. Logistics, capacity-building and security have been omnipresent issues. Is it time for the international community to scrutinize the reasons behind why there hasn’t been more progress?

Could the speaker expand on the issue of the protection of civilians? The UN Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) has been allowing civilians to shelter in their compounds. Have other strategies been put in place in order to reduce the impact of the conflict on the civilian population? Furthermore, is humanitarian access an issue in light of the widespread looting that is being reported?

Eric Marclay

The speaker stated that, while it is not for the ICRC to speak for the entire international community, he has asked himself the same question. Following his first visit to South Sudan, the speaker stated that he could not readily see all of the investments that the international community had made in the new country. It is possible that the development community focused too much attention on emergency assistance. However, the efforts of the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations have been instrumental in helping many people to survive crisis in the country, and they have learned quite a lot about how to make their humanitarian operations more resilient. The ICRC has moved a long way from simply dropping food packages and saving individual lives, to actively considering the future development of regions in crisis.
South Sudan, the ICRC is anticipating and planning for the future reconstruction of the country. The speaker stated that everything that was in the most recent annual budget for South Sudan, including seeds and tools, will be maintained, as long as the security situation allows it.

The speaker stated that, while he is not fully knowledgeable about the capacity of UNMISS, the situation can be viewed through either a 'glass half empty' or 'glass half full' prism. By allowing people to shelter in their compounds, UNMISS has saved the lives of over 80,000 people. However, the question of the protection of civilians needs to be addressed. Even if the Kiir and Machar factions come to an agreement, it is possible that elements of the population will not accept this outcome. Deep political and ethnic fractures exist in South Sudan. People will eventually have to leave the UNMISS camps and they will have resume living with their neighbours.

The ICRC is engaging with the two warring parties on the matter of protecting civilians. It is not an easy task but the ICRC has maintained, and will continue to maintain, quiet dialogue with all parties. Although some may criticize the ICRC for this approach, the speaker alluded to Nelson Mandela's views on the ICRC, by quoting 'it is not only the good that we bring, it is also the bad that we prevent'. Many people have been killed, but by maintaining dialogue, continuing training and by encouraging donors to support the ICRC’s approach, the organization has saved many lives. In addition to the direct assistance that the ICRC provides, preventive action is a very important aspect of the organization’s strategy in South Sudan.

Looting has been a problem for the ICRC; a few vehicles were taken in Bor and the organization’s office was also looted. However, this office was established relatively recently. The office in Bentiu is also quite new and suffered partial looting. The ICRC has had a much longer presence in Malakal and the organization is very well known there. As such, the hospital and office there were not looted. The speaker expressed his belief that the ICRC was not specifically targeted in any of these areas. Humanitarian organizations are looted primarily due to their expensive computers and vehicles. It is not because of what the ICRC and other organization’s represent. Many of the people in South Sudan have nothing and are desperate.

**Comment**

While the speaker mentioned Malakal numerous times, he did not mention the wider Shilluk region, of which Malakal is a part of. President Kiir has strategically placed 42 military stations in populated areas. Some Shilluk
people have taken up arms in order to defend themselves from the Dinka-dominated government in Juba. The social fabric of the region is being destroyed and the government is committing atrocities against the Shilluk people. Nobody is talking about this. The ICRC should visit the region and report to the world that genocide is taking place.

**Eric Marclay**

One of the main strengths of the ICRC is its confidential approach. The organization must build trust and confidence with all actors and try to change influence the crisis from the inside. The speaker stated that, while the ICRC will certainly visit the Shilluk region, he regrets that the organization will not be able to make any public statements. This is not the way that the organization operates; it must strive to maintain dialogue. Bilateral confidence-building measures have always been the most effective method for the ICRC. The ICRC only makes public denouncements when all other possible options have been exhausted.

**Question**

How is the ICRC cooperating with the South Sudanese Red Cross? It is a very young national society and has limited capacity. How is the ICRC supporting them?

**Eric Marclay**

The speaker stated that a national Red Cross society is essentially a mirror image of a society. These societies need very strong investment and support. Even before the crisis, the ICRC had supported the South Sudanese branch with first-aid training and disaster management, and will continue to invest its resources. The South Sudanese national society was instrumental in providing protection for the people of Bentiu early on in the crisis. National societies will often be the first responder in a crisis and the ICRC will continue to support them. It is important that the national societies that operate under the flag of both the ICRC and the International Community of the Red Crescent are able to provide early support in conflicts.