



Opposition soldiers pose for a picture 8 January 2019 while loading their guns in Panyume town, the headquarters for the opposition in Central Equatoria state, in South Sudan, where previously warring parties have been working to rebuild trust in some of the areas hardest hit by the war. (Photo by Sam Mednick, Associated Press)

Unified Tribes

Part IV

Maj. Philip Neri, U.S. Army

**13 October 2044, CJATF
Headquarters, Juba**

[Phone rings]

“Hello?” Nazer answered.

“Abdo, this is Corey. Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you. What can I do for you, Colonel?” Abdo replied with a slight irritation in his voice.

“Nuer militia attacked in Juba yesterday. Do you know anything about this?” I queried.

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“I know very little. Some of our commanders expressed they wanted to attack while the government was regrouping.”

“Okay, can you explain this strategy to me? What do they think the response will be? They did not do enough damage to weaken the government.”

“They are doing what all Nuer do in this situation. We are simply trying to exhaust the government until they have to accept us.”

“Exhaustion...?” I paused for a moment before speaking. “But we are working with the president to stop the violence. That is part of the reason why they haven’t attacked recently. What do you expect will happen when your fighters exploit the lull in fighting? We are not here to resolve your political problems, but we are here to help you do it peacefully.”

“I understand your position, Colonel, but you need to understand our position. President Rayan has the power and the population behind him. We are in the minority and must take every advantage we can to defeat him. I did not sanction this attack, but what you fail to see is that there are others who are willing to replace me as a leader if I can’t show progress. To help you, you must help me. You must give me something. Something that I can show we are making progress with the government.”

“The government not attacking wasn’t enough?” I quickly retorted.

“Periods of no attacks usually means they are strategizing or regrouping. It does not change our position.”

“Okay, okay. Then what did you have in mind?”

“Safe passage into Juba, aid from the international community to us, not the government, and pro-American messages showing Nuer support.”

“I understand and I don’t blame you for the way you feel. What we are asking is that you help us with a ceasefire. We’ve been doing our part to keep government security forces from hitting you. Here’s the deal, Abdo. We know your forces have been smuggling more weapons.” I recalled this information from the update brief given by the British commander. “Safe passage into Juba could very well mean more preplanned attacks not unlike what happened yesterday.”

“Here is what I will do, Colonel. I will go and see who initiated this attack. But you need to realize that our coalition of fighters are not as unified as you think. We do not command all forces like an American general does his army.”

“Okay, Abdo. I understand. Thank you for your help with this.”

“Goodbye, Colonel.”

Not feeling totally satisfied with that exchange, I reoriented my mind toward the moment I dreaded: going to meet with Defense Minister Halim Okot. I knew he was going to have an earful for me after this latest Nuer attack.

Barry and I pulled up to the entrance of South Sudan’s Ministry of Defense. It was a clear and sunny day with a slight wind from the east. We had been here numerous times to hold engagements with the minister of defense and his staff, but this time was going to be different.

As we walked up to the marble white building, two security guards opened the main doors. Staff officers stood in the hallways discussing the latest Nuer attacks and how they should retaliate. Some of the officers suggested that they should wipe out the entire Nuer clan while other officers wanted to starve them to death; a very familiar method of dying for populations on the African continent. We continued down the hall and then stepped into the office of Okot’s secretary.

“Hello, we are scheduled to speak with the defense minister at one o’clock.”

“Yes, he is expecting you. Please, go right in.”

As we entered the room, the defense minister was sitting at his desk looking through reports. His eyes darted toward the door as we crossed the threshold into his office.

“Hello, Mr. Defense Minister.”

“Colonel Hernandez, why haven’t the Americans handed over the Nuer rebels they captured?” Okot roared back.

“Defense Minister, please, we are in new territory here. We have not held Nuer rebels captive, but we want to mitigate the violence. If we hand them over, which it is not my decision, what could we expect from the government?”

“Justice! Justice, for those who were killed and their families. Isn’t that what you would do in America?” His remark sounded more like a demand rather than a question.

“Sir, with all due respect, demonstrations of South Sudanese ‘justice’ is what brought us here in the first place,” I replied.

“Have we not abided by the ceasefire? Is this not a betrayal of Salim and his militia? Do you not consider their actions criminal?”

“Yes, but what we want to avoid is an information victory that could be exploited. If you retaliate with a heavy hand

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against these Nuer fighters, their leadership will not only use it to demonize the government, but also galvanize their coalition and use it to recruit others to their cause,” I argued.

Okot’s eyes sharpened. “Their acts cannot go unanswered. I met with the president about how we should respond. He is considering his options as we speak. We must show the people that there will be justice.”

“The difference between revenge and justice is that revenge is about payback and backed my emotion. Justice is backed by reason and seeks closure. Revenge simply perpetuates cycles; in this case, of violence.” I attempted to reason with him. Okot looked down at the ground, scowling.

Barry interrupted, “Why don’t we consider another option?” Okot looked up at him, still frowning. “This could be an opportunity for President Rayan.”

“What do you mean?” Okot responded.

“As the Colonel mentioned, revenge is about cycles, and surely South Sudan has seen its share of violent cycles since its independence. But perhaps we can bring about a different future for the South Sudanese people. A unique future ushered in by President Rayan.”

Okot’s eyes widened. “President Rayan? Are you kidding?” he replied, laughing. “Do you know what you are saying? President Rayan, like many of us, has been fighting the Nuer since we were born, you do not under—”

Barry jumped back in. “Yes, yes, we all know of the incessant fighting between your two ethnic groups for the past three decades, but now might be a good time to change the political calculus. You and the president have an opportunity here. You hold the power, the ability to play victim after the last attack, and an opportunity to take the high road. Are you really going to let that go to waste?”

Okot glanced at both of us with an intrigued look and then turned to look at the wall as if contemplating his options. “I take your point, Mr. Barry, but it is not up to me what we do.”

“But it is you that can influence the president, no?” I asked.

“Maybe. Like I said, we all have our personal histories of fighting the Nuer. President Rayan is not easily influenced, but maybe we can do something,” Okot reluctantly relented.

We chatted about what steps we could take to help move things forward and get General Larson and the ambassador

on board. We then departed on much better terms than where we began.

Leaving the ministry of defense, Barry asked, “Good meeting, Colonel?”

“It was somewhat productive,” I replied as we hopped back into our truck.

When I got back to my office, I saw that General Wright had responded to my email:

Corey,

I was afraid it was heading in that direction. Do you see any evidence of South Sudan splitting yet again, creating one state for the Dinka and one for the Nuer? If you haven’t heard any grumblings about it down there, that is Washington’s primary concern and they keep ping us for atmospherics. No one wants to see a split following a U.S.-led intervention. Keep up the good work and let me know if you need anything.

Very Respectfully,

B. Wright

I hadn’t really considered a further breakup of South Sudan along tribal fault lines. That wouldn’t even work. The two tribes would never agree on how to break up the provinces. That had been a long point of contention that dated back to the beginning of the conflict.¹ I would think there were people at AFRICOM who knew that and could easily squash such rumors. It didn’t really add up to me, but I wasn’t too worried about it.

Meanwhile, Gen. Larson had been discussing the fire-fight with the UNMISS commander, Gen. Chao. Larson met Chao at the UN headquarters in Juba and when he arrived, Chao was busy on the phone with Beijing discussing the matter. The UN headquarters in New York had also contacted Chao in an attempt to get an understanding of the situation to brief the UN Secretary General. However, they would have to wait until he was done speaking with the Chinese government.

After hanging up with Beijing, Chao called Larson into his office. Chao asked Larson how the fire-fight could happen. Through Chao’s translator, Larson quickly responded with, “This is an active conflict. I’m honestly surprised it hadn’t happened earlier.”

“You Americans will not be welcome here for long if this is what is in store,” Chao replied.

Larson, never one to hesitate, replied, “We have a saying in the U.S., you have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.”

Chao’s lips pursed and he simply said, “Okay, General Larson. What is it that you would like to suggest?” Chao asked his question in English. Chao’s English was good, but not good enough to go without a translator.

Larson suggested he increase his force posture while acknowledging that UNMISS could not conduct offensive operations. Larson simply wanted UNMISS out on the streets providing a deterrent and reporting any suspicious movements so that the U.S.-led coalition could posture to react. Chao expressed his concerns with exposing the UNMISS force, but apparently whatever Beijing had instructed him to do was in line with Larson’s request.

Beijing wanted Chao and his forces to demonstrate unwavering resolution in the face of reckless attacks despite Chinese casualties. Chao was acutely aware of the delicate situation among the Sudanese warring factions, the contributing nations to the UN mission, and the U.S.-led coalition.

Larson was a bit taken aback by Chao’s reaction to the very short engagement. Due to its mandate, UNMISS was not accustomed to anything resembling a pitched battle with the locals. When U.S. forces didn’t hesitate to use force and capture the aggressors, UNMISS was unsure how to take it at first. Some of the UN commanders stated that the U.S. coalition would make things worse, others said that UNMISS should be taking the lead instead of letting the U.S. come in and alter the dynamic. As for Chao, he became more emboldened to protect Chinese interests, and not what UNMISS was there to do. He surged UNMISS troops to get out and make more of a presence and increased force posture, though their rules of engagement remained the same under Chapter VI of the UN Charter.²

19 October 2044

Lt. Col. Turner followed up with Abdo Nazer after my phone call with him. Turner said that Abdo talked to the small cell that had organized the attack. Members of the small cell were upset that the Americans had been working with the Dinka government while neglecting the Nuer. They were upset that Zareb Salim remained in exile and the government appeared to be consolidating power. Turner tried to explain to Abdo that the situation was too sensitive and complicated to turn around overnight. It was going to take some time. In an effort to defend the Nuer fighters, Abdo retorted that the U.S. had created a perception that it was conspiring with the Dinka government to keep Zareb Salim out of power. The United States expressed that an attack would not allow the coalition and the government

to forget about or discard the Nuer as irrelevant. Turner acknowledged Abdo’s concerns and assured him that he would try to do everything in his power to improve the situation. He ended the call feeling worried that another attack could happen and that he could have done a better job to alleviate the Nuer’s concerns.

Over the next three months, CJTF-HOA and UNMISS were able to restrain the government from retaliating against the Nuer, and despite Turner’s doubts, the Nuer leadership reined in their nefarious activities. Additionally, the rhetoric between President Rayan and Salim ebbed and flowed, but remained at a tolerable level, considering the tension. The time seemed ripe for a breakthrough.

4 January 2045

It was just after the New Year. Since Operation Unified Tribes had begun, the ambassador and General Larson had been working on getting President Rayan to allow Zareb Salim back into the country and getting him to return under the terms agreed upon by the government. It had been a long slog, but it finally appeared that Salim was headed back to his homeland. In advance of Salim’s arrival, and with the lull in violence, many refugees began returning to South Sudan from Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The French battalion commander even reported that his troops had become overwhelmed with the number of refugees and their belongings clogging up the streets, hindering civilian and military traffic. Journalists began to publish stories with headlines that spanned from “A New Break in the South Sudanese Conflict” to “Another False Sense of Security in Juba.” I couldn’t help but think of Barry’s remarks about South Sudanese breakthroughs being public relations deep. I became lost in my thoughts of what it would take for a sustainable peace. I started to flip through my collection of books on my iPad in hopes of helping me spur some ideas. After a couple of hours looking through titles, I turned to a postcard I had received from Jill.

Since I couldn’t come home for the holidays, Jill had decided to fly back to the states to be with her parents and brother in Ohio. She sent me a postcard and in it, she said that she couldn’t wait until I returned home and that she hadn’t been home in so long that she felt like an outsider embedded with the family. I knew what she meant; we had moved around so much due to various assignments, many of which had been overseas. I sat back to rest my eyes. The images of Dayton, Ohio, my wife, and her folks populated my mind. I thought about the conversations they must be having to make Jill feel a little distant, and I reassured myself that getting back together with family



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was as natural as riding a bike. I wondered about Jill referring to herself as an embed, which led me to think about the embedded reporters who accompanied the troops in the SFAB and National Guard brigade. My mind then drifted to embedding peacekeepers inside the South Sudanese coalition government. Why not? The international community would probably be willing to provide that. I seemed to remember someone proposing that after South Sudan's peace agreement in 2018, but it never came to fruition. I met with Barry two hours later to see what he would think of the idea.

Barry had just come from talking with Lt. Col. Turner and a few of the other CJIATF subordinate commanders. He informed me that their teams were in high spirits and that my staff was helping them solve some of their complex problems.

"I was daydreaming earlier and I wanted to see about trying something a little different," I said to Barry.

"What's that?" Barry asked.

"Well, when we do advise and assist missions, we embed with our partners to monitor their activities and operations to ensure they are making steady progress in their processes. We also do it to identify and mitigate corruption. I think if we can get an international body to embed with the coalition government they could monitor their progress, mitigate conflicts between them, and give us an early warning if things are about to come off the rails. What do you think?"

"Uhh, well, maybe. I think I've heard of this before. We do this with military personnel in the Iraq and Afghanistan governments to a certain extent. I'm not sure, however, where exactly this international body of professionals is coming from."

"That's kind of the downside. I think it will be partly UN. I think the French and your country may be willing to participate. I'm not really sure how the U.S. will react to it."

"Are you suggesting military personnel?" Barry inquired. "No offense sir, but we're going to need more people adept at governance and civil reconciliation than military troops."

"Agreed. It's going to be an uphill struggle to get anyone, uniformed or not, to commit to a long-term embed project. Besides, we're going to have to identify where each Nuer

soldier is going and that's going to take a lot of time and work," I acknowledged.

"Yes indeed it will, but getting people to serve as embeds with the government may not be as hard. The African Union has been wanting to crack on with this if for no other reason than to get us out and ease the refugee population flowing across their borders."

"You're right. Can't say that I blame them, but they haven't exactly presented real 'African solutions to African problems' either."

"I think it's best we keep that to ourselves," Barry responded with a slight smile on his face.

Barry and I laid out some different timetables and began mapping out where many of the Nuer fighters and administrators would fall in a newly unified government that we could present to the boss. There were no doctrinal answers to this stuff. Historical precedents were either scarce—the few that exist were not applicable in this context—or resulted in one side being nearly obliterated, leaving no opposition to challenge a lasting peace. It took us two and half days sitting down with the CJIATF staff and commanders to complete a first draft.

8 January 2015, Juba, South Sudan, CJTF-HOA Forward Headquarters

I called General Larson to see if he was available for Barry and me to pitch our concept that could potentially capitalize on Salim returning to the country and the recent break in violence. When we arrived at his office, he was talking to his political advisor and deputy commander about Salim's return.

"Corey, Barry, how you guys doing? Come on in," Larson said, motioning us into his office.

"Gentleman, we're doing good," I replied.

"You two happen to be at the forefront of my mind at the moment," Larson said.

"What makes you say that, sir?"

"I believe a large part of the reason we're not seeing government forces try and retaliate against the Nuer over these past few months is due in no small part to the advice you gave me on suggesting Rayan become a unifier of the Sudanese people to solidify his legacy. I told him that is

going to take quite a bit of restraint and it looks like he's trying to do that. I believe he even got the defense minister on board."

"Yes, sir, I was hoping he would get Halim to buy in to that vision," I said.

"It seems to be holding up. When I first brought it up, he seemed skeptical, but after a few times talking about it, he started going on about the Nuer and Dinka building a statue or monument in his name. He thought it would make his family proud and that his presidency would become a story told throughout Africa."

"Glad to hear it, sir. We were somewhat surprised to see him exercise this much restraint over the past few months."

"I've been working hard with the ambassador to try and keep his emotions in check while keeping Salim on task to hold up his end of the bargain. Especially now, as we prepare to bring him back into the country. What did you guys want to talk about?" Larson asked.

"Barry and I were thinking it might be a good idea to establish an embedded advisor program within the South Sudanese government to monitor their reconciliation."

"Embeds?" Larson asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Yes, sir, embedded advisors can help the South Sudanese government work through the problems of reconciliation and provide early warning if orders go out to reinstate fighting. A long-term ceasefire will depend largely on where Salim's lieutenants, like Abdo Nazer, will fall in a unified government."

"Okay, it sounds plausible, but I'll be honest, Washington is not going to support an open-ended program with our people. It has to be AU-led, if not fully staffed and resourced by them. If we can get Rayan and Salim to agree to it and the AU to support it, I think it's a great idea," Larson stated, looking at Barry and me as he spoke.

"Yes, sir, I agree."

"I'll talk to the ambassador about it today."

"Yes, sir, let us know how we can help."

"Just do everything you can to keep those Nuer fighters at bay and make sure the defense minister doesn't stray away from the plan; no surprises at this point," Larson said.

"Got it, sir. We'll do everything we can," I responded.

Barry and I departed to begin coordinating with General Larson's staff on a plan that we could present to AFRICOM and ultimately the AU.

28 January 2045, Juba

Zareb Salim arrived back in Juba to much fanfare with television cameras and journalists in every direction he looked. He met with President Rayan, shook hands

for the cameras, and they jointly signed a new ceasefire agreement. Then both men headed into the presidential residence to talk demobilization of troops and integrating the Nuer back into the government; the hard part. Salim's official position would be Vice President of South Sudan, the same position Riek Machar had held when he led the Nuer against former president Salva Kiir.³ Abdo Nazer did not care much for Salim leading the Nuer, but acquiesced to the arrangement to improve the Nuer's position relative to the Dinka's position. I largely thought he was biding his time until he could ascend the ladder of leadership. At any rate, both Nuer leaders were right to view the durability of any future deal with skepticism.

President Rayan and the Nuer's leadership begin planning how they would integrate back into the government. Everyone could see the apprehensive looks on the Nuer leadership's faces as we sat down to talk. The Nuer felt they had been in that position before and they knew nothing was certain. The difference this time was that the U.S.-led coalition and the Chinese-led UN mission were sitting with them in addition to the AU delegation. For us, another concern was that China would push to establish a permanent base in South Sudan. This would likely cause China to side with whoever was in power instead of adequately integrating the Nuer. General Chao had requested permission for UNMISS to transition to peace enforcement rather than peacekeeping in order to have some level of authorization to prevent rogue actors from threatening the volatile reconciliation phase.⁴ China's aid to South Sudan had more than doubled in the thirty years since China provided US\$49 million in 2013.⁵ The Chinese-led UNMISS was ostensibly working to protect those interests to ensure its investment did not go wasted. However, unsettling as this fact was, it set the conditions for the U.S. to leave and to do so honorably with some semblance of mission success.

With the discussions between the reinstated vice president and the government ongoing, our next task was to get the Nuer demobilized and integrated into the government. The logistical challenges of demobilizing and moving troops to unify the army was going to take the SFAB, National Guard brigade, and assistance from the UN to get it done in a timely fashion. The security detail assigned to Juba proved to be the most contentious. Salim refused any unification of the army unless the national command structure was changed. He insisted that the vice president be inserted into the chain of command. When demilitarizing Juba was suggested, both Salim and Rayan demonstrated a rare instance of resolute agreement; they both stated it was out of the question. They only agreed on



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proposals that left them room to reinitiate fighting. It was frustrating for all involved. However, this is what coalition government looked like in sub-Saharan Africa sometimes. We had brought them as far as we could. The U.S.-led coalition had brought the government back from the brink of genocide—if one considers it was never crossed to begin with—and brought the Nuer back to the capital. Our time to leave had arrived.

28 February 2014, Juba Airport, South Sudan

After ten months on the ground, we were finally heading home. The DOD wanted its forces back and many of us were eager to leave. Our replacements would be a single brigade provided by Central African Republic, Ethiopia, and Cameroon to the AU. Of course, UNMISS would remain as well. Both Abdo Nazer and defense minister Halim escorted Barry and me to the airport. Barry would be flying back with me to Germany before heading on to the UK. As we said our goodbyes to Nazer and Halim, I couldn't help but think about those that would be embedding with the government. Moreover, how the AU would be held ultimately responsible for how

South Sudan turned out. I looked in Nazer's eyes and saw a hungry young man betting on the future. Although it was an uneasy alliance, when push came to shove, Nazer stood with his Nuer leader in forming a coalition government with the Dinkas. When I looked at Halim, I saw an old man, tired of fighting as if he would be more inclined to revert back to the status quo than put in the work necessary to make this new government work. I guess it was not for us to decide, only to watch.

Many of the pundits, scholars, and interlocutors in the international community were doubtful the peace would hold. However, the refugees flowing into neighboring states, the genocidal efforts that brought us here, and the threat to Chinese investments renewed stakeholder commitments. It wasn't peace, but rather the momentary absence of conflict. While reclining in my seat on the flight back to Germany, all I could think about was how little it would take for the embers of contentious tribes to reignite the flames of violence. I also realized I had been wrong about the AU being ultimately responsible for how South Sudan turned out. The South Sudanese people, like all other nations, were responsible for their destiny. It would be up to them to decide whether or not they would become unified tribes. ■

Notes

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2. United Nations, "Charter of the United Nations," 24 October 1945, VI, 34.

3. PRI, "South Sudan Rebel Leader to be Reinstated as Vice President as Part of Civil War Peace Deal," Reuters, 18 July 2008, accessed 16 October 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-07-08/south-sudan-rebel-leader-be-reinstated-vice-president-part-civil-war-peace-deal>.

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