



Southern Sudanese wave flags and cheer at the Republic of South Sudan's first national soccer match 10 July 2011 in the capital of Juba. The game, played against Kenya, came just one day after South Sudan declared its independence from the north following decades of costly civil war. (Photo by Pete Muller, Associated Press)

Unified Tribes

South Sudan, Year 2044, Part I

Maj. Philip Neri, U.S. Army

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South Sudan seceded from Sudan thirty-three years ago in December of 2011 after decades of civil war that divided the country between the Muslim north and the largely Christian south. In addition to the religious divide, the south maintained an uneasy coalition of tribes. The majority was Dinka and the Nuer was the largest minority tribe. After a relatively peaceful succession, South Sudan's first president, Salva Kiir Mayardit (a Dinka), reached out to Dr. Reik Machar Teny (a Nuer) to serve as his vice president in an attempt to unite the country's two largest tribes in the newly declared state. Shortly after, however, the situation erupted into a power-sharing struggle between the Dinka and Nuer factions in the government. Reik charged Salva with corrupt policies and threatened to run against him in the next election. Salva accused Reik of

The map depicts the location of the Republic of South Sudan (widely referred to as South Sudan) on the African continent. South Sudan seceded from the Republic of Sudan (also known as North Sudan) by overwhelming majority vote in 2011 after a long and brutal civil war that began in the 1950s that pitted the predominately Christian and animist south against the predominately Muslim north. Subsequent to obtaining independence, South Sudan has been engaged in almost constant intertribal civil war as well as fending off frequent cross-border forays by regular military and irregular forces from its neighbors. (Graphic courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

undermining his leadership and possibly overthrowing his government. By 2013, the Dinka and Nuer erupted into a full-blown civil war. Reik fled the capital of Juba to lead his Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) in a guerilla war against Salva's security forces. The civil war raged at varying levels of intensity for more than thirty-one

years. As the two men got older, they both concluded that they would need successors. In 2027, Salva endorsed Namir Rayan to serve as South Sudan's next president. A Salva endorsement amounted to an engineered election in favor of his candidate.

Namir Rayan was thirty-six years old when he ascended to the presidency. He had become a "Lost Boy" shortly after his birth in 1985. The Lost Boys were a group of about forty thousand children who were orphaned following the Second Sudanese Civil War that lasted from 1987–2005 and culminated in South Sudan's independence in 2011. Namir grew up in a Dinkan tribe near Juba and spent the majority of his twenties fighting the Nuer before gaining a position in Salva Kiir's government. At twenty-eight, he had become a commander in the Presidential Guard where he had the opportunity to rub elbows with high-level government officials, to include Salva himself. Four years later, he was a special military advisor to Salva. In another four short years, he became president of South Sudan. Now, at fifty-three, Namir has been president for the past seventeen years. His hair, much more gray these days, reflects his experience and stress that influences his stubborn demeanor. He remains frustrated that the Nuer rebellion is still a credible force in the country and views them as traitors that have robbed South Sudan from achieving prosperity.

Reik chose a devoted militant intellectual in Zareb Salim to continue leading the SPLM/A. Zareb is a battle-hardened leader who has earned his stripes by fighting Dinka government forces and leading the Nuer's notorious "White Army," a select group of radical fighters committed to the Nuer's cause. It derives its name from its soldiers' practice of covering themselves with white ash to help prevent bug bites while conducting operations. Zareb has never enjoyed the living comforts that Namir came to appreciate after joining Salva's government. Instead, Zareb has spent his entire life living in what is often colloquially referred to across sub-Saharan Africa as "the bush," a term used to describe the living conditions of the wild or sparsely populated rural areas away



Sudanese rebel fighters gather 8 February 2014 in a village in Upper Nile State. Tribal and ethnic enclaves whose opposition to each other frequently results in violence continues to be a persistent feature of South Sudanese society with no resolution in sight. (Photo by Goran Tomasevic, Reuters)

from where government forces maintain a presence. The bush is just as likely to contain a rebel African army as it is a National Geographic film crew. In 2039, Dinka security forces killed Zareb's pregnant wife during a night raid against Nuer fighters. Any hope of Zareb's willingness to negotiate with the Dinka forces died along with his wife that night. Today, in the spring of 2044, Namir and Zareb are just as committed to exterminating one another. As a result, a tidal wave of death has descended over the South Sudanese population leaving over two hundred thousand dead in its wake.

International Outcry

The international community has been watching the events in South Sudan in horror. Of course, civil war is nothing new to the country, but in January 2044, African experts began warning of increased numbers of displaced persons and refugees fleeing the violence. They also reported indicators of a pending

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clash between government and rebel forces as the South Sudanese atmosphere reached a fever pitch. On 18 March 2044, the Nuer village of Nasir in the Upper Nile region of South Sudan was ransacked and set ablaze by South Sudanese government forces. International media outlets rushed to the area to cover the unfolding scene. The images that followed displayed dead women and children as well as decapitated bodies. Journalists and camera crews also captured body parts strewn about the collapsed homes and flaming buildings. The officials in Juba declared that it was a staged event to delegitimize the government and that its forces were responding to Nuer aggression. The media termed it the “March Massacre” as activists around the globe decried genocide in attempts to get the international community to render justice to the perpetrators.

Many international observers have written it off as just another civil war in a distant African country still struggling to find its place in the postcolonial world that began in the last century. Others regard it as this century’s “Rwanda moment” and feel that it should have a different conclusion than the genocide carried out fifty years ago. Fellow African nations, such as Kenya and Ethiopia, are particularly frustrated, as they have tried to work with South Sudan for decades in conjunction with the UN, the United States, and China. They both attempted to facilitate peace talks during Salva and Riek’s time in power but to no avail. The UN, however, continues to operate bases in Juba and Malakal. The UN established the base in Malakal following the South’s independence in July 2011. Malakal is near the northern border of Sudan that contains much of the oil reserves for both countries. China is particularly interested in supporting its state-owned enterprise China National Petroleum Corporation in extracting South Sudan’s oil reserves to continue fueling its economy. Whatever South Sudan’s future, it remains clear that there are plenty of stakeholders who will be watching events unfold.



Soldiers are accused of burning huts in the disputed town of Abyei, the scene of renewed violence after Sudanese government forces took over the area in May 2011. The burning of villages is a recurring tactic used against various South Sudanese populations by their enemies. (Photo by Stuart Price, United Nations Mission in Sudan)

13 April 2044, Stuttgart, Germany, U.S. Africa Command Headquarters

“Hey, Corey, the boss wants everyone in the conference room in ten minutes.”

“OK, I’ll start heading that way as soon as I finish this email,” I replied without looking in Carl’s direction. My eyes were glued to the screen as I typed the final two sentences.

As I entered the conference room, I could see that it was alive with small chatter as staff members discussed why we were assembling on such short notice. The J5 directorate’s key staff members huddled around the large rectangular table dominating the room while waiting for our boss, Maj. Gen. Brandon Wright, to enter the room.

Assigned to the AFRICOM plans shop for the past eight months, I figured we would have come a lot further on the African continent by 2044. Instead, the continent maintained corrupt governments, rampant crime, widespread poverty, and numerous violent extremist organizations. The South Sudan crisis had been weighing on everyone’s minds as we watched the news and tried to reconcile how tragedies like this could still happen despite us approaching the midway point of the twenty-first century. I took up a seat next to Carl, who had notified me minutes prior to the meeting as the boss walked in.

“OK, ladies and gents, the embassy in Juba is estimating over two hundred thousand people have died over the past three to four weeks. The commanding general just asked the staff for a contingency plan and now they’re asking what plans we have on the shelf that could help get us started.”

“Sir, CJTF-HOA [Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa] and I have been monitoring the instability in South Sudan, but our planning focus has been finding ways to continue building partner capacity and countering violent extremists. We haven’t really been looking at ways to get the Dinka and Nuer factions to get along,” I informed him as I had been working on South Sudanese stability plans more than anyone else had.

“Well, that’s all changing now. Assessing South Sudan’s stability and preventing further genocide is now the number one priority on the continent.”

Carl—the one who had told me about the meeting—was an eighteen-year career Air Force pilot from Texas with a quick wit. He interrupted with a question, “Does the embassy think South Sudan will allow U.S. forces in, sir?”

“That’s currently being worked, but I suspect we’ll get a green light if the commander is asking for a plan. At any rate, we have to be ready in the event it’s a go.”

“Sir, I’ll be honest, like Corey stated, the only thing we’ve ever done in South Sudan is partner with their security forces a handful of times using special ops guys and the Africa security force assistant brigade [SFAB]. They’re not even crazy about having us over there to do that,” Carl replied.

“Well, any partnering with government security forces at this point would just make the killers more effective while granting them some semblance of legitimacy to go along with it,” Wright retorted.

The meeting turned into a quick flowing dialogue with others around the table starting to chime in with questions and suggestions. Some asked if we would just be delaying the inevitable, implying a half-hearted effort that could stop the killing temporarily without a long-term solution. Some even alluded to another Sudanese split giving the Dinka the south and the Nuer the north portion

of South Sudan. Some nodded in agreement while others withheld judgment.

Carl jumped in again, “Substantial ground troops will be needed to hold both sides at bay, but I think we’re going to have issues getting enough interagency personnel for stability tasks.”

Wright’s deputy, Brig. Gen. Roy Chamberlain, interjected. “Before we go down the road of who is or isn’t providing people, we need to come to an agreement on what ‘the people’ are going to do. Let’s first focus on the strategy of how we’re gonna get this done.”

Chamberlain’s previous assignment had been in the Pentagon’s operations directorate. He was a career Marine infantryman who came to our staff six months ago. He was extremely focused, didn’t care for office politics, and was only interested in ensuring Wright had what he needed to be a successful J5 director.



Contingency operations are discussed during a Combined Joint Task Force–Horn of Africa (CJTF–HOA) Fusion Action Cell meeting July 2015. A crisis in South Sudan would trigger the convening of such a meeting to formulate and critically examine courses of action in response. (Photo courtesy of CJTF–HOA Public Affairs Office)

“Roy is right. I’m only interested in the ‘how’ right now; we’ll let Washington determine what they’re willing to commit to this operation. We will develop a recommendation at some point soon though.”

After an hour of debating and brainstorming, Wright was ready to conclude the meeting.

“I’ll be frank team; we have little guidance and plenty of ambiguity. We’ve got to give the boss something he can pitch to D.C. as the military option. Roy, I want you to



Soldiers wait in line to board an Air Force C-17 Globemaster III 17 November 2008 from Joint Base Balad, Iraq. Since South Sudan is landlocked, soldiers deploying to stability operations in that country would likely be similarly transported by air to the operational area. (Photo by Tech. Sgt. Erik Gudmundson, U.S. Air Force)

take part of the team here and review the contingency plans we have on the shelf. Corey, I'd like you and Carl to stay behind for a moment."

After Wright dismissed the meeting, Carl and I took up seats closer to Wright.

"Based on what you know about the region, do you really think we can come up with a plan that stops the killing and doesn't require a large U.S. troop presence?"

After pausing to think about the past eight months here, what I know about Africa in general and South Sudan in particular, I offered up a proposal,

"Sir, I recommend we use a cease, pacify, and integrate phasing model. Most likely, we're going to need forces to get both factions to hold to a ceasefire. How many is unclear, so I wouldn't want to commit to a number until working through the planning process. We'll also need interagency personnel to pacify core grievances and integrate the Nuer back into the government. Sir, that last part is the most critical thing we have to get right."

"That's a tall order, Corey, but I think you're right. There is no easy answer to this one. But how do you think that scenario would end?"

"It's hard to say, sir, but regardless of what materializes, I think the narrative needs to be that we are not here to resolve the conflict, just to stop the genocide."

"Aren't they one in the same?"

"South Sudan's civil war has ebbed and flowed since 2013, the genocide part is a new addition. I believe that African problems need African solutions, and I think that will have to come from Juba and the African Union [AU] rather than us. But the interagency effort will set the foundation because they will be the ones who marshal the coalition of South Sudan's domestic and international stakeholders."

Wright looked down at the table as if thinking intensely about what I just said. "I have little faith that the South Sudanese government and the AU can resolve the conflict. They haven't been able to for the past thirty-plus years. But I think you're right about the interagency piece. We need to go

beyond band-aid fixes. I would like to see us set a structure in place that allows these guys to work toward a sustainable peace.”

“Agreed, sir, but like Carl mentioned in the meeting, we are going to need a substantial amount of interagency people to do that. The conflict has left the majority of the population lacking basic utilities. There are not enough internally displaced person camps to handle the volume of people and there is hardly any infrastructure left to serve as a baseline.”

Carl jumped in, “Corey’s right, sir. The time to intervene was about three or five years ago. Now it’s so bad that we need to establish some of the basics while deterring them from fighting. We’re not going to just need interagency people for advising. We’re going to need contractors to start building.”

“OK, OK, guys. I got it. Corey, go ahead with the phasing model you were talking about.”

“Yes, sir. The cease part is fairly self-explanatory. Our ground troops will be tasked with keeping both sides from fighting once on the ground. Pacify is the short-term carrot we need to provide to both sides to reinforce any ceasefire we are able to obtain. What that may look like could range anywhere from increased aid to the government, some type of legitimacy status to the Nuer faction, or maybe even something else. Integration is more long-term and will require a power sharing agreement. More than likely, we’ll have to hand it off to another organization for the long-term transition. We may be a part of it, but I’m going to recommend either an international body or the AU to lead the effort.”

“OK, that’s a good rundown. Let’s get some meat on the bones of this phasing model and get it in front of the boss within seventy-two hours as a concept. Carl, tell Chamberlain that I want him to look at building this phasing model into our contingency plans. Corey, get me smart on South Sudan so we can get ready to brief the CG. I’ll queue it up, but you’re going to be the primary talker.”

I sat with Gen. Wright for about an hour reviewing what I knew about South Sudan and how I saw events unfold once troops were deployed. I hammered home the importance of interagency expertise to bring this thing to any kind of successful conclusion. Three days later, I briefed the AFRICOM CG for about forty-five minutes followed by a twenty-minute Q-and-A. He appeared pleased and instructed us to get ready to help him prepare for a brief to the secretary of defense and a hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee in the coming weeks.

Our existing contingency plans did not address South Sudan in particular and mainly addressed regime collapses rather than genocide scenarios. I think we assumed that any genocide scenario would be led by the UN and we would

support with whatever plan the international community developed. All indications suggested that my cease, pacify, and integrate framework would be adopted, perhaps because it was convenient and expedient for the commander. A week after briefing the CG, Wright called me into his office.

“Corey, I just finished talking with the boss. He liked your proposal and we found out that Department of Defense just completed drafting a deployment order for the initial units to start flowing into South Sudan. As we suspected, CJTF-HOA is going to deploy to Juba to assume responsibility of the overall headquarters. It’s going to be called Operation Unified Tribes.”

“Yes, sir, do you need anything from me?”

“Well, the Africa SFAB is deploying at full strength and then some and should be on the ground within four to six weeks. A National Guard brigade with State Sponsorship Program experience in sub-Saharan Africa will follow close behind. It’s looking like the force will grow or shrink based on conditions and the CJTF commander’s recommendations.”

“Yes, sir. And the interagency personnel?”

“That’s what I called you in here for. A combined joint interagency task force is being stood up from scratch to round out the forces. The joint staff requested we pull the commander for it out of AFRICOM or one of our subordinates. I suggested you and the CG agreed; you up for it?”

“Yes, sir. It has been a while since I’ve been in command, and never with interagency folks, but I...”

“Good. I suspected you’d say something like that. The bad news is I need you down in Juba within the next two weeks. You’re not going to get to meet your team until you’re on the ground with them due to deployment timelines.”

“I’ll manage it, sir.”

I headed home to get my things ready to deploy. After talking to my wife about my deployment, I packed my things and reviewed my notes. She was a little anxious about being left alone in Germany, but she had built up a small network of friends in Stuttgart. Our youngest had just left for college in the states during my last assignment so this would be the first time she would be alone while I was gone. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t bother me as I got ready to depart. Ten days later, I was standing on the tarmac waiting to board a plane headed to Juba International Airport. As I took my seat and thought about what I would say to my new team, my mind wondered to what was going through the minds of those issuing the orders to slaughter more South Sudanese people. I further thought what would be their response to the introduction of U.S. troops to disrupt what they had in store for the coming days and weeks ahead. ■

