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Abyei Voices: Messages for the future

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Ahmed Dudu, "Peace is the priority now".

The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) called for a referendum for the former civil war battleground of Abyei to be held on January 9, 2011- the same day as the South's own self-determination vote. The people of Abyei were given the right to choose to be ruled either by North or South Sudan.

Nowhere has the tentative peace brokered in 2005 been more threatened than in Abyei. Hundreds died when fighting broke out in May 2008. Tens of thousands fled their homes.

A July 2009 border ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague defined the disputed borders of Abyei. This ruling was accepted by both the South's ruling Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) in Khartoum.

Oil production is important but has declined

in Abyei, due to both falling production rates and the placing of key fields outside the re-drawn border of 2009. But issues over land, water, and livestock grazing rights remain.

Oil or no oil, tensions persist between the South's Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army (SPLA) and the North's Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) in the region. In Abyei, they work together in a united Joint Integrated Unit (JIU). But elements of these joint forces turned against each other in the deadly violence of 2008, and mistrust between the formerly warring armies endures.

In November 2010, three Sudanese journalists travelled to Abyei and the neighbouring Muglad region in Southern Kordofan state, which lies north of the contested north-south border. They went to hear how the people in the region saw the future. They recorded their experiences and concerns, as well as their hopes and suggestions for possible solutions.

Interviews were held with the Dinka Ngok people native to the Abyei territory, as well as the pastoralist Misseriya people, who move traditionally every year through the area to graze their cattle. The following are the views of some of the people on the ground. They do not represent the views of the journalists who collected them.

THE PEOPLE

Voices of the Dinka Ngok

"The future of Abyei is gloomy for there are many challenges. The government is using the Misseriya as a tool to fight the Abyei people; because of this, we see our future as at threatened. The Misseriya threaten that if we don't evacuate Abyei town or cancel the referendum, they will attack us. But the Misseriya are just being encouraged by the government - those who do come here are peaceful. They become hostile only if they are being backed up by the

After the referendum, I am confident that we will live better and development will be fast. We have resources but the insecurity has kept us back.

There can be a solution to the problem – all the tribal leaders must sit down together and talk, and see what happens then.

All of us, men, women, children, want future Abyei generations to live in peace.

We are waiting for three things that will make Abyei to prosper: the day that Abyei will become part of South Sudan, the day the SPLA will take over the security, and the day that the border between north and south Sudan is drawn.

Many people think that the issue of Abyei only concerns Misseriya and Dinka but it is the rest of the country that can drag us into war. All the country should work hard to solve the problem.

There is no difference between southerners and northerners. We are all together. Separation would be very difficult for all of the cattle herders.



Abyei was left in ruins by conflict.

government, but they don't know that they will regret in the future what they are doing now." **Nyankor Ayong Dau, a woman in her late thirties.**

"We don't have anything to bring us together with the Arabs - they have nothing to contribute to us. We see that nothing will ever keep us together at all. All of us -- men, women, children and youths -- want future Abyei generations to live in peace." **Awuor Kuol Arop, Dinka elder.**

"If the NCP was interested in the people of Abyei, President Omar el Bashir would have visited the area when the whole town was razed to ground. This shows me clearly that he is not supporting the people of Abyei, but is rather interested in the natural resources of the land. The future will be miserable if Abyei remains part of the North. We want the new generation to be in peace. We have lost property, animals and lives. We want to be in a place where there will be no more suffering ever again."

Awuor Koul Arop, a grandmother in her seventies.

"When war ends, development follows, and when development comes, there is prosperity in an area. The future is worse if Abyei remains in the North. You have seen our colour, we are black and we are Dinka - and we don't have any relationship with the North. For this reason, when the CPA was signed, the people of Abyei were the most impressed - because the agreement guarantees our referendum.

"Even if they don't conduct the referendum, we will seek other options. First of all, Abyei was in the South but it was annexed during colonial time to Southern Kordofan in the North. We should observe the conventional referendum law, but if the referendum fails, as the chiefs we can decide on people's behalf. We have other options if the referendum fails. If so the CPA partners should accept, bless and adhere to what we shall decide as a way for-

ward to avoid return to war.

"The NCP alleges that the Ngok Dinka and the Misseriya in Abyei are co-existing, and so the Misseriya should vote in the Abyei referendum. Yet this is not true. To show you that these people want to start war, they stop vehicles from Khartoum on the way to Abyei. They rape young girls, and harass the young men, and also kidnap people in their residence. These are plans to cause war."

Nyiol Paguot, Dinka elder.

"The future of Abyei is under threat, because the government wants to rule over us by force. Our main worry is that the NCP might attack the area once we decide to join the South. But people are determined to defend their land at whatever cost. Last year the Misseriya attacked three villages, killed people, both police and civilians. This is still in the minds of people, and the Arabs come without any proper agreement.

"People are waiting to retaliate. Nowadays people are being seen missing. We suspect that the Misseriya, the JIUs, and Arab militias are responsible for this.

"We are waiting for three things that will make Abyei prosper: the day that Abyei will become part of South Sudan, the day the SPLA will take over the security, and the day that the border between North and South Sudan is drawn. After that life will improve." **Nyankiir Chol Piok, a woman in her late 40s.**

"I travelled back from Isba Estate in Khartoum to Abyei. Life was very poor there but here in Abyei is very good. Firstly, Abyei is home, and one can do everything in freedom. Life is easy here, food is cheap.

"But the journey back was hard. I was beaten up together with other passengers. While we were coming, we found security personnel on the road; they stopped us, ordered us to get out. They asked: 'Why are you going to Abyei?' They also harassed some young men. We were stopped and asked as to where we were going. Why leave Khartoum? They asked us if we were going to vote for Abyei to remain in the North.

"At that time, I felt like turning back because I knew we were going to meet other check points and it would happen again. But now that I am here in Abyei, I have had not to pay house rent as I used to do in Khartoum. I expect to send my children to school now, because it is not so expensive in Abyei as it was in the North. People should come back to those who are still here and experience the life at home."

Abuk Deng, a Dinka returnee in her late 30s.

"It is good that young people have returned

with new ideas to develop the area. After the referendum, I am confident that we will live better and development will be fast. We have resources but the insecurity has kept us back. When we get peace back we shall cultivate, do business and develop ourselves." **Diang Deng Agok, Chairperson of Abyei Youth Union.**

Voices of the Misseriya

"The Misseriya must be allowed to take part in the Abyei referendum. We don't want Abyei to go to the South. The land cannot be simply given away: it is like an identity card for me. It is our land and we will never give it up to the Dinka Ngok - we have the right to vote in the referendum to decide our future. We also have the right to citizenship.

"We will not accept other alternatives than this. Our relations with Dinka Ngok have gone beyond the norms, but I don't know what has happened to them by wanting to kick us out of our land. This is a shame. If they want to live in peace we are ready, but if they want war, we never fear - especially when it comes to land." **Ahmed Adel, a 30-year-old travel agency owner in Muglad.**

"Many people think that the issue of Abyei only concerns Misseriya and Dinka but it is the rest of the country that can drag us into war. All the country should work hard to solve the problem. I hope there is peace in all of Sudan, not just in Abyei because Sudan is like a body - if one part suffers than all is affected." **Mahasin Adam, a 20-year-old Misseriya woman.**

"I am not optimistic about the future: war is inevitable. Since the time of the Mahdi our country was united, but now because of the educated sons and daughters of both tribes, we are losing our country and our harmony. As a Misseriya woman I have to support my husband whether I like it or hate it, even in war. This is what we do as women - supporting our husbands and brothers." **Amina Kubus, a 55-year-old woman. Her son is in the northern Sudanese army (SAF), stationed near Abyei town.**

"I don't want war again - if there are any options rather than war let [our leaders] try it. My father died in the war. It is very sad to lose your father. But my friends still have fathers who are alive. I want to send a message to all people to make sure this does not happen again, because I don't want my friends to have to lose their fathers too." **Zahir Mohammed, a 12-year-old schoolboy in Muglad. His father died in the civil war, and he now lives with his grandmother.**

"I don't fear war, even though my brothers died fighting in the past. If God helps us in making things easy now, we don't want war.

Peace is the priority now. Our fathers were killed in the war, and my brother died in the north-south civil war. I want peaceful solutions, rather than dragging ourselves back into war." **30-year-old Ahmed Dudu keeps his horse ready in case of "possible war."**

"As a Misseriya man nothing worries me, not even war, because I am a very strong warrior. The Dinka Ngok already know that Abyei does not belong to them. They had problems with other Dinka tribes, and their areas were destroyed by floods. We just hosted them. And now they want to take our land. That is impossible because all of us will die fighting for it.

"But there can be a solution to the problem: all the tribal leaders must sit down together and talk, and see what happens then. If that doesn't work then war is the only thing that brings solution to the issue of Abyei." **Jubur Nimir, an engineer from the Abyei area who now lives outside the region, in Southern Kordofan state. Many of his family continue to live as cattle herders.**

"Life is unbearable without my loved ones. We need to find agreement, instead of making more divisions. Some of my children live in the South, some in the North. We feel that both Abyei and Muglad are one place - we want to live together in peace. I think we are more than family: my son's friends are all Dinka, they study together. War is killing our children. How can we enjoy life without our children? We want prosperity and peace." **Latifa Yagub, a 50-year-old mother of six children.**

"Abyei will not be given to Dinka. There are many Dinka Ngok people living in Muglad with us - but in Abyei there is not a single Misseriya. My horses are ready and I will take part in any war, but I want to see peace between us." **Basher Adam, aged 80. He carries a rusty sword and claims his horses are "ready" if there is a need to fight.**

THE ISSUES

Livestock Grazing

"For me as a farmer, Abyei separation will be very difficult, especially for my cows. We don't want separation. There is no difference between southerners and northerners. We are all together. Separation would be very difficult for all of the cattle herders. Every year I take my cows far to the south to find grass and water, so I am worried that my 40 cows might die if Abyei goes to the South and Misseriya are not allowed to go there. Any war would harm both sides, the Misseriya and the Dinka Ngok. That is why I support unity, for peaceful living for all." **Alamin Hamdan, a 40-year-old Misseriya cattle herder.**

We have lost property, animals and lives. We want to be in a place where there will be no more suffering ever again.

My father died in the war... I want to send a message to all people to make sure this does not happen again, because I don't want my friends to have to lose their fathers too.

We need to find agreement, instead of making more divisions. Some of my children live in the south, some in the north.

Most of our goods come from the North. Should anything happen now, the road would be blocked and that will affect people on the ground and the economy.

You have seen our colour, we are Dinka – and we don't have any relationship with the North.

The Misseriya must be allowed to take part in the Abyei referendum. We don't want Abyei to go to the South.

"Grazing in Abyei is by two different groups of people—the Misseriya and the Southern Sudanese. Misseriya cattle graze on dry grass, which is not only found in Abyei. They should try elsewhere after the referendum. Misseriya grazing is at the expense of the ordinary Abyei citizens; it is associated with killing. Why do we compromise lives? "There must be defined routes for the Misseriya cattle once they are to get onto Abyei land, or their grazing should stop." **Deng Monyluak Rou, Dinka elder.**

"The Misseriya do not come to graze their cattle, but to cause problems. It rains everywhere in Sudan, not only Abyei; so, they should try grazing elsewhere." **Sarah Ayuel Adhim, Dinka lady.**

"Nothing will change our mind from casting our vote to be a part of the South, even if the NCP provokes war. The South should deploy its army along the border to control if the North attacks Abyei. The Misseriya are negative in their actions because they are not always purely civilians, but sometimes they are mixed with the SAF. When the dry season ends, they always kill people when going back to their land. So we do not want them to come again. Since we shall have a border between us, they should graze their cattle in Southern Kordofan." **Mabeek Chol, Dinka youth.**

"If Abyei becomes part of South Sudan the Misseriya who come to graze their cows should be taxed, as they are in Upper Nile and Unity states. Another concern is that authori-



Nyiol Paguot, "When war ends, development follows".

ties push for compensation to the Misseriya if their property is tempered with. Meanwhile, the Misseriya do not compensate in any way. The future stability of Abyei depends on who takes over control of security in the area." **Nyiol Paguot, Dinka elder.**

Borders and trade

"I have a college degree in oil engineering and want to be employed at an oil company here. I have just arrived from Khartoum. But the uncertainty here means that it is hard [to find work with an oil company]. If there is any war, oil companies will have to leave, so I will not get a job. We don't want this to tear us apart." **Hanan Mohammed, an oil engineering graduate in Muglad.**

"With this situation of high tension and the threat of violence, there must be legal documents to regulate travel between the North and South. This is because we have experienced bad relations with the Misseriya. We will not accept to have an open border with them. This causes an increase in the final price of commodities. Moreover, the taxes do not go for national service but to the hands of individuals.

"If Abyei is annexed to the South then trade may be affected. If the border is completely closed we shall still go to East Africa for goods. If they decide to prevent border trade because of the results of the vote, then we shall also close the border for animal grazing.

"The government of South Sudan needs to establish strong relationships with its sister countries in East Africa, including Ethiopia, so that trade continues normally after the referendum.

"But there are also many checkpoints from Juba to Abyei, so goods may be taxed many times. The government should consider this so that traders will be able to affordably bring goods into Abyei. Most of our goods come from the North. Should anything happen now, the road would be blocked and that will affect people on the ground and the economy. If the Northern traders are coming they are not charged along the way from Khartoum, so the price charges of goods are fair. In the South they are charged at every state taxation office, raising the prices." **Chol Deng Chol Buk, a businessman and Chairperson of Abyei Chamber of Commerce.**

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