

Unity State: Situation Outlook on Peace and Stability

Dec 2018

An Overview of the Peace and Security Situation

1. In the period between July and December 2018, the Unity State situation manifested some degree of relative stability albeit with continued fragility. The Revitalised Peace Agreement was cautiously received in Unity State, denoting existing local community divisions especially along the SPLA-IO and SPLA-IO 2 lines. Insecurity and localized conflicts remained prevalent and acute in the State. Oil production resumed in unity oil field while several other oil field in the state continue to undergo rehabilitation and repair in a quest to accelerate resumption of oil production. The local economy remains suppressed and shrunken as a result of on-going conflict. Social cohesion and inter-communal relationships continue to soften but mistrust persist. Governance structures both at formal and traditional spheres, remain substantially challenged.
2. In line with its traditional weather patterns, Unity State and larger part of greater Upper Nile region experienced heavy and long rainfall from month of May to October which affected the largely black cotton terrain resulting in involuntary grounding of vehicular movements in larger parts of the State- a situation which in turn somewhat imposed a forced détente and ceasefire between warring groups for some months. The onset of dry season towards end of October witnessed renewed violent confrontations and fighting between pro-Machar and pro-Taban forces in some locations including Beah in Koch County, and recently Bill in Guit County. The period also witnessed a spike in local inter-communal conflicts including cattle raids, revenge killings, pasture disputes, and general criminality. The peace and security situation in the Unity State continues to be undermined by inadequate policing, absence of rule of law, shrunken economy and joblessness among youth, and ready availability of modern weaponry in the hands of criminal elements.

The Prospects and Challenges of Revitalised Peace Agreement in Unity State

3. The Revitalised Peace Agreement was and continue to be cautiously received in Unity State. In Bentiu PoC, a huge Peace Celebration was held on 1st November 2018 by the community, an indication that the IDP's community have somewhat embraced and placed some hope in the peace agreement and may be willing to give it chance to succeed. The presence of SPLA-IO leaders in the national peace celebration in Juba, and subsequent release from detention of former SPLA-IO spokesperson James Gatdet, imbued considerable confidence and trust on the peace agreement among the IDP's population in the PoC. The reaction to the peace agreement in the Counties and interior parts of the State was more subdued and varied, which is symptomatic of the existing context of divisions and alignments among the population either in support SPLA- IO (1) or SPLA-IO (2). The political alignment largely follows the clan contours which also define geographical and cultural settlement patterns. Both parties therefore have certain Counties and localities considered their political strongholds while some areas are regularly contested. Currently, Mayom County and parts of Guit County are largely seen as pro-Taban while Panyjiar and Leer in the southern part of Unity are perceived pro-Machar. The Counties of Rubkona, Mayendit and Koch are contested

Unity State: Situation Outlook on Peace and Stability

Dec 2018

4. In spite of the subdued reaction to RPA deep in the interior, there have been positive indicators that the local political and security actors are tentatively embracing the peace deal. In late December, the incumbent Governor of Northern Liech State and the SPLA-IO Governor led the Bentiu PoC and Bentiu Town communities in joint peace rallies in both locations. The delegations from both sides engaged in talks for a number of days before the SPLA-IO delegation departed the area. In spite of these positive gestures, renewed fighting was witnessed around the same time between pro-Machar and pro-Taban forces in Biil area of Guit County and cases of gender based violence have reportedly increased.
5. The Peace Agreement will likely continue to face acute challenges in Unity State as a consequent of several factors. One, Unity area serves as home base for both the SPLA-IO led by former First Vice-president Dr. Riek Machar and the SPLA-IO- 2 led by Vice-President Taban Deng and their rivalry for Nuer community leadership and control of local politics and resources will likely continue fuel intermittent clashes between their foot soldiers until the unification of forces happens successfully. Two, Unity area has historically been one of the oil rich areas in South Sudan and contestation over access, control and sharing of oil revenue deeply underpins the current national and local conflicts. With the Revitalised Peace Agreement giving Oil producing states and their communities a significant say and stake in the decision making and use of such resources, the contestation of both pro-Machar and pro-Taban sides may likely intensify as each sides vies to control the right levers of power at State and County level, with an eye on possible oil windfall in terms of local share of oil revenue. Currently, renovation field works are on-going in the Unity oil fields in Rubkona County; Thar Jath field in Koch County, and Joknyang in Guit County. Communities have lately been observed moving closer to oil fields and pipeline perhaps in anticipation of employment opportunities once the oil fields become operational. Thirdly, and lastly, both Dr. Machar and Taban Deng hail from a high context cultural background of Nuer community which places high premium in winning and face-saving and abhors appearance of weakness or losing in a contest. Nevertheless, given that both Dr. Machar and Taban Deng are going to be senior members of the Transitional Government, there exists hope that the two leaders will guide their sides into striking a local deal on power and resource sharing and therefore stem the tide of violence in the Unity region.

Probability of Spontaneous Return of IDP's and Refugees to Unity State and anticipated HLP Challenge

6. The RPA tasks both the pre-transition and transition administrations to expedite the processes of repatriation, resettlement, and reintegration of displaced population. The parties to the conflict are likely going to place high premium on return and resettlement of population displaced in order to “show that peace is holding” and they may thus apply pressure on the population in PoC's and Refugee Camps to return home. The pressure from leaders may then produce a situation where the displaced population engage in mass, spontaneous, and voluntary return especially in greater Upper Nile region which was hardest hit by conflict. However, this pressure may start gain momentum one year after the inauguration of Transition Government

Unity State: Situation Outlook on Peace and Stability

Dec 2018

when all sides would have gain considerable control of state power and machinery at national and local levels.

7. In the recent months following the signing of the RPA, signs of small scale return have continued to be observed in several parts of Unity State. In Mayom County, local aid organizations and authorities reported an average fifty (50) returning to the County from the Sudan. Some returns have also been observed in Mayendit, Rubkona and Leer Counties during the same period. In December 2018, UNMISS reported that the population in the TPA in Leer County has reduced to around 600 persons, down from over 1300 persons in July 2018 indicating that situation has somewhat calmed and normalized in southern unity. In November 2018, UNMISS(Bentiu) indicated that plans were at advanced stage to facilitate voluntary return of 76 IDP's to various parts Unity State from Wau PoC. The Humanitarian actors at Unity State have reactivated coordination mechanisms (Solution Working Group) of addressing the question of possible returns. The SWG determined a glaring gap being lack of up-to-date information to guide planning and facilitating safe, dignified and sustainable return displaced populations and called on partners with competencies to generate such knowledge products to prioritize commissioning or sharing the latest results on any intention and perception surveys, AS, and Area security assessment undertaken.
8. In an event of mass voluntary return materializing, the Housing, Land, and Property conflicts might flare up especially in urban settings such as Bentiu, Rubkona, Guit, Mayom, Leer, and Koch towns where successive lots of IDPs have occupied same space at different times. The Government of Northern Liech State has reportedly identified and set aside some portions of land in Bentiu town for returnees or IDP's who may find it hard to return to their interior villages but still wish to integrate into life outside PoC's or Refugee camps.

Dynamics on Population movements, Displacement and Gender Situation

9. The Unity area plays hosts to Bentiu PoC which is currently the largest PoC in South Sudan with close to 120,000 IDPs. Despite the episodic fighting in regularly being experienced in various parts of the State, the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix shows that the population count in PoC has remained relatively static in 2018, showing neither sharp inflows nor heavy outflows. Both the low out-flow and in-flow reflects prevailing situational dynamics where the PoC-based population still exhibit residual fear about security and safety situation in their former home localities and, where the population outside PoC from violence-affected areas especially in southern counties are geographically cut off from safe corridors to access Bentiu PoC. In Leer County for example it has been reported that the population affected by violent conflicts were either seeking refuge in UNMISS Temporary Protection Area(TPA) in Leer or go hide the forests, or lodge with relatives in safe areas and immediately return to their villages once situation relatively stabilizes.
10. Rape and abduction of girls (under 18) and women continues to be used as weapon of war in most instances where attacks have been reported. In a widely reported case ,the medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in November 2018 reported that its staff in the town of Bentiu

Unity State: Situation Outlook on Peace and Stability

Dec 2018

had treated 125 women and girls who were raped, beaten, and robbed over a 10-day period between November 19 and 29 alone(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/30/spree-of-violence-in-bentiu-south-sudan-msf>). These claims were however strongly disputed by the local and national authorities. On another front, appetite for quick wealth derived from dowry continues to predispose young girls to socio-cultural context which promotes early marriage and thus limits the chances of girls to pursue other life –transforming endeavors, including opportunity to pursue education.

Economic and Socio-cultural Dynamics

11. Despite the prevailing instability in various parts of Unity State, community socio-economic structures and interlinkages have continued to demonstrate resilience and show signs of steady recovery especially in areas where supply routes have usable infrastructure and are relatively secure. Trade interlinkages between communities in Mayom County and those in Sudan and Abyei area has enabled cattle trade to thrive and support the local area economy. Mayom market in turn has become a vital supply route for communities living in other areas in southern counties including Mayendit, Leer and Koch. In Rubkona County, Bentiu and Rubkona markets have steadily picked up fed by supply lines from Anet area within Abyei administrative area, Mayom market, and airlift from Capital city Juba. Additionally, in Rubkona inter-group trade flourishes between the PoC population and proximate communities but each group retreats to their zone of safety at nightfall. Inter-communal trade in other parts of the State are still on low recovery trajectory due to prevalent insecurity along supply routes and inaccessibility as a result of poor infrastructure. Similarly, previously booming riverine trade along River Nile tributaries in the area has collapsed on account of insecurity.
12. Worryingly, bulk of goods available in local markets come from other areas in the country or across the country borders. The prolonged instability and insecurity in various parts of the Unity and attendant population displacement has suppressed production of local goods and thus exposing the local population to possibilities of severe shocks in an event where violence acutely disrupt entry or supply of goods from outside the area. Apart from Mayom and Rubkona counties, the other southern counties in the Unity State are currently depended on air transportation for availability of goods and services. The recent announcement by the Government of Sudan that it intent to re-open its borders with South Sudan borders may likely lead to robust cross-border trade and inject new life into Unity area economy. On a flipside, the re-opening of the border may trigger escalated cattle raids as already cash-starved and conflict-affected communities compete to supply new market across the border.

An Overview of Bentiu PoC Situation

13. In the last few years, the population in Bentiu PoC has largely remained ethnically homogenous consisting mainly of Nuer speaking people. However, the population fissures of division continue to manifest along clan lines and affiliations to counties of origin. These subtle and invisible differences largely inform political affiliations and prism of evaluating perception of fairness and inclusivity in access to opportunities and services, including employment

Unity State: Situation Outlook on Peace and Stability

Dec 2018

opportunities within Humanitarian community and representation in governance structures within the PoC.

14. Relationship between PoC and Community outside POC remains one characterized by mistrusts and suspicions of each other. PoC community perceive those who live outside as government collaborators while community living outside perceive PoC population as staunch rebel supporters and sympathizers. Consequently, this has seen development of a stark sense of “them vs us” mentality which may at times act as an obstruction to willful and voluntary return of individuals due to fear of in-group sanction. Issue of land and property appropriation and occupation remain emotive and a source of conflict and division. Tensions between displaced communities wishing to return to their former lands and property and the communities that now have settled on such spaces persists and may take long to resolve.

Conclusion

15. In a nutshell, Unity area shows all indications of persisting as a flashpoint of conflict and humanitarian crisis for considerable future. The political and security situation remain fragile and volatile. The economic situation risks degenerating into serious humanitarian crisis in a situation where air and road supply lines are obstructed. Inter-group mistrust and fear of the other persists and hampers willful individual return due to fear of in-group sanction. Girls and women continue to face gender-based violence by warring groups. On a positive front, if the peace agreement continues to hold at national and if the oil production resumes to the optimum levels, then these will likely have positive impact on the grassroots at Unity area.