



Abyie Border Demarcation: Implications and Possible Outcomes

Intercontinental Hotel, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Friday 4th December 2009

Seminar Report

Rationale

The Government of Sudan led by the National Congress Party and the Sudan People Liberation Movement had previously agreed on the Abyie Protocol, as stipulated by the Comprehensive Peace Agreement to work out the Abyie boundary. However, both the National Congress Party and Sudan People Liberation Movement have not been able to reach a fair deal or a compromised position over Abyie. Therefore, they agreed to refer the dispute to the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague for a final and binding ruling. Yet, the court's ruling was fiercely contested and inter-tribal rivalries are currently mounting. The African Conflict Prevention Programme-Addis Ababa organized a seminar featuring the leaders of the conflicting groups in Abyie in order to highlight the critical issues related to the dispute including historical roots, and future possibilities in light of the new demarcation.

The seminar was chaired by Dr. Kojo Busia, head of the African Peer Review Mechanism Section at the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and Dr. Muna Abdalla, Senior Researcher of the African Conflict Prevention Programme. The presenters were the leaders of the conflicting groups living in Abyie including Sultan Chief Kual Deng Majok, Paramount Chief of Dinka Ngok, Sultan Bagat Makwag Abyem, Emir Ismaeel Hamdeen and Mr. Bashtna Mohamed Salem, the Head of the Mediation Committee for Missiriya and Dinka Ngok. Moreover, the seminar was very well attended by representatives of diplomatic missions in Addis Ababa, members of civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, international organizations and also officials of the government of Ethiopia.

Presentations

Mr. Berouk Mesfin, the Acting Programme Head of African Conflict Prevention Programme-Addis Ababa, welcomed the participants and highlighted the objectives and significance of the seminars organized by the Institute for Security Studies. Then, Dr. Muna Abdalla provided a brief background to the problem, how it started and factors that contributed to its

intensification. Four presentations were made by representatives from the two conflicting groups living in and around Abyie. From the Dinka Ngok side, the speakers were Sultan Chief Kual Deng Majok, Paramount Chief of Dinka Ngok, and Sultan Bagat Makwag Abyem. From the Missiriya side, the speakers were Emir Ismaeel Hamdeen and Mr. Bashtna Mohamed Salem, the Head of the Mediation Committee for Missiriya and Dinka Ngok.

It was underlined during the seminar that both the Dinka Ngok and the Missiriya have lived in the area for a very long time and, according to the perception of each group, the area undoubtedly belongs to them. But, while the Dinka Ngok insist on the 1905 border, the Missiriya insist on the 1956 border. Furthermore, the conflict in the area has multiple underlying roots which go beyond the issue of demarcation

Both groups also believe that the ruling of the International Permanent Court of Arbitration was not fair, especially for the Missiriya who claim that the ruling represents a 'death sentence'. During the seminar, it was repeatedly stressed that the two groups lived in harmony for centuries even during the different civil war periods. Paradoxically, however, the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the 22-years of the second civil war in Sudan has marked the beginning of intense conflict and insecurity in Abyie.

The Protocol for Abyie stipulated the formation of Abyie Boundary Commission (ABC) to take charge of the sharing of wealth and resources. The decision of the ABC was rejected under the pretext that the Commission had exceeded its mandate. It was underlined during the seminar that the existence of oil fields in the area has complicated the matter further and introduced other players to the game including the National Congress Party and the Sudan People Liberation Movement, which have their own agenda and do not seem to take into consideration the interests of all the peoples living in Abyie.

The decision of the International Permanent Court of Arbitration has also played a significant part in the new emerging conflict. The ruling has set certain borders which the Missiriya clearly believe to have compromised their ability to pursue their livelihoods, despite giving them the right to grazing routes. According to the panellists, both groups, the Dinka Ngok and the Missiriya, seem to be preparing for a showdown at some point of this conflict. For the Missiriya, abiding by the court ruling would certainly mean losing access to water sources "at any cost". For them, the Dinka Ngok are supported by the Sudan People Liberation Movement and have far more modern equipment and support than what they have.

On the other hand, for the Dinka Ngok, the Missiriya are supported by the National Congress Party and have historically committed numerous atrocities against them. For the Dinka Ngok, the demarcation process will be hindered by the Missiriya once it gets started. Furthermore, the position of the National Congress Party is contradictory by itself as it has vowed to adhere to the court ruling but at the same time sends forces to prevent the actual demarcation from taking place.

All the panellists nonetheless agreed that the two groups were very much capable of solving their problems through their own traditional mechanisms of conflict management, which were successfully tested before. They expressed their appreciation to have the opportunity to participate in this kind of platform organized by parties which are noticeably neutral. They said that there is a need for this kind of dialogue which would allow them to discuss their problems and to take their message to the international community which could better

understand the reasons why they are fighting. They finally suggested that the Institute for Security Studies should hold a similar seminar in Abyie itself.

Discussion

The ensuing discussion raised the issues of root causes of the Abyie problem and the efforts to solve them, the possibilities of future coexistence and also the existing types of support in the area. During the discussion, participant repeatedly enquired about the proposals of the conflicting parties, the situations and positions of refugees and returnees as well as the significance of granting land rights. The seminar pointed out to the fact that there should be a well-developed and fairly structured conflict management mechanism in place in the area which only needs enhancement and adaptation to the new challenges. Participants particularly from the diplomatic missions thought that the seminar was highly informative and conveyed their hope that such seminars ought to be sustained in order for them to better understand the underlying causes and sources of grassroots conflicts in Africa.