



## View Point

### Clashes in Abeyi: Threat to Sudan's Peaceful Partition

*Nivedita Ray\**

The January 2011 referendum in South Sudan was supposed to resolve the issues that led to 22 years of fighting between the Arab-dominated North and secessionists in the South. But it has not. The contested land of Abeyi bordering north and South Sudan remains still the point of discord between both sides. The resolving of Abeyi issue is crucial for north –south settlement and holds the key for peace and stability in the region.

However, the recent clashes in this disputed territory, following north Sudan's occupation of the contested area is seen as a possible trigger for a new war and it comes just weeks before the South due to become an independent state. Khartoum has claimed that the military offensive was in response to an attack by the southern forces, Sudan people Liberation Army (SPLA), on the northern forces, Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) convoy while they were evacuating out of Abeyi with the escort of UN peacekeepers. The escalation of violence in the region since the takeover by North Sudan forces has raised concerns that it will have serious implications for the region as well as for other stakeholders including India

Abeyi bordering north and south Sudan with some of Sudan's biggest oil-fields nearby has long been a source for north-south tension with both sides being reluctant to give up their claims over the region. Control of the Abeyi region, where most of

Sudan's estimated six billion barrels of oil reserves lie, will mean huge profits for whoever that takes over the region. According to some reports Abeyi accounted for roughly 13 per cent of the country's total income from oil export.

As per the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement(CPA) which ended 22 years of devastating civil war between north and south Sudan, both sides were supposed to keep their troops out of the contested land of Abeyi until a vote to determine its future. The CPA had called for a referendum in Abeyi to decide whether the region will be part of North or South Sudan. The poll was to be held alongside the independence referendum, which created south Sudan.

However disputes over border demarcation and voter eligibility have postponed the process indefinitely. As far as dispute over land is concerned the National Congress Party (NCP) government of north Sudan has refused to redraw the boundaries as suggested in the provisions of the Abeyi protocol which was signed as part of the CPA. With regard to the voter eligibility the former southern rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and their tribal allies, the Dinka Ngok, remain at loggerheads with the Misseriya pastoralists and the north's ruling party (NCP) over who should be allowed to vote. The negotiations between the SPLM, the NCP, the Dinka Ngok and the Misseriya aimed at breaking the Abeyi deadlock have yet to bear fruit.

This current impasse coupled with the serious fighting in Abeyi has worrying implications for the region as well as for other external powers whose interest lie in the stability of the region. This rising tension not only present grave risks for the people in Abyei but has the potential to inflame north-south proxy conflicts elsewhere. Concerns are raised that hardening of the North's position on Juba could make an amicable divorce between North and South more difficult. It would threaten the peaceful secession of the south in July and would also undermine efforts toward a constructive north-south relationship beyond July 2011. The deteriorating situation in Abeyi could likely spread instability and violence to other parts of Sudan unless the international community and other foreign powers use their leverage to stop it.

Unfortunately the international community — particularly the United Nations so far has not been effective in getting the deadlock resolved. United Nations peacekeeping forces in Abeyi have failed to protect civilians from attacks and keep the two sides apart. The United States efforts to stabilize the situation have not been also that effective. Moreover, Washington's reduced diplomatic and economic ties during the civil war have limited its leverage over the Sudanese government.

Analysts however feel that China, the key player could take advantage of its position to resolve the issue, as it has considerable economic and political clout in Khartoum and at the same time, it is trying to build good relations with the Southern leadership in Juba. The Chinese Foreign Ministry recently urged the two sides to adhere to peace and restrain themselves by fulfilling the provisions of the peace agreement. The occupation of Abeyi is threatening Chinese oil operations along the border and inside South Sudan.

As far as India is concerned prolongation of such a situation is not in India's interest given its huge economic and energy stakes in Sudan. For India it is important that the Abeyi situation, which holds key to peace, is amicably resolved soon as the occupation of Abeyi may threaten India's oil operations along the border. A prudent and proactive role on the part of India is necessary in order to address Sudan's concerns and challenges and thereby advance its growing interests in Sudan. It is important for India to urge both sides to maintain peace and ensure that the situation does not escalate into a wider crisis while supporting the decisions and measures suggested by the African Union.

*\*Dr. Nivedita Ray, Research Fellow, at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi  
110001*

*7 June 2011*