



## **Gatluak Gai Rebellion, Unity State**

Gatluak Gai's rebellion is linked to the complex and high-stakes politics of Unity state. The site of horrific violence and significant casualties during the civil war, Unity is home to political dynamics that mirror tensions at the highest levels of the Southern government. Given the ongoing armed banditry and insecurity in the state, these rifts, driven by wartime battle ties and longstanding tribal alliances, are unlikely to be resolved following the referendum on Southern self-determination that began on 9 January 2011. They will likely remain serious destabilizing factors and may even pose a threat to the integrity of the vote, particularly if violence breaks out during or after polling.

Although Gatluak was not a major player in state politics prior to the April 2010 elections, the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) was convinced that he was linked to Angelina Teny—wife of Vice-President Riek Machar who ran as an 'independent' candidate for the Unity governorship—and thus perceived him as a threat. Consequently, the GoSS deployed additional Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) troops to the state, particularly in Mayom and Pariang counties, seasonal destinations of the migrating Missiriya, and along the border with South Kordofan. The bolstered SPLA presence was motivated by suspicions regarding Angelina's political aspirations, as well as the army's intention to neutralize any potential security threats, such as the Missiriya. Oil-rich Unity, which shares a tense and militarized border with Northern Sudan, is of particular strategic importance to the GoSS.

Gatluak and his forces did not launch any attacks in Unity between June and December 2010. Nevertheless, the areas of the state where he initially operated—in and around Koch county, south of Bentiu, and in the centre of the state—continued to be insecure, with frequent incidents of banditry and armed violence. These include a 2 December ambush on an SPLA convoy near Bentiu by an armed group whose identity is still unconfirmed.

Shortly after the SPLA and George Athor signed a 'permanent ceasefire agreement' on 5 January, Gatluak's forces were implicated in a clash with the SPLA in Mayom. The SPLA says his forces attacked one of their installations on 7 January, and that a counterattack by the army killed four and wounded six of Gatluak's men. Gen. Acuil Tito Madut, inspector general of the South Sudan Police Service, said 32 fighters from the group were captured by the Southern military and were being brought to Juba to be interrogated. The men were reportedly in possession of 30 AK-47 assault rifles, one machine gun, and one rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

Neither the UN Mission in Sudan nor the SPLA has a verifiable figure for how many forces Gatluak had under his control at the height of the insurgency; like George Athor, he has proven successful in exploiting local grievances and insecurity to further his own aims.

Another lesser-known Southern dissident operating in Unity, Kol Chara Nyang, who was believed to be in hiding in Heglig, may be responsible for several more recent



armed incidents in the Mayom area. Kol Chara and his supporters had appeared quiet since August, until the location of the 2 December ambush on the SPLA—north-east of Mayom—raised suspicions regarding their re-emergence. This activity could be part of an attempt to disrupt the registration and polling processes before the referendum.

A Nuer from Koch county, Gatluak was not a high-ranking SPLA officer before he launched his insurgency in late May 2010 by attacking an SPLA base at Awarping, Abiemnom county. (The SPLA claims that he was previously on the payroll of the Unity state prisons guard.) He reportedly had aspirations to be Koch county commissioner prior to Taban Deng Gai's appointment as governor following the 2008 Sudan People's Liberation Movement convention. After Taban rejected this bid, Gatluak apparently grew resentful and eventually became one of the campaign managers for 'independent' candidate Angelina Teny, perhaps with the hope of gaining the county commissionership if she proved successful.

After Taban's re-election, in what was widely seen as a flawed process, Gatluak and his forces attacked SPLA installations in May 2010 and engaged in fighting in Mayom and Abiemnom. These counties are strategically significant, partly because they have histories of anti-SPLA sentiment and are frontline border areas. Of particular interest is Mayom, home of the former militia leader and current deputy commander-in-chief of the SPLA, Paulino Matiep.

Many rumours circulate in Unity as to the sources of Gatluak's ample forces and the weapons needed to launch attacks on significant SPLA installations. Some Khartoum press reports suggest that SPLA fighters defected to join him, while SPLA officials in Bentiu and other GoSS officials alleged that the National Congress Party sent civilians, namely armed Missiriya, from South Kordofan, to fight in the rebellion. The SPLA also alleged that former Southern militia leaders who are part of the Sudan Armed Forces, such as Maj. Gen. Gabriel Tang Gatwich Chan (also known as Tang-Ginye), have backed him. His sources of support remain unclear; it may be that he has simply engaged heavily armed civilians in his areas of operation.

On 8 June 2010, the SPLA announced that the rebellion was defeated and that it had captured more than 50 of Gatluak's forces, several of whom were defected SPLA soldiers. Like George Athor, he was offered an amnesty by GoSS President Salva Kiir at the end of September 2010. As of January 2011, however, Gatluak had not issued a public response to Kiir's offer, and it seemed that his next move might be influenced by one of two factors: George's signing of a ceasefire with the SPLA and Angelina Teny's next political moves.

In November, GoSS Vice-President Riek Machar and his wife visited Bentiu. At a rally Riek publicly endorsed a state-level reconciliation process and later travelled with a delegation that included Angelina and Governor Taban Deng throughout Unity to encourage citizens to participate peacefully in the referendum. If the local population can be convinced that this reconciliation is genuine—and that it will reduce tensions by loosening the state's grip on all aspects of political life in Unity—then the state's prospects for peace and stability may be enhanced. If, instead, the



apparent reconciliation is not followed up quickly with efforts to increase political space and redress violations committed by state security forces during the elections, Unity is likely to remain an insecure area that could pose a threat to stability in the South during and after the January referendum.

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