

Malakal firefight subsides as Sudan leaders call for truce

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February 24, 2009 (MALAKAL) – Fighting in the northernmost state capital of South Sudan eased by Tuesday afternoon as the region’s vice president arrived to intervene in Malakal, a town of major military significance during the civil war ended four years ago.

Sudan’s president and other top officials called for a halt to the clashes, which pitted the Southern Sudan Army against a Khartoum-backed militia.

In a meeting held today in Juba the Sudanese Presidency condemned the “isolated” incident and directed a high-level delegation of the governments of Sudan and Southern Sudan to work for the immediate containment of the clashes.

Headed by regional vice president Riek Machar Teny, the joint delegation arrived today by helicopter to Falluj, several miles north of Malakal town—a much swifter intervention than in 2006 when clashes with the same militia left 150 dead.

A statement from Machar’s office said that only sporadic firefights took place this afternoon and an “unofficial ceasefire” seemed to have ended the confrontation since the vice president had landed in the late afternoon.

UN peacekeepers reported up to eight casualties in Malakal while the Office of the Vice President cited unverified reports that there were bodies of civilians and uniformed fighters in the streets. Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) reports four people were killed and 18 wounded.

The fighting began Tuesday morning following the arrival on the preceding afternoon of Maj. Gen. Gabriel Tang Ginya, a militia leader who suddenly appeared with 20 armed men.

Tang had been banished from the town after the 2006 fighting, which resulted from a fierce dispute over the commissionership of Malakal.

While reports differ as to the exact circumstances of the confrontation, it is clear that Tang’s arrival was vehemently opposed by certain elements within a combined north-south military unit, known as a Joint Integrated Unit

(JIU), while other JIU soldiers were in fact former members of Tang's militia.

Eyewitnesses told Sudan Tribune that some troops in the southern army, SPLA, wanted to capture Tang alive or else shoot him. UN peacekeepers tried to intervene to convince him to leave with no results.

Speaking in Juba, some members of parliament from Upper Nile blamed Tang's forces for trying to occupy the Malakal airport with eight tanks, two of which were destroyed by SPLA. The legislators, who declined to be named, further alleged that some of the militiamen disguised themselves in uniforms of UN peacekeepers in order to occupy the airport. These claims are unverified.

Another SPLM figure from the region alleged that Tang had flown in from Khartoum on a jet chartered by the central government. He said that SPLA overran two of three military outposts in the area—one by the airport and one in the town—while Tang then took shelter in a third garrison by the Nile where artillery were based.

The state has declared a state of emergency.

More clashes are reported outside of Malakal, though details are sketchy. According to a radio station affiliated with the United Nations Miraya FM, clashes with militia fighter also took place in Falluj in Malut County. Sources told the radio that elements of JIUs are fighting among themselves while SPLA is fighting Sudan Armed Forces in Girbanat, a town northeast of Renk town in Renk County.

Ashraf Qazi, the UN Secretary-General's representative to Sudan, noted it is "essential for the military leadership of the SAF and the SPLA to ensure that the JIUs fulfilled their function as integrated units working together to protect civilians."

One UN national staff member was wounded in the foot when fired upon while riding in a bus from a logistics base, the UN said.

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