

# South Sudan's Coming Famine

Renewed fighting in the war-torn country has derailed humanitarian relief efforts, and now tens of thousands are facing starvation.

BY TY MCCORMICK

**J**UBA, South Sudan — Shots rang out at daybreak on Friday in Bentiu, the capital of the oil-producing Unity state, and continued for much of the morning. At least one artillery shell exploded close to the U.N. base, where some 40,000 people have taken refuge, many of them knee deep in water from rainy-season floods and forced to sleep standing up. Government forces also clashed with rebels in the Ayod region Jonglei state, southeast of Bentiu, where a military spokesman for the government said that 120 rebels were killed.

This fresh round of fighting, which erupted over the weekend between government forces and rebels loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar, further erodes the prospects for peace in the world's newest nation and imperils critical humanitarian efforts aimed at keeping a potential famine at bay.

Both sides blame the other for the resumption of hostilities, with rebel spokesman Lul Ruai Koang claiming it was a "long-awaited government offensive" and Joseph Marier Samuel, a spokesman for the South Sudanese military, saying that the government has "maintained a defensive military position."

South Sudan has been mired in civil war since December 2013, when President Salva Kiir accused Machar of attempting to mount a coup, touching off a round of ethnic killings in the capital and igniting a domestic rebellion. Since then, more than 10,000 people have been killed and another 1.5 million have been displaced. The United Nations has called the resulting humanitarian crisis "the worst in the world," while aid agencies warn that more than 1 million people are in need of emergency food aid.

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The origins of the food-security crisis are layered. War disrupted the planting season, not just where there was active fighting, but across the northern half of the country as farmers fled their fields in anticipation of violence. But systematic underinvestment by the South Sudanese government, which has battled numerous corruption scandals since it became independent in

2011, is also part of the equation: Roughly 90 percent of South Sudanese territory is suitable for agriculture, but only about four percent of it was being cultivated, even before the current crisis. This combination of greed, violence, and lack of capacity has proven deadly.

"This is as bad as I've ever seen it," Toby Lanzer, the top U.N. aid official in South Sudan said in an interview from Juba. "By the end of the year, we're facing a situation where one out of every two people in South Sudan are either going to have a real threat to their lives because of hunger or they will have been displaced from their homes ... or they will have fled from the country."

The outbreak of fighting makes delivering desperately needed food aid and other humanitarian assistance that much more difficult. During the rainy season, which typically runs from April to November, it is virtually impossible to reach most of the country by road, and boat travel along the Nile River has all but ceased because of the violence. In Bentiu, where control has changed hands several times since the fighting broke out, the roughly 40,000 people holed up in the U.N. base must rely on humanitarian airlifts to survive.

For the last two days, those flights have been cancelled because of the fighting.

"If we can't get flights in in the next couple of days, we risk running out of essentials, including therapeutic food used to treat severe acute malnutrition," said Jonathan Veitch, UNICEF's representative in South Sudan.

Such complications couldn't come at a more inopportune time. According to a recent report by Doctors Without Borders, at least three children under the age of five are dying every day from malnutrition in the U.N. camp in Bentiu.

Experts have yet to formally declare a famine -- a step that requires rigorous analysis of food supply, malnutrition, and mortality rates and can take months to complete -- but the United Nations has classified South Sudan a "level-3 emergency," a designation it shares with only three other countries: Syria, Iraq, and the Central African Republic. But aid agencies, like UNICEF, caution against relying too heavily on formal

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declarations or quantitative analysis. Waiting for a famine declaration before taking action, they warn, could be catastrophic. "By the time the famine was declared in Somalia in 2011," said Veitch, "Half of the people that would die in the famine were already dead."

Renewed hostilities come less than a week after government and rebel negotiators missed a key deadline, agreed to by both parties, to stop fighting and form a transitional government. The failure to reach an agreement prompted sharp criticism from human rights advocates and regional governments alike. The United States, arguably South Sudan's most important ally, was uncharacteristically blunt: "Deadlines keep passing and innocent people keep dying," U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry said in a statement. "This is an outrage and an insult to the people of South Sudan."

A recent U.N. Security Council visit to South Sudan led by Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, threatened to impose sanctions on both sides if the violence continues. The United States and European Union have already sanctioned military leaders on either side.

While the peace talks drag on in a luxury hotel in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia -- the first four rounds of peace talks reportedly cost \$17 million -- the humanitarian disaster continues to deepen in South Sudan. By the end of the year, 50,000 children could die from severe acute malnutrition, according to the World Food Program.

"The needs are unmet. Healthcare is virtually absent. I really don't know how people live and survive on a day-to-day basis," said Mukesh Kapila, former high-ranking British U.N. official who was among the first to raise the alarm about the genocide in Darfur.

In Bentiu, a plan to drain the flooded camp inside the U.N. base has been held up because of the inability to transport machinery and water engineers from Holland. Aid workers had intended to dig a roughly two-mile drainage ditch to allow the water to flow into nearby lowlands, but after two weeks of work with only two backhoes, the project remains unfinished.\*

"The place is completely flooded and people are suffering," said Veitch of UNICEF. "As long as we are prevented from landing, 40,000 people are under threat."

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*\*Correction, August 24, 2014: An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated the number of backhoes working to drain the camp in Bentiu. There were two, not one, and considerable progress has been made, although the ditch has not yet been finished.*

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