Origins, character and impact of the civil war
South Sudan has been embroiled in a brutal civil war since December 2013. On one side is the government of President Salva Kiir Mayardit (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement) and its’ allies; on the other side is former Vice-President Riek Machar (Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-in-Opposition) and his backers.

As some observers warned might happen at the time, the euphoria and optimism that attended South Sudan’s independence in July 2011 has quickly been shattered. At least 2.5 million people currently face crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity. 1.5 million people have been internally displaced. An estimated 60,000 people have been killed. With the price of oil down and oil exports in decline, the country’s economy is in a parlous condition.

Source: UN OCHA (at 12 March 2015. Note that South Sudan’s total population is estimated at 11.5 million)
Both sides have been backed by a range of armed groups, over which they appear to have at best partial control. Horrific abuses have been committed by both sides and the violence has taken on an increasingly ethnic character. Salva Kiir is Dinka, the largest ethnic group in the country. Machar is Nuer.

Salva Kiir sacked Machar in July 2013 after he had announced his intention to challenge for the presidency of the country at the next election. Fighting first erupted between the two sides in the South Sudanese capital, Juba, in December 2013. Salva Kiir accused Riek Machar of an attempted coup, which the latter denies, accusing the former of launching a pre-emptive attack against him.

A ceasefire between the two sides has officially been in place since January 2014, although it only began to take the most minimal hold on the ground in May. Since then, the ceasefire has continued to be regularly violated by both sides.

**Peace efforts have so far failed**

There are fears that worse may be yet to come. During the course of 2014, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organisation in the Horn of Africa, has spearheaded efforts to broker a peace agreement between the two men, supported by a ‘Troika’ of Western countries – the US, UK and Norway. There have been moments of hope but ultimately a peace deal has proven elusive. A ‘final’ deadline for reaching an agreement of 5 March 2015 passed without success.

The talks were focused on establishing a ‘Transitional Government of National Unity’ (TGNU). Agreement on the principle of power-sharing was reached. However, the most recent – and supposedly final – round of talks reportedly foundered over Riek Machar’s desire to delay the demobilisation of his armed forces and their (re)integration into the army for longer than was acceptable to Salva Kiir. The allocation of senior positions under a power-sharing arrangement and whether new states should be created were reportedly also unresolved points of dispute (there are currently ten but Machar and his allies want 21). Meanwhile, Salva Kiir has postponed elections due in June 2015 to 2017.

Both men have been forcefully criticised by IGAD and the Troika for failing to reach a deal during the most recent talks. The chair of IGAD, Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, said in a message to the people of South Sudan on 6 March: “The consequences of inaction are the continued suffering of you, the people of South Sudan, and the prolonging of a senseless war in your country. This is unacceptable, both morally and politically.”

**Developments at the UN and AU**

The UN could now impose sanctions (asset freezes and/or travel bans) on all those deemed to be obstructing peace efforts – including Salva Kiir, Riek Machar and their respective entourages. The Security Council passed a resolution permitting such sanctions on 3 March. However, there is not yet an international consensus (let alone one within South Sudan) on sanctions. China, Russia, Uganda, Kenya and Sudan currently oppose them.

The EU and the US introduced targeted sanctions against two South Sudanese military leaders – one from each side, but not Salva Kiir or Riek Machar – in mid-2014.

There have also been calls for a UN arms embargo against South Sudan. The EU has extended the arms embargo that was already in place against Sudan to include South Sudan. The US, which has been the South Sudanese government’s strongest backer since it gained independence in 2011, has not yet done so – but may now be losing patience.
The UN Secretary-General, Ban ki-Moon, has also called for a special tribunal to be established to investigate allegations that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed in South Sudan since 2013. Despite promising not to do so, both sides have recruited thousands of child soldiers since then.

When weighing up its next steps, the UN has to consider the safety and security of the UN’s beleaguered peace-keeping mission in South Sudan (UNMISS).

There are also growing calls for the final report of the AU’s Commission of Inquiry into abuses committed in South Sudan since 2013, chaired by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo, to be published. Established in March 2014, many expected that the report would be published some time ago.

In March 2015 a document purporting to be an October 2014 draft of this report was leaked. This document recommended that all senior members of the government in July 2013, at the time when Salva Kiir sacked Machar, should be excluded from any future transitional body and that South Sudan should be subject to something akin to AU ‘trusteeship’ for a period. The AU has said that this document is not the final report and has no official standing.

While many would support such an approach, others warn that it could make a peace agreement impossible.

Towards renewed talks or a return to all-out conflict?
IGAD and the Troika are trying and reinvigorate the peace process through what is being described as an “IGAD Plus” approach, involving greater coordination and increased pressure by all the international stakeholders involved. A resumption of talks is currently planned for the first week of April.

However, an amnesty offered by the Salva Kiir government to Riek Machar and his backers expires on 31 March. With pro-government forces having gained ground militarily over the last six months (with strong support from Uganda), the International Crisis Group fears there will be a large-scale government offensive after that date and has urged the international community to make sure that peace talks re-start before then to prevent this from happening. Salva Kiir’s rhetoric has hardened considerably since the last talks failed – he has said that he is no longer willing to consider power-sharing – and clashes between the two sides are already on the increase.

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