



South Sudan: Hussein Abdel Bagi deepens his control of the borderland

RVI FIELD UPDATE 5

Key points

- Since Salva Kiir appointed Hussein Abdel Abgi as one of his five vice-presidents he has strengthened his control over the borderland region between South Sudan and Sudan, now occupying political space previously filled by Paul Malong (former SPLA Chief of Staff).
- Abdel Bagi has deepened his control of the re-formed Northern Bahr el-Ghazal by successfully negotiating the appointment of Tong Aken Ngor (former governor of Aweil state), who operates under his patronage as the new state governor.
- Abdel Bagi and Tong Aken have built their popularity with communities on both sides of the border by promising that they will help keep the peace, build new roads and strengthen the cross-border economy between Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and East Darfur / West Kordofan states.
- Abdel Bagi also used his links with the Misseriya community in Sudan, plus his relationship with Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himedti'—leader of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—to negotiate an end to a conflict between Dinka and Misseriya groups earlier in 2020.
- While security subsequently improved in the area, a recent build-up of armed Rizeigat groups from East Darfur—particularly around the 14-mile demilitarized zone—has raised concerns amongst the local Dinka community about a return to conflict in the area.
- The Dinka community has responded by distributing weapons and recruiting young men to reinforce the conventional military presence if conflict re-starts during the dry season, when Sudanese groups move livestock across the borderland.

Abdel Bagi's new man in Aweil

In February 2020 Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, appointed Hussein Abdel Bagi—head of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA)—as one of his five vice-presidents. Abdel Bagi is a member of the Malual Dinka community from Madhol, on the Northern Bahr el-Ghazal border with West Kordofan, and is the son of the late Abdel Bagi Ayii Akol, a powerful Dinka chief and ally of Khartoum during both the first and second Sudanese civil wars. Like his father, Hussein Abdel Bagi has forged strong relationships with Sudan's security elites and powerful borderland communities—particularly the Rizeigat and Misseriya in Darfur and West Kordofan—which has made him an increasingly important player in South Sudan's relations with Khartoum.

For more on this see RVI Field Update 3, ['Understanding Hussein Abdel Bagi: South Sudan's vice-president from the borderlands'](#).



Northern Bahr el-Ghazal borderlands

Abdel Bagi's new man in Aweil

Abdel Bagi's elevation to vice-president has strengthened his position as a powerbroker in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, working through a number of allies in important political and security roles. For example, Hussein played a key role in the selection of Tong Aken Ngor—former governor of Aweil state—as the new governor of Northern Bahr el-Ghazal in June 2020, after South Sudan reverted to its ten state system.

Tong Aken is an example of a governor picked for his credentials as a cross-border operator, coupled with the political advantages his appointment gives to more powerful players under whose patronage he has prospered. Tong served as an intelligence officer for the Sudanese government in the 1980s and fought

the SPLA as part of Khartoum's counterinsurgency campaign against the rebel movement. This meant that Tong, and others, developed strong and enduring relationships with northern political and military elites, as well as with influential members of the neighbouring Sudanese Rizeigat and Misseriya tribes, who remain a key factor in cross-border security and trade. He also remained a member of the National Congress Party (NCP) until 2011 when South Sudan became independent and Tong joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), which took power in Juba.

Tong's earlier appointment as governor of Aweil state (May 2019), under the former 32 state system—replacing Jal Malith, an ex-South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF) commander with little influence across the border—took place at a time when Juba was trying to strengthen its relations with Khartoum. In addition to this, Salva Kiir was seeking to put in place a governor with no significant support base with the SPLM or SSPDF, unlike his powerful predecessors, such as Paul Malong—governor of North Bahr el-Ghazal (2008–14) and Kiir's former SPLA Chief of Staff (2014–17)—who split from the president and started a short-lived rebellion in January 2018.

For more on this see RVI Field Update 2, ['Kiir consolidates power through border deal with Khartoum'](#).

Tong's appointment was negotiated by Hussein—fast becoming a security lynchpin in the borderlands—with the different communities on both sides of the border. He was able to convince them that Tong would help keep the peace and encourage cross-border trade. As leader of the SSOA, on paper Hussein's involvement in Tong's appointment violated the R-ARCSS peace agreement, which stated that the governor should represent the SPLM in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal. However, the local Dinka, Rizeigat and Misseriya leaders across the border saw Tong as an acceptable appointment following a period of conflict in May 2020 between the Malual Dinka and Misseriya.

Peacebuilding across borders

In March 2020, the South Sudan-Sudan border had been partly closed to slow the spread of COVID-19 in the region. This sparked a rise in illegal crossing and smuggling—a profitable endeavor for local political and security elites.

For more on this see RVI Field Update 4, ['Covid-19 in South Sudan's borderlands: a view from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal'](#).

In May, with COVID-19 cases remaining relatively low in South Sudan, border closure measures were relaxed, allowing people to cross for work and trade. However, the re-opening was followed by cross-border tensions ignited by the theft of Misseriya cattle by local Dinka SSPDF soldiers stationed at War-guet in Aweil East on the border with West Kordofan. This caused a series of clashes between SSPDF and the Misseriya and subsequent re-closing of the border.

Using the occasion of his father's funeral in late June 2020, Hussein Abdel Bagi brought together leaders from the SSPDF, Dinka chiefs and members of the peace committees, and the Misseriya community in Kordofan. The Abdel Bagi family has close connections with the Misseriya in Kordofan dating back to the 1950s when Hussein's father was the court clerk to Chief Deng Majok of Abyei. Abdel Bagi senior lived most of his life since the 1960s in Kordofan, first leading Malual Dinka militias against the Anya Nya rebels during the First Sudan Civil War (1955–72), and latterly against the SPLA in the Second Civil War (1983–2005). The Sudanese Misseriya and Rizeigat communities saw Abdel Bagi senior as a long-time defender and loyalist and his death brought the recently divided Dinka and Arab communities together in dialogue.

These post-funeral discussions helped to reduce tensions and agreements were made on compensation for lives and property that had been lost during fighting. Hussein also promised that he would appoint a governor to Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state—Tong Aken Ngor—who would satisfy Dinka and Misseriya communities; ensure that peace would prevail across the border; and repair the road linking Warawar (Northern Bahr el-Ghazal) to Meiram (West Kordofan).

Soon after Tong became governor in June, he began a tour of the state accompanied by Hussein, during which they made promises to reopen the borders and set out a programme of road building, which also included a new route linking Gok Machar (between Aweil and Kiir Adem on the border) and Daen in East Darfur. These promises were welcomed by the state's population, which depends on food and other commodities imported from Sudan. Work has now started on the Meiram road.

Buying and building peace

The peace that was mediated between borderland communities in June and July has, so far, lasted. In November, at a celebration of the Juba Peace Agreement, which saw Sudanese rebel groups from Darfur and Blue Nile state agree to a peace deal with Khartoum, Hussein personally delivered a payment of SDP 38,000,000 (USD 690,000) to Mohamed Hamdan Daglo 'Himedti', the leader of Sudan's paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), and Hamad Abdelrahman Salih, the governor of Sudan's West Kordofan state. This served as compensation for the deaths of Sudanese Misseriya killed by Malual Dinka in the May and June clashes.

Himedti, who is from the Rizeigat tribe on the border between Darfur and Chad, is an important player in cross-border dynamics, including influence (although not control) over the wider Rizeigat community extending into the Kordofans. Hussein has also retained influence in Kordofan through his family's history and continued ownership of a number of businesses and large areas of land, including the old military training camp near Meiram that his father founded in the 1960s. His forces—mainly young Dinka men conscripted on the road north—are now being trained at the cantonment site at Pan-tit as part of the peace agreement. They are under the direct command of Hussein's younger brother Nuradin (Garang) Abdel Bagi.

While the road from Aweil to Meram via Majok Nyin Thiou remains closed as repairs take place, tensions in the area are much reduced and people are able to use an alternative route, via Amiet, which passes through Abyei to Meiram. This has enabled migration to Khartoum to restart, which is a vital pathway for young men and women from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal seeking work and education. Hussein, who remains the real power in the state, has promised to inaugurate the repaired road in-person with the added presence of Himedti, ostentatiously cementing the spirit of cooperation between borderland communities.

RSF build-up causes tensions amongst borderland communities

While Northern Bahr el-Ghazal is expecting to reopen the border at Majok and Kiir Adem, there has been a build-up of the military presence on the Sudan side of the border close to Kiir Adem in the demilitarized zone. This was partly a response to an attempt by UNISFA—the UN peacekeeping mission in Abyei—to open a new base at Raiq Mandalla, a seasonal market a few miles north of the River Kiir, at the end of 2019.

UNISFA's intention was to provide security and protection to the civilians trading in the area, which includes members of the Dinka, Rizeigat and Misseriya communities. However, local accounts suggest that the Rizeigat believed that the UN was pursuing a hidden agenda to extend the Dinka border beyond the River Kiir into their ancestral land. Consequently, the new base was rejected by a host of Rizeigat from East Darfur. A few weeks later, a small force of RSF was deployed in the area, apparently to keep the UN away. During July and August, the RSF forces appeared to be further expanded with helicopters regularly observed landing by fishermen in Kiir Adem.

The RSF build-up has sent a signal about control of the border area, particularly the disputed 14-mile demilitarized zone south of the River Kiir. While relations between the local Dinka and Rizeigat communities have improved after the interventions of Hussein Abdel Bagi, the RSF / Rizeigat build-up is again causing worry amongst the Dinka, who fear a return to familiar patterns of borderland raiding and violence.

This RSF / Rizeigat build-up has stimulated a local response. In the last week of November, General Baak Akoon, commander of the SSPDF Third Division, began to reinforce its 17th Brigade on the East Darfur border at Gokmachar and Malek Miir, a few miles south of Kiir Adem. Baak also conducted a tour and held meetings with chiefs and local administrators in the areas bordering East Darfur. He distributed guns to chiefs—40–45 each—to give to *gelweng* (cattle guards) who will reinforce SSPDF should violence occur over the dry season months. He also asked chiefs to inform and mobilize the retired SSPDF soldiers in their areas to register with chiefs or report to the nearest SSPDF barracks with a promise that their names be returned to the payroll as full SSPDF soldiers.

Conclusion

Recent developments in the border region show that, despite interventions from several powerful political players on both sides of the border, relations between different communities remain fragile, particularly at times when pastoralist communities move their cattle into agricultural areas, such as the disputed 14-mile zone. While nationally important figures like Himedti in Sudan, or Hussein Abdel Bagi in South Sudan, have negotiated a broader peace along the border, which serves their long-term economic and political interests in the region, its longer-term viability remains subject to local dynamics, which may progress out of their control.



Credits

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