

Dinka

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Profile

Dinka are the largest single southern Nilotic group. They are cattle herders living in northern Bahr al Ghazal and areas south and west of the White Nile.

Historical context

Living on the frontier between Nilotic southern peoples and cattle-herding Arabs has meant that the Dinka have been less isolated than other southern peoples and to a certain extent have played a brokerage role between them and the Arabs. However, this proximity has made the Dinka most vulnerable to raids from Arab militias, often at the instigation of political leaders in Khartoum, who shoot the men and enslave the women and children, to be kept as personal property or marched north and sold. Throughout Sudan's north-south conflict, UN documents and the news media provided persistent reports of the revival of slavery in Sudan.

The Dinka have also been targeted by Khartoum's Islamicization campaigns, as most Dinka exercise traditional beliefs and others are Christian.

The Ngok Dinka of the area of Abyei struck an agreement with their Misseriya Arab neighbours shortly before Sudan's independence to remain part of Kordofan, rather than joining their Dinka cousins in administrative southern Sudan. The agreement aimed at maintaining cordial and mutually beneficial trading relations between the two peoples, but, as Sudan descended into civil war in the 1960s, the Ngok Dinka threw in their lot with southern rebels.

Over the following decades, Khartoum mobilized Misseriya and Rizeigat Arab militias against the Ngok Dinka, and the conflict was consciously injected with ethnic and religious meaning. The suffering of the Ngok Dinka reached new heights in the mid-1980s, when Khartoum-backed Arab militias burned nearly all Dinka villages surrounding Abyei, looted cattle, and abducted women and children.

The discovery of oil in the region fuelled the pogrom, and rural Dinka were dispersed to the north and concentrated into Abyei town. In March 1988, 1,000 Dinka men, women and children were massacred by Rizeigat Arab militias in southern Darfur.

The leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), John Garang, was a Dinka, but his people nevertheless experienced severe displacement as a result of SPLA operations. Pro-government militia attacks aimed to depopulate southern oil fields and expand large-scale mechanized agriculture, resulting in famine.

The first large exodus came in 1983, and the process reached a peak between 1986 and 1988. The

displaced were not granted access to urban land. The only available sites were rubbish dumps and other wasteland. In 1991, when faced with those displaced by the war from southern Sudan, the Khartoum authorities relocated 150,000 displaced persons and squatters from Khartoum and housed them in a series of ramshackle, government-controlled transit camps too far from the city to commute to work.

The SPLA split in 1991, with Riek Machar (a Nuer) and Lam Akol Ajawin (a Shilluk) forming a splinter faction and taking many ethnic Nuer and Shilluk with them. The government in Khartoum seized the opportunity to deepen the southern divide, and provided military support to Machar. Amnesty International reported 2,000 deaths in a raid by Machar's forces on the Dinka settlement at Bor, Jonglei state in 1991.

Thousands of Dinka fled the massacre south and west to Equatoria state. Sporadic violence between Dinka and Nuer factions worsened the situation in southern Sudan throughout the 1990s. In 1999 Dinka and Nuer leaders signed a ceasefire. Some Dinka parents, desperate to escape the civil war in the south, handed over their children as slaves to pay for their own transport by truck to the north.

War and famine brought growing numbers of unaccompanied Dinka children from rural areas to the streets of northern Sudanese urban areas. There they were exposed to many forms of abuse and frequently taken to inqaz, 'salvation camps' located far out in the desert, for 're-education' and training for militia forces.

Current issues

The situation for Dinka in the south has improved since the January 2005 CPA. For the most part they are no longer subject to attack by the Sudanese military and Khartoum-backed militias, although some attacks by the Khartoum-supported Lord's Resistance Army of Uganda have continued.

The end of the war has turned Juba into a development boomtown of sorts, although housing is desperately short and many have not yet seen any economic benefits. Many of the thousands of Dinka displaced from Bor in 1991 are making the journey home.

Likewise, some Dinka among the estimated 2 million southerners living in Khartoum are moving back to the south, some motivated by the planned census, while others have returned due to a lack of work and land for them in the north. Southern militias have been slow to disarm, and tensions between Dinka and Nuer remain.

Fears about Dinka domination are also present among the south's other tribes. Although the vice-president of the south is a Nuer (Riek Machar) and the foreign minister of the unity government is a Shilluk (Lam Akol), there are deep-rooted tensions, deriving from historical rivalries.

MRG research in Sudan 2006 revealed mixed opinions on this subject, with some former SPLA soldiers feeling that, since the Dinka made up the bulk of the fighting force during the civil war, they deserved the lion's share of the spoils. Other SPLM officials realized the political sensitivities, and publicly rejected the Dinka domination theories. Others make the wider point that it has long been Khartoum's favoured position to emphasize the 'Dinka War', as part of its efforts to drive a wedge between the southerners.

The situation is also complicated by differences within the SPLM Dinka themselves. In the aftermath of John Garang's death, ICG reported pressure on Salva Kiir to sideline 'Garang's boys' from the government in Khartoum. (ICG, 2006) In the 2007 administration reshuffles, it was noted that it was

Bahr el Ghazal Dinkas, close to Salva Kiir, who benefited the most.

Abyei

The CPA created a special temporary administrative status for Abyei until a referendum gives its residents a choice between joining the north or the south. Yet, in 2006, President al Bashir and the government rejected the findings of the Abyei Boundary Commission that under the CPA were to have been final and binding. It is believed the key difficulty is that the valuable oil fields which Khartoum wanted to remain under its control have instead been assigned to the south.

Khartoum has also been assiduously stoking Misseriya Arab fears over the future referendum as one tactic in preventing the return of Ngok Dinka before the vote. The regime has also been moving northerners into the area in an effort to change the demography. In late 2007 the regime began organizing Misseriya Arab men into 'Popular Defence Forces', much as it had done with the Arab Janjaweed in Darfur. In response, the former SPLA were reported to be backing Ngok Dinka militarization. Serious clashes followed. In April 2008, the Enough Project warned that continued non-implementation of the Abyei Protocol was leading to mutual provocations between Khartoum and the SPLM and threatening to cause the larger CPA to collapse. Then in May, an Enough analyst reported from the ground that the Sudan Armed Forces had bombarded the town from the air and invaded on the ground. The government forces had emptied Abyei of civilians and systematically burned markets and homes. UN officials estimated that 50,000 displaced persons fled to the south. Sudanese President Omar al Bashir and southern leader Salva Kiir reached an agreement in June 2008 to form joint north-south military and police units for Abyei and facilitate the return of the displaced. The sides subsequently agreed that the Permanent Court for Arbitration in The Hague would decide whether the Abyei Boundary Commission had overstepped its mandate, as claimed by Khartoum. By the end of the month, there were apparent delays in the departure of northern and southern forces, although a joint military unit for Abyei had been formed.