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This Gun is our Food

Demilitarising the White Army
Militias of South Sudan

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“This Gun is our Food”:

Demilitarising the White Army Militias of South Sudan

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[Abstract] Militias and other armed groups embody a special dimension in warfare that transcends the classic inter-state and intra-state (government/guerrilla movement) disputes of the past. These militarised entities are prone to pursue conflict first and foremost in terms of local interests, which make them notoriously difficult to manage in the context of post-conflict transitions to peace, and as a consequent pose particular challenges for DDR programmes. The classic instruments utilised in disarmament practices – namely influence, incentives and coercion – tend to be blunt in their generic, internationally-mandated application and can therefore produce a variety of unintended consequences, including active resistance amongst militias. The demilitarisation of the so-called ‘White Army’ militias of South Sudan highlights, on the one hand, the complexities inherent in managing a disarmament process aimed at militias and, on the other hand, illustrates the possibilities for success inherent in a well-considered campaign. This paper highlights policy considerations for the demilitarisation of militias based on the lessons learned from South Sudan’s recent experiences disarming White Army militias in Upper Nile and Jonglei states from January to August 2006.

This working paper is part of a larger project on Demilitarisation, commissioned by the Training for Peace (TFP) Programme at NUPI.

Section 1: Introduction

One of the most serious problems confronting transitions from conflict to peace in Africa today is the role of local armed groups and militias, what are commonly referred to as ‘other armed groups’ (OAGs). OAGs embody a special dimension in warfare that transcends the classic inter-state and intra-state (government/guerrilla movement) disputes of the past. These militarised entities are prone to pursue conflict first and foremost in terms of local interests, which make them notoriously difficult to manage in the context of post-conflict transitions to peace.¹ As such, the conventional approaches to conflict management and resolution promulgated by the international community and focused as they are at the national (or more recently regional) levels² are singularly inadequate in addressing the issue of OAGs as well as the enduring effect that they have on post-conflict situations.

Tackling this particular set of actors, for whom the confluence of local social dynamics, individual strategies of status accrual, pursuit of security and income enhancement can all serve as motivations, is especially challenging for proponents of Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) programs. The classic instruments utilised in disarmament practices – namely influence, incentives and coercion – tend to be blunt in their generic, internationally-mandated application and can therefore produce a variety of unintended consequences, including active resistance amongst OAGs. A recognition of actor motivation (both individuals and communities), the context of abiding fear, strategies and local social practices that have developed during the conflict, as well as the role of identity politics can, if properly integrated into a comprehensive disarmament campaign, facilitate positive responses amongst militias. Such a campaign would need to be structured around the selective employment of influence, incentives and coercive instruments in a sequenced manner as well as being coupled to a publicity operation targeting potential recidivists if it were to achieve its key objectives. Moreover, for the publicity itself to be effective, it would need to be handled by recognised and legitimised agents who had the authority to inform and persuade militias. The demilitarisation of the so-called ‘White Army’ militias of South Sudan highlights, on the one hand, the complexities inherent in managing a disarmament process aimed at militias and, on the other hand, illustrates the possibilities for success inherent in a well-considered campaign.

Save for a period of roughly a decade, Sudan endured an intense civil war since its independence in 1956. The civil war in the south was a very complex one, involving a plethora of armed actors ranging from state armies such as the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), to formal rebel movements such as the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), as well as down to local militias. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Khartoum government and the SPLA took effect in January 2005, ending 21 years of

¹ For an elaboration on this approach see Chris Alden, Matthew Arnold and Monika Thakur, ‘Conceptualising Armed Groups, Militias and Other Non Statutory Forces: a preliminary assessment’, unpublished, pp. 1-11.

² See the regional approach adopted by the Multi Donor Reintegration Programme aimed at the central African region.

fighting in the south and establishing the autonomous state of South Sudan.³ As part of the CPA, the UN established a peacekeeping mission in South Sudan known as UNMIS. An important OAG in South Sudan is the so-called ‘White Army’ militias. These militias are groupings of armed civilians, mostly youth, which during the course of the long civil war, notably during the 1990s, coalesced into village-level formations. The presence of numerous White Army militias created a significant degree of instability in Upper Nile and Jonglei states even after the signing of the CPA and their militant presence has been one of the major security challenges for the Government of South Sudan (GoSS).

The purpose of the paper is not to provide a comprehensive status report of the White Army militias in South Sudan. Rather, the article intends to highlight policy considerations for the demilitarisation of OAGs more broadly in Africa based on the lessons learned from South Sudan’s recent experiences disarming White Army militias. Given that, the paper will narrow its focus to draw out specific lessons learned from the disarmament exercise of White Army militias in Upper Nile and Jonglei states from January to August 2006. This limiting of the material covered is necessary to allow for general themes to be garnered from a detailed analysis of definite ‘real world’ developments.

Section 2: Overview of White Army militias

2.1: White Army history and current presence in South Sudan

The White Army is not real army and aren’t proper soldiers. Anybody with a gun can claim to be ‘White Army’ soldier. They are just local people who have guns and it’s just name given to gunmen in villages. - Lou Nuer elder⁴

As described above, the ‘White Army’ is not a single, coherent armed force. Rather it is a generic name given to bands of armed civilians, primarily male youth, who reside mostly in Jonglei and Upper Nile states in South Sudan.⁵ White Army militiamen do not serve as full-time, dedicated soldiers but rather intermittently in collectives of armed civilians, who undertake cattle raids against their neighbours, occasionally banditry, and generally carry on with their everyday lives armed and militant. Often much of the fighting is actually between the various constituent groups that make up what are broadly known as White Army militias. However, at other times they do temporarily unite to fight larger, commonly identified enemies.

³ The CPA was signed in May 2004 in Kenya. It allowed for an autonomous state of South Sudan within the country of Sudan. Its main provision was a referendum on independence for the south in 2011. Furthermore, of note to this article, the SPLA was deemed the official army of South Sudan prior to the referendum.

⁴ Interview in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 5/8/2006. The Lou Nuer are a sub-group of one of the largest tribes in South Sudan, the Nuer.

⁵ Interview with group of Lou Nuer elders who reside in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 5/8/2006. Note that White Nile concentrations are also found in Upper Nile State but to a much lower extent than is seen in Jonglei State. For one of the few academic reviews available of the White Army prior to the CPA, see Skedsmo, Arild; Danhier, Kwong; and Luak, Hoth Gor. “The Changing Meaning of Small Arms in Nuer Society.” *African Security Review*, Vol. 12 (4), 2003, pgs 57-67.

The armed youth in question come from Dinka as well as Gawaar and Lou Nuer communities. The UN estimated that at the beginning of 2006 there were “20-30,000 mainly youth” members of the White Army militias who were “loosely organized under the leadership of chiefs.”⁶ Violence associated with the White Army militias has traditionally been at its peak during the dry season, when cattle are congregated along the Sobat and Nile rivers, thus leading the various militias into greater contact with one another as well as other communities. Historically, the seasonal movements of people with their cattle were relatively less violent, but over decades of war- leading to high levels of armaments accumulation and the near complete dissolution of governmental authorities- they became more so.⁷

The reason that the White Army militias should be taken seriously and considered in the post-conflict reconstruction policies of South Sudan is that their presence has severely hindered the ability of the GoSS to exert effective governmental control over the south, namely in Jonglei and Upper Nile states. While there is no single army, the presence of many bands of militiamen who operate largely without restraint in their home areas meant that they needed to be disarmed to allow for effective governance to be implemented. As will be discussed in greater detail below, attempts by the SPLA to disarm White Army militias, specifically from the Lou Nuer community in the first half of 2006, resulted in a great deal of violence. This resistance to disarmament was conducted in a fairly coherent manner, enough so as to inflict significant casualties upon the SPLA numbering well into the hundreds.

2.2: History of disarmament exercises undertaken from January to July 2006

In response to the presence of White Army militias, an exercise was begun by the SPLA in December 2005 to disarm them. ‘Peace meetings’ were held with the respective communities by the SPLA, to encourage the peaceful disarmament of the White Army militias, something that was overall agreed upon by the parties.⁸ However, in January 2006 a SPLA disarmament contingent that arrived in western Jonglei State was ambushed by White Army militias resulting in the deaths of up to 300 SPLA soldiers, forcing the SPLA to temporarily retreat.⁹ While the SPLA momentarily withdrew from western and central Jonglei state, it proceeded with disarmament exercises in Upper Nile state, which occurred relatively uneventfully.

Intermittent fighting between the SPLA and White Army militias continued for the next several months and peaked again in central Jonglei State in March and May when a force

⁶ UNMIS UMAC Brief: “Security Related Events in Jonglei during May and June 2006”, dated 5/7/2006.

⁷ This is a contentious argument and there has been little to no formal academic research into it. However, it was a common sentiment of both southerners and aid workers dealing with security issues in Upper Nile and Jonglei states.

⁸ A meeting was held between SPLA, GoSS, and community representatives from the respective communities that agreed that disarmament was necessary, especially of White Army militias.

⁹ “Fragile Disarmament in the south.” IRIN News, 18/8/2006. Most of these deaths were not combat deaths but from thirst and starvation after they were scattered following the fighting.

of 3,000 SPLA undertook forceful disarmament in the Yuai area.¹⁰ During this forceful disarmament exercise, White Army militias and SPLA forces were engaged in extensive combat. Furthermore, extensive pillaging of local communities was undertaken by White Army militias during the mayhem and the SPLA selectively burnt hundreds of huts that belonged to White Army members who were resisting them. The fighting eventually stopped after the militias suffered significant losses, ran out of ammunition, and subsequently retreated northward.¹¹

Following the violence in western and then central Jonglei State, efforts were made to ensure a peaceful disarmament exercise in eastern Jonglei state, notably in and around the town of Akobo. During July 2006, a peaceful disarmament exercise was undertaken there by the SPLA and its partners. The County Commissioner of Akobo County had given a timeframe of the 15th to 30th of July for armed civilians in the county to voluntarily disarm after which it was publicized that they could be forcefully disarmed by the SPLA.¹² The Commissioner had been keen that instead of the large force of SPLA soldiers, such as that used in central Jonglei, that the SPLA undertake a voluntary disarmament using smaller dispersed forces. This was hoped for so as to lessen tensions with local communities and to prevent the SPLA presence from becoming a burden on already food insecure local communities.

The disarmament exercise was undertaken through the manning of a dozen or so ‘disarmament posts’ where groups of approximately ten SPLA soldiers, supported by ‘deputised’ armed civilians, collected guns that were brought in by civilians in the vicinity. The UN provided logistical and technical support through their UNDP DDR Unit while UNMIS Military Observers and Force Protection soldiers provided a general presence and monitoring of the situation. Furthermore, the UNDP promised that for those who turned over weapons, they would later receive compensation for each gun in the form of a packet of goods, such as fishing and mosquito nets and other small items. More than 1,000 guns were collected during the exercise.¹³

Overall, it can be summarised that a key goal of the SPLA’s post-CPA security strategy has been to disarm major concentrations of heavily armed civilians in the south, namely

¹⁰ Sudan Mirror, “White Army, Case for Disarmament.” 14/8-27/8, 2006, pg 19.

¹¹ Interviews with UNMIS sources in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 6/8/2006. Following these clashes, one group of remnant White Army militiamen retreated to the North and stopped near the town of Korfluss.¹¹ The SPLA decided to allow these White Army remnants to stay in the area after they agreed to cease hostilities and be absorbed into the SPLA gradually. A second group of White Army remnants, attempting to flee further to the north was stopped by the SPLA and forcefully disarmed. A third group was rumoured to have fled from central Jonglei State to the west where it disappeared.

¹² Interview with UN source, UNDP DDR Unit, Malakal, Upper Nile State, 4/8/2006. Note that the County Commissioner is the highest ranking official in Sudan’s local administrations.

¹³ This number should be qualified. The total numbers of arms in Akobo County is unknown. However, it is likely to be considerably higher than 1,000, meaning that many arms were left uncollected. One NGO, PACT, estimated (based on field research) to UNMIS that “Outside of Akobo town itself, approximately 75-90 % of male civilians above the age of 15 possess automatic weapons.” This means that a total of approximately 1,000 guns, while substantial, is not very high proportionate to the potential number of guns most likely in the county, something impossible to know presently. PACT presentation to UNMIS in late-April 2006 in Malakal entitled “Briefing on Security and Arms Control in Jonglei.”

the White Army militias in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. The SPLA has never been deluded into thinking its initial disarmament exercises can collect absolutely all of the firearms, or even most for that matter, held by civilians in Jonglei and Upper Nile states. Rather, the strategy has been to end attacks by large formations of White Army militias, such as the attacks by 800 to 1,000 militiamen on Ulang and other Sobat corridor communities in March and April 2006.¹⁴ Following the aforementioned major disarmament exercises, it was hoped by the SPLA that a majority of civilians will have been disarmed and given this, there should only be small remnant groups of White Army militia of perhaps 10 to 15 people. These smaller groups could then be disarmed gradually through SPLA bush patrols. The SPLA argued that because of the problem of cattle raiding it would maintain a 'security' presence in villages, but after complete disarmament, i.e. for instance of the Murle in southern Jonglei state, all SPLA troops would go back to their barracks.¹⁵

This has been the SPLA's strategy in any case, and the balance of the article will review its efficacy, the role of other actors to it, and continuing challenges for engendering peace and stability in its aftermath. Emphasis will be placed on contrasting the SPLA's forceful disarmament exercise from January to May 2006 in western and central Jonglei State with the voluntary disarmament exercises in Akobo County in eastern Jonglei State in July 2006.

Section 3: An empirical mapping of White Army militias

3.1: White Army militias' motivation

In order to understand the White Army militias to a level sufficient for extracting lessons that could apply to demilitarisation strategies more broadly, it is necessary to undertake some 'cognitive mapping' of its members, starting with a review of their motivation. An analysis of the motivations behind the White Army militias must be broken down into two levels, firstly the impetus for owning a gun and joining a White Army militia and secondly, the rationale for resisting disarmament exercises through violence.

Rationale to own a gun and belong to a White Army militia

If you have a gun, you believe you can get something. If you don't have a gun, you don't feel like you have anything at all. - White Army youth¹⁶

A starting point for understanding how the White Army militias came into existence is the consideration of the general anarchy that has existed for decades in South Sudan. The civil wars fought in the south have almost entirely prevented the presence of effective governance. When combined with the proliferation of small arms and the fractured nature of the tribal systems of the south, an environment has been fostered very conducive to the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interview with SPLA Brig. General Charles Lam in Nassir, Upper Nile State on 24/7/2006.

¹⁶ Interview of youth in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/3006.

development of small, localised militias. One ex-White Army member disarmed in Jonglei State described the rationale for its existence: “The White Army only existed because there was no government.”¹⁷ With no presence of a coherent government, and the constant flux of assorted other larger armed groups operating in the south, many youth felt free to join their local White Army militia as a form of self-defence.¹⁸ This argument by White Army youth cannot be discounted as the need for self-protection by local populations from the larger rebel movements, such as the SPLA which developed a reputation for harassing and exploiting civilians, and from other local militias and armed groups like bandits, is a very significant one.

In addition to this environment of anarchy and the need for self-protection, the creation of local militias also had decidedly commercial rationales as well. Cattle raiding has long been an important aspect of the socio-economic systems of South Sudan. Ownership of a firearm and membership in a militia greatly facilitated the ability of individuals to undertake cattle raids by otherwise exceedingly marginalised youth.¹⁹ The existence of general anarchy, compounded by a breakdown in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, left what one southerner called a “war culture” in which people “use guns to enrich themselves”, mostly through cattle raiding.²⁰ This ability to generate some income is significant given there are few other economic outlets available to youth in the war-torn south. Furthermore, the acquisition of cattle is significant culturally in the south to Nuer society, for instance the pressing need for cattle is central to dowries which must be supplied by the groom in marriage ceremonies.

The fact that the civil war in the south went on for so long means that an entire generation knows little other than a war-time existence, which means that the “only things in the minds of the youth is a war culture and a gun.”²¹ The sense of frustration and isolation of rural youths is also very strong. Ownership of a gun and membership in a local militia is very empowering to youths who feel that their options are decidedly limited.²² Adding to this sense of empowerment that this gives White Army youth is the belief that through their membership in militias and ownership of firearms, they are guaranteed recognition in war as well as a post-conflict environments that otherwise would ignore them completely.

Rationale to resist disarmament

*You can't collect my gun when you are my enemy. – White Army youth*²³

¹⁷ Interview with group of ex-White Army members in Akobo, Jonglei State, 22/8/2006.

¹⁸ Interview with group of ex-White Army members in Walgak, Jonglei State, 20/8/2006. One noted that “We joined because there was no government to help us.”

¹⁹ It is a phrase often heard amongst Nuer youth of the gun that “this is our food” meaning while other tribes grow food, they use the gun for their sustenance. This is especially so during a time of war when traditional economic systems have been disrupted, such as herding and agriculture.

²⁰ SPLM Security Advisor and Shilluk tribal elder, 16/7/2006 in Malakal, Upper Nile State.

²¹ Ibid

²² This insight was articulated to Arnold by a UNDP consultant who had undertaken extensive interviewing of White Army youth. Interview in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

²³ Interview with White Army youth in Walgak, Jonglei State on 20/8/2006.

That the resistance by White Army militias was so violent and broad was a surprise to the SPLA, which experienced significant casualties when it began its disarmament exercise precisely because it wasn't expecting so much resistance. The reasons behind the strong resistance can be placed upon three major factors: (i) a fear and even hatred of the SPLA, (ii) civilians in Jonglei and Upper Nile states worrying about a need for self-protections generally, and (iii) a dislike of the very idea of being disarmed.

As per the first consideration, despite the fact that it was the largest rebel movement in the region, the SPLA is not well regarded in much of the south. This is especially so in the 'Nuer belt' of Upper Nile and Jonglei states where much of the White Army militias were resident. The Lou Nuer, who formed the bulk of the White Army militias, are also very strongly represented in other anti-SPLA actors in the south, notably the South Sudan Defence Forces (SSDF).²⁴ The result of this is that Lou generally are still very wary of the SPLA because it was fighting with significant numbers of them for many years. This continuing wariness of disarmament is fundamentally a matter of trust and many White Army militiamen felt that they could simply not trust the SPLA to be the 'ultimate provider of security' in South Sudan.²⁵ This overarching mistrust and dislike of the SPLA was compounded by the presence of several SSDF commanders who agitated against the SPLA and coordinated much of the White Army militias' resistance in western and central Jonglei.²⁶

Considering the second reason, the resistance by the White Army militias was so intense because of a fear that to do so would leave them exposed to attacks by neighbours. Cattle raiding is common throughout the south and is often a violent undertaking. The Lou Nuer areas, where the White Army militias put up the most significant resistance, are surrounded by neighbours who have a history of raiding the Lou Nuer for cattle, as well as of general pillaging. The Lou have traditionally had animosities with the Dinka and since the early-1990s have had a pronounced conflict with the Jikany Nuer. Perhaps most of all, the Lou are very fearful of their aggressive Murle neighbours to the south. As one Lou elder exclaimed, "The Lou have a dangerous life."²⁷ The resistance to the disarmament by White Army militiamen was strongest where it was felt that to lose their weapons to an organisation they didn't trust, i.e. the SPLA, was going to be greatly compounded by being newly defenceless and surrounded by enemy neighbours who still had their own weapons.

The third reason for resistance to disarmament by the White Army militias in central Jonglei was a mixture of personal considerations by its members. Related to a general fear of the SPLA, there was a broadly felt anxiety about the future. Many southerners are still fearful of the peace agreement falling apart. As most have been carrying guns for a long

²⁴ The SSDF is an umbrella organization of southern militias formed through the signing of peace agreements known as the Khartoum Agreement and the Fashoda Agreement in 1997. The agreements aligned the SSDF with the Khartoum government against the SPLA.

²⁵ Interview with White Army youth in Walgak, Jonglei State in 20/8/2006.

²⁶ UNMIS source interviewed in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 9/8/2006 and UNDP source interviewed in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

²⁷ Interview with group of Lou Nuer elders in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 16/7/2006.

time, they don't want to give them up quite yet since they are still anxious about a peaceful future.²⁸ This fear is compounded by their dislike of the SPLA, since they do not know how the SPLA will treat them. Another facet of the dislike for disarmament felt by the youth was that they firmly believed that they were due financial compensation for their weapons since these had been mostly acquired with their own resources. For instance, an AK-47 assault rifle could cost anywhere from 5 to 7 cows while a PKM machine gun could cost from 10 to 12 cows.²⁹

A further facet is the fear of youth about how to make a living without a gun, which is necessary for cattle raiding since cattle, as mentioned previously, are essential to pay wedding dowries and act as a form of hard currency in the war devastated south. While many Lou Nuer feared being raided by their neighbours, they were as fearful that they themselves would be incapable of raiding should they be disarmed, one of the main reasons they joined the militias in the first place. Lastly, it was articulated by many youth and observers that owning a gun is simply 'much more exciting' than not owning one. As one youth explained, the "main cause of all [our] problems is idleness."³⁰ Playing off of a sense of frustration and isolation, many White Army youth simply wanted to keep their guns because to lose them would mean condemnation to an even more marginalised, idle life out in rural villages.

It is worth concluding the section with a brief description of not just why armed resistance was undertaken but concomitantly, what the White Army youths' hopes are for a better future. This is best illustrated by a youth who had been disarmed voluntarily in Akobo.³¹ He noted:

We handed over our guns because we want peace. If there is peace there will be development. If people remain with their guns, there can be no development and it can cause problems, like death.

To the youth of the region, they feel that "development means education."³² Ultimately, the youth want to 'normalise' their lives and despite the fact that they have been conditioned by decades of war, there is a broad understanding of the benefits of education and of other lifestyles being possible than just the violence of war.³³ These sentiments are encouraged by the return of IDPs and refugees who have been exposed to new ideas, namely education and cash economies. These sentiments are also encouraged by the very pressing reality of death by violence. The youth's very blunt language, i.e. 'problems, like death', highlights an interest to exchange an extreme of life with guns with a hope

²⁸ A senior GoSS member for Upper Nile State, the Speaker of the State Assembly, described this condition as a 'psychological problem' whereby the youth are excessively paranoid about their present and future conditions and owning a gun is the one thing they can do to calm themselves. Interview in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 2/8/2006.

²⁹ Interview with recently disarmed youth in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

³⁰ Youth interviewed in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

³¹ Group of youth interviewed in market in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

³² Group of youth interviewed in market in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

³³ This insight was articulated to the author by a UNDP consultant who had undertaken extensive interviewing of White Army youth. Interview in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

for a more peaceful, moderated future. The hesitance, however, comes from a fear of the SPLA, their neighbours, and general anxieties about disarmament exercises overwhelming that hope.

3.2: White Army militias' operational mode and identity politics

Operational mode

The operational mode of the White Army militias is centred on their nature as relatively small, usually autonomous village militias following clan and lineal lines. Much of the conflict is actually between the assorted militias but there is the possibility for uniting into larger configurations during significant confrontations against common enemies³⁴. The best example of this was the fighting in May 2006 against the SPLA around Yuai in central Jonglei. There are allegations that White Army militias received supplies from SAF,³⁵ but while this is plausible on a very limited scale, it is more likely that whatever support White Army militias were getting, was coming through a couple of SSDF commanders, also on a fairly limited scale.³⁶ The resources that the White Army used in its resistance to the SPLA's disarmament exercise was most generally stock on hand and what could be secured through battle victories and the occasional sale of cattle for armaments.³⁷

The relationship between the SSDF and White Army militias is an important one even though it can be considered informal and largely tactical and united by a common dislike of the SPLA. Both White Army militiamen and SSDF members interviewed noted that there were some kinship affiliations, but that the SSDF and White Army militias have never had any systematic, formal relationships.³⁸ However, during the confrontations between the SPLA and White Army militias, there was a limited presence of SSDF commanders agitating the armed youth to resist disarmament. Although the SSDF did not participate as organised units with the White Army militias, the presence of smaller groups of experienced SSDF soldiers led by a few notable SSDF commanders seems to have had

³⁴ This tendency of the militias to temporarily unify against larger enemies mirrors the organizational make-up of the Nuer nation more broadly. As the anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard noted in 'The Nuer: A description of the modes of livelihood and political institutions of a Nilotic people.' (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1940): "The Nuer... are divided into a number of tribes which have no common organization or central administration and these peoples may be said to be, politically, a congeries of tribes, which sometimes form loose federations." Pg 5.

³⁵ For instance, there was an allegation that a SAF helicopter was used to directly re-supply White Army militiamen during their conflicts with the SPLA. Interview with Nasir County Commissioner in Nasir, Upper Nile State on 31/7/2006. This was also mentioned in UNMIS, UMAC Brief entitled "Security Related Events in Jonglei during May and June 2006"; dated 5/7/2006, page 4.

³⁶ Jonglei State Deputy Governor interviewed in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006. Furthermore, it is notable that after the White Army remnants left Yuai in May they went to Dolieb Hill area near Malakal, allegedly with the original intention to recuperate and to replenish their freshly depleted stocks of armaments from Thomas Mabior's SSDF unit barracked there. Interview with UNMIS source in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 19/7/2006.

³⁷ For instance, it was feared that White Army militiamen were going to Ethiopia in the dry season to buy ammunition from Ethiopian rebels or still well-armed communities

³⁸ Interview with Lou Nuer member of SSDF in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 29/7/2006.

a major impact on the extent of resistance that was witnessed.³⁹ Of crucial importance was the role these SSDF commanders played in briefly uniting the disparate militias of the White Army together to fight what was perceived as their common enemy, the SPLA.⁴⁰

Identity politics

The role of identity politics for White Army militias follows similar lines to the broader ethnic divides for South Sudan. In general this means that the Nuer and Dinka cleavages and historical animosities are important. Amongst Nuer members of White Army militias, the perception of the SPLA as a partisan Dinka organisation is a prevalent and strongly felt one.⁴¹ For the Lou Nuer, it is believed rather conspiratorially that this explains why the GoSS wished to disarm them before their Dinka neighbours further to the west or their Murle neighbours to the south. The logic behind this belief is that ‘the Dinka SPLA’ want to further strengthen their position in the south by collecting all of the arms held by Nuers who will then be further weakened by attacks from their still armed neighbours. Conversely, localised ethnic loyalties seem to have played a friendly role in some SPLA and White Army interactions. For instance, there were reports of ‘recycling’ of weapons back to ethnic kin and family by individual SPLA soldiers after they had been collected during the various disarmament exercises.⁴²

Section 4: Lessons learned from the disarmament exercise for White Army militias

It is important to garner lessons learned from the voluntary, peaceful disarmament exercise that took place in eastern Jonglei state in July 2006. This exercise was driven by the SPLA but importantly involved many other actors. It is useful to contrast the July exercise with the forceful disarmament exercise that took place from January to May 2006 in western and central Jonglei State when the SPLA effectively acted on its own. This sec-

³⁹ A UNMIS, UMAC Brief entitled “Security Related Events in Jonglei during May and June 2006” and dated 5/7/2006 stated: “SPLA assesses that SAF continues support to former SSDF of Yuai under the command of Simon Weijang Reth, deputy of Cdr. Simon Gatwic and is able to reorganize the scattered White Armies.”

⁴⁰ Interview with Lou Nuer member of SSDF in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 29/7/2006. It was noted that amongst the Nuer, there frequently is ‘in-fighting’ between the various Nuer groups but they can at times form loose federations. It seems that the confrontation with the SPLA in early to mid-2006 was an example of this and that was largely a result of the rallying role of the SSDF commanders. The importance of personal relationships is very important to this support. Individual commanders have long ties to specific communities and the personal loyalties developed carry significant weight. Furthermore, it is more likely that whatever support White Army militias were getting was coming through a couple of SSDF commanders, also on a fairly limited scale

⁴¹ For instance, as noted in a UNDP report on the 1991 ‘great split’ in the SPLA: “Many Nuer supported the Nasir faction [of Lam Akol and Riek Machar] as an anti-Dinka move and could be coupled with anti-Bor Dinka sentiments.” UNDP Sudan, “Roots of Conflict In North Kordofan, North Darfur and Sobat Basin of Upper Nile State”, dated July 2003.

⁴² UNMIS source interviewed in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 9/8/2006.

tion will firstly highlight some of the actors involved in eastern Jonglei, their roles and the beneficial aspects of them.

Role of local communities

Disarmament means a lot. It is peace itself. The armed youth were the main problem, causing all the violence, destruction and hostility. Before disarmament we couldn't gather or visit because we were afraid some violence could happen. Guns were like a disease going around.

- Akobo Women's Association leader⁴³

The role of the local communities in the peaceful disarmament exercise for White Army youth in Akobo County in eastern Jonglei was a very profound one. For the rural communities in general, there was both frustration about the prevalence of weapons bearing youth and fear of a potentially violent clash subsequently with the SPLA, which meant families and neighbourhoods were keen to see their youth turn over firearms voluntarily. Given this, there were two dynamics pushing for peaceful disarmament: a very real fear of forceful disarmament by the SPLA and the traditional dynamics of communalism prevalent amongst the Lou Nuer.⁴⁴ Together, these two forces catalysed a peaceful disarmament exercise in Akobo County, as compared to central Jonglei, as the youth were actively encouraged to voluntarily disarm by their family and neighbours.⁴⁵

The communities' fear of being 'collectively punished' (by default) through forceful disarmament by the SPLA was exceptionally strong. In central Jonglei, the fighting between the White Army militias and SPLA and the resultant mayhem had seen up to a thousand huts burned, up to 500 youths killed, and tens of thousands of cattle rustled.⁴⁶ Furthermore, as a longer-term result of the violence, communities faced food shortages as the violence had seen food stores destroyed, livestock stolen or scattered, and crops left unplanted. While the violence had occurred mostly in March and May, the repercussions in terms of hunger for the broader community in central Jonglei were felt most direly during the lean season in July and August.⁴⁷

There is a general debate in post-conflict recovery circles of whether to give out incentives for disarmament to communities or to individuals.⁴⁸ In the South Sudan context, specifically in mid-2006, the community approach was the more suitable one because the government, and to a lesser extent the international community in the form of the UN,

⁴³ Interview with Akobo Women's Association in Akobo, Jonglei State on 23/8/2006.

⁴⁴ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

⁴⁵ Interview with youth in market in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006 who said that the encouragement of family and neighbors was an 'important factor' in them volunteering to hand in their weapons.

⁴⁶ *Sudan Mirror*, "White Army, Case for Disarmament." 14/8-27/8, 2006, pg 19.

⁴⁷ Interview with Lou elder in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 5/8/2006. "Food shortages resulted because when there was fighting many huts [and] stored food was destroyed so now have nothing to eat. Some huts were destroyed as punishment by the SPLA while others were looted by bandits and neighbours when they were temporarily vacated by people fleeing the fighting."

⁴⁸ See for example Kees Kingma, "Demobilisation in Sub-Saharan Africa: the development and security impact" (New York: St Martins Press 2000).

could hold the whole community accountable. If the SPLA comes into an area, then the whole community blames their youth for provoking the confrontation, which means the community pressures their youth to do voluntary disarmament to pre-empt such a confrontation.⁴⁹ If an individual approach is used, there is little correlation between the actions of individuals, be they good or bad, and developments for the community as a whole.

In addition to these two dynamics, there are some basic demands of community members, which largely mirror those of the White Army youths. The two most common ones are security provision once the disarmament has been undertaken and also that there be 'universal disarmament.'⁵⁰ In an anarchic region where there is both a deep felt mistrust of the government army (i.e. the SPLA) and a fear of attacks by still armed tribal neighbours, there is a very basic interest in personal physical security. If these fears of the communities can be alleviated, then their openness to participation in demilitarisation programming is all the greater. This is largely because when previously isolated communities say they want development and engagement, it really means that they are willing to change by accepting and committing to a peace process in a 'new' South Sudan, grounded in a sense that their community is actually part of a larger country, not just an isolated group in a state with no real government.⁵¹

Some caution of participation by local communities must be made. A major complaint frequently cited by the SPLA has been their difficulty working with 'traditional leadership.' SPLA officers noted rather cynically that they were often told to work with 'the chiefs' by the UN and NGOs, but the difficulty of this was that they couldn't rely on Lou Nuer traditional chiefs because it was alleged that they were the ones instigating much of the violence. Under Lou Nuer culture, which has no lineal or even 'elder' leadership, White Army members are free to choose their own leaders, i.e. 'chiefs', which makes working through them difficult.⁵² To work through the chiefs, so the SPLA argued, would only encourage them to agitate against the disarmament exercise and hide weapons too.⁵³

⁴⁹ This idea was raised in an interview with UNDP DDR officer in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006. Interestingly, while UNDP officers in general seemed to favour community approaches, individual incentives were offered in Akobo County. This action seemed to provoke much internal debate with UNDP as it was feared it would create a precedent for the rest of the South and force the UN to adopt an individual approach for their DDR programming rather than work through voluntary community programmes.

⁵⁰ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 4/8/2006. This officer had participated intensively in the voluntary disarmament exercise in eastern Jonglei State.

⁵¹ This idea was articulated first by a UN official. Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

⁵² The White Army militias follow the leadership of their local chiefs. For the Nuer militias of the White Army, it is notably that tribal leadership is chosen through quite democratic means rather than being hereditary in nature. Furthermore, it was also interesting to note that during discussions with Lou elders, a frequent complaint of theirs was that Lou Nuer youth in White Army militias simply did not listen to elder leadership in any case. Through their membership in the militias, and ownership of firearms, they were greatly empowered to resist being influenced by tribal leadership other than their own militia commanders.

⁵³ Interview with local SPLM security official in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 16/7/2006. This caution of the SPLA for traditional authorities is long held and also parallels their general suspicion of other alternative power structures in the south, notably the churches.

In any case, foreigners need to be careful about simplistic understandings of ‘chiefs’ and their ostensibly positive mediating role in relations with local communities and militias.

Role of government

The need to disarm White Army militias was a strong one as the inability to implement basic governance because of the presence of so many armed civilians was debilitating. As the County Commissioner of Akobo County noted: “Nobody could carry out their administrative duties because there were too many arms; people wouldn’t listen to the government!”⁵⁴ Additionally, rampant homicide within the Lou Nuer community was resulting from unmitigated banditry, cattle raiding, and blood feuding. The Deputy-Governor of Jonglei State said the government was forced to take pro-active action to disarm civilians since amongst the Lou Nuer alone, it was estimated that “at least 700 Lou Nuer [were] killed by infighting” in 2005 (which means after the CPA was signed and ‘peace’ had begun).⁵⁵

The government played two basic roles in eastern Jonglei. One was brokering agreements between the SPLA, local communities and White Army militias and the second was facilitating the actual disarmament process. In terms of mediating, the Akobo County government played a key role in mitigating the anxieties of the armed youth. Armed youth noted that in their minds a key difference between Akobo County and those further to the west where violence had erupted was the role of the county commissioners.⁵⁶ According to White Army youth, in Akobo County the commissioner explained exactly what was going to happen (disarmament protocols and interim security provision steps) whereas in Uror County (the county to the west of Akobo in central Jonglei) “the commissioner [there] said lots of things that were confusing.”⁵⁷

In terms of the role that local government could play for the immediate follow-up to voluntary disarmament, the Akobo County administration had three priorities: the need to re-establish the traditional Lou Nuer compensation method for homicides to limit them; the need to bring notably bad criminals to justice for past crimes; and, the need to provide basic community services.⁵⁸ Of primary interest was the need to re-instate the compensation system for homicides whereby the guilty person would compensate the victim’s family with an agreed number of cattle, thereby preventing ‘blood feuding’ between the victim’s and guilty party’s clans and sub-clans as well as punishing the guilty person financially.

Role of the UN

The role of the UN in the voluntary disarmament in eastern Jonglei was very conducive to its ostensible success. Whereas the UN had been unable to take an active participation

⁵⁴ Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁵⁵ Interview with Jonglei State Deputy-Governor in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁵⁶ Interview with group of ex-White Army youth in Walgak, Jonglei State on 2/8/2006.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

in the disarmament exercise in central Jonglei, which notably turned violent and coerced, it was able to help ensure the one in eastern Jonglei was peaceful. The UN's official mandate in South Sudan does not cover civilian disarmament.⁵⁹ However, the Akobo County Commissioner, after seeing the violence in the counties to the west of his, wanted to avoid forceful disarmament by SPLA, and contacted the UN for help.⁶⁰ The UN's role was largely to maintain a presence of Military Observers ('UNMOs') and a 'Long Range Patrol' of force protection troops in Akobo during the exercise. Additionally, UNDP provided logistical support and technical advice for exercise.⁶¹ This technical support should be qualified. It was notable that the UNMIS/UNDP efforts were significantly furthered through the expertise of a couple individual staff members who had extensive knowledge in South Sudan affairs, built over years of experience in the south.⁶² It is doubtful that a general UN response without the thoughtful input of expert individuals with field experience could have achieved nearly as much.

The most beneficial aspect of the UN's participation in the voluntary disarmament exercise was its mere presence, which acted to pre-empt much of the potential for violence. Ex-White Army youth explained that they felt the presence of foreign military staff and aid workers signalled that changes were really taking place in South Sudan after the signing of the CPA.⁶³ Further to the improved hopes of White Army militiamen that significant changes were really occurring was the impact that the UN presence had on the broader community. A sign of this was that commercial trade improved immediately upon completion of the disarmament exercise.⁶⁴ Traders who arrived in Akobo from downriver after the disarmament exercises' completion explained they decided to come precisely because they heard that there was a UN presence and that the disarmament exercise had occurred peacefully as compared to other neighbouring counties.⁶⁵

Role of NGOs

The role of NGOs, notably indigenous ones, was very significant to the voluntary disarmament exercise in Akobo County. The role centred primarily on arranging mediation between communities and with the local and state governments as well as with the SPLA. Secondly, NGOs resident in Akobo County saw themselves as playing a key role in post-disarmament outreach to the newly disarmed youth of the White Army militias.

⁵⁹ Rather it is for demobilisation of redundant SPLA soldiers after a registration exercise.

⁶⁰ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006.

⁶¹ For instance, petrol for boats and technical advice for registering guns and managing collection sites.

⁶² For instance, some UNMIS/UNDP officials spoke local languages and near all had at least several years experience working in emergency situations with local political actors and groups in the south. This experience and expertise is priceless and the institutional success of the UN is dependent on it.

⁶³ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Juba, South Sudan on 17/8/2006. One problem with a foreign presence is that if it is especially transient, locals lose faith in it to secure them. The continued presence of the UN troops and aid officials throughout the exercise helped to renew faith in the UN (which had waned with its frequent comings and goings during the civil war).

⁶⁴ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 4/8/2006. It was noted that the simple presence of boats going up and down the river in the Akobo vicinity flying the UN flag played a substantial 'public relations' role in letting the community know that a UN presence was in the area.

⁶⁵ Traders interviewed in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

The Nile Hope and Development Forum (NHDF), an indigenous NGO, was instrumental to arranging ‘peace meetings’ in Jonglei State.⁶⁶ At the peace meetings participants agreed to encourage reconciliation between communities through dialogue and that community leaders would mobilize their communities to disarm peacefully with the youths giving up their guns voluntarily. One of the most important aspects of the peace meetings was to encourage dialogue between various communities so that they could “see that they are all ‘southerners.’”⁶⁷ The war had stopped interaction between the region’s communities and isolated them from one another aside from negative, exceptionally violent contact. For instance, reconciliation between the Murle and Lou communities was encouraged and participants were supposed to take news of reconciliation efforts back to their communities.⁶⁸ Lastly, the local NGOs were careful to work within traditional problem solving mechanisms utilising local leaders. As one NGO staff member articulated, “Chiefs can do the job, but we can help facilitate it.”⁶⁹

Another interesting aspect of the peace meetings was the blunt advice that the local NGOs proffered to community representatives. Namely this was that they faced a clear choice between forced disarmament by the SPLA versus voluntary disarmament, highlighting to participants that “they had seen what had happened to the neighbouring county.”⁷⁰ This pragmatic advice was then sent back to the communities through ‘community mobilisers’ to explain to White Army youth and other community members the dichotomous decision they faced. This ‘sensitisation’ of armed youth to the pros and cons of disarmament options was crucial to Akobo County’s voluntary disarmament exercise. In the neighbouring counties to the west, outreach to the armed youth to explain to them their options was impossible due to security concerns which limited NGOs’ access and youth in those areas also did not have the same perspective, namely a negative one, on potential outcomes for non-voluntary disarmament.⁷¹

The second role that NGOs played was to encourage youth to engage in new activities after the disarmament exercise, something felt to be crucial to longer-term peace. An indigenous NGO staff member explained regarding newly disarmed youth, “If [we] have disarmament but nothing else, they will just sit on the roadside.”⁷² Follow-up measures being implemented centred on providing training to disarmed youth in basic and civic

⁶⁶ Interview with NHDF Programme Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006. The first peace meetings was held in August 2005 for inter-Akobo reconciliation; the second in November 2005 to create dialogue and reconciliation between the Jikany Nuer of Nasir and Akobo’s Lou Nuer; and the third meeting was held in July 2006 between the Murle and Akobo’s Lou Nuer to agree to voluntary disarmament and reconciliation. It should be noted that much of NHDF’s approach was built off the ‘grassroots’ peacemaking approaches advocated by the international NGO PACT and its founder Paul Murphy. This approach eschews higher level, static dialogue in favour of a dynamic process that actively engages groups and individuals at the local community level. PACT funded the NHDF’s activities in Akobo.

⁶⁷ Interview with PACT Programme Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 20/8/2006.

⁶⁸ Interview with PACT Community Development Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁶⁹ Interview with PACT Community Development Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁷⁰ Interview with NHDF Programme Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁷¹ Interview with PACT Community Development Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁷² Interview with NHDF Programme Officer in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

education and vocational skills.⁷³ The goal of this outreach and training is “to give them some basic skills to achieve some sustainable development and to get their minds off guns and cows.”⁷⁴ The leader of an Akobo youth association further noted that, “The ones facing the problems and the ones being disarmed are the youth... so it [the training] is very important to us.”⁷⁵ The NGOs outreach to disarmed youth is mirrored somewhat by the action of the state and central governments, which has a priority of offering options to youth to join the SPLA or nascent police forces.⁷⁶

Section 5: Outstanding challenges to disarmament exercises

This section will explain some of the notable challenges to the disarmament exercise and subsequent efforts to stabilise the situation in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. This is important to qualify the short-term successes of the voluntary disarmament exercises against some of the longer-term challenges that are still to be overcome.

Prevalence and corruption of cultural norms of retribution and cattle raiding

While many arguments can be made for the merits of collecting firearms, holding ‘peace meetings’ and undertaking follow-up activities such as youth training schemes, underlying ‘peace’ in what are semi-nomadic pastoral communities, such as the Nuer, are some deeper cultural attributes. These attributes play a significant role in fomenting violent activities in the region, one defined by its historical anarchy and a strong presence of everyday violence. One of the strongest of these is the ‘normality’ of cattle raiding in South Sudan as a key facet of the socio-economic system there and related to it, a propensity to engage in blood feuds between clans and sub-clans after homicides and other transgressions occur.⁷⁷ However, after decades of war, these cultural attributes and practices that were integrated through ascribed rituals and norms of exchange within the socio-economics systems of the semi-nomadic, pastoralist tribes of the south have intensified significantly.

Firstly, the rate and level of cattle raiding, as well as the degree of violence that firearms permit, has helped to accelerate and intensify a practice that previous to the civil war was undertaken at lower levels of frequency and violence.⁷⁸ The use of cattle raiding also ex-

⁷³ Interview with PACT Training Consultant in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006. For instance, a one month training package will be provided to newly disarmed youth through an indigenous NGO, the Akobo Youth Association.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Interview with Akobo Youth Association staff in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁷⁶ Interview with Jonglei State Deputy-Governor in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to note when discussions were held with rural southerners about their ‘security’ concerns, cattle raiding in itself was almost never raised as a primary one. It is an act in the area so prevalent and common that it seems to not merit much attention in itself by locals. Furthermore, the two issues of blood feuding and cattle raiding are closely interlinked because cattle raiding is a response to and a cause for blood feuding.

⁷⁸ This was a general sentiment expressed by southerners on the significance of cattle raiding historically versus its current manifestation. It is impossible to justify this claim statistically but future academic re-

panded to being an activity that the various larger armed groups, such as the SPLA and SSDF, also engaged in, thereby increasing both its scope and prevalence in South Sudan. Overall, cattle raiding can be seen to have reached a level that completely exceeded traditional mechanisms to keep it in check, such as peace agreements negotiated by elders, especially during times of drought.

Secondly, blood feuds were an accepted practice amongst the Nuer historically but only implemented in fairly limited circumstances when other means of conflict resolution had failed.⁷⁹ The escalation in the sheer numbers of blood feuds between Nuer groups saw this cultural practice distorted by the prevalence of firearms which weakened normal conflict resolution means amongst the Nuer, namely the cattle compensation scheme.⁸⁰ As the civil war progressed, and with it came massive population displacements, increases in the prevalence of firearms, the weakening of older cultural norms of behaviour and the introduction of new ones that were conditioned out of firearm driven violence, the cattle compensation scheme gradually stopped working in rural communities in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. As a result, following transgressions, violence between groups started to immediately proceed to blood feuds defined solely by revenge killings.⁸¹

The simple collection of firearms is unlikely to quell cattle raiding or blood feuding by itself; largely because it is near impossible to immediately, or ever, collect absolutely all of the firearms in places that have become so saturated with them as South Sudan. These cultural factors require follow-up in the form of the re-assertion of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, i.e. the cattle compensation system, and the introduction of more modern forms, such as functioning police and legal systems. A basic disarmament exercise is a first step however because, as one local highlighted, before disarmament, “civilians were more powerfully armed than the government,” and in many cases the SPLA as well.⁸² It is hoped, as articulated by another southerner, that now that an initial disarmament has occurred, “the government will be more powerful than the civilians so it can restart the compensation system.”⁸³

search would be very worthwhile to look at historical trends and compare them against post-conflict reconstruction efforts in the south.

⁷⁹ One Nuer elder explained, “Even before guns, in Nuer tradition, there is retribution but if you kill somebody else, a compensation arrangement can be made.” This ‘compensation arrangement’ then prevents the tensions from escalating into a violent blood feud. Interview in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁸⁰ Again, this was a general sentiment of many southerners, notably those in rural communities where interviews were conducted like Walgak, Nasir and Akobo.

⁸¹ It is notable that the disarmament celebrations held in Akobo, Jonglei State in mid-August 2006 were marred by groups of youth who mocked one another verbally, as well as threw rocks back and forth, as being ‘cowards’ because they had not responded to previous violence between themselves since they had been newly disarmed. The local police arrested many youths for this ‘incitement’ but the event serves to illustrate how ingrained in the youth the notions of revenge killings have become to maintaining individual and community honour.

⁸² Interview with local resident in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁸³ Ibid. It is notable that in other neighbouring towns where government control had been in effect relatively longer, such as Nasir, the cattle compensation system was restarted fairly quickly and served to limit the blood feuding in the area. Akobo, which was one of the most violent parts of all of the South during the civil war, saw its cattle compensation almost entirely ended, and hence had a very high level of blood feuding.

Lastly, the result of escalations in cattle raiding and blood feuding also served to limit a very simple, universally applicable problem solving method, namely dialogue between aggrieved parties, because communities and individuals simply stopped interacting with one another aside from through violence. As the Akobo County Commissioner explained of the situation resulting from such a prevalence of weapons:

People are not sharing common things like marriages, dances, grazing. Each clan now grazes their cattle alone. Usually people moved together but because of guns they stopped. No single clan hasn't fought with another clan. All have fought.⁸⁴

When normal, friendly interaction became largely impossible between neighbours, it was only natural that suspicion and hatred developed and violence ensued.

Ethiopia-Sudan 'frontier' issues

The Ethiopia-Sudan border has historically been the setting for a significant level of cross-border interchange linked to conflicts within both states and this phenomena was especially so for eastern Upper Nile and Jonglei states.⁸⁵ The neighbouring Ethiopian region of Gambella has a high prevalence of firearms and several armed groups operating in it. A persistent concern of those implementing the disarmament exercises was connected to the likelihood of small arms flowing back into South Sudan after the disarmament exercise or of neighbouring groups living in Ethiopia raiding newly disarmed communities in South Sudan.⁸⁶ The challenges of implementing disarmament on one side of a firearms laden border is all the more so when the other side is not concomitantly undertaking such programming as well. It is noteworthy that one of the disarmament posts for the aforementioned July exercise, officially for Akobo County in South Sudan, was actually physically located in Ethiopia, demonstrating the great fluidity of the border region.⁸⁷ The near to total lack of Ethiopian border patrol posts was a major concern of Akobo County government officials as was a less than desired level of coordination between Sudanese and Ethiopian officials over border control issues.⁸⁸

Interestingly, while the border region still has a weak border control capacity, there had been co-ordination between the SPLA and the Ethiopian Army to jointly attack Ethiopian Anuak rebels and other armed groups in the Gambella region of Ethiopia in February

⁸⁴ Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁸⁵ Gambella province, in western Ethiopia alongside Sudan's border, was the major base for the SPLA throughout the 1980s. Akobo town has for its part hosted many anti-Ethiopian government rebels; most recently, members of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) in 2002.

⁸⁶ The Akobo County Commissioner for instance noted: "I hope Ethiopia will soon finish all disarmament and we'll have no problems with armed people coming across the border- rebels or civilians." The Gaguan Nuer in Ethiopia, for instance, were at the time of the disarmament exercise still armed and there was a worry that they might raid Akobo County, especially given their long held animosities towards the Lou Nuer. Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁸⁷ Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 4/8/2006.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Ethiopian and South Sudanese officials have met to discuss Jikany-Lou Nuer reconciliation as these populations overlap the border. Sudan Tribune, "South Sudan, Ethiopia discuss Lou-Nuer peace process", 6/10/2006.

2006.⁸⁹ Parallel to this, it is believed that Ethiopian Army forces have been allowed access to limited pieces of South Sudanese territory in order to counter the forces of the Gambellan Peoples Liberation Movement (GPLM) and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF).⁹⁰ In exchange for this access, it is believed that the SPLA was given freer reign to control Lou Nuer areas in western Gambella state. It is notable that the one area of Akobo County not disarmed during the July 2006 exercise was the area in its southeastern corner around the town of Pochalla. There are some Ethiopian rebels in that area, namely the Anuak GPLM and there was a fear amongst UN staff and county officials that there could be a future problem of armed Anuaks attacking recently disarmed citizens in other areas of the county.⁹¹

The efficacy of SPLA's 'rolling wave' of disarmament

Even now [we] worry about the Murle. The people of Akobo County are worried... worried because the Murle are still armed. Protection should come from the SPLA.
– Akobo County Commissioner⁹²

When it was decided to implement a disarmament exercise for armed civilians in the south, the SPLA chose a strategy that could be termed as a 'rolling wave.' While many parties have called for 'universal disarmament', the feasibility for such an exercise was simply impossible. The SPLA does not have enough troops or the logistics to support a disarmament exercise for all of South Sudan at one time. Given that, it was decided to 'roll' across South Sudan, disarming one group before proceeding to the next.⁹³ As the 'wave' of disarmament exercises proceeded, the SPLA would then provide security to the newly disarmed groups while their neighbours were disarmed as well. In theory it all sounds quite simple and straightforward, yet the challenges of implementation have proved considerable and bear important lessons for future disarmament exercises.

Firstly was that many communities felt that the 'rolling wave' strategy was really just a way of retaliating against individual communities, namely the Lou Nuer, with whom they had fought frequently with during the civil war. As one Lou elder explained, "The Lou can accept the disarmament if others are being disarmed too."⁹⁴ However, if this was seen as not happening, the resentment of many Nuer for the SPLA as a 'Dinka militia' was only exacerbated, as often seems to have been the case.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006. This development was also noted in numerous UNMIS briefings and reports.

⁹⁰ The Ethiopian Government alleges that the Eritrean Government supports these groups logistically. For instance, it is alleged that the town of Pagak in eastern Upper Nile State is used as a logistics base to supply arms and ammunition.

⁹¹ Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006 and interview with UNDP DDR officer in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 4/8/2006.

⁹² Interview with Akobo County Commissioner in Akobo, Jonglei State on 22/8/2006.

⁹³ It was decided to first start with the Jikany Nuer, then proceed to the Lou Nuer and then the Murle, etc.

⁹⁴ Interview with Lou Nuer elder in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 6/7/2006.

⁹⁵ The political challenges of rolling waves of disarmament are significant and anti-SPLA forces, such as the SSDF, have been quick to capitalise on the situation and accuse the SPLA of targeting individual communities for 'pay-back.'

Secondly, for the civilians experiencing the SPLA's disarmament exercise, their doubts weren't so much that the SPLA couldn't disarm them, but rather as to whether there would be any protection for them afterwards. And in fact, the fears of the Lou Nuer communities for attacks against freshly disarmed Lou Nuer communities by Murle coming from the south and to a lesser extent by Jikany Nuer from the north has been realised.⁹⁶ The ability of the SPLA to provide blanket security for disarmed communities is decidedly lacking.⁹⁷

While the SPLA was not able to provide enough troops for comprehensive security in the aftermath of the disarmament exercise, communities still felt trapped between wanting a larger SPLA force to provide security for them versus being afraid of the SPLA in general as well as fearing that a larger force would 'eat off' communities that are already food insecure.⁹⁸ The large SPLA contingent of 3,000 troops that had forcefully disarmed central Jonglei in May 2006 stayed in the area afterwards and supplied itself with food-stuffs from the local community, further compounding their food insecurity and the locals' resentment of the SPLA.⁹⁹

Furthermore, while the SPLA has instituted a comprehensive upgrade and reform effort, the development of police forces has been greatly hindered in South Sudan. The CPA is not very explicit on issues regarding police forces and there is a great deal of ambiguity over jurisdiction issues with the national police (i.e. those under the control of Khartoum) and for the development of local police forces. A result of this, as well as that rural South Sudan has never had much in the way of a civil police presence, is that Upper Nile and Jonglei states have little to no police presence even a year and a half after the CPA's signing.¹⁰⁰ There is certainly an overarching lack of police capacity to guarantee the security of a civilian population threatened by still well armed groups.

The challenge of protecting newly disarmed communities from still armed neighbours was especially pressing considering the still armed presence of the Murle to the south of the Lou Nuer. This consideration had a dichotomous effect on disarmament dynamics in

⁹⁶ UNMIS UNMO briefing in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 11/8/2006. Murle had raided Lou Nuer communities in both central Jonglei as well as eastern Jonglei after disarmament exercises. These Murle attacks have mostly been cattle raiding and petty banditry against Lou villages.

⁹⁷ Although re-enforcements were promised, immediately after the disarmament exercise was completed SPLA forces in Akobo County were very few in number, mostly in small groups of ten in some village for a total of two battalions in the entire county, which was not enough to provide security to all of the County's communities. Interview with UNDP DDR officer in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 4/8/2006.

⁹⁸ This experience was one of the primary rationales of the Akobo County government to invite the UN to help facilitate and monitor a peaceful disarmament exercise and why it was keen to avoid the same large SPLA contingent from proceeding further east where it might 'eat off' Akobo County as well.

⁹⁹ An interview with UNMIS Military observers confirmed that as the SPLA doesn't have adequate logistics chains, it did in fact 'eat off' civilians in central Jonglei State and also used them for housing too. Interview in Malakal, Upper Nile State on 10/8/2006. Furthermore, the UNMIS noted that: "The SPLA does not provide protection for the disarmed population, though its soldiers are stationed in the area; they are eating off the local community, instead." UNMIS, UMAC Brief. "Security Related Events in Jonglei during May and June 2006", dated 5 July 2006.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold noted that in his travels around Jonglei and Upper Nile states, police were far and few between to completely non-existent. Even Malakal had very little police presence.

southern Jonglei state. Firstly, it was widely expected that the Murle would be disarmed after the Nuer and that there was a good chance that armed resistance would be undertaken by armed Murle civilians in a repeat of the violence in central Jonglei.¹⁰¹ Compounding this fear was the likelihood that armed Murle youth would be encouraged to resist disarmament by SSDF components, primarily the Pibor Defence Force (PDF) militia of Ismail Konyi.¹⁰² The rationale behind this potential agitation by SSDF components was to prevent the SPLA from establishing itself in the area around Pibor, the stronghold of the PDF.

Counteracting this agitation was the call by other Murle actors, namely prominent chiefs, that the community undergo a peaceful disarmament exercise as had been accomplished in Akobo County rather than experience forceful disarmament by the SPLA.¹⁰³ In order to help this along, it was suggested by them that UNMIS establish a presence in Pibor and other Murle communities to counter the influence of Ismail Konyi and his PDF component of the SSDF. Encouraging this perception within parts of the Murle community for peaceful disarmament was the fact that the Lou Nuer had been disarmed and that this in itself relieved a great deal of pressure to remain armed themselves. This de-escalation of the communities 'arms race' meant that voluntary disarmament of the Murle could be a real possibility as part of a rolling wave of disarmament. As a Murle chief articulated this point:

We mostly had guns because SAF gave them out in the past but now if everybody gives up guns, everybody can be safe.¹⁰⁴

Section 6: Conclusion

A review of the history and efficacy of the disarmament exercises of the White Army militias in South Sudan from January to August 2006 highlights many policy considerations for the demilitarisation of OAGs more broadly in Africa. A key goal of the SPLA's post-CPA security strategy has been to disarm major concentrations of heavily armed civilians in the south, namely the White Army militias in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. The SPLA has never naively believed that its initial disarmament exercises can collect absolutely all of the firearms held by civilians. Rather it was hoped that following the major disarmament exercises, there would only be small remnant groups of White Army militias which could then be gradually disarmed individually. This has largely been achieved and the White Army militias of Jonglei and Upper Nile states have effectively ceased to exist as

¹⁰¹ Murle youth explained themselves that disarmament would be resisted, largely for the same reasons argued by Lou Nuer youth earlier. Interview with Murle youth in Lokongole, Jonglei State on 23/8/2006.

¹⁰² Murle chiefs who participated in peace meetings in Akobo argued that: "If the Lou have problems now from the Murle, it will only be the militias trying to cause problems." Interview with Murle chiefs in Akobo, Jonglei State on 23/8/2006.

¹⁰³ Interview with Murle chiefs in Lokongole, Jonglei State on 20/8/2006. A Murle chief stated: "We don't want to be forcefully disarmed by the SPLA. We want the chiefs to work with the local administration to collect the guns like they did in Akobo. We don't want to be like Yuai."

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Murle chiefs in Lokongole, Jonglei State on 20/8/2006.

armed groups in themselves capable of broadly preventing the implementation of basic governance.

At the heart of this success was a calibrated demilitarisation campaign based on influence, incentives and coercion, coupled to a publicity operation by a recognised authority that provided information on disarmament that was sufficiently persuasive to produce the desired effect. A comparison of the SPLA's forceful disarmament exercise from January to May 2006 in western and central Jonglei State with the voluntary disarmament exercise in eastern Jonglei State in July 2006 shows important lessons learned. While these processes were both driven by the SPLA, the voluntary exercise in eastern Jonglei also involved many other actors who played roles conducive to its peaceful unfolding. In contrast, the disarmament exercise that took place from January to May 2006 in western and central Jonglei State was forceful when the SPLA effectively acted on its own. In eastern Jonglei the role of local communities to encourage their youth to disarm peacefully was crucial and was encouraged by a fear of the 'collective punishment' of a forceful SPLA exercise as well as cultural proclivities towards communalism. Furthermore, the simple presence of UNMIS and UNDP staff during the exercise was very pacifying to a generally volatile environment while the local county government helped to facilitate mediation between the SPLA and White Army youth as well as coordinate the collection of arms. Lastly, local NGOs played a crucial role 'sensitizing' armed youth to the benefits of a peaceful, voluntary exercise as well as instigated useful 'peace meetings' between various actors necessary for a successful exercise.

However, caution remains in order at this point as there are still significant challenges to be met in furthering peace and stability following the disarmament exercises. Firstly, the proclivity of southern communities towards blood feuding and cattle raiding is strong and even with disarmament exercises, will lead to some continuation of violence. With the gradual return of traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution, such as cattle compensation systems, as well as the introduction of new ones, like a functioning judiciary, these challenges can be overcome. Secondly, the continuing fluidity of the Ethiopia-Sudan border is problematic given the prevalence of armed groups and armaments on the Ethiopian side. More co-ordination is required between the Sudanese and Ethiopian governments to mitigate negative 'spill-over' effects between the two countries. Lastly, while the 'rolling wave' of disarmament strategy is open to criticism, the fact is that as 'universal disarmament' is unfeasible, rolling wave strategies are the best possible approach at this point. If they are done with enough political astuteness and public information campaigns, they can be implemented with a minimal amount of political and ethnic divisiveness. However, the larger challenge is how to provide security for disarmed communities once the wave has rolled over them.