

Situation Report

Abyei Natural Resources Conflict



Muna A Abdalla
Addis Ababa, 26 July 2010

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INTRODUCTION

This report explores the major factors underlying the violent conflict in Abyei. It aims to contribute to policy-relevant knowledge of the link between resources and conflict and to propose a general framework for action.

It examines the territorial attachment of conflicting groups and establishes a link between intensification of conflict and the changes in livelihoods resulting from environmental stresses and overexploitation of assets. The report will also examine efforts to demarcate borders and its potential for solving the problem. It will also explore the peace-building potential of envisioned peace parks in the ecologically sensitive zone of multiple jurisdictions, Abyei, with focus on the formation of conservation zones in which the sharing of physical space can build and sustain peace.

This study, based on qualitative research conducted in Sudan in October 2009, took in an extensive literature review of historical materials written by colonial administrators as well as Sudanese historians and politicians, newspaper articles and conferences proceedings. It has benefited from field study in Sudan, which allowed informal discussions and interviews with leaders and members of the two conflicting communities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and United Nations Missions in Sudan (UNIMS) personnel, researchers and informed individuals.

Abyei is a narrow patch of land that straddles the border between North and South Sudan. Administratively, it falls under the jurisdiction of West Kurdofan (North Sudan). However, the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the National Congress Party (NCP) and Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA) granted Abyei a special administrative status.¹ Thus, pending the 2011 referendum, Abyei is currently a political entity attached to neither the North nor the South.

The Abyei conflict is the outcome of several complex processes that interact with and reinforce each other. Despite being rich in natural resources, it has remained one of the least-developed regions in the country. As with the other peripheral regions, it was subject to the northern government's policy of socioeconomic and cultural marginalisation. Therefore, the political development of Abyei has been characterised by aggressive suppression of ethnic and religious identity. It has also been marked by continuous attempts to revolt and change the status quo. The conflict of Abyei has been an important driving force for the civil war in Sudan, which started in 1983, yet domestic politics have always kept it on the backburner. Recently, the long-standing conflicts have developed into dangerous bouts of violence, setting off vicious cycles of attacks involving heavily armed forces.

The conflict involves the Dinka Ngok ethnic groups supported by the SPLM, on the one hand, and the Misseriya ethnic groups supported by the government of Khartoum on the other. For both groups the area holds intrinsic economic, sociocultural, political and institutional values that have been inherited over generations. The two groups compete over which has rights to the territory and essentially the right to grazing and water resources.

The livelihood of the population of Abyei is directly connected to its natural resources: communities are either pastoralist or agropastoralist. Their survival is almost completely dependent on natural resources and the environment. Their ability to use resources and manage relations in a way that preserves the environment and secures its use by all is critical for their survival. Any solution needs to consider this.

It is proposed here that the whole area of Abyei should be designated as a Peace Park that transcends political boundaries and units and allows equitable sharing of resources, reduce the tension along the border between the South and the North, and preserve and protect the environment from overgrazing and encroachment of oil exploration activities.

From reviewing massive sources related to the conflict of Abyei, it became clear that there is a lack of the type of studies that address the following issues:

- The factors that surround the conflict processes in their multiplicity and their interaction
- The policy and institutions that influence people's livelihood strategies and the decision-making process
- The perspective of the people affected by the conflict, their assets, entitlements, and the specific and differentiated vulnerabilities
- Previous experiences of community in self-governance of natural resources

THE TWO CONFLICTING ETHNIC GROUPS

The current Abyei population is a mixture of several immigrations and an amalgamation of various ethnic groups that settled around the triangle of Bahr Al Arab/Kiir² River at different times. The area is inhabited permanently by the Dinka Ngok, and seasonally it is visited by the Misseriya ethnic groups. The Misseriya belong to a larger group, predominantly Arab Muslim, named Al Baggara. The Dinka Ngok belong ethnically and racially to the South, and are predominantly Christian. The Ngok is a branch of the larger Nylotic ethnic group of Dinka, which represents around 35 per

cent of the population of the south. The Ngok is divided along several subgroups and nine chiefdoms, led by a paramount chief.

Despite their racial and cultural differences, the two ethnic groups had an amicable relationship across the traditionally demarcated boundaries and managed natural resources wisely. They also overcame their differences using their own traditional mechanisms for conflict management and resolution. However, it has become clear that the conflict has tested the limits of all traditional mechanisms.

DRIVERS OF THE CONFLICT

Generally, territorial conflict is directly linked to the importance of the territory to a certain population group. In other words, territorial attachments of a population group relate to the tangible and/or intangible (indivisible) qualities of the territory,³ in particular land and natural resources. Natural resources provide important sources for conflict. Both scarcity⁴ and abundance⁵ of resources can contribute to competition, and the consequent eruption of violent conflict. However, there are also circumstances where abundance and scarcity have not contributed to conflict. The point of departure is that scarcity and abundance are likely to generate conflict where populations are marginalised and where there is a breakdown in the legitimacy of political authority and effectiveness of the state.⁶

The intangible qualities relate to the history, religion and culture that form the identity of the conflicting groups. Conflict over intangible qualities is believed to be more violent, intractable and prone to reemerge after long periods of apparent dormancy, than conflict over tangible factors.⁷ This is due to the way actors use the indivisibility rhetoric to deny other groups territorial rights. In the case of Abyei, the indivisible factors have been portrayed as being the most important for the Dinka Ngok.⁸

Globalisation has complicated domestic territorial conflict by widely opening the door for a new power dynamic in the internal affairs of sovereign states.⁹ Multinational corporates become the major determinant of the extent of territorial tangibility with potentially far-reaching consequences for territorial conflict.¹⁰ Hence intrastate territorial conflict becomes complex and involves several internal and external parties.

MANIPULATING THE INTANGIBLE FACTORS IN THE CONFLICT

The issues of identity and attachments to the land are important in explaining the way the two conflicting

groups of Abyei have expressed their territorial identities and institutional allegiances. Abyei assumes major social, political and functional significance for both groups. Both have lived and worked on this land for many years and both have a strong moral claim to it. But these identities and attachments clash, as each group sees Abyei as its exclusively.

The Dinka Ngok harbour exceptionally strong sentimental attachments to Abyei, which has formed and consolidated their identities for generations. It has a strong religious and cultural significance; it is the shrine of their ancestors and shall also hold theirs.¹¹ Abyei has given birth to some of the most powerful armed resistance movements in the country. Both *Anania* (1) and *Anania* (2) resistance movements were started by intellectuals from the Dinka Ngok of Abyei, many of whom were leaders or members of these movements.¹² The *Anania* (2) movement evolved into the SPLM/SPLA. When the central government clamped down on the movements, it dealt a particularly savage blow to the Dinka Ngok of Abyei, the demographic effect of which is still felt.

The Misseriya refute the contention of the Dinka Ngok that the territory of Abyei belongs exclusively to them. The Misseriya settled in the area before the 17th century. It has equally shaped their way of life and identity, and constitutes a significant part of their history, legends, values and tradition. The irreconcilable claims on the indivisible salience of the territory have led to stifled negotiations, and the collapse of any settlement proposal. The rhetoric of indivisibility of the territory has been used by elites from both sides to rally support for their groups and to pressurise their rivals into making compromises.¹³ Recognising the importance of homelands, sacred sites, identity ties etc. to each group, this should not preclude the other group from its rights in the area.

Indivisibility of the territory is proven to be a socially constructed phenomenon, it is 'neither an objective, inherent property nor territory, nor subjective and reducible to individual consciousness'.¹⁴ In practice, territories are physically divisible, and the notion of their indivisibility remains dynamic and diverges across time and space. Experiences have shown that indivisible territory can 'become divisible through partition, shared sovereignty, compensation, or other mechanisms of division'.¹⁵ In particular, sharing in the form of Transboundary Protected Areas are good examples where the intangible salience of the territory, eg historical and cultural possessions, is protected and maintained jointly to promote peace and cooperation. However, this will require the willingness of the key actors in the conflict to compromise to reach an equitable and fair settlement.¹⁶

THE TANGIBLE FACTORS (NATURAL RESOURCES)

Natural resources provide a strong base for territorial attachments, and territorial disputes are directly or indirectly connected to natural resources. In the literature, both scarcity and abundance of natural resources are linked to violent conflicts. Abyei commands both abundance and scarcity of resources. It has an abundance of renewable natural resources that should be sufficient for the daily survival of both groups. It has also a large oil reserve that is being exploited by various multinational companies. However the geographical distribution of renewable resources and the unequal ability to access them have contributed to the scarcity of water and grazing land to one group. Oil explorations have heightened such scarcity. Furthermore, the system of revenue allocation is likely to contribute to increased conflicts in the area.

The oil

Oil and other lucrative natural resources such as diamonds and uranium have provided a strong base for violent conflict in different parts of the world. These types of conflicts are often referred to as 'resource wars'.¹⁷ Examples of these are the wars of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Angola, among others.¹⁸ There is also an argument that availability of such resources is often associated with separatist trends, particularly in areas where extensive exploration and processing take place and where the community is generally marginalised.¹⁹ The conflict involving Tuareg in the Sahel is a good example.

Abyei is considered one of the most oil rich areas in Sudan, with a quarter of total crude oil output of the entire country. But because the development of the oil sector in Sudan has been influenced greatly by the complex political environment of the country, the oil resource did not contribute to the human and economic development of the area. To the contrary, it caused suffering, sustaining one of the longest civil wars in Africa, that between the North and the South of Sudan. Oilfields were a vital source of revenue for the Khartoum government's war against the South. The multinational companies operating in the area are not neutral in this war. Their activities remain strongly linked to profit-seeking rationales as well as to state interests. Therefore, historically these companies were 'deterrents to peace in [that] long-standing and devastating civil war'.²⁰

Since its discovery, the North has taken control of Sudan's oil, and after the signing of the CPA the revenue was shared with the South. Notwithstanding the signing of the CPA between the SPLM and the government of

Khartoum, sharing of Abyei's oil remains one of the most fiercely contested issues between the two parties.

According to the CPA, revenue from oil produced in the south should be divided equally between the governments of Khartoum and of Southern Sudan after deducting 2 per cent for each of the oil-producing states. Revenue sharing from Abyei oil has a slightly different formula from that of the rest of the country. It was agreed that Abyei oil revenue should be divided as follows: 50 per cent for the national government, 42 per cent for the government of Southern Sudan, 2 per cent for Abyei and 2 per cent for the two major ethnic groups in Abyei, the Dinka Ngok and the Misseriya. However, more than five years after signing the CPA, the South still does not have its fair share of Sudan's oil.²¹

Sudan uses both multinational and national oil companies to produce oil. Companies provide capital investment for production and divide crude oil between them and the government of Sudan through a contractual mechanism of production-sharing agreements (PSAs). Some sources, including a report by Global Witness and the Southerners themselves, raised doubts on the accuracy of figures provided by the oil companies and the government of Khartoum.²² A major problem with the current revenue-sharing formula is that it lacks transparency. Agreements on the revenue sharing between the government and the companies are kept secret. The 2011 referendum on the status of Abyei will bring to an end the wealth-sharing deal between the two parties. But termination of the deal will not be simple. For both the North and the South, oil matters significantly and has constituted a significant source of revenue. More than 90 per cent of the income of the government of South Sudan, and more than 50 per cent of domestic revenue of the government in the North, come from oil revenue.

A zero-sum perception of the outcome of the referendum prevails, ie that the referendum will certainly create a winner and a loser in the game. Winning will translate into both total control of oil revenue and enhanced capability for other actions. The deployment of both Northern and Southern troops along the border that separates the North from the South, may help to explain how determined each is not to lose.

The shape and nature of the outcome of the referendum will significantly be influenced by both the system of revenue allocation and the nature of oil exploration. This matter calls for an accountable and transparent system of oil revenue allocation that allows fair sharing of oil. Furthermore, any solution should engage the marginalised communities. The conflict in oil could possibly be transformed into cooperation by identifying mutual gains and building upon them.

Grazing land and livelihoods

An intrinsic link has been assumed between scarcity of resources and intrastate armed conflict.²³ Competition over scarce resources often develops into violent conflict and war, but there are also examples where resource abundance and scarcity have not led to conflict. The conditions in which resource scarcity leads to conflict relate basically to dependence on these resources. It is useful to highlight the vulnerability of individuals and groups that makes them sensitive to resource scarcity. Livelihoods and vulnerability analysis supports this assumption. People become vulnerable when their access to livelihood resources is blocked. Blaikie et al²⁴ conceptualised vulnerability as a function of economic and political structures and processes that limit people's capacity to deal with shocks (such as scarcity of resources). In the case of Abyei this is particularly relevant. The conflict over the natural resources of Abyei is explained in terms of the vulnerability of groups and their complete dependence on these resources.

The population of Abyei are either pastoralist or agropastoralist. Their survival is almost completely dependent on climatic conditions and their ability to use and manage human/environment relations in a way that preserves the environment and secures its use by all. The population have developed the best techniques to deal with the wide variation in agro-ecological zones. They graze their cattle in an annual cycle. The Misseriya trek to Abyei from Babanusa and Al Muglad towns and cross the region on their way to Bahr Al Arab/Kiir River in November. They leave the area in May or June when the Dinka Ngok take their turn. During the dry season, the Misseriya return to graze their cattle and so forth. For generations, they lived side by side and preserved the environment. Conflict erupted sometimes, but they were almost always able to overcome and solve their differences using traditional mechanisms of conflict management and resolution.

At the end of each seasonal grazing trip, seniors and leaders of each ethnic group held forums to address problems during the trip, including animal injuries or attacks on humans. They proposed solutions to the original cause and restitution, and compensation measures for loss and destruction. These forums were uniquely democratic and allowed the groups to manage livelihood resources and solve conflicts. However, these mechanisms are no longer able to deal with conflict. The involvement of new parties in the conflict has weakened and manipulated traditional institutions and made it harder to resolve conflict peacefully.²⁵ Furthermore, the militarisation of tribal hierarchies and accessibility of modern weapons have introduced an alternative source of power and control and have elevated the conflict to a new level.

Although Abyei is endowed with fertile pasture grounds and a network of waterways flowing into Bahr Al Arab/Kiir River, access to these resources has been restricted to one group. The redrawing of Abyei area borders by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague has led to the loss of a large tract of fertile pasture. Lack of pastoral water points and the blockage of stock routes make it impossible for cattle to survive in the dry season.

Furthermore, the amount of grazing land has shrunk, while the numbers of people and livestock have kept growing. Commercial farming continues to encroach on the pastures and trails of the Misseriya northward, pushing them to the south.²⁶ But from the south, the extensive oil exploration that started around 1970 and intensified during the 1990s has also cut across fertile pasture lands and trails. The government of Sudan has licensed more than 1,1 million square kilometres for oil exploration.²⁷ The exploration structures have disturbed both the ecological and social environment. As a result, the Misseriya are pushed further into a marginal land that is less able to support their livestock, leading to overgrazing of pastures and loss of assets.

Therefore, it becomes a matter of survival for the Misseriya to fight their way through to the water in Bahr Al Arab/Kiir River.²⁸ Actions taken by the group should be understood as mechanisms to survive in the face of multiple constraints. Diminishing access to water and grazing land is expected to exacerbate post-2011 referendum results, particularly in case of secession and if Abyei's population chooses to belong to the South. The Misseriya then will have to remain within the North, and Abyei become part of the neighbouring canton. But if the neighbour is unwilling to share resources then Misseriya has two choices, either to abandon the mode of livelihood they followed for generations or keep following it at any cost. The choice for them seems to be very clear. Without negotiating a transboundary resource area, conflict in this zone will escalate. Any solution has to take into account the livelihoods of both population groups.

THE BORDER DISPUTE

The major disputes over Abyei hinge on which of the two ethnic groups arrived first and to which geographical area. The two parties (the Misseriya backed by the government of Khartoum, and the Dinka Ngok backed by government of South Sudan) have opposing answers to these questions. Each claims to have settled in the area before the other. The Misseriya claim that they were the first to settle and this is why the area is named after them – Dar Misseriya, or Misseriya homeland.²⁹ However there is no evidence to support their claim. The Dinka Ngok

too claim that their nine chiefdoms existed in the area long before any other group. But again their claim has little evidence to support it. The area known today as Abyei was occupied until the 17th century by the Nuba and Dajo ethnic groups, which are now not part of the conflict. Then Arab ethnic groups (from which the Misseriya descend) landed in the area from the Arabian Peninsula.³⁰ The Arab groups removed the Nuba and the Dajo. Some took refuge in the mountains, while others were subdued and enslaved by the Arab invaders, forming the major labour force for their cotton farms. The Arab groups continued to live in the area, where they fought bitter wars against each other or forged alliances with indigenous ethnic groups, including the Dinka. The date of the arrival of the Dinka Ngok to the area of Abyei varies historically, but it is generally agreed that they arrived from the Upper Nile and settled in the riverine area between Bahr Al Arab/Kiir River and Ngol/Ragaba ez Zarga during the 19th century (1830).³¹ Their settlement in the area is linked to recurring floods of the White Nile.³²

Lack of proper historical sourcing for events and geographical boundaries made it extremely difficult to provide acceptable answers to the disputing parties. But it is certain that both the Misseriya and the Dinka Ngok have lived and worked on this particular land, their relationships evolving from total exploitation to cooperation, with intervals of conflict. They both have strong moral claims to the land. They are both unlikely to give up their claim without a fight. Therefore, there is a need for the type of solution that caters for sharing and managing of transboundary systems in both cases: secession or unity.

The Abyei Boundary Commission (ABC)

The CPA includes provisions for the establishment of the Abyei Boundary Commission (ABC) to define the exact borders of Abyei and to define the area of the nine Dinka Ngok chiefdoms that was annexed to Kurdofan in 1905. The ABC is made up of 15 members drawn from the National Congress Party (NCP), SPLM, the Dinka Ngok of Abyei, the Misseriya and experts with a sound knowledge of Sudan's history. The ABC report presented to the Presidency in July 2005 made several proposals.³³ It defined the northern limit of the area of the nine Ngok Dinka chiefdoms as latitude 10°10'N, from longitude 27°50'E to longitude 29°00'E. Both the Dinka Ngok and the Misseriya share secondary rights to the area between latitude 10°10'N and latitude 10°35'N. The shared area is to be divided equally between the two. The northern limit of Abyei area is located at approximately latitude 10°22'N. The eastern boundary is located along longitude

29°32'E extending the Kurdofan-Upper Nile boundary northwards up to latitude 10°22'N and corresponds with the original claim of the Dinka Ngok and SPLM. The southern boundary of the Abyei area is left untouched along the Kurdofan-Bahr el-Ghazal-Upper Nile boundary at the time of independence in 1956. The ABC did not make any specific verdict on the western boundary. The government of Khartoum could not agree on the extent of the area defined by the ABC on the grounds that the committee had exceeded its mandate. The redrawn boundaries had ceded some of the most lucrative oilfields to South Sudan. The Misseriya rejected the ABC decision on the basis that the new boundaries had taken large tract of their fertile pasture land. They vowed to protect their land and to fight if the ABC decision was implemented. The SPLM and the Dinka Ngok viewed the ABC decision as fair and that, according to the agreements signed by both parties, it should be final and binding.

The disagreements between the two parties peaked when both the government of Khartoum and the SPLM demobilised their armed forces. In May 2008, the tension exploded into full-scale fighting in Abyei town. An agreement called the Abyei Road Map was signed between the SPLM and the government of Khartoum, which ended the fighting. Based on the Abyei Road Map the two conflicting parties agreed to refer the case to the PCA in The Hague, for a final and binding decision.

Decision of the PCA

The main tasks of the PCA were to determine whether the ABC Experts exceeded their mandate in defining the area of the nine Dinka Ngok chiefdoms and define the boundaries of the area.³⁴ The PCA found that the ABC did not exceed its mandate in interpreting the mandate in the manner that experts did ... '[but have] exceeded their mandate with respect to some of their conclusions'.³⁵ For example, there was little evidence to support the proposition of latitude line 10°35'N as the northern limit of the Dinka Ngok and the Misseriya's shared rights, and the consequent placement of the northern limit of the Abyei area at latitude 10°22'N.

The tribunal ruled that the northern boundary runs in a straight line at approximately latitude 10°22'N as defined by the ABC. As for the eastern boundary, the court found that the ABC had drawn it without conclusive evidence. Therefore, the PCA re-drew the eastern and western boundaries of the area to run in a straight line along longitude 29°E, from latitude 10°10'N south to the Kurdofan-Upper Nile boundary defined on 1 January 1956. The western boundary of the area is the Kurdofan-Darfur boundary as defined on 1 January 1956

that runs along longitude 27°50'E, from latitude 10°10'N. The Tribunal ruled that the nine Dinka Ngok chiefdoms run along latitude 10°10'N between longitudes 27°50'E and 29°E, and mainly around the watercourses of Bahr Al Arab/Kiir River, Ragaba Umm Biero and Ragaba ez Zarga.

With the redrawing of the eastern and western borders, some of the key oilfields (Heglig and Bamboo) were given to North Sudan, with implications for revenue sharing for the population of Abyei area. This matter was later disputed by the SPLM. Furthermore, the new boundaries mean that significant numbers of the Abyei population are no longer eligible to vote in the referendum on the future status of Abyei. The new borders have dissected the natural resource systems, creating serious implications for the Misseriya group and the ecosystem. The Misseriya have once again lost a large tract of their fertile pasture land and have been further pushed to a marginal land that is less able to support their livestock.

It becomes very difficult to have boundary lines that are mutually agreed upon by all parties. Tension and sporadic conflicts are mounting, with the backing of the SPLM/SPLA and the government of Khartoum for their respective ethnic groups.

INVOKING ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

As stated above, natural resources and environmental concerns are key contributory factors in the current conflict. Therefore, environmental concerns should be the major contributory factor to the peace-building process and its sustainability. It is proposed here that the whole area of Abyei should be designated as a Peace Park that transcends political boundaries and units. The objective would be to reduce the tension along the border between the South and the North, and preserve and protect the environment from overgrazing and encroachment of mining activities.

PEACE PARK OR TRANSBOUNDARY PROTECTED AREA (TBPA)

Different forms of cooperation can take place between adjoining protected areas divided by international or sub-national boundaries. These zones have symbolic value for peaceful cooperation and coordinated conservation management efforts between nations. The term Peace Park – sometimes referred to as Transboundary Protected Area (TBPA) – refers to protected areas across borders.³⁶ Peace Parks are defined as: "Transboundary Protected Areas that are formally dedicated to the

protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and to the promotion of peace and cooperation."³⁷ Experience has shown that Peace Parks have mitigated conflict by turning environmental factors in conflicts into cooperation elements in peace-building. For example, Bolivia and Guatemala built an effective Peace Park in the shared conservation zones of La Ruta Maya, which has enhanced and facilitated peace-building between the two nations. Similarly, Peru and Ecuador have resolved a century-and-a-half violent border conflict through the establishment of the TBPA of Sierra del Condor (Mountain Range) Corridor.

Notwithstanding its apparently self-evident benefits, transferring the conflict zone into a protected area and opening up administrative and boundaries has serious political ramifications. It superimposes additional layers of politics and raises important questions about management and authority. Therefore, it requires first and foremost a serious and sincere political commitment of the two parties to resolving the conflict and to the overall development of the area, taking into account mutual and separate interests.

Abyei Peace Park

A Peace Park is envisaged to bring about a newly logical space shared equitably by both ethnic groups. It should span administrative boundaries and form a large and completely adaptable zone and management body. This project can take place regardless of the outcome of the 2011 referendum to build confidence for the future relations between the North and the South in secession or in unity. For the population of Abyei, the biophysical zone has always been far more important than the political one. Historically they shared an amicable relationship across the traditionally demarcated boundaries, and managed natural resources wisely. The peace park will only allow this relationship to continue in a more formal and organised way. A Peace Park will require the reforming of old structures to respond to the changes and to reflect separate and mutual interests.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion has highlighted the factors underlying the conflict of Abyei, including the mechanisms that link resources to conflict. It appears that there is a direct relationship between reduced or diminished access to resources and the conflict of Abyei. Grazing land and water are very important to the livelihood of the population, but managing these resources is equally important. The two conflicting

groups had managed to share an amicable relationship across the traditionally demarcated boundaries, managed natural resources wisely and solved conflicts using their own social institutions. However, when access to resources was reduced or blocked, the conflict took a different turn. Efforts to settle the disputes through legal means have become technically complex and legally controversial. It becomes very difficult to have a boundary line that is mutually agreed upon, and it has also become difficult to share resources as in the past.

The conflict of Abyei has become more complex for reasons of territorial attachment of each of the conflicting groups. Abyei assumes major economic, social, cultural and historical significance. But the elites have manipulated this in a way that undermines prospects for peace.

Any practical and forward-looking solution should take into account the livelihoods of the population of the area. It should take into consideration the issues of identity and attachments to the land for both conflicting groups. Without defining a clear way through which natural and physical resources are to be shared equitably in either secession or unity, the conflict is likely to continue.

Therefore, it is proposed that the whole area of Abyei should be designated as a Peace Park that transcends political boundaries and units, and allows the community to share and manage natural resources. The objective of the Peace Park would be to reduce the tension along the border between the South and the North, and preserve and protect the environment from overgrazing and encroachment of exploration activities.

NOTES

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