

U.S. Pushes for Global Eye on South Sudan Conflict
By MARK LANDLER
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WASHINGTON — When the [National Security Council](#), the most buttoned-up part of a buttoned-up Obama administration, is aggressively trying to get the word out about a violent, murky conflict in a distant land, it's worth listening to. It's also worth asking, why single out this crisis? Such is the case with the ethnic and tribal clashes that are rippling through a remote, sprawling part of [South Sudan](#) known as Jonglei State. Administration officials say they are deeply concerned about the violence, all the more so because there is so little reliable information coming out of a region that is inaccessible in the best of times.

Rather than monitor events quietly from their offices in the Old Executive Office Building, as they do with more widely publicized conflicts like the one in Syria, senior N.S.C. officials have invited in humanitarian and advocacy groups for briefings. They have written blog items. And they have discussed their fears with American and foreign journalists.

"More than 100,000 people have been displaced," said Grant T. Harris, senior director for African Affairs at the council. "The international community doesn't know where these people are."

Officials describe a desperate scenario in which tens of thousands of people are hiding in swamps, without food, water or medicine — fearful of returning to their villages because of attacks by rival tribes or even soldiers who are supposed to be protecting them.

"We've got all the ingredients for a conflict that could get much worse very quickly," said Gayle Smith, senior director for global development and humanitarian issues at the N.S.C.

Their immediate goal, officials say, is to put an obscure conflict on the world's radar screen before it mutates into a humanitarian tragedy. But they are also working to preserve one of the Obama administration's few undisputed achievements in Africa: the 2011 referendum that split South Sudan off from Sudan and created a new nation.

The violence in Jonglei, South Sudan's largest and most populous state, threatens to destabilize the country and tatter the credibility of its fledgling, American-backed government.

In addition to the perennial feuding between two tribes, the Lou Nuer and the Murle, there are reports of attacks on civilians by troops from the Sudan People's Liberation Army, which began as a guerrilla force fighting for South Sudan's independence and is now the country's army.

Jonglei, Ms. Smith said, "has all the characteristics of the rest of South Sudan. The problem now is you have tribal tension, a lot of history of bad blood, and a rebellion on top of it."

The United States and other Western nations have poured billions of dollars into South Sudan, before and after the referendum, to try to turn a destitute land, with oil reserves but a long history of violence and little in the way of institutions, into the viable country.

The administration has strongly supported the South Sudan government, which is led by Salva Kiir, a leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army. But now President Kiir is himself a problem: last week, he dismissed his vice president, who had threatened to challenge him for his party's leadership before elections in 2015, and his entire cabinet.

On Friday, Secretary of State [John Kerry](#) telephoned Mr. Kiir to deliver what amounted to a rap on the knuckles. He warned the president to form a new government quickly, stop the ethnic clashes in Jonglei and crack down on soldiers in the Sudan People's Liberation Army who are found guilty of human rights abuses.

Noting that he had traveled to Sudan to witness the referendum, Mr. Kerry said in a statement: “Too much sacrifice has been made to see that effort go backward. The world is watching to see if South Sudan pursues the path of peace and prosperity, or the tragic path of violence and conflict that has characterized much of its past.”

The National Security Council has held deputy-level meetings almost daily to determine how the United States should respond, both to the escalating violence in Jonglei and the governance problems. [President Obama](#), they said, has been briefed about the crisis.

In the short term, officials are focused on trying to get relief supplies to the displaced people. Jonglei, which is the size of Bangladesh, has few roads and those are impassable after heavy rains. That means emergency aid must be airlifted into the region. The [United Nations](#)’ World Food Program is seeking \$20 million to lease helicopters.

Another major obstacle is that United Nations peacekeepers in South Sudan are reluctant to go to Jonglei because in April, five United Nations employees and five Indian peacekeepers were killed there in an ambush by armed men the South Sudanese described as anti-government rebels. Five months before that, the South Sudanese military shot down a U.N. helicopter — by accident, according to local officials.

As a big provider of financial assistance, the United States has considerable leverage over the South Sudanese government. It also has sway over how the World Bank and International Monetary Fund treat the country. But having labored for years to nurture democracy in South Sudan, the White House is loath to turn against it.

“They’re very worried that they’re going to have to do a major policy shift,” said Sarah Margon, the acting Washington director of Human Rights Watch. “They’re trying to figure out how to balance a very tricky situation in a way that doesn’t end up being a major fail for them.”

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