Satellite Sentinel Project

A Satellite Snapshot of South Sudan's War

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Situation Report: A Satellite Snapshot of South Sudan's War

January 11, 2014

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For the past month, South Sudan has been engulfed in an expanding civil war. Unlike Sudan, where the Satellite Sentinel Project pioneered its work, with a few limited exceptions, South Sudan's government has been allowing both journalists and humanitarians to operate around the country, even as violence spreads. As a result, harrowing videos, interviews, and photographs documenting the crisis have been emerging for weeks.

The United Nations estimates that over 395,000 people have been displaced by violence, 352,000 internally, of which 60,000 have sought shelter at U.N. compounds around the country. Another 43,000 are refugees in neighboring countries including Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda, with an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 people from South Sudan arriving daily in Uganda alone. Although no mortality surveys have been conducted, conservative estimates suggest that thousands have died in the fighting, which was triggered by a political struggle between competing factions of the ruling party.

With the release of this report, the Satellite Sentinel Project augments existing reporting on South Sudan's civil war with satellite imagery of Mayom and Bor, captured from 300 miles above the earth. Digital Globe imagery offers independent confirmation of the scale of South Sudan's civil war with vivid evidence of the intentional destruction of civilian dwellings and market areas. UN bases in both Bor and Bentiu are crowded with displaced people. Images of Mayom show civilians fleeing en masse.

South Sudan's crisis is not unfolding in the dark, but enhanced documentation efforts are essential to combat impunity and ensure accountability for crimes committed during the course of hostilities. The Satellite Sentinel Project will continue to monitor all parts of South Sudan experiencing violence.

On the Run in Mayom

The town of Mayom is located in South Sudan's strategically important and oil-rich Unity state, which is also a stronghold for opposition leader Riek Machar. Home to many other key state politicians, Mayom was one of the first towns to fall into the opposition's hands during the outbreak of violence in December with the defection of a division of South Sudan's army in the area.

The South Sudan Liberation Army, or SSLA, formerly a rebel movement that has been recently integrated into the South Sudanese army, has played a significant role in the fighting in Mayom. In mid-December, SSLA commander Maj. Gen. Mathew Pul Jang promised to fight alongside government soldiers, against Riek Machar's forces, to liberate the country's oil fields. "In three days, the former SSLA fighters will be in Bentiu town [the capital of Unity state]," the group said in a statement issued to Sudan Tribune. "Civilians and U.N. staff are advised to leave the town because the former SSLA forces will use heavy artillery to dislodge Maj. Gen. James Koang if he doesn't change his mind before the deadline given to him."

Figure 2

Huts and tukuls destroyed

DigitalGlobe

DigitalGlobe Panchromatic Image
December 11, 2013

Mayom, Unity State, South Sudan
DigitalGlobe Color Infrared Image
January 10, 2014

Figure 3

Huts and tukuls destroyed

DigitalGlobe

DigitalGlobe Panchromatic Image
December 11, 2013

Mayom, Unity State, South Sudan
DigitalGlobe Color Infrared Image
January 10, 2014