

On May 20 Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) invaded Abyei, a disputed region situated on the border between South and North Sudan. The Khartoum regime reportedly razed villages and used tanks and helicopters to indiscriminately shell and bomb civilian population, causing at least 20,000 to flee. Armed government-supported militiamen were reported to burn and loot on a massive scale. The attack brought the largest African nation to the brink of all-out war and may severely harm the chances for peaceful separation of the South, planned for July 9. Abyei's oil reserves and fertile grazing lands are claimed by both the African South, where the residents are mostly Christians and the followers of traditional beliefs, and the Arab, largely Muslim, North. The region belonged to the South until 1905 when the British transferred the administration of Abyei from Bahr el-Ghazal province (South) to Kordofan (North). The majority of Abyei's population is African despite the Government's large scale settling of Messariya Arabs. The 2005 America-brokered Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which halted the decades-long North/South war and provided for January referendum on South's independence, also included the Abyei protocol, which promised the citizens of Abyei an opportunity to choose between staying in the North and returning to the South. After preventing the referendum various Sudanese government officials, including President Hassan al Bashir, asserted northern ownership of the area. The timing of the attack - a day after President Barack Obama exalted the Arab revolutions and promised "concrete actions" to support human rights, democracy and the right for self-determination in the Arab world - suggests that al Bashir is testing whether America's commitment to supporting opposition to Arab oppression would also extend to Sudan. Experts believe that the US "incentive-oriented" policy toward Sudan created a situation where the regime "felt certain that it would face no international consequences for its attack." The White House condemned the assault, but will it truly support the Arab world's African victims?

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