

Arms Collection Begins in Southern Sudan

- [Arms Control Today](#)

[Emma Ensign](#)

Authorities in Sudan have begun a series of weapons collection programs aimed at increasing security in the semiautonomous southern region of the country as part of an effort to increase stability there prior to national elections scheduled for April. The disarmament campaigns, which require civilians and the military to give up small arms, are mandated by a 2005 peace agreement. But the financial and political weakness of southern Sudan's government has led some observers to question its ability to carry out the campaigns successfully, in spite of assistance from the United Nations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The campaigns come at a critical time in Sudan's history. Since its independence in 1956, the country has been engulfed in two civil wars over resources, religion, and ideology. The more recent war ended in 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which laid out the framework for a power-sharing arrangement between the predominantly Muslim north and the mainly Christian south. In addition to requiring the disarmament campaigns, the peace agreement includes mandates for national elections in 2010 and a referendum on southern secession in 2011. The agreement is widely believed to be the sole provision standing in the way of a return to civil war, but implementation is faltering, and tensions are mounting in the run-up to the national elections. Reportedly, both the north and south are gearing up for a return to war.

Another concern is the rise in ethnic violence, which, according to one UN source, is escalating to "levels rarely seen even during the war." The UN estimates that more than 1,000 people have been killed in southern Sudan since the beginning of the year, a death toll that exceeds that of Darfur, the war-torn western region of Sudan, over the same period of time. According to one estimate, there are 2 million small arms in southern Sudan, an area slightly smaller than Texas. Almost all are in the hands of civilians, who view the weapons as necessary for their safety and survival.

Salva Kiir, the president of southern Sudan, announced the government's recommitment to the civilian disarmament campaign May 22. The statement came a year after the declaration of Operational Order 1/2008, which began a six-month program in southern Sudan aimed at completely disarming the civilian population.

Obstacles to Disarmament

The initial program, started in June 2008, did not have a clear mandate. As a voluntary disarmament measure, it gave civilians incentives to relinquish their weapons. However, it also explicitly condoned the use of force if peaceful methods did not prove sufficient, without clearly defining the limits of such force. The interpretation and application of the program were left largely up to the discretion of the 10 state governors whose job it was to carry out the program. Many of the collection efforts were marked by high numbers of civilian and military casualties as a result of efforts by the southern Sudanese army to disarm the civilian populations by force.

While expressing hope that the 2009 cycle of civilian disarmament would be more successful, Ezekiel Lol Gatkuoth, the head of the southern Sudanese mission to the United States, said his government would be proceeding "with caution." The southern government conducted an emergency meeting with traditional leaders May 18-24 in Unity state to discuss issues of insecurity, Gatkuoth said in an Aug. 5 interview. The meeting highlighted the need to involve chiefs and traditional leaders in the

Arms Collection Begins in Southern Sudan

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

disarmament process and examined the shortfalls of previous disarmament attempts, he said.

“State governors do not have the police force necessary to conduct disarmament,” he said. For that reason, he said, the southern government allowed its army, known as the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), to assist. Gatkuoth emphasized that the SPLA was brought in solely because the southern government did not have the capacity to carry out the project without military help.

Among the government’s problems are a weak police force and judiciary, as well as a lack of physical and institutional infrastructure, the UN source said. According to Gatkuoth, future civilian disarmament will rely more heavily on traditional leaders to jump-start the campaigns. The leaders will oversee registration efforts, acting as a conduit through which armed youth can surrender their weapons to local authorities, with the weapons being stored in SPLA barracks, he said. The southern government will then provide security for the disarmed regions, he said.

But many areas are likely to remain insecure and unstable, other observers said. According to Bill Paterson, the Sudan team leader for Saferworld, a London-based NGO that works with government institutions and civil society to promote security and conflict prevention, the SPLA does not have the capacity to protect all the regions that need added security, particularly because simultaneous disarmament throughout southern Sudan does not seem to be an attainable goal at the moment.

A further complication is that, in certain parts of southern Sudan, the government encourages gun ownership as a form of defense against armed groups. According to an issue brief published in May by the Small Arms Survey, an independent research project in Geneva on small arms and security, civilians in Western Equatoria state were encouraged to use their weapons to protect themselves by forming civilian defense forces against the threat of the Lord’s Resistance Army, a Ugandan rebel group notorious for its tendency to kidnap children for use as soldiers.

Although Gatkuoth said the disarmament program would reach every state once the dry season began in December, the UN source said the civilian disarmament program seems to target areas that are more politically threatening to the southern government and, within those, certain groups in certain communities that are particularly troublesome.

The government, for its part, publicly maintains that disarmament attempts are being complicated and undermined by the National Congress Party (NCP), the ruling party in the north. The southern government accuses the NCP of arming militias and ethnic groups in the south in an attempt to make the area “ungovernable,” according to Gatkuoth. The NCP denies these allegations. Another part of the work on Sudanese civilian disarmament is the approach that the UN Development Program (UNDP) is pursuing through its Community Security and Arms Control (CSAC) project. Created in 2007, the program is specifically designed to head off the potential violence of forced disarmament. It works in areas that have either recently been forcefully disarmed or are facing forceful disarmament in the near future.

Disarming the Army

An effort to collect weapons from the military is running in parallel with the civilian disarmament campaigns. Under the 2005 peace agreement, the north and south agreed to reduce their armies by 90,000 soldiers each. The United Nations Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and UNDP have stepped in to help with the campaign through the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) project. As of June 14, more than 4,500 members of both northern and southern armies had been demobilized and reintegrated into civilian life, according to information posted on the UNMIS Web site.

The first phase of the campaign calls for the disarmament of 35,000 soldiers considered to have special needs, specifically women, children, and the disabled. Following a registration period, selected combatants are discharged and relinquish their weapons in exchange for reintegration packages consisting of money, provisions, and vocational training. The DDR process for the SPLA is considered particularly important because it is linked to the current transition of the SPLA from the armed branch of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement into a professional army. Disarmament campaigns in Sudan typically have been difficult, with corruption and violence leading to tensions

Arms Collection Begins in Southern Sudan

Published on Arms Control Association (<https://www.armscontrol.org>)

between the civilian population and the army. According to Paterson, it is difficult to draw the line between combatants and civilians, in large part because civilians are so heavily armed.

[Click here to comment on this article.](#)

Posted: September 4, 2009

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2009_09/Sudan