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South Sudan: a young country on the brink of collapse

The return to Juba of Riek Machar, leader of the armed opposition faction of the Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM), last April 25 was initially greeted as a reconciliatory signal. Machar returned in the capital of the world's newest country in order to sworn in as Vice-President after fleeing in December 2013 when President Salva Kiir accused him of reportedly plotting a coup. Since that moment the country crashed into a cycle of violence apparently concluded with the agreement signed in Addis Ababa in August 2015. President Salva Kiir after on-off negotiations decided to sign that deal aimed at ending 20-month long civil war and undertaking the path to peace.

In a climate of tensions never completely subdued, fights resumed in Juba last July, the troops loyal to the President Kiir fought those of Riek Machar, soon after replaced in its charge by Tabang Deng Gai. The clashes reopened the civil war scenario in a country already on the brink of the abyss. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees since the beginning of the year 110.000 people have fled to Uganda, 82.000 only last month owing to the breakout of the violence and to the growing food insecurity. Aid agencies were forced to withdraw from the nation that has half of its population threatened by famine.

To exacerbate further the already dire situation an accusation of human rights abuses has been levelled against both Kiir's and Machar's troops. According to the report published last March by the UN Human Rights Office the Government operated a "scorched earth policy" and all parties to the conflict have conducted deliberate attacks against civilians, rapes and other crimes of sexual violence, arbitrary arrests and detentions, abductions and deprivations of liberty, disappearances and attacks on UN personnel and peacekeeping facilities.

South Sudan is facing a crisis that will hardly find a short-term solution. The internal rivalries go beyond the single personalities in power, it is rather a war that is being fought along ethnic lines, above all Kiir's majority Dinka and Nuer group of Riek Machar. As long as the Transitional Government of National Unity provided for in the August 2015 peace deal will not take affective action violence will continue to rage.

The stable functioning of the government is the solution to end the exodus of millions of refugees and to avoid a broadening escalation of tensions in a highly precarious region. Meanwhile the neighbouring countries took position: a Ugandan expedition rushed to the aid of President Kiir during the civil war, former Vice-President Machar has the support of Sudan, while Ethiopia opposed an external intervention. This situation is likely to worsen the regional framework, likewise the existence of the young South Sudan itself.