

Starving Out the Enemy

Withholding Food Aid as a Tactic of War in South Sudan

HANNAH BARRY¹, *Memorial University of Newfoundland*

Abstract. South Sudan has been at the heart of a relentless civil war for more than 30 years, but its ongoing violence has recently reached a level of unprecedented severity. As armed insurgents continue to clash with the government's military forces, thousands of civilians have lost their lives and millions remain displaced. Earlier this year, the country experienced a devastating and widespread famine that threatened to starve more than 100,000 people. Even now, as the country recovers, more than 5 million remain critically food insecure. Food shortages are to be expected in cases of prolonged war – however, the situation in South Sudan is considered to be “man-made”. This paper seeks to examine how access to food is obstructed during cases of protracted conflict and discusses the role of corruption in this process. This paper concludes that wealthy elites are strategically profiting from South Sudan's ongoing violence, and are, therefore, reluctant to negotiate a peace that will cost them their affluence. Withholding food aid is a tactic of war used to sustain conflict and must be recognized as a potential warning sign for future genocidal attacks.

Introduction

The violent conflict in South Sudan that has come to define the nation, has recently reached an unprecedented level of severity. Since its secession from Sudan in July 2011, ethnic divisions, political instability, and the mismanagement of natural resources have created the perfect storm for civil war within the southern state (Al Jazeera, 2017; Freccia and Pelton, 2014). Since violence resumed after a short ceasefire in July 2016, armed insurgents continue to clash with government military forces (Al Jazeera, 2017; Roach, 2016). Thousands of civilians have lost their lives and millions remain displaced, which has posed severe cross border challenges for regional and neighboring countries. The majority of official deaths have typically been linked to organized violent attacks; however, a silent killer has recently emerged from beneath the smoking guns. South Sudan is currently recovering from a devastating famine that has crippled the nation since the beginning of this year; and even now, more than two million civilians remain severely malnourished and food insecure (France 24, 2017).

Conflict zones like South Sudan are known to be particularly vulnerable to fluctuating global market prices and shortages of both homegrown and imported foods. However, the present situation in South Sudan has been exacerbated by grand corruption, and its current food crisis is considered to be “man-made” (BBC, 2017a; Lynch 2017; Nichols, 2017c). There is enough food available to feed the South Sudanese, but it is being unlawfully withheld from civilians as a tactic

¹ Hannah Barry is an undergraduate Political Science student and research assistant at Memorial University. She holds a strong interest in international relations, refugee migration, and the role of women in development. To date, she has largely focused her studies on African affairs; completing fieldwork in both Ghana and Tanzania. Hannah hopes to complete her Honours thesis next year and wishes to pursue an M.A in Peace and Conflict studies.

of war. This paper examines how access to food is leveraged for military gains in cases of protracted conflict, and provides insight into the strategic benefits behind this modern war scheme. Using the political economy of conflict framework to analyze my findings, this paper concludes that a state's level of corruption significantly contributes to the longevity of its civil war. Therefore, higher levels of corruption tend to result in longer wars – and longer wars result in higher profits for political and military elites. As a result, the withholding of food aid is increasingly used by corrupt regimes as a low-cost, low-risk strategy to deliberately sustain violence (Wennmann, 2007, 2009).

Protracted Conflict and Food Security

South Sudan is six years old, but it has been at war for decades with its neighbors in northern Sudan. Christians in the South were often victims of ethnically targeted attacks, and Sudan's government developed policies that frequently favored the North (Freccia and Pelton, 2014). This resulted in the South's tireless fight for equality within Sudan, and soon after became the driving force behind its desire for independence (Freccia and Pelton, 2014; Roach, 2016).

Oil was discovered in Sudan during the 1980s, which could have been used to unite the state in prosperity and development. Instead, it only fueled a deadly civil war. The country's two factions were no longer fighting over ethnic disparities, alone; but now each sought control over resource-rich land (Al Jazeera, 2017). A peace agreement was signed in 2005, which entitled the South to a share of crude oil and allowed the region to secede (Freccia and Pelton, 2014; Young, 2005). Upon independence, South Sudan established its own government and a strong official opposition, with members of both prominent ethnicities holding executive positions in government. This led some experts to believe that the new country could become a model for the development of post-conflict democracy, while others warned that underlying issues of state development had not been addressed, and a return to conflict was inevitable (Freccia and Pelton, 2014; Roach, 2016; Young, 2005).

On 15 December 2013, violence erupted in the capital city of Juba – and once again South Sudan found itself at war (Freccia and Pelton, 2014). In 2015, a peace agreement was signed, but its ceasefire was short lived as brutal violence returned months later, in July 2016 (Al Jazeera, 2017; Roach, 2016). Since then, the country has been in a constant state of turmoil; villages have been burned to the ground, livelihoods destroyed, and heads of households murdered (BBC, 2017a; BBC, 2017b). South Sudan's women and girls have been victims of systematic rape, and many young children have suffered and/or died from hunger (Lynch, 2017a; Pendle, 2014). The pattern of warfare that has occurred in this once promising state is a prime example of the complex nature in which protracted conflict occurs.

Protracted conflict refers to persistent warfare that continues to recur in the same geographical region over an extended period of time (Maxwell et al., 2012). It is seemingly irreparable, as a myriad of intersectional issues contribute to cyclical violence; bringing with it a set of long-term consequences, both in times of peace and war. Even after ceasefires and third-party mediations, regions experiencing protracted conflict often relapse back into periods of intense violence and resolutions are hard to achieve (Maxwell et al., 2012; Wennmann, 2007). Therefore, protracted conflict differs in nature and cause from other contentious events, which typically have a well-defined beginning and end. South Sudan's complex war fits well within this framework, which helps to establish a better understanding of its barriers to peace.

Food security is another term that should be defined, as its absence has been detrimental for many South Sudanese. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) states that, “Food security exists when all people at all times have physical and economic access, to sufficient [amounts] of safe and nutritious food” (2006:1). It is not enough to simply eat and no longer feel hungry. Individuals must have access to dietary alternatives and culturally appropriate food. When individuals, families, or entire populations do not fit this criteria, they are deemed *food insecure*, and at risk of suffering long-term consequences to their health (FAO, 2006). Many of the world’s poorest states, such as those in Sub-Saharan Africa, experience chronic food insecurity as a result of inadequate production and distribution systems (Duffield, 1990; Loewenberg, 2015).

Protracted conflict positively correlates with widespread food shortages; as daily activities are interrupted by organized violence. In conflict zones, food production falls, prices rise, and distribution systems are halted; because food cannot be grown if farmers have fled to fight, nor can it be distributed if infrastructure is inaccessible or has been destroyed (Konviser, 2016; SSHP, 2016). Not only does the presence of war result in vulnerable food systems, they often occur in regions that were *already* vulnerable to begin with. Food insecurity during conflict has been recorded in several poor Sub-Saharan states, including; Angola, Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Somalia (Macrae and Zwi, 1992; Maxwell et al., 2012; Wennmann, 2009). South Sudan has an abundance of fertile land that has traditionally been used by subsistence farmers to feed their families. Livestock holdings have provided income for many average households, and village markets were widely used for cash crop sale or supplementary purchases (Duffield, 1990). As a result of the ongoing conflict, these food systems have deteriorated, leaving civilians without the means to provide for themselves (BBC, 2017b; Lynch, 2017a; Maxwell et al., 2012).

The ongoing war has negatively effected South Sudan’s level of food security in three distinct ways. First: since 2013 more than 3.5 million civilians have been displaced, which has forced many farmers to abandon their crops, leaving their livelihoods behind (BBC, 2017a). Second: fields of cash crops have been deliberately destroyed during the raiding of entire villages, and livestock holdings have been stolen en mass. Markets no longer exist in conflict zones, and the constant mobility of civilians has made subsistence farming impossible (Konviser, 2016; Loewenberg, 2015). Finally: local food systems typically rely on the collective work of its members, but the mass murder of villagers and the unpredictable pattern of war has left human resources depleted. Survivors cannot reconstruct these intricate systems alone, and have therefore fallen victim to widespread famine (Duffield, 1990).

Famine occurs when a population experiences severe food insecurity for an extended period of time, and they fight to survive by eating unhealthy or dangerous foods. Large-scale famines are declared emergency situations by the United Nations due to the imminent risk of mass starvation (BBC, 2017b). Earlier this year, South Sudan experienced a severe famine, where thousands of displaced civilians reportedly hid from armed soldiers near the Sudd swamp; eating water lilies, tree roots, and leaves. Other civilians had reportedly not eaten in days (Freccia and Pelton, 2014; Green, 2013; Mednick, 2017). Although the country’s famine is temporarily mitigated due to an increase in emergency humanitarian assistance, its level of food insecurity remains extremely high. This delicate environment leaves little space for the impact of potential economic or political shocks, which could easily send the state into crisis, once again (Nichols, 2017; WFP, 2017; Winter, 1991).

The Political Economy of Conflict and Corruption

Protracted conflict is increasingly common in contemporary civil wars; which Achim Wennmann argues, are commonly pursued for purely financial gains (2007, 2009). In reality, civil wars often occur in underdeveloped states that also have an abundance of natural resources. Previous research has shown that civil wars are four times more likely to occur in states that rely on oil, diamonds, or timber as their primary source of export revenue (Wennmann, 2007). South Sudan's oil industry provides 97 per cent of the country's income, making it a highly contentious commodity that can easily be exploited by the state's corrupt regime (SSHP, 2016; Wennmann, 2009).

In his piece, *The Political Economy of Conflict and the Mediated State*, Wennmann outlines several sub-frameworks that exist under the umbrella of political economy. Of most importance was his discussion on the "economic agendas" of actors in cases of civil war, as their end-game motives provide significant insight into the strategies they utilize during war (2009). Wennmann argues that when analysing an actor's economic agenda, it is important to question whether economic gains are an "ends" or a "means" of warfare; therefore, is it in the economic interest of factions to end a war and receive settlement benefits, or to simply collect benefits from the ongoing conflict (Wennmann, 2009)? Using this theory in our analysis of the civil war in South Sudan, it is easily determined that government elites are profiting from persistent violence, and that continued fighting provides more "means" to personal profit than an "end" to violence ever will. Therefore, it is in the best interest of war wagers to prolong their fight and continue to collect high economic rewards (Malaquias, 2001).

According to the South Sudan Humanitarian Project, the country was entirely debt-free upon secession, and also had the privilege of reaping lucrative rewards from existing oil reserves (SSHP, 2016). Scholars who believed, at the time, that the post-conflict state would survive, saw great potential in the country's ability to invest in social programs like healthcare and education (SSHP, 2016). However, since the civil conflict resumed, South Sudan's market economy has plummeted.

Oil production has been cut in half; leading to a significant decline in state-earned revenue (BBC, 2017a; Mednick, 2017; Roach, 2016), and inflation has increased food prices by more than 800 per cent. This has made it difficult, for those even in stable regions of the country, to access affordable goods (BBC, 2017a; Roach, 2016). In addition to the country's internal struggles in resource management, South Sudan's economy was ill prepared for the global decline in market value that the world experienced in 2015. The significant drop in oil prices over the past two years has had economic repercussions worldwide, but countries in conflict like South Sudan were driven into financial ruin. By the end of this year, South Sudan expects to declare a deficit of more than \$1.1 billion USD (SSHP, 2016).

The economic crisis that South Sudan is currently experiencing would lead many to falsely believe that government dollars are now being carefully spent. However, the opposite is true, as exorbitant amounts of public funds are being privately looted, or used to purchase weapons of war (Al Jazeera, 2017; SSHP, 2016). Several reports have recently been released that tie the country's executive leaders and top military personnel to instances of fraud and embezzlement (Channel 90seconds Newscom, 2016; Malo, 2017). Through the analysis of financial records, legal documents, and movement monitoring, a private investigation by The Sentry has exposed President Salva Kiir's many conflicts of interest. Evidence shows that Kiir holds financial shares in more than 20 private sector companies pertaining to oil, mining, and construction (Channel

90seconds Newscom, 2016). These claims have been refuted by the South Sudanese government, but further evidence shows that the country's top officials – and their family members – all own luxurious estates, both in Africa and the United States (Channel 90seconds Newscom, 2016; Malo, 2017; PBS NewsHour, 2016). Such lifestyles exist in stark contrast to the suffering that their own citizens have endured; and only reinforces the notion that those in positions of power can profit from protracted warfare.

More than half of South Sudan's population has been affected by famine, displacement, and a lack of social services. Yet, the United Nations (UN) has reported that millions of government dollars have recently been spent on acquiring arms (Malo, 2017; Nichols, 2017). Last year, oil sales from the country earned \$243 million USD, but the UN believes that “substantially more than half” of this money has been used to strengthen the state's military forces (Malo, 2017: 1; Nichols, 2017: 1). State representatives have denied these accusations, and claim that the country has not purchased any weapons in the last 2-3 years (Malo, 2017: 1; Nichols, 2017: 1). This sentiment holds little weight against other financial reports, showing that billions of dollars in revenue have gone unaccounted for (PBS NewsHour, 2017; SSHP, 2016;).

Developing nations that have experienced extreme poverty are prone to political instability and corruption, because the basic foundations for state cohesion and transparency have not been well-established. Therefore, it is easier for disparities in public funds to go unnoticed, and the additional responsibility of managing lucrative resources poses a problem for greedy regimes. More often than not, government elites who have experienced a kind of poverty themselves, are tempted to exploit public funds to enjoy their own luxurious lifestyles (SSHP, 2016; Young, 2005). Financial gains are a “means” of war that are enjoyed as long as conflict prevails. Therefore, an end to South Sudan's prolonged civil war would result in the end of private embezzlement, and would not be in the economic interests of government or military leaders (Wennmann, 2009).

The political economy of conflict framework focuses on the nexus of internal state actors and their connection to global markets, and ultimately shows the deeply rooted role that corruption plays in prolonged, resource-based war (Wennmann, 2007, 2009). Without a financial motive for faction leaders to establish peace, civil conflict will inevitably rage on.

Withholding Food Aid as a Tactic of War

When famine occurs in conflict zones, emergency intervention is needed, and civilians often rely on foreign food aid to survive. Humanitarian agencies with workers on the ground are often the only means of support that states experiencing famine can rely on. Therefore, their presence and resources are crucial to helping those who are most vulnerable survive (Maxwell et al., 2012). South Sudan's government has recognized the importance of foreign aid, but has deliberately chosen to withhold food packages from rebel-held areas, and have actively pursued a campaign that prevents third-party agencies from providing life-sustaining measures to their enemy (Nichols, 2017b; Nichols, 2017c).

Since 2013, 82 aid workers have been violently killed by military forces in an attempt to stop them from delivering food aid to conflict zones. This year alone, 15 workers have been killed, which has prompted some agencies to withdraw their staff from the ground (Bacchi, 2017; Dumo, 2017). Heightened security risks have been deliberate, because government forces know that severe violence will discourage foreigners from intruding on domestic affairs. The UN has been forced to cancel ground missions in some regions, due to security risks and are alternatively focusing on airlift operations to deliver food aid to isolated regions (Bacchi, 2017; Dumo, 2017).

A UN representative confirmed that this alternative method is nearly ten times more expensive than traditional ground delivery, and if blockades continue, agency funds are expected to deplete quickly (Bacchi, 2017).

Other obstacles have been put in place by South Sudan's government in an attempt to deter aid workers from coming into the country. Earlier this year, President Salva Kiir proposed a hike in work permit fees from \$100 USD to \$10,000 USD, per person (Reuters Staff, 2017). The proposed hike would have made it virtually impossible for agencies to afford work visas for their staff, and it would have ultimately reduced the amount of food aid delivered throughout the country. Due to extensive backlash from the international community, this decision was recently revoked. However, hostilities towards foreign aid workers still remain (Reuters Staff, 2017).

Withholding food aid as a tactic of war is a brutal strategy, but none the less, a cunning and effective one. Wennmann argues that financial stress on conflict economies influences the tactics used, and says that limited sources of financing may force armed factions to adopt low-cost strategies (Wennmann, 2009). Indeed, isolating rebel-held regions and blocking their access to food allows the government to steal, use, or sell donated foreign aid while simultaneously starving out their enemy (Wennmann, 2007). Road blocks and security measures that control borders and state operations are already under the government's jurisdiction, and therefore merely require enough military troops to carry out ground searches and violent blockades. In essence, this slow but effective strategy has the same outcome of large-scale attacks, yet does not require the same need for conventional weapons (Konviser, 2016).

Although in breach of international law and considered a formal war crime, withholding food aid is a low-risk strategy, in addition to being low-cost (Reeves, 2011). Instead of initiating conflict along armed enemy lines – losing soldiers and weapons in the process – this tactic takes control of an existing resource base. By declaring war on humanitarian aid, factions have been able to seize food supplies meant for civilians in order to feed their own troops (Duffield, 1990). Peaceful aid agencies are vulnerable to violence and easily deterred from conflict zones. By posing a threat to agency staff, forces can insure that food will not be delivered to areas under their control. In this way, factions are able to set themselves up for simpler victories (Bacchi, 2017).

Although South Sudan is the most recent state to use such a tactic, food has been used as a weapon of war for decades. It is typically used as a means of pressuring the enemy into surrender with the ultimate goal of capturing contentious land or forcing civilians out of a particular area (Konviser, 2016; Macrae and Zwi, 1992). However, the case in South Sudan is unique. Starving out the enemy applies a multifaceted approach, and ultimately seeks to wipe out entire ethnic tribes (Muhumuza, 2017). Not only does it allow the government to exploit external resources and better finance its own violent campaign, this tactic acts as an opportunity for Dinka-majority leaders to commit acts of genocide (Muhumuza, 2017; PBS NewsHour, 2017).

Withholding food aid is an effective way of killing ethnically homogenous groups, due to the fact that tribes often travel and live together. Therefore, it is easy for armed forces to identify rebel-held areas, where their civilian supporters reside (Nichols, 2017b). Once territory is re-captured, ethnic groups are easy to isolate, and armed forces can exercise complete control over their access to food (BBC, 2017b; Nichols, 2017b; Reeves, 2011). Withholding food aid is a long-term tactic that prolongs the death of enemy factions, and is therefore used as an ideal strategy for those who wish to wage a lasting war.

Conclusion

Using the political economy of conflict framework to examine the financial benefits of war, this paper has analyzed the role of corruption in cases of protracted conflict. It has argued that a state's level of corruption significantly contributes to the longevity of war, and concludes that financial benefits offer a "means", rather than an "end" to violence. Without economic incentives for leaders to negotiate peace, protracted conflict in resource-rich states will likely resume (Wennmann, 2009). Through the analysis of academic literature and current media reports, this paper has examined the case of civil war in South Sudan; particularly emphasizing the country's economic volatility and its low level of food security. Over the past six months, the country has experienced a severe and widespread famine that was deliberately orchestrated by corrupt government leaders as a long-term strategy of war (Reeves, 2011; Nichols, 2017b). Cutting off access to food and obstructing the work of humanitarian aid agencies has proved to be a low-cost, low-risk strategy for prolonging violence. It has also been an efficient way of targeting ethnically homogenous groups.

For now, the famine in South Sudan has been temporarily mitigated, but millions remain displaced and food insecure. Nuer minority tribes remain at risk for future genocidal attacks and no significant progress has been achieved in sustaining peace (France 24, 2017). Going forward, the role of grand corruption should not only be examined in the analysis of resource-based wars – but it should be recognized as a warning sign for future war crimes and genocidal attacks. In cases of protracted conflict, corrupt regimes pose a threat to state food supply, and should therefore, be closely monitored by the international community. Until the underlying issue of corruption among state leaders is addressed, consequences of South Sudan's civil war will likely continue until its money, bullets, and people have all been spent.

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