

The Sudan Consortium

African and International Civil Society Action for Sudan

The Impact of Aerial Bombing of Civilian Settlements in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Republic of Sudan January 2014

The Sudan Consortium works with a trusted group of local Sudanese partners who have been working on the ground in Southern Kordofan since the current conflict began in late 2011. All the attacks referred to in this report were launched against areas where there was no military presence and which were clearly identifiable as civilian in character. **We believe that this information provides strong circumstantial evidence that civilians are being directly and deliberately targeted by the Sudanese armed forces in Southern Kordofan.**

With the international community's attention focused on unfolding events in South Sudan, President Bashir of Sudan has taken the opportunity to launch a major military offensive against the armed opposition forces that have controlled significant areas of Sudan's Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States since they took up arms against the Khartoum government in 2011.

As an integral part of this offensive, the Sudanese Air Force has stepped up its aerial bombardment of the civilian population who live in these opposition-held territories, with December seeing the highest number of bombing attacks on populated areas - and the highest number of civilian casualties - since the current conflict in Southern Kordofan began over two and a half years ago.

Southern Kordofan

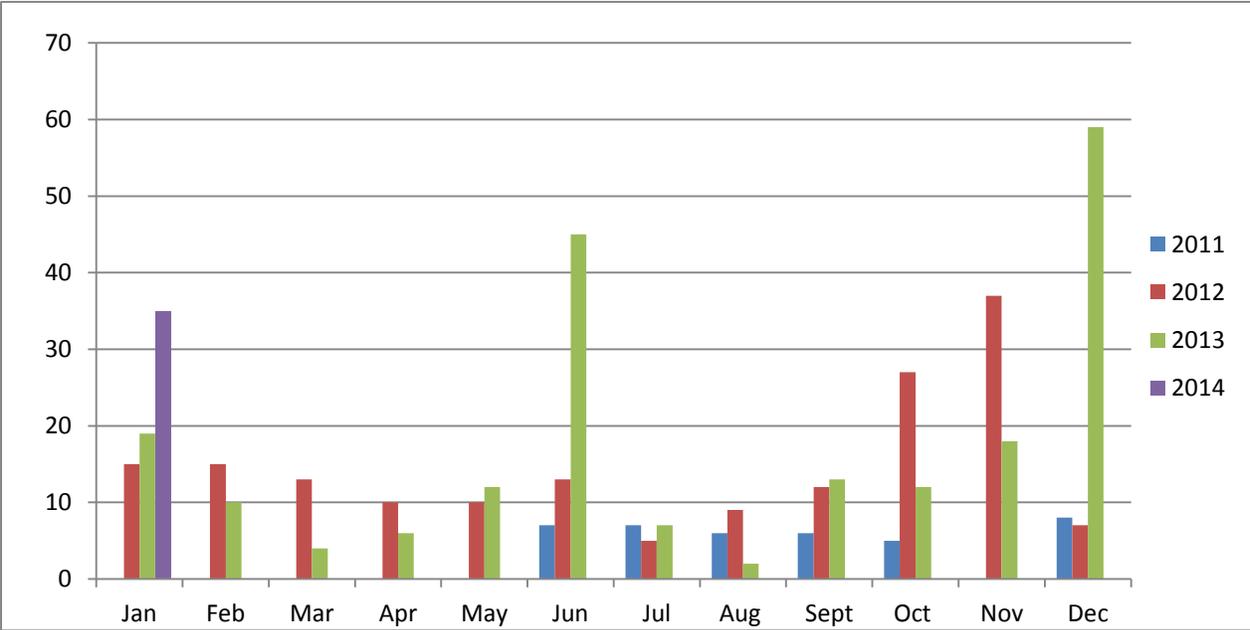
The government of Sudan has been signaling for some weeks that it intends to make use of the onset of the dry season to launch a military offensive on territory occupied by opposition forces in the south of the country with the aim of "ending the rebellion" in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile. On 20 December, just one week after fighting broke out in South Sudan, Sudanese Armed Forces launched the first of a series of ground offensives into Southern Kordofan, first attacking areas close to Kauda, the major population centre, before switching its line of attack to Toroje in Buram County, apparently aiming to seize control of the road linking Southern Kordofan with South Sudan. Opposition forces of the Sudan People's Liberation Army – North (SPLA-N) are reported to have resisted these attacks and appear to have launched their own counter-offensives in other locations in Southern Kordofan.

The ground fighting, and the consequent ebb and flow of front lines, has resulted in significant damage to civilian property in opposition-held territory, with approximately 1,500 civilian homes reportedly destroyed in the fighting in Kadugli County, and up to 100 houses destroyed in Al Buram. It is reported that the majority of these houses were deliberately burned by Sudanese government forces as they advanced, but monitors on the ground have not yet been able to verify this allegation.

Aside from the significant damage that has resulted directly from clashes between government and opposition forces along their various lines of confrontation during these ongoing clashes, Sudanese Armed Forces have also stepped up their campaign of aerial bombardment against populated civilian areas, killing and injuring large numbers of non-combatants, destroying property, damaging farmland and killing and injuring livestock.

Between 15 December 2013 and 15 January 2014, human rights monitors working on the ground in Southern Kordofan reported a significant increase in aerial bombing attacks on civilian settlements in all five counties in which monitoring teams are located (Heiban, Dellami, Al Buram, Um Dorein and Kadugli). Specifically, monitors recorded 56 separate bombing attacks on civilian objects throughout Southern Kordofan in December. This represents more than a three-fold increase on the number of attacks recorded in November, and is the highest recorded figure since the current conflict in Southern Kordofan began in 2011. The exceptionally high level of bombing attacks against civilian objects has continued into the new year, with 35 separate attacks taking place between 1- 15 January 2014.

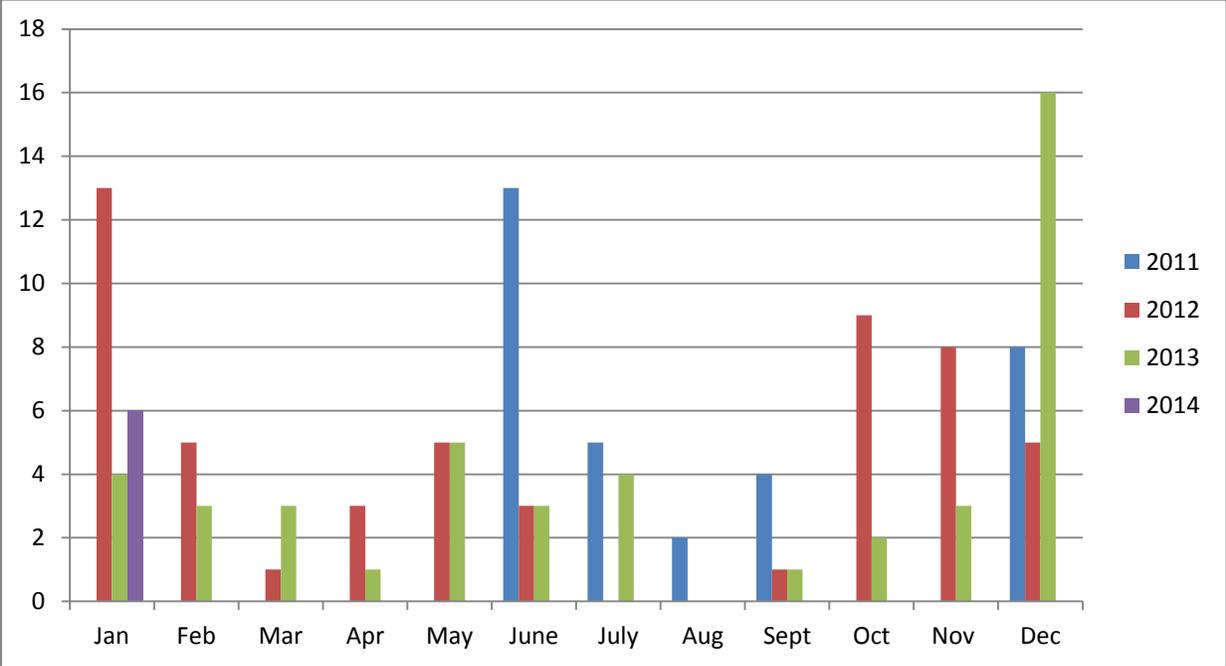
Southern Kordofan: Bombing attacks on civilian settlements: June 2011-January 2014



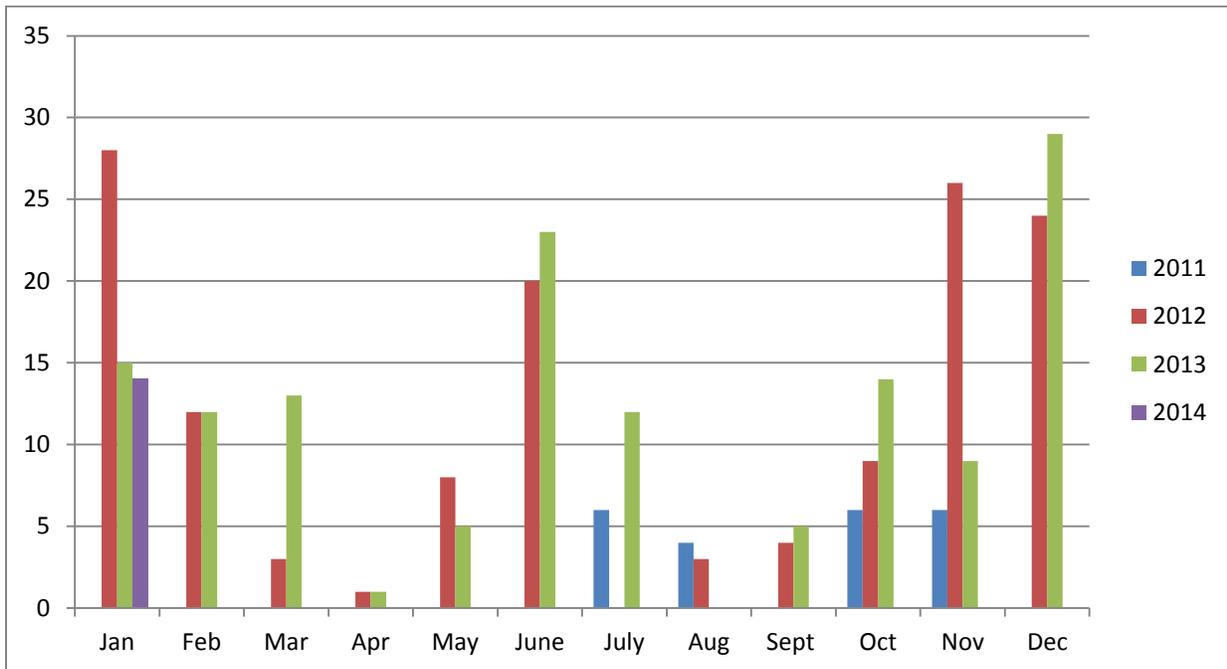
Inevitably, the increase in attacks on civilian objects has also resulted in increased civilian casualties. Although the civilian population has grown accustomed to being the target of repeated attacks from the air since 2011, and has therefore learned the most effective ways of seeking shelter from the bombers which circle overhead on a daily basis, many were unable to protect themselves or their families during

the recent onslaught, and in the one-month period between 15 December 2013 and 15 January 2014, 22 civilians were killed and 41 seriously injured by bombs dropped by the Sudanese Air Force on Southern Kordofan. Again, the casualty figures for December represent the highest recorded by the Sudan Consortium’s partners since the conflict began in 2011.

Southern Kordofan: Civilians killed by aerial bombardment: June 2011 – January 2014



Southern Kordofan: Civilians injured by aerial bombardment: June 2011 –January 2014



The sharp rise in attacks on the civilian population in Southern Kordofan, combined with uncertainties over the ongoing military offensives, is causing some to consider whether it is safe for them and their families to remain in Southern Kordofan any longer. However, many who would otherwise have considered seeking protection from the fighting by crossing the border to refugee camps in neighbouring South Sudan are now being forced to choose between continuing to endure the escalating conflict in their own country, or fleeing across the border into the highly unstable and insecure environment of South Sudan. Southern Kordofan borders on South Sudan's Unity State, which has been heavily affected by the recent violence as the opposing forces have fought for control of the capital, Bentiu.

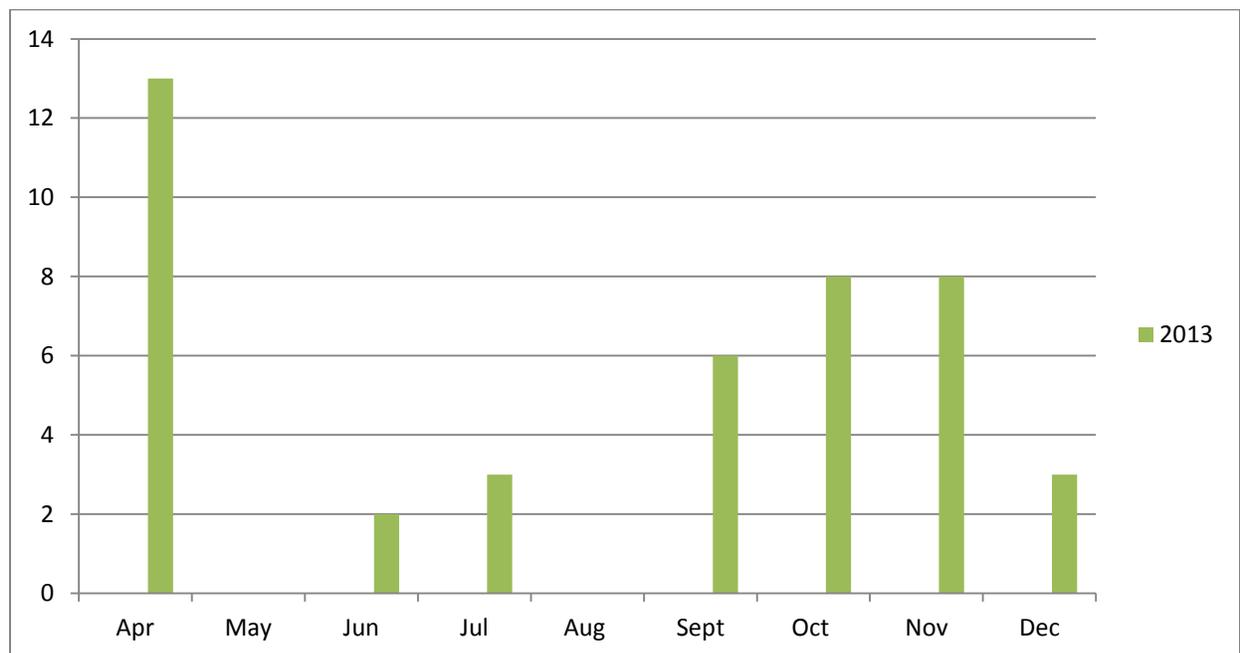
The assessment set out above is bleak enough, but perhaps does not reflect sufficiently starkly the fact that the attacks, directed against the civilian population of Southern Kordofan since 2011, have resulted in the slow but steady destruction of their communal amenities, their facilities, resources and other essential infrastructure necessary to ensure their basic survival, both as individuals and as a community, including their water-points, markets, schools, clinics and places of worship. Of equal concern, as has been highlighted in reports issued by the Sudan Consortium throughout 2013, is that the timing and geographical spread in the pattern of these aerial bombing attacks appears to indicate a deliberate intention to disrupt the planting, harvesting and distribution of food crops, thereby exacerbating an already precarious humanitarian situation as the Sudanese government continues to severely restrict the delivery of aid to opposition held areas in its territory.

Blue Nile

The information contained in this report so far relates specifically to Southern Kordofan, where partners of the Sudan Consortium have been working to gather information consistently over the last two and half years of the conflict. However, the situation is perhaps even more dire for the civilian population in Blue Nile, where, as a result of their early military successes, combined with a series of poor harvests, the Sudanese government has been far more effective in forcing the civilian population to vacate their villages, give up their land, and flee across the border. At least 121,000 refugees from Blue Nile are currently in camps in South Sudan's Upper Nile State, with a further 38,000 having sought refuge in Ethiopia. However, despite (or perhaps because) of their success in forcing population displacement, the Sudanese government continues to target the limited means of subsistence of those of its own citizens who remain in opposition held areas of Blue Nile, again focusing their bombing campaign against civilian settlements, communal infrastructure (including attacking markets on market days) and on the ever-diminishing areas of land that are used to cultivate vital food crops.

Information has been less easy to obtain from Blue Nile over the course of the last year, and the Sudan Consortium has been unable to obtain data from its partners on the ground since mid-December, but the chart below indicates the pattern of attacks on civilian objects observed and verified in Blue Nile since April 2013. As in Southern Kordofan, the timing of the attacks coincides with the harvesting and planting seasons – presumably in order to disrupt those essential activities and further to limit the capacity of the civilian population in opposition-held areas to feed and sustain itself. The cycle of attacks runs slightly ahead of that observed in Southern Kordofan, as the harvesting and planting seasons begin earlier in Blue Nile.

Blue Nile: Bombing attacks on civilian settlements: April – December 2013



Conclusion

The trends and patterns reflected in this update on the situation in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile remain consistent with those reported by the Sudan Consortium throughout 2013, namely that the government of Sudan has been allowed, once again, to pursue a deliberate strategy of waging war against its own population, targeting the infrastructure and resources necessary to sustain civilians in areas controlled by the opposition forces. These strategies – whether as previously deployed by the government of Sudan in the Nuba mountains in the late 1980s and 1990s or in Darfur since 2003 – appear to indicate the intention on the part of those commanding their counter-insurgency operations not simply to attack military personnel, installations and related targets but to conduct a deliberate scorched earth policy aimed at displacing or destroying the civilian population in the communities from which the opposition fighters are drawn. Although conventional ground-fighting between opposing government and SPLM-N armed forces has taken place periodically, the relative military stalemate, combined with the seeming indifference of regional and international bodies, including the African Union to the suffering which the government of Sudan is inflicting on its own population, appears to have resulted in a greater willingness by the Sudanese government to rely on such methods of war (which are clearly categorised as violations of international human rights and humanitarian law) as a major component of their military strategy .