

US says Sudan move into Abyei was premeditated

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UNITED NATIONS -- The Sudanese government's takeover of the disputed border town of Abyei increasingly appears to be premeditated, U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice said Thursday.

Rice said government forces seem to have used an attack by southern forces on a convoy of government soldiers from the north last week as a "pretext" to move into the town in the oil-rich Abyei region on the border between Sudan's Arab-dominated north and mainly ethnic African south.

Both the north and south claim Abyei, a fertile region located near several oil fields. Northern tanks and soldiers rolled into the disputed region Saturday following the attack on a northern army convoy Thursday, raising fears the dispute could trigger a return to civil war.

"There's real concern that the government of Sudan may have taken a decision to continue to occupy Abyei for its own political advantage for an indefinite period," Rice said in a conference call after returning from a Security Council trip to Africa that included visits to the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, and South Sudan's capital, Juba.

"Everybody is in agreement that this is a very destabilizing and unhelpful development and a violation" of the 2005 peace agreement that ended more than two decades of civil war between the north and the south, Rice said.

Under the peace agreement, a referendum on the future of southern Sudan was held in January and the south voted overwhelmingly to secede from Sudan, Africa's largest country.

But key provisions of the 2005 accord have not been implemented including a referendum to determine whether Abyei remains part of the north or the south, agreement on the north-south borders, and future security arrangements between the two countries.

Salva Kiir, the president of Southern Sudan, said Thursday he will not return to war even though the north was reportedly moving thousands of Arab tribesmen into Abyei villages abandoned by tens of thousands of terrified southerners.

Human Rights Watch said Thursday the Sudanese government urgently needs to halt looting and destruction of civilian property by its forces in the town of Abyei and hold those responsible to account. It also demanded that the government allow United Nations peacekeepers access to the entire Abyei area.

The U.N. Country Team in Sudan said late Thursday that the premises of U.N. agencies and humanitarian organizations in Abyei town have been looted of medical supplies, surgical equipment, 800 metric tons of food which is enough to feed 50,000 people for three months, water and hygiene equipment.

The team said tens of thousands of people who fled Abyei have arrived in southern Sudan and are in need of urgent assistance.

Humanitarian agencies are trying to distribute food and emergency items, the U.N. said. But an unknown number of people have fled into the bush while in Turalei, 130 kilometers from Abyei town, 15,000 displaced people are living in the open.

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