

South Sudan denies taxing nomads in Abyei

Tuesday 18 September 2012

September 17, 2012 (WAU) - South Sudan on Monday vehemently denied reports alleging that nomadic communities aligned to the government of neighbouring Sudan have been asked to pay taxes as prerequisite for their cattle being allowed access to the contested Abyei area.

Abyei, which has rich natural resources, including water, pasture and oil fields is claimed by both Sudan and South Sudan. The status of the area was to be decided in a referendum in January 2011 - at the same time that South Sudan voted to seceded from Sudan - but the two sides could not agree on an electoral commission and on who could vote.

Khartoum wanted the Misseriya - an Arab nomadic tribe that enter or pass through the area with the cattle for periods of the year - to be accorded full voting rights in any plebiscite. Juba, however, referring to the wording of the Abyei Protocol of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended decades of conflict, argue that only the Dinka Ngok are "resident" in the area and therefore only they should take part in the referendum.

In response to a news report from the Khartoum-backed Sudan Media Center (SMC), which last week quoted Mohamed Omar Al-Ansari, a prominent Misseriya figure, as claiming that his tribe have given the Dinka Ngok 48 hours to retract a decision imposing a tax of 5 Sudan pounds (SDG) per head of cattle passing through region.

The tax, Al-Ansari claimed in the SMC report was introduced by the "unilateral commission formed by Luka Biong", a Co-Chair of Abyei Joint Oversight Committee representing South Sudan.

If the ftax on cattle was not lifted within two days "the Misseriya would reciprocate by imposing fees on Dinka cattle", SMC quoted Al-Ansari as saying. He also urged the international community and the Ethiopian UN force in the area to prevent the "Dinka expansion in the area".

However, the paramount Chief of the Dinka Ngok on Monday denied knowing about the formation of any such a committee and challenged Al-Ansari to produce any evidence that herders were taxed in the area, while passing through Abyei on their way back visiting grazing areas in South Sudan.

"This is not true. I do not know the existence of such committee. This is the first time I am hearing it. I also did not hear any reports that nomads are taxed as they pass [through Abyei]. We do not have any nomad this time. When were they taxed and why were there no reports about these all times", asked Paramount Chief Kuol Deng Kuol on Monday.

Kuol said the report was "concocted to generate tension" and havoc in the area so that their projects get funds.

"These are just concoctions. It is not that it is true but just they want to confuse situation so that it draws attention of the international community and the government of Khartoum in order to fund their projects", he said

Luka Biong Deng, a leading member of South Sudan's governing Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) on Thursday 13 September in an interview with *Sudan Tribune* from Rome, Italy, dismissed the report, describing it as attempt to create "confusion and tension" in the area by some quarters who do not want peace and tranquility between the two communities.

"There is nothing like that. I have not formed any committee. We only asked those civil servants who fled the town when it was taken in May 2011 by Sudanese armed forces to return and help in the facilitation of the repatriation of the internally displaced persons", Deng told *Sudan Tribune* by phone from Rome, Italy on Thursday last week.

Deng explained that he is actually helping the Miseriya nomads by engaging both international community and the government of South Sudan to accept and ensure the need to; make a clear policy on the concern of the nomads to secure access to water and pasture; encourage holding regular peace conferences; provide protection of nomads when inside territories of Abyei and beyond; and engage international community to provide development assistance in areas of the nomads.

(ST)