

Sudanese Rebels Capture Oil Capital

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JUBA, South Sudan (AP) — Rebel fighters in South Sudan claimed Tuesday that they captured the capital of an oil-rich state, and they issued an ultimatum to oil companies to shut down production and evacuate workers. U.N. peacekeepers rescued 10 oil workers from the violence, but not before five were wounded.

U.N. peacekeepers from Mongolia rescued 10 staff members from the Russian oil company Safinat just north of the city of Bentiu, said Joe Contreras, a U.N. spokesman. He said two of the five wounded were in critical condition.

A rebel commander, speaking by phone from Unity state, said rebel forces recaptured Bentiu from government troops.

"Our forces have completed mopping and cleaning up operations in and around Bentiu Tuesday morning while other combat units are in hot pursuit of government generals running toward," the northern border, said Brig. Gen. Lul Ruai Koang, a spokesman for rebel troops. "The recapturing of Bentiu marks the first phase of liberation of oil fields from anti-democratic and genocidal forces of" President Salva Kiir, he said.

South Sudan saw massive violence sweep the country in December, when fighting broke out between troops loyal to the former vice president and those loyal to Kiir. Thousands of people are believed to have been killed, and more than 1 million have fled their homes.

Koang urged oil companies operating in government controlled areas to immediately begin closing down oil production and evacuate staff within a week. He said a failure to comply would risk the forced shutdown of oil facilities and threaten the safety of staff there.

Despite Koang's claims, the spokesman for South Sudan's military, Col. Philip Aguer, said that the fighting is still ongoing and the picture from Bentiu is not yet clear.

As the fighting continued, Toby Lanzer, the U.N.'s humanitarian coordinator in South Sudan, expressed outrage and frustration with the political and military leaders of South Sudan. He said the renewed outbreak of warfare will further hamper efforts to avoid oncoming hunger.

"What we've been pleading was give the people of your country some breathing space, give the people of South Sudan the space to tend to their cattle, allow them the safety to get to their fields and plant and cultivate," he said.

More than 9,000 civilians are now seeking refuge in the U.N's Bentiu base, he said.

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Peacekeepers have been deployed to protect civilians hiding in a hospital to prevent a repeat of past hospital massacres, he said.

"There are hundreds of women and children, trying to stay safe in a hospital," Lanzer said, adding later: "I really feel a sense of outrage."

International aid officials have increasingly invoked the word "famine" to describe what South Sudan could face in coming months. The country is extremely poor and most residents survive only on the crops they plant and harvest. Because of the fighting, many residents are not able to plant crops ahead of the coming rainy season.

Last weekend top U.S. and European Union aid officials called for increased global support to combat the oncoming crisis. They noted that 800,000 South Sudanese are internally displaced and 280,000 have fled to neighboring countries. International aid actors say South Sudan faces a funding gap of nearly \$800 million.

"This declaration is a wake-up call to prevent a deeper catastrophe from unfolding in South Sudan," said Rajiv Shah, the head of the U.S. government aid arm USAID. "Today, indicators tell us that South Sudan is on the brink of famine, and it's clear that the world must now do more to address this crisis."

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