

South Sudan's ruling party, the Southern Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM), announced on Saturday that it is suspending all post-referendum talks with the Khartoum-based National Congress Party (NCP), sparking fears that a surge in violence could compromise the south's transition to statehood this July.

In the pre-dawn hours of Saturday March 12th, the SPLM's military wing repelled an attack by hundreds of rebel forces on Malakal, the capital of the oil-rich border state of Upper Nile in South Sudan. At least 42 rebels and four government soldiers were killed and more than 100 children at local orphanage were taken hostage, although they were later released. The group's renegade leader, Captain Olonyi, broke away from the south's ruling party in 2009 and is thought by many southern Sudanese officials to be receiving assistance from Khartoum. Captain Olonyi has not commented on these allegations.

Speaking to reporters several hours after the attack, SPLM Secretary-general Pagan Amum publicly accused the NCP of 'creating, training... arming and financing various militia groups in Southern Sudan... to overthrow the government of Southern Sudan before July and to install a puppet government.' On Sunday, Al-Derdiri Mohamed Ahmed, a senior official of the NCP, denied any links to armed rebel forces in the south and stated that 'we are not going to change our position simply because some of the irresponsible SPLM officials or elements had decided to say what they have said.'

Saturday's clashes were just one of many violent outbreaks since January's referendum on independence, which was set up under terms of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement and brought decades of civil war to an end. Since its passage by an astounding 98.8% of southern voters, cries of triumph and jubilation have turned to concern amidst new security challenges in Malakal, Abyei and Jonglei.

One of the greatest concerns is the number of renegade factions in these regions, a byproduct of the south's failure to demobilise tens of thousands of Sudanese soldiers and reintegrate them into society. On March 6th, Olonyi's rebels fought against the southern Sudanese forces in a village north of Malakal, killing 62 people and wounding 71 others, according to the Associated Press. In early February, less than a week after the referendum's results were reported, rebels loyal to renegade militia leader George Athor killed more than 200 people in Jonglei State. In mid-February, General Gabriel Tang, who was supported by Khartoum during Sudan's long civil war, led a militia that killed more than 50 people near Malakal.

Abyei has become a region of particular concern after experiencing five major clashes since January between Misseriya nomads and southern armed police. On Monday, the UN-appointed human rights expert on Sudan, Mohamed Chande Othman, stated that Abyei could potentially derail the entire peace process because of the North-South territorial disputes that continue over this oil-rich region. Abyei sits on the border between North and South Sudan and includes both the north-backed Misseriya tribe and the south-leaning Dinka Ngok group. The lack of a referendum commission and disagreements between North and South over the voting rights of Misseriya has prevented Abyei from having a separate referendum on the issue of secession.

The United Nations Mission in Sudan is adding an additional company to its peacekeeping force in Abyei to reinforce patrols and provide a 'continuous rolling presence'.

SPLM Secretary General Pagan Amum has requested a UN-led investigation on recent clashes and promised to provide 'detailed evidence' of northern interference. He also told reporters on Sunday that southern Sudan President Salva Kiir has instructed him to 'study the possibility of halting pumping petroleum via northern Sudan' and 'to come up with alternatives after the 9th of July.'

North Sudanese authorities are likely to contest any plans that prevent the south from paying fees to the north for the use of pipelines and oil refineries. These and other obstacles, such as border demarcation, labour and property rights, water resources, citizenship rights and the future of more than a million people of southern origin living in the North, are likely to persist even after the south becomes the world's newest nation.