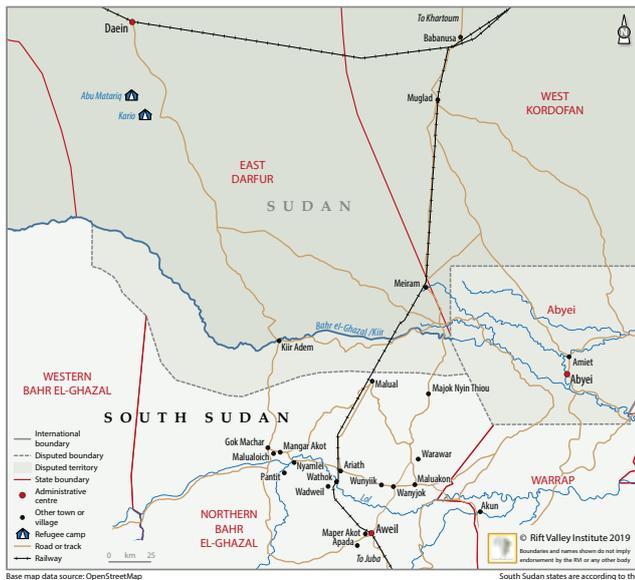




COVID-19 in South Sudan's Borderlands

A view from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal

RVI FIELD UPDATE 4



Northern Bahr el-Ghazal Borderlands

At the time of writing, there have been around 3,000 and 300 confirmed Coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in Sudan and South Sudan respectively, although actual infections are likely to be higher than official figures due to the low availability of testing among the population. South Sudan's response to the virus has drawn on some of the techniques seen across the world to try to limit, or slow, its spread and protect vulnerable populations. These include public campaigns for improved hygiene practices (particularly hand-washing); restrictions of movement internally (often referred to as lockdowns); and national border closures. How these measures might be improved, or tailored to South Sudan's communities—particularly the majority who do not live in towns and cities—are proposed in RVI's recent briefing: [‘Responding to COVID-19 in South Sudan: Making local knowledge count’](#).

Focusing on South Sudan's borderland with Sudan, in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, it is clear that the national response to the virus, particularly the border shutdown, has rapidly become a new factor in Sudan and South Sudan's cross-border political economy. The direct impact of COVID-19—like the consequences of Khartoum's political transition and the establishment of the Transitional Government of National Unity in Juba—are yet to fully materialize in this borderland. This update summarizes the current political holding pattern around both COVID-19 and the political transitions in Khartoum and Juba, and how these interact with established long-distance trade and migrant work systems that drive the borderland economy.

Lockdown of a closed economy

South Sudan's coronavirus task force—a 15-member body responsible for coordinating the response to the virus—shut the country's national borders on 23 March following global moves towards national lockdowns to manage the spread of COVID-19. For South Sudan's border with Sudan—between Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and South Darfur—this has resulted in a restriction of some movement across the border rather than a complete shutdown. The border remains open for everyday trade, enabling local people to maintain access to basic food, as well as their incomes as small-scale traders. Most high value cross-border trade has been officially banned.

Everyday border markets continue. Darfur traders bring sugar, tea and sorghum for sale, and buy up animals, tamarind, lalob fruits, palms and gum Arabic from South Sudan traders. But formal trade in fuel, cement and other construction materials is now banned. These items now only arrive via smuggling networks as contraband goods. The same is true for people, whose movements are heavily controlled on either side of the border.

These changes have reversed the partial easing of cross-border trade restrictions since Bashir's fall from power and the civilian transition in Khartoum, although roadblocks and unofficial taxes were still commonplace. The writ of the civilian governments runs thin in these borderlands. There are many roadblocks run by the military and other security personnel between Nuud, Meiram and Warguet in Western Kordofan, between Dein in Sudan and Kiir Adem in South Sudan, and within South Sudan between Kiir Adem and Gok Machar, Majok Nyinthiou and Warawar, and between Gok Machar and Aweil town.

The partial border lockdown has reopened two sources of military-security income: the smuggling of people and cash.

People smuggling

The lockdown has coincided with the seasonal return migration of young South Sudanese men from Sudan. They usually return to their home areas at this time of year to clear their family farms and cultivate, before returning north again for waged work. To profit from the need of many to cross the closed border back into South Sudan, security personnel on both sides of the border are collaborating with pickup truck drivers in Dein and Meiram to smuggle them for large fees. Each day, two to three pickup trucks arrive from Sudan to Gok Machar in South Sudan filled with young men and some women returning from Darfur and Khartoum.

Male waged workers and female market traders are hit hard by these fees. Only a minority of South Sudanese migrants can afford to pay them. Women face additional risks in smuggling themselves on pickups and lorries, but everyone is subject to the cost. Many others, unable to pay or unwilling to take the risk, are left stranded waiting for borders to be reopened. Overall returnee numbers have declined. Instead, some young men are traveling to the far north of Sudan, on the border with Egypt, to mine gold in the Halaib triangle—a disputed territory between Sudan and Egypt (under Egyptian control)—which has become the latest destination for South Sudan's migrant labourers.

Since the COVID-19 lockdown, fees in this smuggling system have increased. Athian and Angelina report that they returned from Khartoum in early April 2020 via Nyala in Darfur since, due to border closures, they would not have been allowed to leave Khartoum if South Sudan was their stated destination. From Nyala they travelled to Dein in South Darfur (a smuggling hub), where passengers pay 8,000 Sudanese Pounds (SP), around USD 120 or 40,000 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP), to be transported across the border. The fees are reportedly paid in buildings connected to Sudan's military and security. The pickup drivers are also believed to be military personnel.

The smugglers drive their passengers, at night, via forest and other less frequented routes. Drivers avoid the checkpoints from Dein to Muthariq and those on the main road to Kiir Adem. Sometimes they will simply drive fast through checkpoints, and at others they briefly enter checkpoint offices, probably to pay unofficial taxes. From Kiir to Gok Machar, the South Sudan border security does not restrict the entry of people, but instead taxes the drivers at multiple checkpoints.

Once across the border, the arriving South Sudanese and Sudanese are not tested for COVID-19 or quarantined, but instead taxed by the security post. This payment is unofficial and there is no exact amount charged for entering South Sudan. Angelina estimated that it cost around SP 12,000 (SSP 60,000 or USD 200) to travel home from Khartoum.

Migration north from South Sudan to Darfur is not subject to the same restrictions and young men continue to travel across the border. Movement further north past Kosti involves paying for Sudanese identity documents and very expensive taxes on the roads to Khartoum. However, Sudanese security does not stop South Sudanese young men migrating to the large commercial farming areas in Darfur and Kordofan, which need to recruit cheap labour to clear farms at this time of year. Many young men move through Kiir Adem across the river (which is considered the border) and take lifts from trading trucks from the market on the other side.

In contrast, women traders and migrants continue to be stopped by South Sudanese security at the border and are frequently subject to detention, beatings or assault. This is not a consequence of controls brought in as part of the lockdown, but in order to control the out-migration of impoverished South Sudanese families to Darfur’s refugee camps and cities, which the region’s elites see as a threat to their control of a captive labour force.

Cash smuggling

Increased border security, checkpoints and the lockdown have raised the risks of carrying large sums of cash saved from wage labour or profits from market sales. Money transfer via agencies or mobile phones, while safer, is still much more expensive and cuts into already marginal profits. Most traders bring their cash back north by buying goods to re-sell in Sudan: high-profit South Sudanese goods include grass mats, tamarind, gum Arabic, lalob fruits and palm leaves, sold at Kiir Adem, Majok Nyinthiou and other border posts.

The other option for traders and workers to get their cash into Sudan is to employ smugglers to bring it across the border. There are young men working at Gok Machar and Wanyjok—variously soldiers, police and civilians—who take on this work. There are rumours that these smugglers also work in moving gold from Raja, in Western Bahr el-Ghazal, into Sudan. These young men wear dirty clothes and ride motor bikes towards Kiir, pretending that they are fishermen or drivers for hire.

Conclusion

As shown by [RVI’s research in the region over the past two years](#), the borderlands between Sudan and South Sudan—specifically between Northern Bahr-el-Ghazal and South Darfur—have developed a closed and oppressive political economy based on the control of wage labour by the region’s elites. The partial shutdown of the border due to COVID-19 has become part of this political economy, stimulating the development of new and profitable forms of local taxation and smuggling. While such an economy is able to operate without major obstacles, it is doubtful that lockdown measures will be effective in containing the spread of COVID-19 in the borderlands.



Credits

This briefing was written by Joseph Diing Majok and Nicki Kindersley.

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