Sometime in October last year, the President of Southern Sudan, Salva Kiir, flew to Rumbek to officiate in the graduation of some 800 or so new military police personnel.

Among the graduates were gray-haired men and women. In the process, Kiir held a talk back with the cadets. From the questions he raised, it became apparent to those within an ear-shot that the Commander-in-Chief did not approve of the direction the military was taking. For instance, Kiir wondered to know how many of them could read and write. A few hands shot up.

Then, he told the recruits that the future war, if any, would be unlike the old war. The future war, he said, would be a smart one, fought by smart people. It would be brains over brawn. The Sudan has been at war for nearly five decades since an uprising in 1955 that spawned the Anyanya rebellion.

The north and south signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2005, ending a 21-year civil war. The agreement is to be implemented over a six-year time frame after which the south will hold a referendum to determine whether it remains part of the greater Sudan.

Four years after the agreement, war still defines Southern Sudan’s psyche. For many people here, the peace agreement is just a lull but not an end to the conflict. It is rare for Kiir to give a major speech without addressing this issue.

“We don’t want war,” he often says with the rider that “we will be prepared to fight if it comes.” But hardly anyone seems to know exactly how that war would break out.

Some see the disputed oil-rich Abyei region as the start. Others see the war breaking out over the north-south borders. Some see ethnic strife tearing the south apart and making the referendum impossible.

For one, the International Criminal Court’s indictment of President Omar al Bashir for possible crimes against humanity in Darfur might encourage him to disregard the Nairobi peace deal if he feels that he has nothing to lose as long as the indictment hangs over him.

But the indictment can play the opposite role, some say. In Uganda, for instance, the ICC issued indictments against the top leadership of the Lord’s Resistance Army, which pushed the rebels into negotiations.

Likewise, in Sudan, the indictment could pave way for a more diplomatic and cooperative al Bashir so as to convince the world to gang against the international court.

Second, one gets the feeling that the era of reconstruction is replacing the era of war. Southern Sudan right now is not the same region it was in 2007, or even in 2006. Mud and wattle huts have given way to permanent brick and iron sheet-roofed structures.

The city that never used to go to bed now goes to bed early as 10pm as bar life gives way to home life. The image of child bike-taxi drivers has given way to children in school uniform. It’s a far cry from 2006.

Then, one saw a state without a central command. Everyone was law unto themselves. Militias held Juba at sway. Every politician had own security guards and convoys, mostly comprising tribesmen and relatives. Now, the cost of war is making it unattractive.

True still, south Sudan is a sea of ethnic conflicts. In Bor hundreds were killed early this year. In Upper Nile -- the scene of fighting between the SPLA and a Sudan Armed Forces aligned militia at the start of the year-- also saw, in June, civilians calling themselves the White Army battling the SPLA and sinking boats ferrying UN food aid.

Some of the fighting, some Members of the regional Parliament have said, has an external element. And, in apparent reference to the north, the Internal Affairs Minister last month told Parliament that arms are being smuggled into the region to cause chaos. But ethnic fighting is ingrained in Sudan’s history.

In 2007, the Agar and Agok clans engaged in fierce battle in the same state where Kiir passed out army cadets. Dr Amon Wantok, a community advisor, who is devising a peace deal between the groups, told this correspondent that up to 1,000 people could have died. But unlike the current tribal fights, that one didn’t make it to the media.

If the region appears more troubled now than before, it is not because the fighting is worse. Rather, the region is more open to the outside world.

First, in 2006, Juba was teeming with aid agencies operating in the countryside by remote control, and annoying locals who felt that aid workers just came to enjoy life in Juba. In the past two years, aid agencies seem to be more spread out to the rural areas that were inaccessible before, according to one official at the Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

Secondly, communication has become better. By the end of 2006, officials were talking of about 15,000 working mobile phone lines for a region that is more than of East Africa in size. In the past one year mobile telephony has spread fast across the region. Literally every day sees a story about one or the other company launching a service in one or the other state.

The days when a simcard cost $200 (Sh15,000) are long gone. Zain, MTN and national government-owned Sudani have been busy silently working the market. A new phone operator Vivacell has been catching up. The era of the satellite phone seems like so yesterday. Still, it’s hard to think of peace when ethnic strife is perceived to be worse than in the past.

But it is even harder to consider the peace considering that countries that often split end up disintegrating further and in more bloodshed.

Think of the fighting in Somalia and the Ethiopia-Eritrea war. The difference is that in Southern Sudan, the process towards the referendum is internationally managed. The CPA has three dozen countries and agencies, including the United Nations, as guarantors.

But the collapse of the 1972 Addis Ababa agreement that ended the Anya-anya civil war, is too fresh in the minds of many here to let things stay as they are. Mr Kiir certainly isn’t letting them stay.

And nearly a year after the Rumbek graduation, Kiir’s vision for an army ready for a smart war is taking shape.

The new minister of Defense espouses Kiir’s vision. “Right now, especially in the officers corps, we have a large number of officers,”

Nhial Deng Nhial, the SPLA Affairs Minister said in an interview with this Correspondent.

“For some of them we have to find something for them to do,” he added.

The same vision is the basis for the new SPLA law. According to the law, army recruits must be between 18 and 30, with no criminal record, and with a basic education for enlisted personnel and not less than secondary education for the officer cadets. The law retires cadres from privates to sergeants at 47 years and general officers at 60.

From sergeant majors to colonels the retirement age is 50.

“The mission of transforming the SPLA into a professional army is certainly a daunting task,” Nhial said. “The resources are few. The work has to compete with other needs of the country.”

And, to some, the recent reshuffle was a continuation of this trend.

In May, Kiir finally reshuffled the army and the Cabinet. The change of the Finance Minister made more news, but it was the changes in the key security ministries that should give a clue as to Kiir’s strategy.

Kiir named Lt. James Hoth the new Army Chief of General Staff. Oyay Deng, the man who was both when the Rumbek training took pace, is now the Minister of Regional Cooperation. His deputy Salva Mathok was also moved out while Gier Aluong was moved to the Ministry of the Interior.

Gier headed the SPLA signal unit that used the Morse Code and his world rotates around espionage. Even as Telecommunications Minister, whenever he addressed Parliament, Gier referred to his ministry as a security one.

The similarities between these two are striking. Both hold Masters Degrees in Public Administration from Port Hare, South Africa.

Both were in the SPLA Commando Unit which Hoth commanded. Gier was at one time a member. The unit overran several enemy positions during the war. And both They also stuck with the SPLA Garang faction when people from his home region, Upper Nile , deserted to form a faction headed by Riek Machar. Perhaps, more importantly, Hoth and Gier were born in Upper Nile and went to school there.

If the war is coming, Kiir probably sees, as some people here already reckon, Upper Nile, but not Abyei, as the place to watch. Despite outbreak of fighting in 2006 and early 2009, Upper Nile, unlike Abyei, is largely off the radar of the international community, so it can hardly benefit from the international pressure.

Another interesting choice was Obuto Mamur the Deputy Chief of Staff (Operations). Mamur was the rebel Front Commander in Nimule, the SPLA’s only remaining front, following an intensive counter attack by Khartoum. Khartoum’s attack followed a 1992 split led by Lam Akol and Riek Machar from the SPLA. Mamur went on to lead several SPLA frontlines in all regions of the South, including Rumbek and in Upper Nile.

As one ex-aide to Mamur remarked, “This is a war cabinet.”