

# Boma Development Initiative Report



## Community Perspectives on the Lou Nuer / Murle conflict in South Sudan

By Jared Ferrie



### Introduction

Establishing security is one of the greatest challenges faced by the government of the Republic of South Sudan (RoSS), which declared independence July 9. Aside from violence on the border with its northern neighbour the RoSS must contend with a host of militia groups as well as a culture of cattle raiding, and tensions between ethnic

groups that often lead to deadly attacks.

Compounding such problems is the ubiquity of small arms left over from a decades-long war, which also militarized society and broke down traditional structures of authority. The marginalization of southerners, which was a root cause of the war in the first place, has also left its imprint. For decades, southern resources were

exploited by northerners who funnelled wealth to the Khartoum-based establishment. Thus, the south was left with little infrastructure or industry, factors that also contribute to ongoing violence in this new era of independence.<sup>1</sup>

Such problems are common to much of South Sudan, but they are particularly acute in the eastern state of Jonglei. With a population of about

PHOTO: MURLE CHILDREN WALKING THROUGH TALL GRASS, IN LEKONGOLE, NEAR PIBOR, JONGLEI STATE.  
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1.3 million, Jonglei is the base for a number of militia, and the state is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups that often compete for scarce resources. Such competition, in addition to traditional rivalries, which intensified during the civil war and have also been exacerbated by underdevelopment, led to clashes that left thousands of people dead in the state during 2011. The United Nations Secretary General's Special Representative to South Sudan, Hilde Johnson, said:

*The escalation that has taken place in Jonglei has a threshold that is much higher than what we have seen in other states. ... And if it gets out of hand we'll be in a situation where the cycle of violence will escalate to unknown proportions.<sup>2</sup>*

At a governors' forum in the South Sudanese capital, Juba, on 17 November, Jonglei Governor Hussein Maar Nyout said at least 3,000 people had been killed in inter-ethnic conflicts in his state during 2011.<sup>3</sup> To put that number into perspective, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that about 2,500 people were killed in violent conflicts in 2009 throughout the whole of Southern Sudan.<sup>4</sup> About 750 of those killed in 2009 were killed during a week-long battle between the Lou Nuer and the Murle.<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that such statistics are extremely hard to verify due to the lack of road access and communications networks in rural areas. But the figures do point to endemic violence that appears to have worsened in Jonglei in 2011.

Many of those killed in Jonglei in 2011 were victims of attacks and counter attacks between groups of Lou Nuer and Murle. That conflict provides an insight into the factors contributing to inter-ethnic tension in South Sudan, as well as its tragic

results. The subsequent peace process, led by the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC), points to methods of resolution, and its inherent challenges. Interviews with stakeholders suggest possible longer-term initiatives that could lead to lasting peace between such communities.

### Anatomy of a conflict

On 18 August, thousands of heavily armed Murle attacked Lou Nuer communities in Uror county, killing more than 700 people, according to local authorities.<sup>6</sup> The UN put the figure at 340.<sup>7</sup> In a broader sense, this was the latest in example of tensions exploding between groups that have long been rivals. But this particular attack can be seen as the culmination of a recent conflict that had been simmering for months. Between the beginning of February and the end of August more than 1,000 people were killed, tens of thousands displaced and hundreds of women and children abducted.<sup>8</sup> The conflict may have involved a number of relatively less violent incidents that have gone unnoted during this time period, but a general timeline compiled by MRG from various sources is as follows:

#### 6 February

- Murle youth from Pibor County attacked Uror County. Eight people were killed, including two chiefs.<sup>9</sup>
- Although the number of fatalities was relatively low, the fact that two chiefs were killed 'inflamed passions', according to UNMISS official A, one of two officials from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) who spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to comment publicly.<sup>10</sup>

#### 18 - 23 April

- Lou Nuer youth from Uror County attacked Pibor County. In

the fighting, between 200 and 300 people were killed and about 4,400 displaced. Ninety-one people were reportedly abducted.<sup>11</sup>

#### 2 - 23 June

- During this period, Lou Nuer youth from Uror County gathered in Pibor County where they attacked communities and stole cattle. About 430 people were killed, according to the county commissioner who shared this information during a meeting with the SCC. The number of dead may be higher than suggested, as 147 women and children were reported missing; some may have been killed while others were abducted.<sup>12</sup> Between 7,000 and 10,000 people were displaced.<sup>13</sup>
- Although some of the violence took place in the area around Mainyabol village where there is an SPLA garrison, soldiers did not engage the attackers. UNMISS official A noted that most soldiers at that garrison are Nuer. He said, 'The SPLA later said it had no orders to intervene.' He added that the Murle, 'accused the government in Jonglei of failing to prevent the attacks because they were Murle'.

#### 18 August

- At 5 a.m., Murle youth from Pibor County attacked Lou Nuer settlements in Piera Payam in Uror County. The attacks spread to two more payams, Motot and Pulchuol, and affected 10 villages in total. The fighting affected area as large as 150 square kilometres, some crops were destroyed and most villages were burnt to the ground.<sup>14</sup>
- According to an assessment carried out by local authorities, 742 people were killed and 826 were injured. The number of dead may actually be higher as 356 people were reported missing, some of whom were likely abducted. The violence left 31,096 people homeless and

displaced. The attackers stole about 38,000 head of cattle.

- Humanitarian agencies working in the area were also affected as their buildings were set on fire, including a clinic in Pieri. The attackers also looted a World Food Programme warehouse that held enough food to feed about 2,000 people for one month.<sup>15</sup> The primary school in Pieri was also burnt down.<sup>16</sup>

According to UNMISS officials A and B, the 2011 attacks are directly related to an outbreak of violence between the two groups in 2009. More than 1,000 people died during that conflict, including 750 in one week-long battle in March.<sup>17</sup> UNMISS officials A and B, who both have strong knowledge of the conflict in Jonglei, said that although the peace process was delayed, the conflict subsided. They attributed this partly to increased security around the 2010 elections, as well as the January 2011 independence referendum. UNMISS official B said, 'There was a sense somehow that this problem had gone away.'

The problem had not gone away, and it flared up again the month following the referendum. The 2011 attacks outlined above reflect long-standing tension between these two communities. There are also broader factors that have exacerbated the troubled relationship. These include the easy availability of weapons and a lack of security. Extreme poverty underdevelopment are also key to understanding the violence. And there are cultural and political factors as well.

## A nation awash with weapons

After two decades of civil war, small arms are ubiquitous throughout South Sudan. A disarmament programme begun in 2005 has been almost universally condemned as a failure that

in some cases led to further violence rather than achieving security. John Ashworth, a South Sudan expert who has lived here for 28 years and is now advising the SCC on the peace process in Jonglei, said, 'Right from the start it was a complete mess, because they disarmed one group and not another. It was absolute chaos.'<sup>18</sup>

Even government officials have acknowledged the programme's failure. For example, the Minister of Interior said:

*Disarmament has been a problem, because it was not handled well. First, it was done partially. As a result, you disarm one group leaving the other group. The other group will go and try to revenge on those who are disarmed. Secondly, we did not handle the arms, which were collected, in a proper way. So the same arms go back (to the communities).<sup>19</sup>*

Although the minister was speaking about the situation in South Sudan in general, his comments could be applied directly to the recent conflict between the Murle and the Lou Nuer.

Gatwech Koak Nyuon, a member of the Nuer Peace Council who investigated the attacks in Uror County, said the government disarmed the Lou Nuer in February 2006, but left the Murle with their weapons. He said, 'When they disarmed the Lou Nuer, the Murle got an advantage to raid cattle from the Lou Nuer.'<sup>20</sup>

The Lou Nuer did not have difficulty rearming themselves, Nyuon said. When the interior minister mentioned a flawed system of storing arms, he was referring to the fact that weapons collected by the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) were kept in the same areas rather than being transferred to a central storage facility. And Nyuon pointed out that officials in those areas were often members of the dominant ethnic group. He said:

*They disarm them and give them to the payam administration and the administrator may be a member of that specific community. So a community member can come and take the guns and maybe give some cows in exchange.*

Poorly paid police did little to stop the flow of arms, he alleged: 'They also sell guns to civilians, because they don't have anything to eat.'

The Lou Nuer were also able to obtain weapons from George Athor, a militia leader with forces based nearby, according to Nyuon:

*Some Lou Nuer youth did get guns from him because he doesn't want this government. So, Lou Nuer youth did go into the bush and collaborate with George Athor. Some also got guns from the SPLA. Now the Lou Nuer and the Murle are equal in terms of access to guns.*

The involvement of Athor in this conflict points to one of the many destabilizing effects militia groups have in South Sudan. Athor is a former SPLA officer who rebelled after losing the election for governor of Jonglei in 2010. Before his defection he was the SPLA's divisional commander in Jonglei and previously the division commander in Upper Nile state. According to the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey (SAS). 'He was also involved in a violent SPLA-led civilian disarmament campaign in 2006, which claimed more than 1,500 lives.'<sup>21</sup>

Another SAS report cites 'strong circumstantial evidence that the forces of ... George Athor have received logistical and material support including small arms and ammunition, from Khartoum and other external sources'.<sup>22</sup> The government of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan has repeatedly been accused of backing militia groups in South Sudan in an attempt to

destabilize the new nation. If the circumstantial evidence linking Athor to Khartoum is true, the regime in Sudan has not only succeeded in backing an anti-government militia, but it has also indirectly helped fuel ethnic violence between the Lou Nuer and the Murle. However no concrete evidence has emerged to support the thesis that youth on either side were supplied with weapons by the Khartoum regime.

## The security vacuum

One of the main difficulties in disarming the civilian population is the lack of dependable security. Ashworth said, 'One condition that has to be there is for people to feel safe. Until there is a security structure in place and people feel safe, they will want to take the law into their own hands.'

The Lou Nuer, for example, decided to rearm because they could not depend on local security forces for protection, according to Nyuon. The Uror County Authority said in its assessment that the Murle attackers numbered between 3,000 and 4,000 heavily-armed young men, while each payam has only about 15 police officers stationed there.<sup>23</sup>

According to Murle community members, that offensive was mounted as a response to repeated attacks and cattle raiding by Lou Nuer youth in their areas between 2 and 18 of June. Simon Gain, the Presbyterian pastor from Pibor who has represented his community in the SCC-backed peace meetings, said the Murle waited for the government to step in and provide protection and force the Nuer to return their stolen cattle. He said:

*By then the Murle lost a lot of cattle, people were killed and children were abducted. Nobody (from the government) visited them; nobody talked to them. So they went and attacked Uror*

*County, because that's where the cattle were taken.*

Both counties are extremely remote with only a small presence of government authorities and police. The Uror County Authority called on the government to deploy SPLA resources to prevent further attacks. The incident report<sup>24</sup> dated 27 August 2011 stated:

*Military aircraft (helicopter) should be deployed for reconnaissance in between the counties' frontiers to avoid cattle rustling, child abduction activities and killing of innocent people in the future.*

Since the conflict ran from the beginning of February to mid-August, the SPLA might have been expected to step in and provide security at some point during that period. Several interviewees condemned the failure of the government to send troops in, while others suggested that SPLA soldiers themselves were involved in the attacks. While it has not been disproved, there is no evidence to support that accusation.

The Uror County Authority's incident report said:

*The attackers have reported to be between 3,000 to 4,000 men approximately and were in military uniforms. ... The Murle were armed with AK 47 (assault rifles) and light machine guns and rocket propelled grenades.*

During his investigation in the aftermath of the attack, Nyuon of the Nuer Peace Council said he saw SPLA uniforms on bodies of Murle killed in the attack.

UNMISS official A said, 'It's not surprising, because uniforms are all over.' Some of those uniforms may have been provided to Murle youth who were recruited by the SPLA to

fight the militia commander David Yauyau, who launched a revolt after losing the 2010 elections. Yauyau is an ethnic Murle, and according to Small Arms Survey, his rebellion seemed 'linked to the intense rift between two Murle factions'.

The presence of uniforms and trained fighters may not indicate that SPLA soldiers were actually involved in the attacks in June and August, but the perception was there, said UNMISS official B.

The accusation was repeated by Yangyang, a chief from the community of Karyak who was interviewed in Pibor.<sup>25</sup> He said many of the attackers were wearing not only SPLA uniforms but police uniforms as well. He said it was unprecedented that cattle raiders had spent weeks carrying out attacks in Murle territory.

Hilde Johnson, the UNSG special representative, noted that the June and August attacks from both sides were carried out in a military fashion. She said:

*The scary part of the Jonglei crisis is that both in June with the attack on the Murle outside Pibor and in Pieri by the Murle against the Lou Nuer – in both cases we saw very large scale movement in army-like fashion, new arms, new weapons, and thuraya (satellite) phones. This is not normal cattle rustling; this is something way beyond that and it is something that is extremely worrisome.*

Johnson said a strong SPLA presence in Jonglei, along with peacekeeping troops from the UN Mission for South Sudan (UNMISS), is key to stopping the cycle of violence there.

Ashworth, the advisor to the SCC, explained that the SPLA has a strong command and control structure at higher levels. But that structure has been weakened on the ground in some areas because of the government's policy of incorporating militia groups

into the army as a peace-building strategy. Included among the Murle and Lou Nuer fighters he said, “There could well have been what are now SPLA soldiers who were militia before.”

Indeed, members of both communities were recruited into militia groups during the civil war. The Khartoum-backed Pibor Defence Force was largely Murle and Khartoum also backed a Lou Nuer militia organized by the commander Simon Gatwech. While both groups fought the SPLA, they also clashed with each other.<sup>26</sup>

There appears to be little to discourage cattle raiders and militia groups from carrying out further attacks. Despite the fact that large numbers of people are killed, only cursory investigations appear to be carried out by South Sudanese authorities and UNMISS. Even the numbers of casualties differ according to the source. Nor are the perpetrators brought to justice. This highlights the weakness of the security and judicial systems.

## Developing peace

Jonglei is the largest state in South Sudan, with many extremely remote communities, in one of the world’s poorest nations. Community representatives assert that Pibor and Urur are among the least developed counties in the state. Interviewees said the areas lack adequate schools and health care facilities, and residents suffer from chronic food insecurity. During the rainy season, the areas are inaccessible by road, which makes it difficult for government to respond to security incidents and also stalls economic development.

Nyuon said that disarmament alone would not prevent youth from engaging in violence. He said, “When disarming, you also need to create employment opportunities for youth, because they will be idle.”

He noted the high degree of illiteracy and suggested the government build a vocational training institute in the region to teach skills such as construction, which do not require literacy. Nyuon also suggested agriculture as another means of employment, although he noted that the government would need to construct roads to allow farmers to get crops to market. Although some cattle herders may resist switching to agriculture, he noted that some groups of Murle are farmers.

Ashworth was more sceptical, noting that projects attempting to convince herders to switch to farming have failed in the past. He said pastoralist culture does not create a work ethic that is easily integrated into a market-oriented society. He said, “The cattle people don’t have a culture of work. You’re not going to want to become a construction worker, or a plumber, or a mechanic.”

According to the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) about 80 percent of South Sudan’s approximately 8-million people depend on cattle for survival. George Okech, head of the FAO in South Sudan, said a cow or bull can fetch between \$300 and \$800.<sup>27</sup> With an estimated 11-million head of cattle in the country, some have suggested a livestock industry could be a massive source of employment as well as fulfilling a need on the domestic market, and potentially an export.

A November 2011 study by the Netherlands Development Agency, which was commissioned by the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries, notes that the livestock sector constitutes about 18 percent of the East African region’s agricultural GDP. It states:

*The proportion contributed by livestock to agricultural GDP has risen by about two percentage points over the last decade. However, this subsector is still*

*widely characterized by smallholder ownership of livestock across the region. This implies that if optimal livestock farming is extensively undertaken, it has great potential in the creation of employment and can make a huge impact on poverty alleviation.<sup>28</sup>*

The study looked at cattle as well as other livestock such as poultry to assess the feasibility of creating a viable livestock industry in Eastern Equatoria state. The study notes that the government’s investment policy prioritizes agriculture and provides incentives for private investors such as tax exemptions and access to land to be provided by the national and local governments. Once again, the study notes that developing the industry depends on enforcing security:

*This study recommends that in order to create an attractive investment atmosphere, issues of insecurity must be dealt with from the highest levels of policy. A clear policy and regulatory framework for control and enforcement of mechanisms for eliminating insecurity will help in creating an enabling environment conducive for investment in the livestock sector.*

Developing the agriculture sector is consistently touted by South Sudanese officials as a way to wean the country away from dependency on oil, which currently provides 98 percent of the budget. Certainly, the sector holds promise. Much of the land in South Sudan is very fertile and could potentially supply not only local markets, but goods for export as well. The sector could become a tremendous source of employment.

Agricultural development must be approached with caution however. Already there are signs that communities are being bypassed by companies making deals with politicians who fail to

consult their constituencies. In a report released 22 September 2011, Oxfam International estimated that 36 percent of the population is food insecure. It noted that foreign companies, governments and individuals sought or acquired nearly 10 percent of the country's land mass for agriculture, biofuel and forestry projects. The report stated, 'South Sudan's newest challenge, which could derail its long-term socio-economic prospects, is large-scale land acquisitions.'<sup>29</sup>

Even if agricultural development was carried out in a responsible manner, some experts warn that it could be hard to convince pastoralists to abandon their traditional way of life. Ashworth expressed scepticism that pastoralists would easily take to a market oriented approach to cattle herding. Instead, he said, cattle have a deeply symbolic meaning in herder cultures. He said, 'Cattle are wealth. They don't breed cattle for a use. They drink the milk, but they're not bred for slaughter, for meat.'

But Simon Gain, the pastor involved in peace negotiations, said attitudes are changing. He said:

*If you go to Pibor, young people now understand. When we are talking in Pibor about it they like the idea. But sometimes people ask, 'Where is the market? Where is the security?' Because when taking the cows to market in Juba somebody comes with an AK 47 and starts shooting and takes your cows.*

He cited road construction as the key means of improving security as well as bringing cattle to market via lorries.

Ashworth suggested a more general approach to development, rather than trying to steer a culture into appropriating different lifestyles. He said, 'Culture will change as development comes, as education comes.'

He noted the remoteness and insecurity that characterizes both Pibor

and Uror counties and said, 'Some of that will come down to NGOs and donors. Are they willing to do development in these areas?'

Ashworth cited education as a key component to development and peace-building. He said, 'At least education gives people something to do and education is valued in South Sudan, and as South Sudan develops it will need more educated people.'

He also recommended the construction of youth centres as a way to keep young people occupied in a constructive manner. Nyuon also mentioned youth centres, and added that they could be points of contact between Lou Nuer and Murle youth. He said, 'When you build a youth centre they can interact together. They can build a friendship also.'

Ashworth said very little development has been done in either the Lou Nuer and Murle communities. But he noted that the Murle in Pibor were particularly isolated geographically. Compounding this is that they are a minority group that suffers discrimination, which has removed them from the chain of development funding. He said, 'They feel very marginalized from development. It goes through Bor (the state capital), so it goes through the hands of the Dinka before it reaches them.'

South Sudan's deputy minister of information, Atem Yaak Atem, also noted that the Murle are particularly marginalized and suggested this could be one cause of their engagement in conflict. He said measures could be taken to address this, such as 'a special fund for education in the Murle community'. He said, 'If you introduce formal education into these communities maybe in 20 years they will catch up. And they will start asking for schools, for roads.'<sup>30</sup>

Simon Kolen, a primary school teacher in Lekuangle town, which was attacked in June, also emphasized the need for education.<sup>31</sup> He said, 'We will change if there is education. They

will not think about cattle raiding any more.'

Kolen, who fled with his family to hide in the bush during the attacks, said children in the area want to go to school but they lack access. He said, 'We have few schools, we don't have enough schools for our community.'

He said education would lead people to explore employment options other than raising cattle. Already there is evidence of this in Lekuangle town. He said, 'There are some people who come from villages who are now traders, they opened up small shops.' Others work for NGOs. He said, 'They changed their life completely and they are not going back again.'

In order to decrease competition for resources, Kolen also encouraged the government to create more water access points. He said:

*There are two things that make people fight: lack of water and the need for grazing land. These make people fight and go cattle raiding. In the dry season people go find water from far places and sometimes they meet and fight. If there is water near any tribe, they don't need to move.*

Mary Jowang, who survived a June attack in Karyak, also called on the government to provide more services. She said, 'We need water in our villages and schools for those coming generations, because our time has passed but we need a future for our children.'<sup>32</sup>

## The politics of ethnicity

Ashworth noted that the Murle in particular are marginalized not only through lack of development, but from the political system as well. As a minority group in a country that tends to vote along ethnic lines, the Murle stand to elect fewer representatives, and their MPs do not tend to be

appointed to positions of power. He said, 'At a national level there are plenty of Nuer, but you won't find many Murle if any.' The Murle are also under-represented at a state level, he added.

There are ways for the government to address this deficit of minority members in political positions, Ashworth said. The president has the power to appoint senators, for example. He also pointed to an idea floated by Peter Adwok Nyaba, a South Sudanese author and intellectual. Nyaba suggested creating an Upper House of Parliament which would include two representatives from each of the country's ethnic groups. Ashworth said, 'It didn't find a lot of favour with those who held power.'

Pastor Gain said politics can also exacerbate tensions between ethnic groups. He said, 'Sometimes the election loser stirs up violence and resentment toward the election winner.' Such politicians play up perceived ethnic grievances, he added.

An assessment carried out in Uror included the recommendation:

*Politicians should stop inciting tribal conflicts for cheap political gains. They need to bring together both the Murle elders and the Lou Nuer elders in Uror for a peaceful settlement of the conflict.*

A Lou Nuer politician who attended a peace meeting in Pibor responded to accusations voiced by participants that the state government did not respond to them because they were Murle. Riak Gai, a former Jonglei governor and current member of the national assembly, said people should hold their own politicians to account, suggesting the political representatives from the communities could have done more to advocate for their constituencies.<sup>33</sup>

He also responded to criticism that the government did not respond to the June attacks against the Murle but both the government and international

community took action once the Murle counter-attacked in August. Gai attributed this to the fact that Lou Nuer had more educated community members working for NGOs who were able to raise the alarm in the international media as well as among humanitarian groups and the government.

The lack of response has left bitterness among Murle community members. David Ngachgat, from Lekuangole, said the SPLA in a nearby garrison failed to take action in June.<sup>34</sup> But he noted that the fighting in August generated a response from the government as well as UNMISS. He said:

*Are we not part of this nation of South Sudan? If we are part of it, why are we not protected like other tribes? When the Lou Nuer attacks three times I did not hear anybody from the government of Jonglei say anything. But when we attacked them, both the government and the international community put their eyes on the Lou and provided assistance.*

## Cultural factors

Clashes between pastoralists are not new to the region and often spike in the dry season when herders must range far afield to find grassland and water for their cattle. But decades of war have heightened the level of violence and the dangers of cattle rustling attacks. Ashworth said, 'It's been going on forever. It hasn't always had the heavy weapons it has now. That's the difference.'

Exacerbating the problem of cattle rustling is the sky-rocketing bride price, which is paid in cows. In a cattle camp in Terekeka, about 50 miles outside South Sudan's capital, Juba, Angelo Waranyang said he would need to pay 45 head of cattle to obtain a bride.<sup>35</sup>

Okech, head of the FAO, said young men are more likely to go cattle

raiding when their own herds suffer from disease. He said, 'If a disease were to come by and wipe (out) these (cattle), they would easily be tempted to go to the neighbouring county and try and get animals from there. And that would definitely be a cause of conflict.'

Ashworth said that war has also eroded traditional values, making violence more likely than it was traditionally. He said, 'In some areas elders and chiefs have less influence and young men with guns have more.'

Alfred Lokuji, the dean of the Department of Community Studies and Rural Development at Juba University, agreed. He said, 'War broke down traditional authority, that is the crux of the problem. The more militarized it became, the greater the breakdown.'<sup>36</sup>

He said that, during its war against the Khartoum regime, the leadership of the SPLA institutionalized the power of military commanders over traditional authority figures. The SPLA placed officers in administrative positions in areas under its control. For example, a county commissioner would have to answer to a superior officer. He said, 'The soldier in turn gradually sensed a social ranking that placed him above a chief.'

Meanwhile, Lokuji said, rebel militia commanders have capitalized upon the breakdown of traditional power structures. Athor, for example, has said he is fighting on behalf of his tribe, but he has no traditional authority to do so. According to Lokuji militia commanders capitalized from systems of power that emerged during the war, while masking their actions in the rhetoric of tribe. He said, 'These are individuals who are products of the system that is larger than their tribe.'

He added, 'While tribe may provide excellent cover for native sons, and native sons take cover from tribe, it does not mean that tribe drives native sons.'

James Ninrew, a Presbyterian pastor and member of the Nuer Peace Council who is involved in the peace process, said a warrior ethos that is especially strong among the Murle also presents a challenge to the peace process. He said, 'To show prestige you must be very powerful.'<sup>37</sup> This pressure among young Murle men leads them to act independently of directives from elders. Thus he said, there is a breakdown in discussions between the Lou Nuer and the Murle. He said, 'You talk to the leaders and they are very nice and you have a good understanding. But they don't take it a step down to implement.'

Aside from cattle rustling, child abduction has long been practised by some ethnic groups, particularly some in Jonglei, according to a 2010 study by the Rift Valley Institute. The report stated: 'In Jonglei, those involved in child abduction – as perpetrators, victims or both – are drawn primarily from three ethnic groups: Dinka, Nuer and Murle.'<sup>38</sup>

The report goes on to state:

*Abduction of children by Murle has been linked in the historical literature to low fertility in Murle communities, and this has been alleged to be the result of the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This study confirms that there is low population growth in Murle society and that the Murle themselves are concerned about low fertility rates. However a causal link between STDs and low fertility and a clear correlation between these phenomena and the practice of child abduction has yet to be established.*

Interviewees pointed out that many women and children were abducted during the recent conflict between the Lou Nuer and the Murle. Mary Jowang, from Karyak in Pibor County, said, 'Cattle raiding is not a new thing

for us, but our concern is killing of children, women and elderly people.'

Martha Korok, from Lekuangle, also stated that children and women were not targeted in previous attacks as they were in June.<sup>39</sup>

UNMISS officials A and B noted this change, which official B said could mark a disturbing cultural change. While in the past cattle rustling was guided by a code that saw male warriors clash, he said:

*I think what is happened is you're getting a destruction of a code of warriors. It's not just men fighting men. Now they are targeting women and children, what you need to do is re-establish the code of warriors.*

UNMISS official B expressed scepticism that a simple ban on cattle raiding, a traditional activity embedded in some cultures, would work. Rather, he said a more effective strategy would be to get pastoralist communities to agree on rules of engagement that would reflect traditional norms. He characterized these as a localized version of the Geneva conventions, which lay out the rules of engagement for international conflict. He recognized that such an idea may be rejected by many, but he said, 'Back off human rights and give us some practicality.'

## The peace process

The peace process is being led by the SCC, partly due to the fact that there was little response from the government during the months of fighting between the Murle and the Lou Nuer. Gachora Ngunjiri is a member of the SCC who is involved in coordinating peace meetings. He said:

*The SCC was drawn into the scene by the failure to act on the part of the agencies on the ground: state and non-state. Our*

*first objective was to secure some truce, during which people could be engaged in reflecting on the causes, grave consequences of attacks and counter attacks and hopefully hear their genuine feeling on the need for peace. So far that has been achieved.*<sup>40</sup>

He acknowledged the support of UNMISS in transporting peace delegations by air to villages across the region. And he said UNICEF had assisted in negotiating the release of a woman and two children by the Lou Nuer 'as a goodwill gesture to the Murle'.

Peace meetings have been held in communities in both affected areas. The goal of these is to achieve agreement on a negotiating position to be discussed by community representatives who were scheduled to meet between 12 and 14 December. The meeting was postponed due to a flare up of violence in Jonglei in December, particularly a 5 December attack by Murle youth on Dinka communities in Bor South County and Twic East County, which killed more than 40 people. At the time of publication, a new date for the peace meeting had not been set. Before the 5 December attacks, Ashworth noted that, despite peace-building efforts, stability was tenuous. He said:

*In a way this is fire fighting. We hope we will make a deal with them to stop fighting. This is not really long-term peace-building. ... We want to cap the recent fighting. We want to put a stop to the revenge cycle and then see if we can implement a broader peace process. ... We need to expand this throughout the state.*

Indeed, according to a recent OCHA humanitarian bulletin:

*... unconfirmed reports were received of community youths on*



*the move in northern Bor and Duk counties, leading to women and children in some areas fleeing due to fears of attack. It is thought the youths are from remote areas of Pibor County that are unaware of the ongoing peace processes between the Murle and Lou Nuer communities. ... December is considered a key month for Jonglei State in terms of the security and humanitarian situation as youths who have given peace a chance have agreed only to keep the peace until December. In addition, a government-organized civilian disarmament exercise is planned for December.*<sup>41</sup>

UNMISS officials A and B said the current peacekeeping in Jonglei is directly related to lessons learned from past efforts that failed to prevent clashes in March 2009 and related attacks earlier this year. They said UNMISS responded immediately to the August attack, sending in helicopters to evacuate victims for medical attention. Now the strategy sees Blue Helmets touching down in remote areas which they may patrol for a week or so at a time before moving on. Other teams are brought in by helicopter in to areas for a few days at a time to do security assessments. UNMISS official B said:

*'The idea is to move around so people don't know where we are – our footprint gets much larger. ... You need to get even deeper in the field. A lot of these guys (carrying out attacks) are out in the cattle camps, not in the towns.*

In response to a question about whether peacekeepers work jointly with the SPLA, UNMISS official B said, 'There's a lot of background debate about how close we should get with the SPLA. The SPLA is not always seen as a neutral player.'

## Conclusion

The peace process that is ongoing has been effective in stopping the attacks and counter-attacks – for now. A long term solution will require significant investment in development, security and rule of law, as well as continued dialogue between the two groups. The communities must be provided with better access to education and health care. Roads must be built to link these remote regions to more populated centres in order to spur economic development and promote security.

Ninrew of the Nuer Peace Council stressed the importance of providing more resources to the police, including more police posts, radios and vehicles. He said, 'Without that, no matter how many peace talks you have, no matter how many agreements are signed, nothing will happen really.'

His words were underscored by the 5 December attacks, which derailed the peace process. The UN noted that most of the 40 people killed were women, children and the elderly. The attackers also burned buildings and stole livestock.<sup>42</sup>

After the attack, Ninrew said George Athor, the militia leader would likely capitalize on the incident by recruiting young men who would seek arms in order to fight the Murle.<sup>43</sup> Simon Gain expressed the same concern.<sup>44</sup>

On 9 December, UNMISS released a statement condemning the attack. The UN Secretary General's Special Representative to South Sudan, Hilde Johnson said:

*This cycle of violence has to stop. While respecting their need to protect themselves, the communities of Jonglei should be encouraged to refrain from mobilizing their fighters since this will only perpetuate the grisly cycle of mass violence and retaliation.*

Few would argue with Johnson's statement. Yet it will take more than words, and even more of a commitment from national and international actors, to stop the cycle of violence. The challenges, of course, are monumental. As this briefing has noted, Jonglei is in desperate need of development in virtually all sectors in order attain peace between ethnic groups. In the short term, however, more effort could be put into carrying out investigations into attacks such as those discussed in this briefing.

The number of people killed in Jonglei in 2011 is shocking. Massacres on a much smaller scale in different countries have prompted investigations that led to prosecutions. Yet, in Jonglei the perpetrators of such crimes go unpunished; thus there is little deterrent to those who would launch future attacks. The 5 December attack, for example, prompted UNMISS to launch an investigation.<sup>45</sup> Yet, the 9 December statement from UNMISS contained little information beyond that reported by media in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Hopefully, further investigations will yield more information such as the exact number of people killed. But investigations into past incidents have left wide knowledge gaps, certainly too wide to base a court case upon.

The valuable contributions of UNMISS and other national and international actors to the peacebuilding process should not be underestimated. Yet increased efforts are needed to achieve the long term goal of lasting peace. Many interviewees suggested that the situation in Jonglei is at a critical point. This point was underscored by the 5 December attack. If peacebuilding efforts are not strengthened, the cycle of violence will not only continue, but could actually get worse.

## Recommendations

### Security and access to justice

- UNMISS should strengthen its presence throughout Jonglei, including in remote regions, and develop its capacity to monitor movements of armed groups;
- Government should hold consultations with representatives of affected communities to explore options for improving security, including through measures to improve trust and information sharing between communities, SPLA and police;
- The police and judiciary should carry out effective investigations into all acts of violence, including cattle rustling, and prosecute the perpetrators according to international standards of due legal process. Investigations should include interviews with witnesses as well as the collection of forensic evidence to be used in court cases. Police and courts must be provided with adequate resources and

support to conduct full investigations;

- Government should ensure that the SPLA and police act – and are perceived to act - with scrupulous fairness to all communities. Efforts should be made to recruit members of all ethnic groups into the police and SPLA to improve the perception of equal treatment;
- Donors and UNMISS should provide technical expertise to support investigations and conducting court cases, for example in forensic evidence collection and handling.

### Peace-building

- Civil society, Churches, donors and government should support a process of replicating and expanding the peace process between the Lou Nuer and the Murle to other ethnic groups in Jonglei;
- The government, donors and UNMISS should support any peace agreements coming out of

the current process with offers of support for monitoring of compliance with agreements, and targeted financial support to implement specific items, and where appropriate, follow-up meetings between the parties.

- Government, donors and civil society should make efforts to bring youth in both communities into contact through programmes such as education and income generation programmes and sporting events;

### Development

- Government, donors and civil society should set up alternative livelihoods programmes to train youth and provide micro-financing for small businesses;
- Funding should be provided from the national government to the state government in Jonglei to be directed towards road construction;
- Donors and government should make education a focal point for development efforts.

## Notes

- 1 The pattern of marginalization and its relation to conflict has been documented by numerous historians, including Douglas Johnson in "The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars", published by Indiana University Press, 2003
- 2 Statement made at a press conference attended by MRG, Juba, 28 September 2011
- 3 Radio Miria, '3,000 killed in inter-ethnic clashes in Jonglei State', included in UNMISS media monitoring report, 18 November 2011
- 4 UN OCHA, 'Humanitarian Action in Southern Sudan Report', 20 November 2009
- 5 International Crisis Group, 'Jonglei's Tribal Conflicts: Countering Insecurity In South Sudan', 23 December 2009
- 6 Incident report by Uror County Authority, provided to MRG by UNMISS
- 7 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 8 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 9 MRG interview with Gatwech Koak Nyuon, of the Nuer Peace Council, Juba, 15 November 2011
- 10 MRG interviews, Juba, 22 November 2011
- 11 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 12 MRG interview with Simon Gain, Presbyterian pastor from Pibor, Juba, 14 November 2011
- 13 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 14 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 15 OCHA Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 25 August 2011
- 16 Incident report by Uror County Authority
- 17 International Crisis Group, 'Jonglei's Tribal Conflicts: Countering Insecurity In South Sudan', 23 December 2009
- 18 MRG interview with John Ashworth, advisor to the SCC, Juba, Nov 14
- 19 Statement made at a press conference attended by MRG, Juba, 27 September 2011
- 20 MRG interview with Gatwech Koak Nyuon, of the Nuer Peace Council, Juba, 15 November 2011
- 21 Small Arms Survey Human Security Baseline Assessment, April 2011
- 22 Small Arms Survey Human Security Baseline Assessment, November 2011
- 23 Incident report by Uror County Authority
- 24 Incident report by Uror County Authority
- 25 MRG interview, Pibor, 25 November 2011
- 26 International Crisis Group, 'Jonglei's Tribal Conflicts: Countering Insecurity In South Sudan', 23 December 2009
- 27 MRG interview, with George Okech, Terekeka, 27 September 2011
- 28 Livestock Investment Options Feasibility Study for Eastern Equatoria, by the Netherlands Development Organization, released November 2011
- 29 'Land and Power: The growing scandal surrounding the new wave of investments in land', Oxfam briefing paper, 22 September 2011
- 30 MRG interview, Atem Yaak Atem, deputy information minister, Juba, 5 October 2011
- 31 MRG interview, Juba, 26 November 2011
- 32 MRG interview, Pibor, 25 November 2011
- 33 Comments recorded by an MRG researcher at a peace meeting in Pibor, 24 November 2011
- 34 MRG interview, Pibor, 25 November 2011
- 35 MRG interview, Terekeka, 27 September 2011
- 36 Comments made by Alfred Lokuji, dean of the Department of Community Studies and Rural Development at Juba University, at an MRG-organized roundtable discussion, Juba, 17 November 2011
- 37 MRG interview, Juba, 21 November 2011
- 38 Stephanie Riak Akuei and John Jok, 'Child Abduction in Jonglei and Central Equatoria states, Southern Sudan', published by the Rift Valley Institute, November 2010
- 39 MRG interview, Pibor, 25 November 2011
- 40 MRG interview, Gachora Ngunjirir, SCC, via email 16 November 2011
- 41 OCHA South Sudan Weekly Humanitarian Bulletin, 4-10 November 2011
- 42 UNMISS Press Statement, 9 December 2011
- 43 MRG interview, Juba, 8 December 2011
- 44 MRG interview, Juba, 10 December 2011
- 45 UN News Centre, 'Dozens killed in latest round of ethnic violence in South Sudan – UN Mission', 6 December 2011, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40641>, accessed 6 December 2011

# Boma Development Initiative Report



## Community Perspectives on the Lou Nuer / Murle conflict in South Sudan

By Jared Ferrie

The conflict between Lou Nuer and Murle in Jonglei State, South Sudan, has caused many hundreds of deaths in 2011. Some fear that it is entering a seemingly endless revenge cycle. In this briefing, a wide range of actors concerned by the conflict – community representatives, Church and NGO activists, United Nations staff and other experts are interviewed to ascertain their views and recommendations for resolving the conflict. Concrete and detailed recommendations for improving security and access to justice for victims, and strengthening conflict prevention, are made to government, civil society and donors. The briefing draws on interviews carried out in Juba and Jonglei State in November and December 2011, as well as on desk research.

Boma Development Initiative is a community-based organisation, based in Boma town, Pibor County, South Sudan, which implements development, human rights and peace-building initiatives with the various ethnic groups in the Boma area. It is registered with the South Sudan Ministry of Legal Affairs and Constitutional Development.

Minority Rights Group International (MRG) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) working to secure the rights of ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities and indigenous peoples worldwide, and to promote cooperation and understanding between communities.

Our activities are focused on international advocacy, training, publishing and outreach. We are guided by the needs expressed by our worldwide partner network of organizations, which represent minority and indigenous peoples.

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