

## Protection Situation Update: Southern and Central Unity (April – September 2015)

### Overview

Between April and September 2015, the scale and brutality of violence in southern and central Unity reached alarming levels. Civilians were systematically targeted and killed, entire villages were burned, and thousands of people were forcibly displaced. Humanitarian actors worked to gain access to vulnerable populations, only to see safety assurances breached and humanitarian staff killed.<sup>1</sup>

Civilians and the humanitarian community watched closely to see whether the signing of the peace agreement on 17 and 26 August 2015 would mean an end to the violence. The result has been mixed: while some areas have seen a tentative calm, others continue to experience violence. The Protection Cluster has received more than ten reports of attacks in southern and central Unity since the entry into force of the permanent ceasefire on 29 August, and troops who remain stationed in key strategic locations pose an ongoing threat to the civilian population.

While protection actors are encouraged that there has been a relative reduction in the intensity of violence in September, they are nevertheless troubled by the violence that has taken place over the past five months. The following sections outline some of the key concerns.

### Targeting of Civilians

A recent report by the UNMISS Human Rights Division found that violence between April and May “had not only been marked by rampant allegations of killing, rape, abduction, looting, arson and displacement, but also by a new brutality and intensity, including such horrific acts as the burning alive of people in their homes.”<sup>2</sup> These tactics were observed throughout Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties, and continued into early September.

It is estimated that between April and September, at least 1,000 civilians were killed, 1,300 women and girls were raped, and 1,600 women and children were abducted in Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties.<sup>3</sup> Thousands of civilians fled into swamps to escape the violence, only to be hunted down by armed attackers in their places of hiding.

Children were also directly targeted. According to the UN Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism, there were more reports of killings, abductions and sexual violence against children between April and June in southern Unity than in all the reports received from the entire country in the preceding 15 months combined. Many children drowned while fleeing the attacks, and even more became separated from their families. There are now over 900 unaccompanied and separated children registered in southern Unity alone.

During a recent assessment mission in Panyijiar County, one older man shared his story:

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<sup>1</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), “South Sudan: Two MSF aid workers killed as fighting continues in Unity state”, press release, 25 August 2015.

<sup>2</sup> UNMISS Human Rights Division, *Flash Human Rights Report on the Escalation of Fighting in Greater Upper Nile, April/May 2015*, 29 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Data collected from a variety of sources, including human rights reports, local authorities, operational agencies and the media. Whenever possible, information has been verified by contacts on the ground, although some of the data, particularly for the month of May, could not be independently cross-checked.

*“When the soldiers came, we ran into the swamps and stood in the water. Sometimes we would stand in the water for hours or overnight. We thought that in the water we would be safe [there was nothing there for soldiers to take], but they hunted us. They would look for any people and shoot them.”<sup>4</sup>*

IDPs reported that the perpetrators were predominantly SPLA soldiers (identified by their uniforms), or youth alleged to be affiliated with them. Many IDPs reported the widespread recruitment and use of children by SPLA soldiers and Government-allied forces. Some of these children were used to perpetrate grave violations against other children.

There also continues to be a strong correlation between the presence of cattle and the likelihood of attacks. IDPs report feeling more vulnerable when cattle are in their areas, noting however that all cattle have now been raided in many locations. Over the coming months, there may be an increase in revenge raids as people return to their homes and want to reclaim their stolen cattle. As a result, significant small-scale clashes may continue even if large-scale attacks on civilians decrease.

### **Destruction of Civilian Infrastructure and Livelihoods**

The Protection Cluster has also received reports of deliberate destruction of civilian infrastructure in Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties. IDPs have reported that crops were burned, livestock stolen, and tools and other supplies either taken or destroyed. In some villages, every home was burned. Health centers and schools were also looted and destroyed. These types of tactics make it difficult for IDPs to go back home, and lead to questions about whether there was deliberate intent to impede civilian return. Indeed, even if violence were to cease immediately, this destruction will make it impossible for families to return to any sense of normality for many months – and possibly years – to come.

### **Indications of Systematic Forced Displacement**

The July 2015 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report found that “the systematic nature of the destruction and pillage, and the brutality of the attacks on civilians, strongly suggests that attacks in Guit, Rubkona and Koch were intended to displace the populations from those villages and settlements.”<sup>5</sup> The Protection Cluster has received similar indications in Leer and Mayendit counties.

Humanitarians were further concerned by messages that were disseminated to civilians instructing them to leave certain parts of the counties. The HRW report documents one such incident:

*“In early June government officials, including the county commissioners from Guit and Rubkona counties, told people in these areas on government radio that they must come to Bentiu if they wanted to protect their cattle and their lives.”<sup>6</sup>*

IDPs in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (POC) site and in Panyijiar County have indicated that this message was also disseminated directly by soldiers as they moved from village to village in Leer County. Although it was not stated explicitly in the radio dispatch, the message that was delivered in person was reportedly more direct in saying that those people who refused to leave would be considered “rebels” and killed.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with an IDP, Nyal, Panyijiar County, Unity State, August 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch, “*They Burned It All*”: Destruction of Villages, Killings, and Sexual Violence in Unity State, South Sudan, July 2015, page 4.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, page 16.

### Displacement into Bentiu POC and Panyijiar County

Since April 2015, 24,804 new arrivals from Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties have been registered in the Bentiu POC site, over 75 per cent of whom are women and children.<sup>7</sup> The total population of the site has now surged to over 111,700 individuals, which is far beyond its capacity. The Inter-Cluster Working Group (ICWG) undertook a joint mission to Nyal from 9 to 11 September 2015, and is currently working with partners to scale up the humanitarian response in the area.

Many of the new arrivals into Bentiu and Panyijiar reported that the final trigger for their flight was the breakdown of their previous self-protection and coping mechanisms. Displacement has disrupted civilians' early warning networks, and the repeated attacks and raids have led to a loss of the food and assets they had been able to store. Locations that were previously effective as civilian hiding places have been overrun during recent attacks, and cattle that were used as a last resort for milk and meat have been taken. Many IDPs reported they had stayed in their home areas for as long as possible, yet the sustained violence eventually exhausted their ability to protect and support themselves, and they were forced to leave.

### UNMISS Protection of Civilians Response

UNMISS has launched an exercise to improve the protection of civilians in southern and central Unity by increasing patrolling and establishing a more static presence in the conflict-affected counties. The Protection Cluster has been working closely with the Mission to inform its planning, and is providing a biweekly hotspot matrix to help identify the areas with the greatest protection needs. The Protection Cluster believes that a robust UNMISS presence on the ground will contribute to strengthening the security environment for civilians affected by the conflict.

### Challenges for Humanitarian Operations and Staff

Since May 2015, staff from at least six humanitarian agencies have been killed in southern and central Unity. Nearly every humanitarian compound has been looted, burned or destroyed in Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties. Multiple humanitarian interventions have been interrupted by attacks. Humanitarian actors have made repeated attempts to secure access to vulnerable populations, including by trying to negotiate a humanitarian pause. However, these efforts have been hampered by ongoing violence and breaches of access assurances, further reducing humanitarian actors' ability to assist affected populations. For example, the Protection Cluster's *Protection Trends* report highlighted that from May to June alone, access restrictions prevented the delivery of assistance to over 300,000 people in Unity State.<sup>8</sup>

Even though access has been constrained, humanitarians have worked to distribute food and survival kits where possible, and to scale up family tracing and reunification services for children. A few organizations have been able to sustain medical assistance in the area. Humanitarian actors are currently in the process of resuming operations, but risks to both civilians and humanitarians remain high.

The Protection Cluster has recommended to the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), the diplomatic community and UNMISS to closely monitor developments on the ground, and to hold parties accountable for attacks on civilians and breaches of humanitarian access assurances.

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<sup>7</sup> New arrival figures, Bentiu Camp Management.

<sup>8</sup> South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Trends South Sudan No. 5 (April-June 2015)*, July 2015.