



PRESS RELEASE

With UNMISS support, South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) takes steps toward increased accountability through General Court Martial (GCM) process

Juba, 19 June 2023 – The United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) welcomes concrete steps taken by the Government of South Sudan to pursue accountability and justice for survivors of serious crimes, including sexual violence, in Yei, Central Equatoria State.

On 16 June 2023, a General Court Martial, with technical and financial assistance by the United Nations, concluded its work in Yei River County and delivered verdicts in 14 cases. Eleven members of the SSPDF accused of serious crimes, including murder as well as sexual and gender-based violence, were convicted, stripped of their ranks, dismissed from the SSPDF, sentenced to up to 10 years' imprisonment, and required to pay compensation to survivors. The GCM included three female judge-advocates to ensure that both female and male victims and witnesses felt comfortable to participate in the justice process.

Prior to the GCM's deployment, consultations between civilians and military personnel were held to enhance community awareness and ownership of the justice process. The Yei community has since recognized the GCM as an important mechanism for combatting impunity, building trust between military and civilians, improving discipline and order in the SSPDF, and advancing peace and stability in Yei River County.

Brigadier General John Lual, Commander of the Independent Brigade of Yei, explained the GCM's impact. "Soldiers know that rule of law and disciplinary measures will be taken, and civilians have become aware that nobody is above the law. This is a result of the court martial," he stated.

Aggrey Cyrus Kanyikwa, Yei River County Commissioner, also noted that the GCM has "told civilians in Yei that no one is above the law. This should show citizens of Yei that they should not fear to report soldiers who commit crimes. I call for both civilians and soldiers to respect each other and serve the nation."

During the closing of the GCM, the Military Justice Directorate distributed to all military personnel at the Yei Garrison, the Directorate's 'Six Key Messages to End Sexual Violence.' Brigadier General Riek Bim Top Long, Deputy Director of the Directorate, underscored that the SSPDF had enacted these messages as standing orders that are legally binding on all military personnel. Furthermore, Brigadier Long called for the SSPDF to end sexual violence and protect the people of South Sudan.

"We commend the SSPDF's efforts to improve and identify ways to strengthen accountability among the armed forces, implement best practices, and build trust with affected communities. The work of the GCM has created a demand for justice and is a concrete step forward to combatting impunity," said Nicholas Haysom, the Special Representative of the Secretary General and Head of UNMISS.

UNMISS provided funding for victims and witnesses to receive psycho-social support, as well as interpretation services, food, accommodation, and transport from a number of local civil society organizations during the course of the GCM. All victims had access to two civilian victims' counsel who provided free legal advice and participated in the proceedings to protect their rights and help them navigate the justice process.

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