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United Nations Mission in South Sudan

Press Release

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Civilians deliberately and brutally targeted during surge in conflict in Central Equatoria

More than 100 civilians were killed and almost the same number of women and girls were raped or suffered other sexual violence during a surge in conflict in the Central Equatorial region of South Sudan following the signing of the revitalized peace agreement.

A new report by the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Mission in South Sudan has documented 95 separate incidents of violations and abuses in the period from September 2018 until April 2019. These incidents included 30 attacks on villages and led to the killing of 104 civilians and wounding of another 35 as well as the abduction of 187 people.

The violence led to the displacement of more than 56,000 civilians within South Sudan, and nearly 20,000 more across the border to Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Overall, there has been a significant decrease in conflict-related violations and abuses across the country following the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018. However, Central Equatoria has been an exception to this trend, particularly in areas surrounding Yei, where attacks against civilians have continued.

The report identifies three groups of perpetrators responsible for targeting civilians: opposition armed groups who are not signatories to the R-ARCSS (such as the National Salvation Front (NAS), the South Sudan National Movement for Change (SSNMC) and affiliated armed groups/elements); Government armed forces; and the pro-Riek Machar Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO/RM).

The violence took place in two distinct phases. The first coincided with the signing of the peace agreement when SPLA-IO (RM) and NAS, SSNMC and affiliated armed groups clashed over territorial control in parts of the region. During this first phase, these groups were responsible for killing at least 61 civilians, who were either deliberately targeted or victims of indiscriminate fire during clashes. At least 150 civilians were also held in captivity by these groups, including women and girls taken as "wives" by commanders or raped and beaten by multiple fighters.

The second phase of violence began in January 2019, when the Government launched military operations to dislodge so-called "rebels" from the Central Equatorial region. Government forces carried out a coordinated campaign to displace civilians from areas perceived to be providing material support to NAS and SSNMC, punishing those they suspected of being members or supporters by subjecting them to sexual violence as well as looting and destroying homes, churches, schools and health centres.



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Responding to the need to protect civilians, UNMISS deployed an additional 150 troops to the area, enabling it to intensify patrols within Yei town and to outlying communities to deter violence and enable the safe delivery of humanitarian aid. The UNMISS lead representative in the area and the Mission's Civil Affairs Division are also actively promoting reconciliation and peacebuilding activities.

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General has made a number of visits to the area to engage with political and military leaders about the human rights issues raised in the report, the impact of displacement and the need for reconciliation and peace.

All parties to the conflict must comply with international human rights law and international humanitarian law. UNMISS is also urging the Government of South Sudan to uphold its primary responsibility to protect civilians and to fast-track the implementation of the SSPDF Action Plan to combat conflict-related sexual violence within military ranks, including those deployed in Central Equatoria.

The report by the Human Rights Division was shared in advance of its release with the government, and summary of findings with all of the parties involved in the conflict. UNMISS received a copy of a letter from Riek Machar instructing SPLA-IO (RM) commanders to investigate the findings of the report and to hold perpetrators to account. NAS leader Thomas Cirillo has also engaged with UNMISS about the issues raised in the report.

Communications & Public Information Section
Spokesperson: Francesca Mold mold2@un.org
www.unmiss.unmissions.org



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