

South Sudan: Weary, frightened displaced civilians in Upper Nile at imminent risk of further violence

GENEVA (4 May 2017) – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein on Thursday urged the Government of South Sudan to halt any further military offensives towards Aburoc on the west bank of the River Nile in the Upper Nile region. The town holds between 35,000 and 50,000 people, most of whom arrived in recent weeks after terrifying journeys of up to 150 kilometres on foot, after SPLA* attacks on areas to the south of the town of Aburoc. Civilians in Aburoc now find themselves in areas controlled by the opposition SPLM/A-IO* armed group, facing a military offensive by the SPLA.

There are concerns that the SPLM/A-IO has positioned itself in close proximity to civilian areas, placing civilians clearly in harm’s way in the event of an attack by the SPLA and affiliated forces. The SPLA forces, meanwhile, reportedly include new recruits of Dinka ethnicity from the Western Bahr el-Ghazal area. The civilians in Aburoc are mostly of Shilluk ethnicity.

“Civilians in Aburoc are at serious and imminent risk of gross human rights violations, inter-ethnic violence and re-displacement,” Zeid said. “These are people who fled from towns like Tonga and Kodok to the south in the most horrifying circumstances, forced to walk through the bush for up to 150 kilometres in searing temperatures. Many reportedly died along the way due to dehydration and exhaustion. The rest ended up in Aburoc where, weary and frightened, they face grave violence and shortages of food, water and healthcare.”

“These are women, children and men at the mercy of military commanders, on both sides of the political divide, who have consistently shown little or no regard for the protection of civilians.”

The High Commissioner urged the Government to adhere to the pledges made by President Salva Kiir on 25 March, when he committed to declare a unilateral ceasefire, and to work towards political engagement to bring the conflict to an end. The High Commissioner called on all parties to the conflict to comply with international humanitarian law, including taking all feasible precautions to prevent civilian casualties.

“The civilians in Aburoc have nowhere left to go, with the SPLA closing in from the south and options to flee northwards severely limited and fraught with danger,” Zeid said. “I

urge the SPLM/A-IO to ensure that areas containing large numbers of civilians, including Aburoc, are demilitarized and that measures are taken to ensure the protection of civilians under their control.”

The High Commissioner also called on the Government to grant the UN Mission in South Sudan access to Aburoc and Kodok, and to ensure that humanitarian agencies are able to deliver crucial aid to the internally displaced population.

ENDS

* The SPLA is the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, the State’s armed forces. The opposing armed forces are known as the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army In Opposition or the SPLM/A-IO.

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