

PPWG Assessment – South Sudan Conflict

Prepared for the United States Atrocity Early Warning Task Force

Conflict Background

The Republic of South Sudan became the world's newest country on July 9, 2011. In December 2013, civil war broke out when President Salva Kiir Mayardit of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army-In Government (SPLM/A-IG) accused his then-Vice President Riek Machar of the SPLM/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO), of instigating a coup. The resulting civil war was marked by thousands of atrocities, including widespread indiscriminate attacks on civilians, massacres, torture, sexual violence and rape, and led to the deaths of an estimated 380,000 people and the displacement of millions. Currently, one-third of the pre-war population is displaced and half the population remains severely food insecure. In September 2018, most parties to the conflict signed a power-sharing agreement – the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The agreement aimed to end the civil war and form a Transitional Government of National Unity (TGoNU). In February 2020, after delays and extensions, President Kiir and Riek Machar finally formed the government and have since made some progress appointing sub-national government posts.

Despite this breakthrough, South Sudan continues to face significant barriers to peace and stability and the atrocity risk remains high (see risk analysis below). A number of escalatory dynamics raise the atrocity risk level. These include the continuing leadership vacuum at the sub-national level and the continuing stalemate on the integration of armed forces and creation of a national army. They also include recurring cycles of violence (sexual/gender-based, inter/intra-communal, resource-based, displacement-driven, political/factional) in various parts of the country. In addition, the redesignation of UN Protection of Civilian sites as Internally Displaced Persons camps under government control without appropriate safeguards risks unsafe returns and further violence. A number of structural factors also bear watching. These include the country's economic decline, the government's inadequate response to COVID-19, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, widespread corruption, state predation, shrinking civic space, and the continuing impunity for past atrocities. These escalatory and structural factors interact in complex, often contradictory, ways and combine to create multiple sources of atrocity risk that hold the potential to upset the fragile peace process if not addressed.

Atrocity Risk Factors

South Sudan was ranked the fourth most likely country for the onset of mass killing in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Early Warning Project 2019-2020 statistical risk assessment.

PPWG's analysis looked at, and ranked, 14 current factors that could increase the risk of atrocities. Some of these factors are structural in nature while others are more proximate. The ones of most concern are outlined here.

Proximate risk factors and escalatory processes:

- **Leadership vacuum at sub-national level.** The lack of appointment of ministers at the state level and commissioners at the county level perpetuates a climate of insecurity in which violence, corruption and impunity flourish. The stalemate over the nomination of the Upper Nile state governor is instructive in the way it has exacerbated local land conflicts, ethnic tensions and political competition.
- **Stalemate on the integration of forces and creation of a national army.** The lack of progress on this issue continues to divide the state, fuels the proliferation of arms and armed groups, and encourages opportunistic crimes by armed actors. On the flip side, a national army could reinforce an ethnicized elite's exploitation of marginalized populations and become a source of future conflict.
- **Sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV).** Soldiers and non-state armed groups use SGBV as a weapon of war, traumatizing communities and provoking reprisal attacks leading to continuing cycles of violence.
- **Intra-communal violence,** especially in Unity, Warrap (Tonj), and Lakes (Cueibet, Rumbek and parts of Yirol) displaces civilians; leads to reprisal attacks and to sexual- and gender-based violence at a scale that could jeopardize the peace agreement.
- **Ongoing armed conflict** between the SSPDF and SPLM/A-IO and the National Salvation Front (NAS) in Central and Eastern Equatoria and parts of Western Equatoria leads to mass civilian displacement and casualties.
- **Redesignation of Protection of Civilian sites as Internally Displaced Persons camps** without context-specific planning leads to unsafe returns with the potential for further conflict.

Structural risk factors:

- **The collapse of South Sudan's economy** leads to increased criminality, including by security forces who have been unpaid for months.
- **Proliferation of small arms and light weapons fuels conflict within and between communities.**
- **The government's inadequate response to COVID-19** hinders humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts and exacerbates intra- and inter-communal violence, which leads to more competition over resources and increased fatalities.
- **Ongoing impunity for past atrocities** creates an environment for conflict actors to use violence to pursue political aims without consequences, including politicizing past grievances to mobilize along ethnic lines.
- **Ethnic dislocation** of more than 3 million people in several areas of South Sudan where homes have been destroyed and, in some cases, occupied by people from other ethnic groups creates a danger of premature and unsafe returns and which sparks further tensions.

Recommendations

To address and mitigate these risk factors, the parties must continue to implement the peace agreement and the United States and international partners must continue to support the Government. Thanks to U.S. and international pressure, President Kiir returned the country to 10 states in February, and in June, appointed nine state governors. We recognize that the United States appointed a special envoy earlier

this year and has sanctioned individuals for human rights abuses and blocking peace. Despite this, there remains a perceived vacuum of U.S. leadership. We urge the U.S. to increase its engagement so it can have a positive impact, as it has in the past.

To this end, we recommend that over the short-term:

- **The State Department work with all parties to preserve the ceasefire and ensure the implementation of the peace agreement moves forward inclusively, including through:**
 - Supporting dialogue between the main political leaders to ensure that the parties follow through on security reforms;
 - Working with all parties to ensure sub-national state- and county-level ministers, officials, and commissioners are quickly appointed, including the governor of Upper Nile state;
 - Pressuring the government to contain violence around the country, in Jonglei state's Pibor area, in Warrap and Lakes, and between the NAS and the SSPDF in Central, Eastern, and Western Equatoria;
 - Ensuring the redesignation of Protection of Civil sites is guided by a coherent and transparent process that is gradual, well-planned, well-resourced, and appropriately contextualized.
- **The State Department support accountability for atrocities committed** during the civil war by working within the Troika and among regional actors to secure support for the establishment of the Hybrid Court and transitional and restorative justice mechanisms.
- **USAID increase funding to support conflict mitigation, peacebuilding and democracy/governance efforts at the national and sub-national levels to break cycles of violence, increase trust, defend civic space and give local populations a voice in the peace process.** Also, USAID and the State Department should clarify how funds are being spent and which organizations are implementing programs.
- **USAID support South Sudan's capacity to more handle Sexual and Gender Based Violence cases** as well as psychological support programs for survivors of Conflict Related Sexual Violence and programs to address intimate partner violence.

We recommend that over the medium-term:

- **The State and Treasury Departments implement a wide array of tools to counter corruption and tackle illicit financial flows, including positive incentives as well as strong anti-money laundering measures and targeted sanctions.**
- **The State Department urge the Government of South Sudan to reform the National Security Service (NSS) through repealing the National Security Act of 2014** as the NSS has been behind many abuses against dissidents and ordinary civilians. This should include setting up and empowering an independent and impartial commission to fully investigate and prosecute cases of security force abuse, impunity, and corruption.

- **The State Department support investment in security sector reform to make security structures more appropriate in size and function.**
- **The State Department urge the Government of South Sudan to empower, fully support, and work through the Bureau for Community Security and Small Arms Control in its disarmament efforts,** and to seriously engage with communities and community leaders in developing and implementing strategies for community security and small arms management. Furthermore, the U.S. provide technical assistance and expertise in support of the government.
- **The State Department and USAID support humanitarian actors, especially national civil society organizations, and continue to fund UN humanitarian efforts in South Sudan and across the region to address the refugee, IDP and food crises.** This should include support for analyses on population movements, intentions, and barriers to returns to better plan for returns and avoid manipulation of those returns for political purposes.