



In Focus

Human Rights in South Sudan

On 9 July 2015, South Sudan will reach the fourth anniversary of its independence from Sudan. Since December 2013 the country has been in a state of civil war, with the government fighting rebel forces led by the former deputy President. An estimated 50,000 people have died in the conflict so far. A recent report from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan also alleges that the war has seen extreme violence and human rights abuses committed against civilians by government forces.

Background

In January 2011, the population of South Sudan [voted overwhelmingly](#) to secede from Sudan. The referendum formed part of a 2005 peace agreement to end more than two decades of civil war between the north and south of the country. South Sudan officially became an independent nation on 9 July 2011. In December 2013, civil war broke out in the country. According to the [BBC](#), the civil war began after the President, Salva Kiir, accused his deputy, Riek Machar, of plotting a coup. Mr Machar denied the allegation, but then formed a rebel army to fight the government. Since December 2013, intermittent fighting has been taking place between the government's Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) and rebel forces led by Mr Machar.

According to the [International Crisis Group](#), at least 50,000 people have died as a result of the conflict so far, and nearly two million have been displaced. The [World Food Programme](#) reports that 4.6 million people—40 percent of the country's population—"face acute hunger in the next three months and will require urgent lifesaving food or livelihoods assistance". The civil war has also had a significant impact on the economy; [Bloomberg](#) reports that since the conflict began oil production has fallen by a third, the value of the South Sudanese pound has fallen dramatically, and there is "surging inflation".

The [Council on Foreign Relations](#) states that the conflict has "escalated into ethnic violence", with Mr Kiir mobilising support from his ethnic group, the Dinka, and Mr Machar receiving support from his Nuer ethnic group. The [National Geographic](#) describes the Nuer and Dinka as the country's "two predominant and most populous tribes [...] [and] longtime rivals who had battled over land and resources since at least the 19th century". The [New York Times](#) also highlighted the ethnic focus of the violence, reporting civilian claims that their communities were recently targeted during government attacks because they are of Nuer ethnicity. Both the *New York Times* and a recent [report](#) from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) speculate that such a perception risks precipitating a cycle of retributive inter-ethnic violence. The [Intergovernmental Authority on Development](#) (IGAD)—a multi-lateral organisation comprising Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Eritrea—has organised several rounds of talks in an attempt to bring about an end to the civil war. However, according to the [Guardian](#), a rebel spokesman said that the latest round of talks, which took place 27–28 June in Kenya, failed to achieve "any tangible results".

Human Rights Abuses and the Current Conflict

On 29 June 2015, UNMISS released a [Flash Human Rights Report on the Escalation of Fighting in Greater Upper Nile](#), covering April and May 2015. The document reports alleged human rights abuses perpetrated against civilians by government forces during an SPLA offensive in the states of Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglei. The report is based on interviews with local residents, who told investigators that the SPLA and allied militias “carried out a campaign against the local population that killed civilians, looted and destroyed villages and displaced over 100,000 people”. Many of the alleged human rights abuses were perpetrated against women and girls. Witnesses and victims report that 172 women were abducted and that sexual violence, including gang-rape, was committed against at least an additional 79 people. According to the report, in “at least nine separate incidents” women and girls were burnt alive in their homes after being gang-raped. The authors of the report allege that these figures are an under-representation of the true scale of the violence, as they capture only those whose names have been reported to the UN. The government has since [denied](#) the accusations. Rebel forces were earlier [also accused](#) of committing atrocities during an attack on the town of Bentiu in October 2014.

Separately, in [May](#) and [June](#) 2015, UNICEF released bulletins claiming that children have been both victims of the recent fighting and sometimes perpetrators of the violence. For example, UNICEF states that 129 children were killed in Unity state during one three-week period in May. UNICEF quotes witnesses who say that “boys have been castrated and left to bleed to death [...] Children have been tied together before their attackers slit their throats... others have been thrown into burning buildings”. In addition, UNICEF states that children are being recruited by both sides to join the conflict, estimating that approximately 13,000 children have been forced to participate in the fighting.

Sanctions

On 1 July 2015, the [UN Security Council](#) imposed sanctions on six generals it accuses of fuelling the conflict. Three of those who received sanctions are from the government side of the conflict, and three are from the rebel side. These sanctions comprise a travel ban and the freezing of assets. The US Ambassador to the UN has [reportedly](#) stated that these sanctions demonstrate that those who undermine peace will face consequences. However, others, such as the [International Crisis Group](#), have argued that such sanctions may compromise peace efforts. The International Crisis Group contends that the sanctions will turn people in South Sudan who favour peace against the international community, as well as risking losing the sanctioned generals’ support for the peace process.

Further Information

- James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan’s Bitter and Incomplete Divorce*, 2014
- Ty McCormick, [‘Unmade in the USA’](#), *Foreign Policy*, 25 February 2015

Library In Focus are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefings on a selection of topical subjects. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the Notes with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on In Focus should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London, SW1A 0PW or emailed to hlresearchservices@parliament.uk.