

Dealing with Inter-Communal Violence in South Sudan

Written by John Prendergast, Jennifer Christian and Amanda Hsiao

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JOHN PRENDERGAST, JENNIFER CHRISTIAN AND AMANDA HSIAO, FEB 9 2012

The Republic of South Sudan's declaration of independence in July of last year gave rise to serious questions regarding the country's security, economic viability, and capacity to address its numerous development challenges. In the last six months, the challenge of avoiding war between North and South has largely overshadowed troubling internal rifts within South Sudan. Jonglei was the first to explode, but if issues of power-sharing, wealth-sharing, and local justice and reconciliation are not addressed, Jonglei will not be the last example of internal violence in South Sudan.

Inter-communal violence in Jonglei has underscored, among other things, the weaknesses in South Sudan's security and policing sectors. It has also brought to the fore underlying issues of a lack of accountability and political inclusion, as well as the breakdown of traditional authority structures, which collectively threaten to erode the fragile social and political stability of the new nation. The potential for internal violence in South Sudan is, sadly, not new. During Sudan's second civil war, south-on-south violence, perpetrated largely along ethnic and communal lines and fueled primarily by the Khartoum government and its proxies in the South as well as the Sudan People's Liberation Army, cost a great many lives. The tip of the iceberg is the resurgence of conflict between the Lou-Nuer and Murle communities of Jonglei, but below the surface, other potential inter-communal crises exist throughout South Sudan.

Inter-communal violence in Jonglei and throughout South Sudan, while traditionally cyclical in nature, is not inevitable. The causes of this violence go beyond the retaliatory nature of cattle raiding and touch upon broader issues of accountability, reconciliation, political inclusion, state effectiveness, development, and the proliferation of arms among the civilian population. Actors outside of the immediate conflict, including, for decades, the government of Sudan, and now politicians in South Sudan and militia groups with linkages to Khartoum, have also exacerbated the violence. The effort to build the new nation's political, legal, and social systems and the recently initiated process to draft a permanent constitution offer a unique opportunity for the RSS, supported by the international community, to find solutions to the more systemic causes of this and other such instances of inter-communal violence throughout the new nation.

The people of Jonglei have experienced a long history of inter-communal violence. The most recent escalation began with a Murle attack on the Lou-Nuer community in August 2011, which resulted in the deaths of over 700 people. Following this attack, there was a widely held expectation in South Sudan that the Lou-Nuer would launch a retaliatory attack on the Murle. This was borne out in December 2011, as reports emerged of a mobilization of Lou-Nuer youth with the aim of seeking revenge for prior Murle attacks, rescuing kidnapped women and children and regaining stolen cattle. The response of the RSS and the U.N. to both the August attack, and the December reprisal, both in terms of the facilitation of reconciliation efforts and the provision of security and civilian protection were largely inadequate. Smaller-scale reprisal attacks have since occurred and the threat of still larger rounds of violence remains. The U.N. estimates that approximately 140,000 people in Jonglei have been affected by the recent violence and are now in need of humanitarian assistance.

In the immediate term, the RSS and the international community must work rapidly to address the humanitarian situation in Jonglei and ensure that those affected by the initial attacks and the most recent counterattacks are provided with necessary aid. The RSS and the international community must also work in earnest to redouble their support for inter-communal reconciliation efforts and provide security to civilian populations in Jonglei and throughout

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Specifically, a **concerted inter-communal reconciliation process** is needed 1) to bring the two communities into dialogue on accountability, compensation, and similar mechanisms necessary to address grievances on both sides, and 2) to compel actors in both communities to refrain from using or promoting violence as a means of addressing long-standing grievances. The process will require the active involvement of the RSS, civil society, the Sudan Council of Churches, and traditional community leaders, as well as more robust support from UNMISS and donor nations.

The RSS's decision to assume leadership over the reconciliation process is critical for bringing about sustained peace between the Lou-Nuer and Murle communities. Actual grassroots mediation between, and engagement with, the two communities, though, should remain under the leadership of the Sudan Council of Churches, given the churches' relatively neutral and trusted position among both communities, as well as its long history of peacemaking in the region. To this end, the church must strengthen its relationship with Murle and Lou-Nuer youth leaders, whose disaffection with government at all levels and traditional leaders appears to have grown. A deeper understanding of the dynamics and hierarchical structure of both the Lou-Nuer and Murle communities, in general, is also needed for the church-led effort to engage strategically and comprehensively the appropriate stakeholders.

To ensure that **civilians are more effectively protected**, immediate steps must be taken to increase the capacity of UNMISS, the SPLA, and the SSPS. For UNMISS to be able to fulfill the civilian protection aspect of its mandate, it must be better equipped and its force strength must be increased. The U.N. and the international community should take steps to outfit UNMISS with better surveillance capabilities (including the ability to observe and detect movements at night), military grade helicopters (which will allow the mission to better move in a timely manner troops, military hardware, and supplies to remote areas when violence is imminent), and communications equipment, as well as the technical expertise and training to utilize the same.

Concurrently, the RSS, with the support of UNMISS and the international community, must deploy an increased number of troops and police to Jonglei and other conflict prone areas. As well, internationally supported efforts to reform and build capacity within the SPLA and the SSPS should continue in earnest and be focused, in part, on civilian protection. While the ultimate responsibility for civilian protection lies with the RSS, international assistance to the government's efforts to reform its security and policing sectors are critical and must continue both in the short- and long-term.

These short-term initiatives alone, however, are not enough to end inter-communal violence permanently. It is critical that the RSS, with the support and partnership of the international community, also initiate efforts to address the systemic causes of violence in Jonglei so as to help ensure that a sustainable peace within the state takes hold.

Indeed, there must be greater accountability for crimes committed in the context of inter-communal violence. This includes those who foment such violence, as well as those who participate directly in the violence. Accountability in the context of a long history of back-and-forth cattle raiding is complex; which individuals should be held accountable and through which mechanisms are issues that the two communities must discuss and ultimately agree upon within the context of the reconciliation process. Mechanisms by which individuals may be held accountable could be judicial or more traditional in nature.

Efforts, as well, should be taken to make more substantial the political representation of both the Lou-Nuer and Murle communities at the state and national levels of government. Greater inclusion of underrepresented communities at all levels of government will, in turn, provide those communities with mechanisms to voice their concerns in a peaceful and constructive manner. The isolation of the two communities has contributed to the rise of parallel authorities, and leads to violence as one of the few mechanisms for addressing community grievances. Therefore, the expansion of state authority into the Lou-Nuer and Murle areas is critical. Expansion of state authority will require, among other things, capacity building within the national, state, and local levels of government and policing forces, as well as development of Jonglei's infrastructure.

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Jonglei's economy is heavily reliant on cattle as a form of currency. A lack of access to basic services and economic opportunities compounds the reliance of Jonglei's communities on this cattle economy, which, in turn, fuels conflict associated with cattle raiding. Therefore, efforts must be increased to deliver basic services to communities in Jonglei and diversify economic opportunities.

Finally, the RSS recently announced that it will immediately initiate efforts to disarm communities in Jonglei. This would be a grave mistake in the current highly charged context, and any disarmament campaign should be postponed. Forced disarmament conducted by the SPLA and/or SSPS will likely become a source of insecurity in its own right, and thus exacerbate an already tense situation. As such, a disarmament campaign should wait until greater confidence and goodwill has been cultivated between the two communities and the government, and security improves. Any future disarmament efforts should be non-violent and involve the engagement of affected communities in related planning and execution efforts.

Conflict is not inevitable in South Sudan. All of the issues present in Jonglei can be addressed through enlightened government policies. While still young, the RSS may draw from lessons learned throughout the region, where small-scale, largely communal-based violence has fueled devastating conflicts. If Juba is able to decentralize and share power and wealth, create development opportunities available equally to all Southerners, and deal with existing fault lines within South Sudan's social and political fabric, then the new nation has a real chance for peace.

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