

Responses to Intercommunal Violence in Jonglei State

Written by Diana Felix da Costa

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/18/responses-to-intercommunal-violence-in-jonglei-state/>

DIANA FELIX DA COSTA, JUN 18 2012

This short piece looks to offer a brief summary and analysis of the current responses to the latest cycle of intercommunal violence in Jonglei State, based on recent NGO reports and media articles. One of the problems in developing effective responses stems precisely from the lack of enough reliable information and evidence of the situation and of local perspectives. There is a need for greater in-depth research into local perceptions and understandings of violence, which must underpin any external support to short and long-term reconciliation.

Context and brief history

South Sudan achieved its independence less than a year ago after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 between the Sudan's People Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA) and the Government of Sudan. The CPA provided for a referendum on Southern self-determination, which was held in January 2011, and led to the country's subsequent independence on 9 July 2011. Yet peace remains elusive in the new state, and the declaration of independence did not put an end to the pervasive violence and insecurity experienced in the new country. The violence results from a blend of factors that includes armed rebellions against the regime in Juba, counterinsurgency operations by the SPLA, increasing hostilities between South Sudan and Sudan, and an escalation of intercommunal violence throughout the country, most acutely in Jonglei State.

Although local conflicts have increasingly become part of a complex conflict web that includes competition between rival Southern interests, the struggle between the North and South as well as a strong regional dimension, there is a long history of intercommunal conflicts in Southern Sudan that have traditionally been unrelated to the state. According to Markakis (1994:219), Sudan is home to the highest concentration of traditional pastoralists in the world. In combination with scarcity, persistent droughts and a way of life based on mobility, it "inevitably" [Markakis's term] leads to conflict between different pastoralist groups and between pastoralists and farmers. Clashes between clans or ethnic groups due to these issues remain extremely common (Schomerus, 2008). Yet given the many dimensions and history of violence at the local level, it is problematic to use the concept 'local violence' without deconstructing and unpacking it further.

Jonglei is the largest of South Sudan's ten states, being roughly the same size as England and the home to 1.3 million people (Southern Sudan Centre for Census, Statistics and Evaluation, 2010). It is also among the most underdeveloped regions in the world. While there have been pockets of intercommunal violence in many regions in South Sudan [for example, Schomerus (2008) offers some insights into the case of Central and Eastern Equatoria], none have experienced the levels of violence lived in Jonglei State.

As in other areas of South Sudan, cattle-raiding has happened for generations. Cattle are a primary currency for transhumant communities, representing wealth and social status. However, although competition for cattle and resources has historically been a major source of tension among communities in Jonglei, the past five years has seen a change in the way confrontations are experienced. Conflicts have become more violent, and no longer follow social rules the way they used to, with a rising number of deaths and displacement of fighters and civilians (Hutchinson & Jok, 2002).

Jonglei's intercommunal conflicts stem from competition over natural resources and political control, feelings of

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political and socio-economic marginalisation of certain groups over others, and a pervasive lack of accountability and reconciliation between communities. Yet, this competition for access to and control of water and grazing land is aggravated by a legacy of civil war, the widespread militarisation of society (Hutchinson & Jok, 2002) and broad availability of small arms, the weakening of traditional authority and dispute resolution mechanisms, the manipulation by local and national elites of local grievances and ethnic identities, and the absence of formal state-provided security. Poverty and a general perception that 'peace dividends' are not shared equally among groups also contributes to feelings of marginalisation and distrust in government (DDG et al, 2012:4).

In the latest violent outburst in early December 2011, groups of mostly Lou Nuer cattle-raiders, or 'White Army,'[1] gathered in Akobo County before moving south to Pibor County, home of the Murle tribe. Up to 6,000 Lou Nuer men carried out attacks in Pibor County from 23 December 2011 – 3 January 2012, resulting in hundreds of Murle deaths and injuries and a reported up to 50,000 cattle stolen (Rands & LeRiche, 2012). The attacks came as a response to several months of Murle raiding in Akobo, Uror, Duk, Nyirol and Twic East counties that took the lives of up to 1,000 Lou Nuer and the theft of over 100,000 cattle (Rands & LeRiche, 2012). There have since been further retaliations by the Murle tribe. Naturally, such events cannot be seen in isolation, but rather as the consequence of overlapping and changing features involving local, state and national level actors.[2]

Responses to intercommunal violence

The violence in Jonglei is too easily and too often fatalistically discounted as "tribal". Yet the structural causes of intercommunal violence and instability can be found in the lawlessness and vigilantism that result from the lack of confidence in the state's capacity to protect its people and deal with perpetrators, in addition to peoples' military capability and "the lowering of thresholds for resorting to violence" (Rolandsen, 2010:2). As argued by Pact and SSLS (2012:1) many communities across Jonglei perceive violence "as the only reliable means to guarantee their safety, secure livelihoods, obtain redress/revenge for past wrongs and crimes, and address marginalization".

Although communities have offered their perspective on a comprehensive roadmap for peace through the many peace conferences held over the past years, NGOs engaged in these processes argue responses by international actors and government remain largely reactive, ad hoc and not based on communities' own analysis or recommendations for change (Pact & SSLS, 2012). In addition, too often the youth perpetrating the violence, and key to a long-lasting solution, are excluded from peace processes and comprehensive plans. What is needed is a coordinated and long-term plan by the Government of South Sudan (GoSS) supported by its international partners that tackles the root causes of the conflicts, promotes a long-term process of reconciliation among groups, and includes the provision of justice, security and peace dividends equally among all ethnic groups in the state.

The GoSS's immediate response to the latest intercommunal violence was to initiate a six-week civilian disarmament campaign targeting all groups in Jonglei state. The SPLA-led operation is the fifth disarmament campaign taking place in the state in the past six years (Pact et al., 2012) and counts on the logistical support from the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). It first started in March by asking civilians to turn over weapons voluntarily, but by May – given the reluctance encountered, had effectively become a forced disarmament campaign. The initiative was largely received by chiefs and their communities with apprehension and there have been many claims that the campaign was not fully communicated to communities, and has led to communities' greater vulnerability to attacks from rival ethnic groups.

According to a recent civil society report (Pact Sudan et al, 2012:2), seizing arms from civilians has been "accompanied by beatings, intimidation and harassment but also more serious reports of killing, torture, and assault (including sexual abuse) in multiple locations across the state". In addition, legitimate law enforcement agencies, such as the police, have also been disarmed in the process. Although the SPLA has been focused on disarming armed youth, many youth fled the state, making effective disarmament impossible. According to the same organisations, the model of disarmament once again put in practice fails to address the conflict drivers and threatens civilian lives and livelihoods. The reports of abuses associated with the campaign also weaken the confidence in the state's legitimacy and authority, aggravate existing perceptions of marginalization and vulnerability, and ultimately risks further exacerbating violence, becoming in itself part of the cycle of conflict (DDG et al, 2012). Revealingly,

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research conducted by Small Arms Survey in 2007 suggested that 23.5% of respondents in Jonglei felt that disarmament itself triggered insecurity (in DDG et al, 2012).

Despite government assurances, according to recent reports, neither the logistical and practical elements, nor the broader elements required for a successful disarmament campaign have been in place. The former includes issues such as clear communication and sensitisation to communities informing them of the sequence and place of the campaign, simultaneous disarmament of rival groups, and the destruction of stocks of weapons or otherwise their safe storage, among others. Broader elements such as an overarching process of justice and accountability that can lead to reconciliation between groups, community confidence over their own security and the sense there are alternative to resorting to violence (Saferworld, 2012).

Disarmament campaigns have not been linked to an all-encompassing framework that integrates security, governance, and political interventions. Rather, they have been perceived by communities as government strategies to punish and control ethnic groups and/or as highly politicised, not neutral, incomplete and largely unsuccessful (DDG et al, 2012; Garfield, 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2009; Rands & LeRiche, 2012). Processes have not guaranteed civilian safety, met the expectations and needs of the population, nor been located within broader processes that address the key drivers of conflict (DDG et al., 2012).

As has been voiced by many of the national and international organisations involved in supporting local peace processes in the State, civilian disarmament in Jonglei cannot be developed in isolation. Rather, it must be part of a comprehensive and long-term strategy directed towards reducing violence, promoting nonviolent conflict resolution and sustainable human security. Disarmament is an important element towards reaching this end, but it cannot be forced upon communities without offering alternative security arrangements or done selectively to some groups only, since it ends up making communities more vulnerable (Harragin, 2012). As highlighted by Pact et al. (2012:2-3): "The legitimacy of the government and trust in its role as a provider of security- crucial to the prospects for stability in Jonglei depends on its ability to build confidence with all communities."

Alongside to the largely contentious approach to the disarmament campaign, South Sudan's president Salva Kiir Mayardit established a Presidential Peace Committee (PCC). The PCC is headed by Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul of the Episcopal Church of Sudan and South Sudan and is tasked with investigating the causes of intercommunal violence and exploring ways to address these through consultative community meetings. The peace initiative opened the door for the peace committee to organise small conferences with Jonglei's various communities before a larger peace and reconciliation conference that took place in the beginning of May 2012 with representatives of all the communities. The role of the church, through the Sudan Council of Churches, has been crucial in supporting peace dialogues and reconciliation among different communities, as well as encouraging development initiatives that lead to livelihood options for youth (Breidlid & Stensland, 2011).

A peace agreement was signed by representatives of Jonglei's six ethnic groups, with some of the main recommendations making reference to cattle-raiding, unemployment, underdevelopment, lack of roads and infrastructure, food insecurity and women and child abduction as key issues to be addressed by the government. Measures proposed included for example "a) Sensitisation to create awareness amongst the rural communities of Jonglei state (...) c) Promotion of intra/inter-community interactions, sports, workshops, conferences, marriage, follow-up teams, etc; d) Meetings between cattle camp youth" (Resolutions and Recommendations, Bor 5 May 2012), among many others. However, traditional leaders criticised the Peace Resolution for its vagueness over how such issues would be dealt or monitored. According to the Sudan Tribune (6 May 2012), chiefs also expressed reservations over the absence of punishment and accountability for perpetrators of violence, such as cattle-raiders, those abducting women and children and performing indiscriminate killings.

The conference resolutions and recommendations also cautioned against the fact that similar ideas had been proposed in the past yet had lacked follow-up and monitoring. Indeed, there is a long history of failure of peace conferences in Jonglei, which include the 2006 All Jonglei Communities Peace Convent in Gumuruk, witnessed by former governor Philip Thon Leek and Vice President Riek Machar, Anyidi peace between Murle and Dinka Bor in 2003 and Lilier peace accord of 2002 (Sudan Tribune, 5 May 2012). Traditional leaders called for greater

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accountability, justice and security provisions such as deployment of police, as the only route to peace. The SPLA commander responsible for the disarmament campaign, Gen. Kuol Diem Kuol has said that his forces will remain in the state until there are no more reports of insecurity (which presumably will take a long time). However, the tensions felt on the border with Sudan suggest that the government may need to reconsider their ability to keep such a large force of 15,000 soldiers doing what is essentially police work (Sudan Tribune, 5 May 2012).

The way forward: listening to communities

If the latest peace accord is not accompanied by other longer-term measures, including follow-up and monitoring as has been repeated time and time again by community representatives, it is likely to see the same ill fate as previous agreements. Thus far, measures taken have largely been ad hoc. A comprehensive strategy that will honour the latest peace conference outcomes will require addressing the security environment, addressing impunity and genuinely engaging with communities and their ideas about the way forward, beyond a forced disarmament campaign and a one-off peace conference. As rightly argued by DDG et al. (2012:10), “without addressing the agents and institutions that enable and maintain violence, removing the instruments of violence will provide temporary security, if that.” Importantly, politicians must stop manipulating local conflicts for their own political purposes. Peace and reconciliation are long-term processes that also depend on promoting development, such as access to health and education, water bores, etc, equally throughout the territory, avoiding perceived feelings of marginalisation between groups that contribute greatly to intercommunal violence.

Any external support, coming from national government or international actors, that does not reflect and build from the multiple conceptions and understandings of ‘violence’ and ‘peace’, as well as a local vision of the future, is bound to at best fail to lead to positive change, and at worst, have unintended negative consequences and contribute to further tensions.

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[1] See Arnold, M. & Alden C. (2007) and Young, J. (2007) for a historical analysis of the ‘White Army’.

[2] The 2009 ICG report offers an overview of the aggravating dynamics that have changed the nature and scope of violence in Jonglei State. See also Rands & LeRiche (2012) for a concise background and Rolandsen & Breidlid (2012) for a critical analysis of the cultural factors commonly attributed to the violence in Jonglei. For a more anthropological and deeper historical analysis see the background documents shared by Arensen for the Murle, Hutchinson for the Nuer and Harragin for the Dinka, for the *Jonglei State – Strengthening Conflict Mitigation & Peace-Building – Nairobi Conference 19-21 March 2012*.