

# The Internal Displacement of People in South Sudan

Written by Kensiya Kennedy and Keshav Basotia

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## The Internal Displacement of People in South Sudan

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In 2011, South Sudan gained its independence after a 22-year civil war between the predominantly Muslim northern Sudanese (now Sudan) government and the Southern rebels who mostly represented the Christian and indigenous religions. The peace agreement that brought forth South Sudan's independence was facilitated by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and other countries like the United States, United Kingdom, and Norway. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2005 made way for a referendum that allowed the Sudanese people to decide if they wanted Sudan to be split in two. The referendum was held in January 2011 where an overwhelming 99 percent of South Sudanese people voted in the favor of independence of the South thus, forming the Republic of South Sudan on 9 July 9 2011. South Sudanese independence was celebrated, and many international organizations looked at the event optimistically.

This optimism was short-lived, as in December 2013, conflict broke out within factions of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). This plunged the recently formed country into a civil war that resulted in the death, abuse, and displacement of thousands of people. This chapter looks at the key turning points in the civil war in a bid to understand the internal displacement caused by the conflict, which is the largest forced migration event in recent African history. It uses empirical data to assess the movement of people and the trigger events that might have led to the movement in the three regions of the Equatorial states, Jonglei and Upper Nile.

### Variables Defining the Conflict

#### *Ethnic Diversity*

Ethnic diversity is an inherent part of South Sudan, and the country comprises more than 60 different ethnic groups. The largest two groups are the Dinka and the Nuer tribes, which have been at the center of the civil war in South Sudan. Traditionally, both of these are rival pastoralist groups, which have competed over grazing land and water for cattle in the past. They, however, came together for the greater good to mount a resistance against (then) north Sudan. Keeping the rivalries aside did not make the problems go away, and the differences eventually surfaced after independence.

#### *Differences in the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement*

The country's first president, Salva Kiir, is from the Dinka tribe, a tribe that comprises around 36 percent of the population. In his Independence Day speech on 9 July 9 2011, he appealed to the people to view their cultural identities as a 'source of pride and strength, not parochialism and conflict'. Kiir emphasized the fact that the people were South Sudanese first. Kiir also appointed Riek Machar as his vice president. To understand the significance of this appointment, one has to realize that Machar is from the ethnic Nuer tribe, which is the second largest in the country. Machar was not merely a representative of the rival group, but also an important leader who was responsible for leading a brutal massacre in 1991 against Dinka civilians where around 2,000 civilians were killed. It is therefore

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clear how Kiir's stand on unity and the inclusion of a strong figure from a rival ethnic group seemed like a generous step towards inclusion.

Things turned sour when, in the beginning of 2013, Machar began vocalizing his criticisms of the way the government was being run under Kiir and on how the economy was being handled. Machar also expressed his intentions of contesting the presidency in 2015. This was not well-received by Kiir, and he fired Machar and all 28 of his cabinet members in July 2013.

## *The Civil War*

On 15 December 2013, at a meeting, the conflict broke out between factions of the SPLA, each supporting Kiir and Machar. While who started the fight is still debated, one version of the events dictates that, at the meeting, presidential guards of the Dinka majority on Kiir's side tried to disarm the Nuer guards on Machar's side. The conflict escalated dramatically, and the violence spread and resulted in ethnic cleansing in the capital city of Juba. The issue soon evolved from a political conflict to an ethnic face-off. Machar fled the capital city of Juba and the Nuer faction of the SPLA fled with him. President Kiir later stated that the fighting was a coup attempt by Machar and his allies, which Machar denied. In the first week of fighting, 1,000 people were killed and around 100,000 were displaced.

After Machar fled, the violence morphed into an ethnic conflict, spreading to other parts of the country, namely the then-Equatorial states, which are the Central, Eastern, and Western states (Juba is in central Equatoria), the Jonglei state, the Unity state, and the Upper Nile state.

In 2015, the two warring parties, the SPLA led by Salva Kiir and the SPLA-IO (Sudanese People's Liberation Army-In Opposition) led by Riek Machar, reached a peace agreement. The peace agreement was facilitated by IGAD and, as part of the agreement, Machar was supposed to return to Juba and resume his post as the vice president. Machar, however, was insecure about his safety in Juba and insisted on bringing his own fighters to Juba with him. In April 2016, the rival forces clashed again, re-igniting the violence, and Machar fled Juba. In this incident, around 300 people were killed and, in the following week, around 26,000 people fled the city.

In September 2018, a peace deal was signed between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, officially ending the civil war. As part of the peace deal, Machar was supposed to return to Juba by May 2019, which was extended by six months as both parties had disagreements regarding the peace deal. The November date for the peace deal was pushed by a further 100 days due to concerns regarding the rebel leader Machar's security. This series of delays ended when both parties agreed to form a Unity government in February 2020.

## **Evolution from Community Clashes to Identity Politics**

### *Events That Drew the Other Ethnic Communities into the Conflict*

In October 2015, Kiir issued an order to increase the number of the states from 10 to 28. This move gave the Dinkas a majority in strategic locations and caused angst among the Equatorians and the Shilluk populations. This move was seen as a ploy by the Dinkas to grab land that belonged to the other ethnic communities. After these moves, new groups that were earlier relatively dormant in the fight began to rise up against the government.

In September 2016, Lam Akol of the Democratic Change party (the largest opposition party to SPLA) announced a new faction called the National Democratic Movement (NDM) in an attempt to overthrow Kiir. The fighting also spread to the relatively calm Equatoria region, where the SPLA-IO forces had sought shelter, and to the Upper Nile state.

### *Major Outbreaks in Jonglei, Equatoria, and Upper Nile regions*

Post-December 2013, the magnitude of the prevalent community clashes increased. The common occurrence of clashes over resources between different tribes occupying and competing for the same natural resources evolved

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into something more. All empirical and event data used is dated through November 2019.

## *Jonglei*

As a result, South Sudan witnessed its first major post-independence ethnic clash in January 2012 even before the civil war erupted between the Dinka and the Nuer factions of the governing SPLM. The government of South Sudan and SPLA had conducted disarmament, targeting the Lou Nuer people in particular after the CPA in 2005. This selective disarmament fueled the communal tensions between both tribes and resulted in armed confrontation backed by ethnic hatred. The state of Jonglei in South Sudan witnessed ethnic clashes between the Lou Nuer and the Murle tribes. Because of this, around 600 people were killed in Jonglei, and around 100,000 people from the area fled their homes. The reason for these clashes was primarily resource scarcity. However, the magnitude of this clash was much more intense than what had been witnessed before. The clash in Jonglei was bigger, more pronounced, and was backed by mistrust between major ethnic groups.

## *Equatoria*

The second region in focus is the Equatoria region. Equatoria holds some of the best agricultural land in South Sudan and was known as the country's breadbasket. Ironically, the escalation of violence in the region has exposed around 6 million people to the risk of starvation.

The most focused-on ethnic tensions in South Sudan are those between the Nuer and the Dinka tribes, who form the major participants of the civil war, the former being associated with the SPLA-IO and the latter with SPLA. The people in Equatoria had lived in relative harmony for years before the civil war broke out in 2013. After the SPLA accused Machar of attempting a coup in 2013, Dinka troops were accused of carrying out house-to-house searches in the Nuer suburbs. Researchers from Human Rights Watch documented widespread killing of Nuer men mostly between 15–19 December 2013. This included the mass killing of 200–300 men in the Gudele neighborhood in Juba on 16 December 2013. This led to the targeting of the members of the Dinka tribe in other parts of the country, especially the ones controlled by SPLA-IO. This event is just one of the earliest examples of Dinka-Nuer clashes following the events of December 2013.

Despite this outbreak, the region managed to stay out of the conflict until the government army began purging the opposition in 2016. The peace agreement signed between Machar and Kiir sparked violence in this relatively immune region. The peace treaty of 2015 allowed the SPLA-IO to establish bases around the country, which allowed Machar's side to recruit in Equatoria. The government's deployment of the Mathiang Anyoor, a Dinka-dominated militia sought to curtail recruitment in the region. The Mathiang Anyoor, however, terrorized the local population and allegedly killed and arrested anyone suspected of having links with the SPLA-IO. They have also been accused of targeting civilians on ethnic lines.

Since 2015, there have been targeted killings in the region that has caused many citizens to flee to other parts of the country and south to Uganda. In a recent event on 3 July 2019, more than 100 civilians were killed, and a similar number of girls and women were subjected to sexual violence in the Central Equatorial region after the revitalized peace agreement in June 2019. This surge in violence itself caused more than 56,000 civilians to become displaced within South Sudan. The land in the region moreover is not being used for agriculture due to the inherent instability of the region causing a standstill in economic activity and food production in the region.

## *Upper Nile*

In December 2015, President Salva Kiir, after a Christmas Eve broadcast, roped another stakeholder into the conflict when he announced that the then-existing 10 states would be divided into 28 new ones. He appointed 28 new governors who promised loyalty to him in exchange for being put in charge of the new states; these people were then sworn in five days later. This move was seen as a major power play by Kiir's opposition throughout South Sudan.

The Shilluk people in the country's oil-rich Upper Nile state denounced this move. The Shilluk have often viewed their

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land as their most valuable asset and therefore have chosen to tread politics carefully. The Shilluk never retaliated against the government and therefore did not have a reason to expect such a move. The group's main fighting force, called the Angwelek army, was also allied with the government. The carving up of the new states, however, was viewed by the Shilluk leaders as a deliberate attempt to carve up the Shilluk homeland. It was seen by the Dinkas as a move to remove the Shilluk community from their historic land. Therefore, the Shilluk community, along with the Angwelek army, switched sides to fight with Machar.

Another reason that might have contributed to this switch in loyalty is the presence of the Dinka Padong militia in the region. Dinka Padong were civilians armed at the beginning of the conflict (in 2013) to help protect the oil operations in the region, which the government was reluctant to disarm. The presence of such a strong militia in the Shilluk region further made the community insecure.

The Shilluk force was decently supplied with arms that were provided by their former allies, the SPLA. The common people in the region who earlier benefitted from the fragile balance of politics in the region suffered from this change in the power dynamics and, during the fighting between SPLA and SPLA-IO, the allied Upper Nile faction, many Shilluk people were forced to leave their homes. In the aftermath, the chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan claimed that the government was engaging in 'social engineering' after around 2,000 people, mostly Dinka, were transported to the abandoned regions.

## **Internally Displaced Population**

The major brunt of the conflict has been borne by the people of South Sudan. The people barely got time to recover from the struggle for their independence before this conflict broke out. According to a 2018 report, around 400,000 people have lost their lives since December 2013; in addition, 4.5 million people have been displaced.

Such conditions have led the people to move in order to look for better opportunities. South Sudan's refugee crisis is the largest in Africa and the third largest in the world. The internal displacement of the people is a pressing problem and is difficult to assess and monitor, mainly due to the many logistical, social, and psychological disadvantages associated with the problem.

One in every three people in South Sudan is an internally displaced person. The number of internally displaced people has risen from 76,000 at the onset of the conflict in 2013 to 2 million as of 2019. The major cause of relocation of people has been the ethnic conflict. The major stakeholders in this ethnic conflict are the SPLA, with a Dinka majority, and SPLA-IO, with Nuer majority. Other ethnicities, like the Shilluk and the Equatorian tribes, have also been affected. Ethnic cleansing by the Dinka-dominated government, lack of security due to fighting between the rebels and the SPLA, lack of economic opportunities, and natural disasters have also pushed people to move to other places in search for better living conditions.

The conflict left many sections of society vulnerable. Young men and boys were targeted because they were expected to join the struggle. Women and girls were exposed to sexual violence, such as rape and harassment.

According to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, there are currently 1.36 million internally displaced people in South Sudan. Out of these, 15 percent reside in protection of civilian (PoC) sites, 32 percent in collective centers, 7 percent in informal settlements, and 46 percent in other sites .

The United Nations (UN) bases have been a sanctuary for many of the people fleeing violence. The UN recognized its role as a protector, built fences, and set up sentry points to protect its bases. However, these spaces have not escaped the effects of ethnic divides. On several occasions, the UN bases have turned into conflict zones due to the big role that ethnicity plays in the everyday lives of the people. The bases are often divided into Shilluk, Nuer, and Dinka. Despite this, the base residents witness inter-ethnic fights, which are often stopped by UN peacekeepers.

The UN bases have also been targeted and on several occasions, and humanitarian workers have been part of the casualties. In one such incident on 17 February 2016 a UN base that housed 47,000 displaced persons was

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attacked by culprits wearing South Sudan military uniforms. The attackers killed 30 people, injured 120 more, and burned down most of the Shilluk and the Nuer sections of the base by the time UN peacekeepers pushed the attackers out of the camp.

The civilian population at the UN bases live under 24-hour armed guard. Some civilians leave the base during the day either to work or farm, but most stay in the camps due to the fear of being attacked. In bases like these, women have taken up the responsibility of stepping out of the bases for economic activities. The justification given is that men are more likely to be murdered by the soldiers than are women. Women of the families in the bases risk being sexually harassed on a daily basis when they step out of the bases, but they prefer this to putting the men in their family at risk.

## Analyzing the Data

### *Data on Internal Displacement*

The following section assesses the yearly humanitarian needs overview data compiled by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). Examination of the data aims to connect the dots between the empirical data and the events that took place in the region at different moments throughout South Sudan's history. The data on internal displacement also is affected by the sentiments of the people involved and the way they reacted to it.

### *Ceasefire Violations in these States*

The Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) was signed first in January 2014 with the aim of deterring ceasefire violations by providing a platform that could hold the involved parties accountable and hence vulnerable to international scrutiny. The IGAD Monitoring and Verification mechanism (MVM) was established to monitor the CoHA. Following is a table listing the ceasefire violations monitored by the MVM, which was renamed to the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements Monitoring Mechanism (CTSAMM) after the signing of the Agreement of the resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (CTSAMM) in August 2015.

## Connecting the Dots

### *Equatoria*

Looking at the Equatoria region, one might notice the sharp ascent of the number of IDPs in the Central, Eastern, and Western Equatorian states. Between 2015 and 2016 (compare reports from 2016 and 2017), the number displaced people in Central Equatoria almost tripled. The numbers in Eastern Equatoria have risen by more than a factor of 37, and those in Western Equatoria have risen by around 30,000. Such numbers can be attributed to events that incited insecurity at a higher magnitude, like the ones that involved a face-off between the center's forces and rebels, and also to the amount of ceasefire violations reported in Jonglei, which is just north of the Equatoria region. The instability caused by Machar's return in July 2016 could also have been behind the rise of insecurity within the state itself.

### *Jonglei*

The state of Jonglei witnessed a gradual drop in the number of IDPs over the years despite the drop in ceasefire violations. This could be puzzling, but if one looks at the magnitude of the ceasefire violations in Jonglei in 2014, that is the year following the outbreak of the civil war. It is clear that the intensity of insecurity in the state has been high. Jonglei also has been a hotspot for communal violence in the past and a major concern for the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) before the civil war broke out.

### *Upper Nile*

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The major strain in the Upper Nile state comes from the fact that it is an oil-rich state. Hence, violence to grab land should not come as a surprise, which could explain the number of ceasefire violations. The steady number of IDPs in the state, however, is puzzling, which is why one has to look at the indigenous community in the region too.

The government announced in 2015 that it intended to divide the number of states and then went on and gave the control of those states to governors who were favored by the Dinka community. Such a move raised a lot of insecurity amongst indigenous communities in the region, but at the same time also cemented the resolve of the indigenous communities to protect their historic land. The Shilluk community is one of the prominent communities in the Upper Nile who, despite a lot of friction with the ruling SPLM, decided to stay put. This was mainly because of the fear that, if they left, the community would leave their land unprotected. This presence of strong resistance chips away at any insecurity caused by other factors.

## *Lack of Contextual Considerations in the Peace Deals*

In March 2018, nine opposition groups, excluding the SPLA-IO, formed the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA) to negotiate with the government. Following pressure from the international community, the Sudanese government succeeded in bringing Kiir and SPLA-IO to hold talks in Sudan's capital, Khartoum. A ceasefire was signed in June 2018, where both parties agreed to form a transitional government for the 36 months leading up to the national elections. Even though the ceasefire was violated hours after it was signed, and objections were raised regarding the extension of the president's term by three years (passed by a SPLM majority parliament), the SPLA-IO agreed to share power again with Kiir. According to the power-sharing agreement, 332 of the 550 seats in parliament would go to Kiir's faction, 128 to Machar's faction, and rest to other groups. Machar would also be one of the five vice presidents. The SSOA faction, however, was dissatisfied with this arrangement due to the skewed power sharing system as depicted in the table below.

Such an inconsideration has been evident in the peace processes since the CPA in 2005. An example is the composition of the pre-election national executive appointed to oversee the interim period after the CPA. According to the CPA the representation from South Sudan was as follows—28 percent from the SPLM and 6 percent from 'other Southern political forces'.

## **What the Future Holds**

The February 2020 peace agreement is a welcome development for South Sudan's people and the country as a whole. Further, President Kiir's assurance to ensure the security of the opposition leaders and the reappointment of Machhar as vice president gives hope to an otherwise volatile country. This volatility, however, also warns one to tread carefully so as to not repeat the events of the past. It is therefore wise to keep in mind as the country moves towards a new future the plight and the social divisions caused by rifts between the minority communities. Such a consideration would go a long way in formulating sustainable peace processes.

A look at internal migration in South Sudan makes it evident that the situation does not just simply require a CPA—it requires an inclusive one. In a volatile and ethnically diverse community, like that of South Sudan, a strong leader motivated in the wrong way could tip the scales at any moment to restart the violence. It is also clear that, from here on, the peace process has to be sensitive to people's conditions, and focus should be given to providing people the basic right to work and live peacefully. The aim going forward now should be to improve basic infrastructure, secure economic opportunities, and promote equitable resource sharing.

## **Tables**

Table 1: A timeline of the events in the region in focus (Equatoria, Jonglei, Upper Nile)

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<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
July 9	South Sudan gets its independence
January 2012	Ethnic clashes between the Lou Nuer and the Murle communities. 600 people are killed and 100,000 displaced
December 2013	Outbreak of civil war. 200–300 mostly Nuer men killed in Gudele neighborhood of Juba
August 2015	The original agreement on the resolution of conflict in the republic of South Sudan is signed. Machar agrees to return to Juba.
April 2016	Fighting begins again. 300 people are killed and 26,000 people flee Juba
August 2016	Machar flees Juba
August 2018	President Kiir and Riek Machar sign power-sharing agreement
July 2019	Central Equatoria; 100 civilians are killed and women and girls are subjected to sexual exploitation; 56,000 civilians are displaced
November 11, 2019	The formation of the Unity government is pushed by 100 days.
February 2020	Both parties agree to form unity government

Table 2: Internal displacement over the years; Source: Author's calculations of UNOCHA data

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<b>Years/ Regions</b>	<b>2015 report</b>	<b>2016 report</b>	<b>2017 report</b>	<b>2018 report</b>	<b>2019 report</b>
Central Equatoria	80,688	53,415	143,950	168,438	142,475
Eastern Equatoria	7,566	4,654	158,206	107,235	41,671
Western Equatoria	14,742	93,276	124,103	126,384	160,124
Jonglei	623,898	502,209	378,821	363,399	382,906
Upper Nile	390,691	299,084	291,720	219,645	364,357

Table 3: Total number of ceasefire violations

<b>Year/Regions</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
Central Equatoria	1	-	-	-	1
Eastern Equatoria	-	-	-	2	-
Western Equatoria	-	-	1	1	-
Jonglei	6	-	-	1	-
Upper Nile	9	3	4	1	-

Table 4: Percentage of population in power sharing

<b>Ethnic Community(ies)</b>	<b>Percentage of Population</b>	<b>Percentage in Power Sharing</b>
Dinka	36	60.36
Nuer	16	23.27
Others	48	16.36

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