

Protection Situation Update: Leer County, Southern Unity State (May 2016)

Introduction

April 2016 marks one year since the start of the southern Unity offensive. Over a period of approximately seven months in 2015, thousands of people were killed, raped, abducted, and rendered homeless during a series of brutal attacks across southern and central Unity State. The Protection Cluster recently conducted a follow up assessment in Leer County, and with access now improved, the scale of the atrocities that have taken place is becoming increasingly apparent. This note provides an overview of the findings of the protection assessment conducted in early April 2016,¹ and offers an update on the current protection environment in Leer County.

Key Protection Concerns: April 2015 – today

In 2015, the Protection Cluster released three situation updates describing the widespread violence and targeting of civilians in southern and central Unity State.² Based on reports from sources on the ground, human rights investigations, and media reports, the Protection Cluster estimated that between April and October 2015, at least 1,250 individuals were killed in Leer, Mayendit, and Koch Counties. The Protection Cluster was concerned that estimates of such deaths were low, and the recent assessment indicates that the number in Leer County is indeed likely to be much higher. In interviews with 84 people, 90 percent reported that at least one relative³ was killed during the violence.⁴ In fact, many interviewees reported having lost not one, but multiple relatives: of those surveyed, an average of six people were killed per family.

Interviewees also reported a worrying gender pattern to the violence: the persons killed were overwhelmingly male. While attackers would reportedly rape or abduct women, they would often kill men on the spot. One woman reported that during the violence in 2015, 35 men in her family had been killed, and that she now has only one surviving male relative. The aftermath of this violence is still visible in Leer Town and surrounding *payams*, and interviewees reported that skeletons remain strewn in fields nearby main roads.

Sexual Violence and Abductions

In 2015, the Protection Cluster received reports of over 1,430 incidents of rape and 1,630 incidents of abductions in southern and central Unity State. Given the limited GBV services in the area during the height of the crisis, the Protection Cluster knew that these numbers were likely to be an underestimate. Human rights reports⁵ indicated that rape was pervasive, if not used as payment for soldiers and affiliated youth, suggesting that the scale of sexual violence was likely to be much higher.

¹ Data was collected through interviews with 84 people in Leer Town, Thonyor, Adok, Din Din, and Gandor over seven days in early April 2016. Distributions were ongoing at the time of the assessment, which allowed for interviews with people originating from an additional 13 *payams*. Kobo Toolbox was used to collect the quantitative data, however, this sample size is not statistically significant and as such the results cannot be extrapolated to the broader population. Nevertheless, the experiences of these 84 people can offer a window into the larger context.

² South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Situation Update: Southern and Central Unity (April-September 2015)*, 25 September 2015; South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Flash Update: Protection Situation in Southern and Central Unity (September-October 2015)*, 23 October 2015; South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Situation Update: Leer County, Southern Unity (October-December 2015)*, 19 December 2015. These reports are available on <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/south-sudan/protection>.

³ "Relative" in this context includes extended family members such as aunts and uncles.

⁴ A note on dates: most interviewees described incidents that occurred between April and October 2015, however in a few instances interviewees also included incidents that took place post October 2015 during raids by youth, or prior to the full southern Unity Offensive.

⁵ See OHCHR *Report of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Assessment Mission to Improve Human Rights, Accountability, Reconciliation and Capacity in South Sudan*, 10 March 2016; Human Rights Watch, *They Burned It All*, July 2015; UNMISS, *Flash Human Rights Report on the Escalation of Fighting in Greater Upper Nile*, 29 June 2015.

During the assessment in April 2016, 46 percent of interviewees reported that at least one person in their family had been raped during the violence in southern Unity State, and 37 percent reported that at least one person was abducted.⁶ Abducted persons were overwhelmingly women and girls, many of whom have escaped, but some of whom have still not returned. Interviews with family members who survived sexual violence or abduction reported that their relatives often continue to struggle with high levels of trauma.⁷ Symptoms of trauma were limited not just to families that had experienced sexual violence or abduction though: 75 percent of interviewees indicated that their family is currently experiencing at least one symptom of trauma.⁸

Forced Recruitment

Results from the assessment also indicate a high level of forced recruitment, both of adults and of children. Some 36 percent of interviewees reported that at least one relative had been forcibly recruited, and of those 36 percent, over half reported that at least one of the people recruited was a child. Some interviewees reported that their relatives had been able to escape, often to the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (POC) Site, but many more were unsure of the current location of their relatives.

Family Separation

Approximately 60 percent of interviewees reported that at least one relative had become lost or separated during the violence.⁹ It is likely that this figure is low, however, as many of the interviewees did not report persons who had been separated but were subsequently reunited. While in some cases this separation was deliberate (for example, sending relatives to the Bentiu POC Site or Panyijiar County), in other cases family members became separated while fleeing violence, or lost contact with relatives who were en route to safer areas.

With the reduction of fighting in October 2015 and the arrival of UNMISS forces in November, freedom of movement has improved. Many families have now reunified, or at least are aware of the location of their relatives. The number of unaccompanied and separated children in these areas still remains among the highest such caseloads in the country however, with over 1,000 children registered as unaccompanied or separated in Leer and Panyijiar Counties.¹⁰

Systematic Destruction of Civilian Infrastructure

The 2015 Protection Cluster updates on southern Unity described the systematic targeting of civilians attempts to forcibly transfer populations in Leer, Mayendit, and Koch Counties. In addition to indiscriminately firing upon civilians and the prevalence of sexual violence, tactics also included the widespread destruction of civilian homes, assets, and infrastructure, as well as the dissemination of messages warning all civilians to leave the area or be seen as an enemy and face retribution. In some instances, Government trucks even drove civilians under duress out of their areas of residence. Multiple human rights reports noted these tactics with alarm, and suggested that these actions may have constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity.¹¹

As access and freedom of movement increases, the scale of these atrocities is becoming increasingly apparent. During the assessment conducted in April 2016, interviewees reported that in addition to targeting civilians, stealing cattle, destroying tools and crops, and permanently damaging civilian infrastructure such as boreholes, attackers also systematically cut down or burned mango trees to remove

⁶ See previous footnote for explanation on dates.

⁷ Where this was the case, the family was referred to services in Thonyor or Adok.

⁸ The survey questionnaire asked whether family members were experiencing any of the following symptoms: nightmares; flashbacks; intrusive memories; hypervigilance; emotional reactions to triggers; physical reactions to triggers; memory loss related to the event; feeling distant or isolated; feeling numb or overcome by emotions. Terms were described in a more accessible manner during the interviews.

⁹ Where the interviewee reported having lost or become separated from a child, they were referred to the Child Protection partner for follow up.

¹⁰ South Sudan Family Tracing and Reunification database.

¹¹ See OHCHR *Report of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Assessment Mission to Improve Human Rights, Accountability, Reconciliation and Capacity in South Sudan*, 10 March 2016; Human Rights Watch, *They Burned It All*, July 2015; UNMISS, *Flash Human Rights Report on the Escalation of Fighting in Greater Upper Nile*, 29 June 2015.

any natural source of food or livelihood.¹² Mango trees had previously been used to denote property boundaries, and in cutting them down, the attackers reportedly aimed to make it impossible for owners to reclaim their land should they ever return.¹³

Since the start of the offensive, humanitarians have also struggled to quantify the scale of the physical destruction. In late 2015, the Protection Cluster and OCHA reviewed UNOSAT satellite imagery in an attempt to count the number of homes that had been burned. The estimated figures from the satellite imagery were so high that the data was repeatedly discarded because these analysts believed their analysis was incorrect. Upon moving around Leer County however, it is clear that there was almost complete devastation of civilian homes and infrastructure. During the April 2016 assessment, 97 percent of interviewees reported that their homes had been burned.

The Protection Cluster is concerned that thus far there has been no accountability for the crimes that have taken place in southern and central Unity State, and as time progresses, the evidence of these atrocities will likely disappear. Unless additional, robust investigations take place urgently, prosecuting responsible parties may become impossible.

Current Protection Environment

Interviewees reported that the protection environment in Leer County appears to have improved significantly since November 2015. The establishment of the UNMISS Temporary Operating Base in November 2015 and the return of humanitarian organizations the following month were consistently noted as having had a positive impact on the protection environment. Indeed, 91 percent of interviewees reported that they feel their safety has improved, and 67 percent reported that they now feel largely safe during the daytime. This number reduces to only 40 percent feeling safe at night however, when interviewees report that youth often come to loot people's belongings.

While these improvements are a positive sign, the current stability is tenuous. Interviewees reported that they feel the violence has reduced as a result of the presence of UNMISS and humanitarian actors, and said they feared that if international personnel left, the situation could once again deteriorate and families may have to return to their places of hiding. Interviewees reported that UNMISS's evening patrols are particularly useful, and feared that attacks would increase if these were ceased or reduced. In light of this, it will be critical that there is a sustained presence from humanitarian organizations and UNMISS, and that UNMISS continues its evening patrolling. Adding additional UNMISS nighttime patrols would also further enhance the protection environment.

The patterns of threats have also changed during this period. Whereas between April and October 2015 the primary threat was fighting between armed groups and attacks on civilians, now the threats relate more to crime and cattle raids.¹⁴ Although the severity of the attacks on civilians has somewhat reduced, there remains a high degree of fear associated with these incidents, and in some ways they are more difficult to prevent due to their sporadic and unpredictable nature. Interviewees reported that they have adopted coping strategies such as burying their belongings and not cooking after dark so as to not attract attention.¹⁵

Protection Response

Since humanitarian partners returned to Leer County in December 2015, protection actors have worked to urgently scale up protection services. Clinical management of rape (CMR), GBV case management, and psychosocial support are now available in both Thonyor and Adok, and CMR is also available in Leer Town. Child protection programming, including psychosocial support and family tracing and reunification, is in place in Leer Town, Thonyor, as well as nearby *payams* and counties. General protection partners will be

¹² Although the Opposition and affiliated forces engaged in clashes with the government and carried out retaliatory attacks, the Protection Cluster did not receive reports of Opposition forces employing tactics targeting the civilian population in Leer County.

¹³ IDP interviews in Leer County, April 2016.

¹⁴ IDP interviews in Leer County, April 2016.

¹⁵ Interviewees noted that if youth see cooking fires, they will know that the community has food and community members will be more likely to be attacked.

soon engaged in the identification of vulnerable populations and provision of targeted assistance, protection monitoring, accompaniment, and case management. Finally, since April 2015 Mine Action partners have succeeded in clearing 59 hazards, which contained 429 unexploded ordnances and 479 small arms ammunition.

Despite the best efforts of these protection partners however, gaps remain. Additional psychosocial support is needed for all age groups and genders across Leer County, and case management for GBV survivors is currently unavailable in Leer Town. In light of the overwhelming number of unaccompanied and separated children, there is also a need to further scale up child protection activities, particularly family tracing and reunification. Additional funding will be necessary in order for these services to be put in place.

Recommendations

- UNMISS and humanitarian organizations should maintain a continuous presence on the ground until a more sustainable peace is achieved.
- UNMISS should continue its good practice of evening patrols, and should particularly aim to expand its evening patrol range into surrounding *payams*. UNMISS should also conduct night patrols in areas of increased risks to civilians.
- The Government and traditional leaders should make an effort to exercise greater control over youth in their areas to reduce criminality and looting.
- The African Union (AU) should expedite the establishment of the Hybrid Court, and should consider appointing an interim president to engage with political leaders and help move the process forward. Simultaneous to this, the AU should immediately begin investigations to collect evidence.
- Donors should prioritize additional funding for southern Unity, particularly for child protection activities, as well as for further psychosocial services and GBV case management.

11 May 2016

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