



**“IF MEN ARE CAUGHT, THEY
ARE KILLED, IF WOMEN ARE
CAUGHT, THEY ARE RAPED”**

SOUTH SUDAN - ATROCITIES IN EQUATORIA REGION TURN
COUNTRY'S BREADBASKET INTO A KILLING FIELD

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Cover photo: *Yei city - few residents remain in this once bustling trading centre.*
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MAP



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Amnesty International

INTRODUCTION

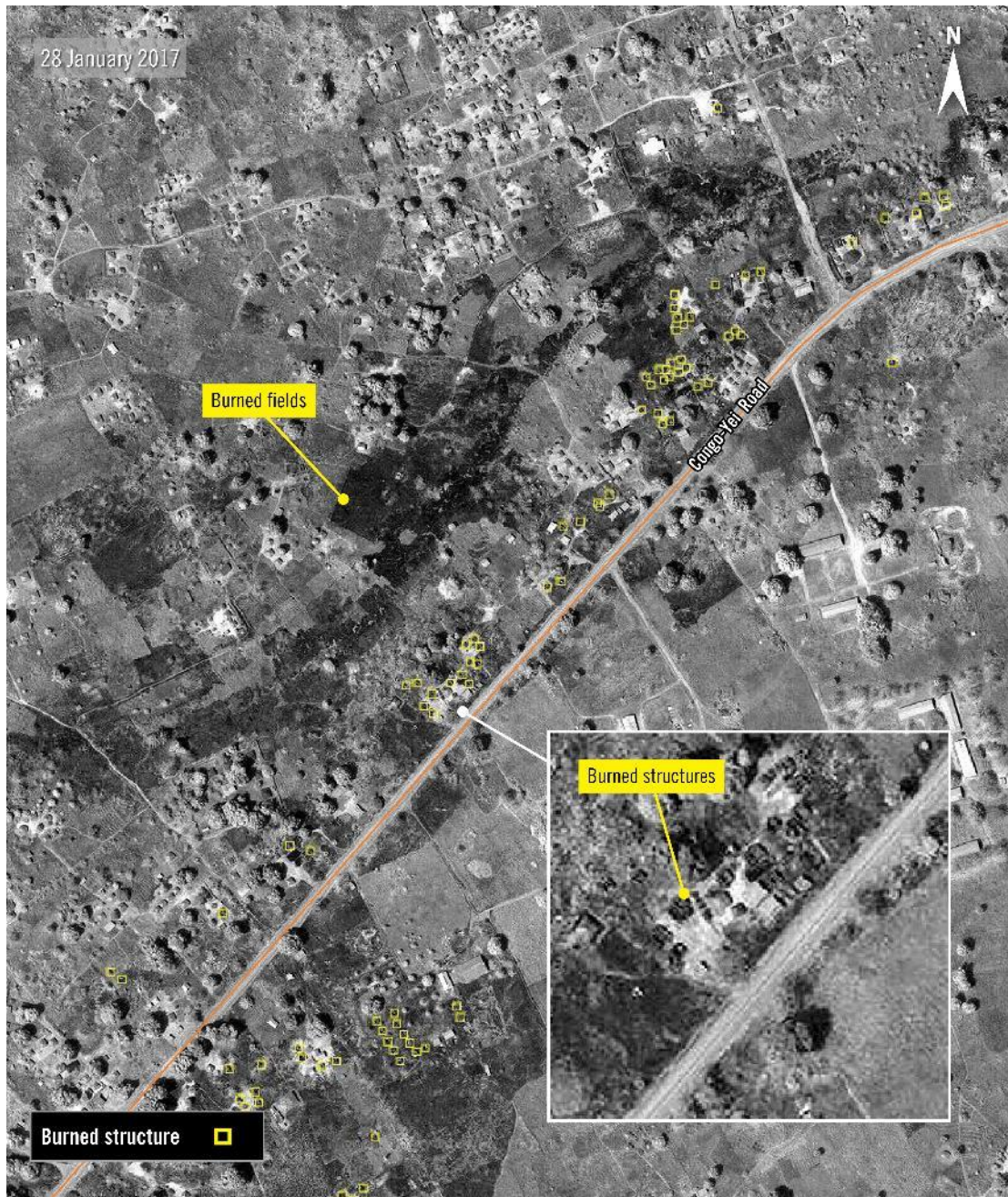
Government and opposition forces in South Sudan's Equatoria region, have committed war crimes and widespread and serious human rights abuses against civilians.¹ Men, women and children have been shot, hacked to death with machetes and burned alive in their homes. Women and girls have been gang-raped, some after having been abducted. Homes, schools, medical facilities and humanitarian organizations' compounds have been looted, vandalized and burned down.² Such atrocities have already forcibly displaced hundreds of thousands of the region's inhabitants, and are continuing. Many of the displaced have fled the country and are now living as refugees in neighbouring Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Others are internally displaced within the region, living in fear of the ongoing violence and in dire humanitarian conditions. Both government and opposition forces have used food as a weapon of war, denying civilians access to food as a means to control their movement or force them out of their homes and off their land. As a result, in a region previously considered as South Sudan's breadbasket, the remaining population faces acute food shortages and increasing malnutrition.



Recently arrived refugees from the Equatoria region waiting to be registered at a refugee centre in northern Uganda, June 2017 © Amnesty International

¹ From 14 May to 12 June 2017 Amnesty International delegates visited Yei city and areas in Kajo-Keji County in the Equatoria region of South Sudan, as well as areas in northern Uganda hosting refugees from South Sudan. The delegates interviewed 98 victims and witnesses as well as humanitarian and medical workers, civil society activists and local government and security officials. Names and other details of the interviewees have been changed for security reasons. Amnesty International has also been monitoring patterns of destruction in the Equatoria region through satellite imagery analysis.

² See for example *Human rights violations and abuses in Yei July 2016 – January 2017*, OHCHR, May 2017 http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SS/UNMISSReportJuly2016_January2017.pdf



Imagery from 28 January 2017 shows burnt structures along the road in Lutaya. The structures were burned between 1 January and 28 January 2017. Fields also appear burned in the image. Coordinates: 4.0755°, 30.6440° © 2017 DigitalGlobe, Inc. Source: USG, NextView License

BACKGROUND - THE SPREAD OF THE CONFLICT TO THE EQUATORIA REGION

South Sudan's Equatoria region had been spared the political and inter-communal violence which has ravaged the country since 2013, after fighting broke out between members of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) loyal to President Salva Kiir and those loyal to the then Vice-President Riek Machar. The latter formed the SPLA-In Opposition (SPLA-IO, often referred to as IO). A peace deal, signed in August 2015³ by President Kiir and Machar, which reinstated Machar as Vice-President, was never fully implemented and eventually collapsed in July 2016.

Since the conflict broke out, most of the fighting was concentrated in Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity. As tensions mounted between the warring sides in late 2015 and early 2016, the conflict spread to other parts of the country, including the Equatoria region, where frustration at government forces' operations seemingly contributed to young men taking up arms. At the same time SPLA-IO fighters moved to the Equatoria region in the framework of the 'cantonment' of armed forces/fighters, as provided for in the 2015 Peace Agreement.⁴ Attacks by armed individuals, who may or may not have been linked to the SPLA-IO,⁵ created insecurity that spread to the area around Yei, a major strategic town 150 km south-west of the capital, close to the borders with the DRC and Uganda – major trading partners of South Sudan. The government deployed hundreds of troops to Yei and surrounding areas as the conflict intensified incrementally throughout 2016. First, after deadly clashes in the capital, Juba in early July 2016, when Machar and part of

³ Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS) of 17 August 2015, https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/final_proposed_compromise_agreement_for_south_sudan_conflict.pdf. The agreement was the result of intense pressure from the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations (UN). It called for truth and reconciliation, the establishment of a hybrid court, and the establishment of a transitional government of national unity (TGONU). However, implementation of the deal was slow. It was not until April 2016 when Riek Machar arrived in Juba to take up the position of First Vice President that the Transitional Government of National Unity was formed. During those eight months between the signing of the peace agreement and the establishment of the TGONU, the conflict spread to other parts of the country, including the Equatoria region - the states along South Sudan's southern border (bordering Uganda, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo).

⁴ Article 2, Chapter 2, the ARCSS, https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/final_proposed_compromise_agreement_for_south_sudan_conflict.pdf, which did not, however, specify the precise 'cantonment' locations. For more information, see: Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan Small Arms Survey: Conflict in Western Equatoria; July 2016 <http://www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/facts-figures/HSBA-Conflict-in-WES-July-2016.pdf>

⁵ See, for example: Eye Radio: Armed Yei youth attack travellers; 13 March 2016 <http://www.everadio.org/armed-yei-youth-attack-travelers/>

his forces fled South Sudan via the Equatoria region. And again, at the end of 2016, after SPLA-IO forces who had fled to the DRC returned to South Sudan to set-up base in the Equatoria region.⁶

The increased militarisation of the region, with both sides pouring their respective forces into the area, spelt disaster for the civilian population. Many of the government forces deployed to the region are members of the Mathiang Anyoor, a militia (mainly) composed of youth from the Dinka ethnic group (initially set-up by former Chief of Staff, General Paul Malong, for presidential protection). Residents of Yei and surrounding areas as well as civil society activists interviewed by Amnesty International were unanimous in asserting that the arrival of the new forces in mid-2016 coincided with the sharp deterioration of the security situation.

“Before we didn’t see the soldiers very much and they did not bother us, but when the Mathiang Anyoor came, everything changed. They did things that other soldiers never did before. They kill people, rape women and steal everything they find, and nobody can stop them. Even the police can’t do anything to them,”⁷ a medical worker told Amnesty International in Yei.

“Before we didn’t see the soldiers very much and they did not bother us, but when the Mathiang Anyoor came, everything changed. They did things that other soldiers never did before. They kill people, rape women and steal everything they find, and nobody can stop them. Even the police can’t do anything to them.”

A medical worker told Amnesty International in Yei

Although the government maintains the Mathiang Anyoor is a regular SPLA brigade, several government and security officials told Amnesty International it is a semi-voluntary, ethnically-based, Dinka militia whose members are poorly-trained, undisciplined and unaccountable.

Though on a smaller scale than government forces, opposition forces have also committed serious abuses, targeting especially Dinka civilians and Sudanese refugees, whom they consider pro-government, and abducting and sexually assaulting women and girls.

The South Sudan conflict has taken on an increasingly ethnic dimension, with the leaders of the two main opposing factions belonging to the two largest ethnic groups - President Kiir, a Dinka, and former Vice-President Machar, a Nuer - and drawing much of their support from members of their own ethnic groups. With the formation of new armed groups with different grievances, some affiliated with the SPLM/IO and others who are not, the conflict can no longer be seen as binary, being solely between the government and SPLM/IO.

The SPLA-IO, has sought to broaden its support base to include other ethnic groups, but it is not clear to what extent local armed opposition groups in the Equatoria region are part of the SPLA-IO or just temporary/tactical allies. General Thomas Cirillo, from the Bari ethnic group, resigned as SPLA Deputy Chief of Staff in February 2017, called on President Kiir to step down and announced he was considering participating in the conflict with his own armed group. It remains unclear whether he has an operational armed group under his command and the extent to which forces loyal to him may cooperate with the SPLA-IO.⁸

⁶ See: IRIN News: Congo’s South Sudan rebel problem; 17 October 2016. <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2016/10/17/congo%E2%80%99s-south-sudan-rebel-problem> and: Sudan Tribune: South Sudan army accused of raiding SPLA-IO cantonment area in Mundri; 25 November 2016 <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article57162>

⁷ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 3 of June 2017.

⁸ See: The Messenger: Exclusive interview with South Sudan’s General Thomas Cirilo Swaka; 22 March 2017 <https://messengerfrica.com/2017/03/22/exclusive-interview-with-south-sudans-general-thomas-cirilo-swaka/> and: Sudan Tribune: S. Sudan rebels deny presence of NAS forces in Equatoria region; 16 March 2017 <http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article61916>

A peace deal between the government and a local armed opposition group facilitated by Bishop Elias Taban, was signed in Uganda in early June, but was dismissed as irrelevant by the SPLA-IO. It remains unclear how much influence that group commands among opposition forces.⁹

⁹ Though the armed opposition groups which signed the deal said they are part of the SPLA-IO, the latter dismissed both the deal and those who signed it. See: News Ghana: Fault lines in South Sudan rebel movement offers peace a chance; 7 June 2017 <https://www.newsghana.com.gh/fault-lines-in-south-sudan-rebel-movement-offers-peace-a-chance/>

DELIBERATE KILLINGS OF CIVILIANS

Survivors, witnesses and relatives of victims interviewed by Amnesty International in Yei, in an internally displaced people's settlement in the Kajo-Keji area, near the border with Uganda, and among the refugees sheltering in northern Uganda, as well as NGO workers and church leaders, reported a consistent and on-going pattern of killings and attacks against civilians and their property by government soldiers.

In the evening of 16 May 2017, government soldiers arrested 11 men in Kudupi village, in Kajo Keji County. They forced eight of them into a hut, locked the door, set fire to the hut and fired several shots into the burning hut. Six were killed in the incident, two of them were burnt and the others were shot as they tried to flee, four of the survivors told Amnesty International.

John, a 45-year-old father of 10, told Amnesty International: "I was at home on my own (because my family had already fled to the refugee camps in Uganda) when two soldiers came to my home. One of them was in uniform, camouflage, and the other wore civilian clothes and a vest with lots of pockets, like soldiers wear to carry munitions. Both had rifles. One had an AK-47 and the other a PKM, with the bullets slung over his shoulder. The soldiers who took me also arrested my friend Richard and another local man, James Oliya, who they handcuffed. They took us to a nearby compound where the owner, Daniel, was being detained with seven others. We were 11 prisoners in all. They ordered all of us to sit down. They asked 'who speaks Arabic?' and nobody responded. They made us hand over our phones but didn't ask us anything else. They asked who is the owner of the house and made him sit separately, then sent two others to the kitchen to cook for them. Then they forced the remaining eight of us into one of the huts, a brick hut with a thatch roof, locked the door and set fire to the roof of the hut, while at the same time they fired several shots into the hut through the door. It was pitch dark inside the hut so [I] could not see anything but heard two of the men who were inside with me scream as they were injured by incoming bullets. The two were Eric Innocent and Onya Joseph, aged about 50 and 40 respectively. We struggled to break the door as the fire was spreading but finally managed to break the door and run outside. I ran to a nearby hill and hid there until the morning, when I returned to the compound to look for survivors. I first found the body of one of the neighbours, Malish Kenyi, about 36. He had been shot in the back of the neck and the right flank. Behind the burned out hut, I found the bodies of Olya James and Pityia Julias. Olya was lying face down and Pityia was lying on top of him facing up. Olya's hands were still bound together. His face was very badly burnt but I knew it was him because he was the tallest of us all. Inside the burnt-out hut, I found the bodies of Onya Joseph and Eric Innocent. Only the two skulls and some bones remained but I knew it was them because they had been shot and injured in the hut and so had been unable to flee. As I went to my compound, about 100 metres away, I found the body of my uncle, Simon Ladu, aged about 60. He was at home when the soldiers came to arrest me but he was not taken. Perhaps the soldiers only saw him later. He had been shot in the back of the neck. I don't know why the soldiers committed such a massacre. We committed no crime, we were just cattle farmers. Our wives and children had fled to the refugee camps in Uganda while we had stayed on our land to look after our cows."¹⁰

¹⁰ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 27 of May 2017.

“They forced the remaining eight of us into one of the huts, a brick hut with a thatch roof, locked the door and set fire to the roof of the hut, while at the same time they fired several shots into the hut through the door.”

John, survivor of mass killing by government forces

Daniel, the owner of the burnt hut, gave a similar account: “Meand George and Simon fled before the others were locked up into the house. We managed to flee because the soldiers sent us to the kitchen, which was in a separate hut, to cook for them. While there, I whispered to the other two that the situation did not look good and that these soldiers may harm us. Simon escaped, then George, and then I escaped. Then the soldiers started to shoot and set fire to my house. I hid all night in the bush nearby and from there I could see the fire. In the morning, I started to look for my friends. I found Simon. He said ‘I’m alive, God is with us.’ He told me some of our friends were dead in the compound. We went there and found the bodies of Oliya, Pitya and Malish, and then the body of Simon Ladu. At first, I did not realize that anyone had burnt in my hut but then I spoke to a neighbour who said that her husband, Onya Joseph, and Eric Innocent were missing. We only found their remains later, after we had already buried the first four. The soldiers also burned another tukul in my compound with 13 goats inside. They burned them alive. I found their bones in the burnt out tukul. In another tukul, which was not burnt, they stole all my money – 135,000 Ugandan shillings which I had just received from the sale of three goats and 3,500 South Sudan pounds. I was left with nothing. I had stayed in my village despite the unsafe situation in order to keep working on my farm and support my family in the refugee camp in Uganda. But, after this terrible attack, I also was forced to flee and to join my family as a refugee.”¹¹

Joyce, a mother of six from Payawa, a village in the Mugwo Payam, south of Yei, told Amnesty International how her husband and five other men were killed on 18 May 2017: “My husband was killed at our home on 18 May 2017. There was an army barracks about 4 km from Yei town. The Dinka [uniformed soldiers] came from there to attack us at about 10 am. We ran away. I grabbed my children and escaped. They were targeting the men, so women were able to escape. They killed about six people. I was outside next to the house when the Dinka arrived. I grabbed the children. I saw them shoot my husband and I ran. They shot him at the door as he was coming out of the house. They didn’t say anything. I think they shot him because they wanted to steal our cattle. They took all the cattle.”¹²

The victims included Joyce’s husband, Emmanuel Yoma, a 45 year-old farmer and herder, his cousin Moris Mali Baba and four neighbours, all killed, and a 35 year-old cousin, Paul, who was shot in the arm. Paul told Amnesty International: “It was Sunday and I went to church as every Sunday. While in the church, I heard shooting and I ran outside and got hit by a bullet in my right arm. Four people were killed there, Emmanuel, Moris Mali and Kemi Levi. I don’t know the name of the fourth. Two others were shot in another spot.”¹³

Some of the bodies were partly burnt, Emmanuel’s mother told Amnesty International. Witnesses said that, after having shot the men, soldiers took some dry grass, lit it and used it to set the bodies on fire.

Joyce said: “This was the fifth time the village was attacked by the army. In the first four attacks, they had looted goods but not killed anyone. They used to come, arrest people, torture them and steal things. They would take people to hidden places to torture them. They would also arrest young girls and rape them and then release them. Susie, my husband’s niece, age 18, was raped. It happened on 18 December 2016. They raped her in the village.”¹⁴

In Mugwo, a village south of Yei, in the early afternoon of 3 May 2017, government forces killed at least four civilians and then set fire to their homes, witnesses told Amnesty International. Among the victims was Amule Manoa Aligo, a 38-year-old father of three who kept bees and cultivated a small farm for a living. One of his neighbours recounted: “Soldiers appeared out of nowhere between our compounds shooting residents. They shot Amule in his home and then set fire to his tukul. He was obviously too injured to be able to escape so he burnt in his home. I was hiding in the bush nearby. I could not go to rescue him as I feared

¹¹ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 26 of May 2017.

¹² Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 28 of May 2017.

¹³ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 28 of May 2017.

¹⁴ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 28 of May 2017.

that the soldiers would catch me and do the same to me. The following morning, I went to his burnt-out home and found his bones. Three other neighbours were also shot dead. The soldiers also took some animals with them, several goats and other animals.”¹⁵



Burned bodies of civilians killed outside Yei, South Sudan, November 2016 © Justin Lynch

While in Yei in the first week of June 2017, an Amnesty international delegate received information about the arrest on 21 May 2017 in Gimunu, 13 kilometres outside Yei town, of four men and two women who remain unaccounted for, and of three more civilians few days later in the same area. Witnesses said those who had seized the nine were government soldiers from the nearby army barrack. The Yei Police Commissioner told Amnesty International the case of the nine missing civilians was under investigation.

On 3 June 2017, witnesses told Amnesty International the bodies of the three men abducted some days earlier had been found in the area. The Yei Police Commissioner later announced the bodies of the three had been found. The bodies of the six were also eventually found in the second week of June 2017.¹⁶ The victims are: Alfred Asu Bullen, Francis Joja James, Thomas Taban Ezibon, Charles Lasu Morris, Rejoice Konga, Peter Abe Oliver, Ajo Lo Ezibon, Amule Lo Jongu and City na Cosmas Lawuya. They were reportedly hacked to death with machetes. To date, no outcome from the investigation has been reported. In previous cases where the police investigated killings and other abuses, no soldiers were prosecuted – apparently because of lack of cooperation from the army.

Attacks on villages by government forces often take place soon after ambushes or attacks by armed opposition groups on government forces and appear to be in revenge for the activities of opposition forces in the region.

Simon, a pastor from a village near Yei, told Amnesty International: “If IO fighters carry out an attack somewhere in the area, civilians had better run because for sure government soldiers will come and kill people randomly and destroy their homes. Sometimes it is enough that opposition fighters pass by through a village and, if the soldiers find out, they will punish the villagers because they consider that this is cooperation by the villagers with the IO. And, at the same time, soldiers are all the time looking to loot food and other property because they are receiving almost no salary, so when they attack civilians, they usually also loot homes and property in the area. Really, it is difficult for civilians to keep safe in these circumstances.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 27 of May 2017.

¹⁶ The cases were also reported by local media on 14 June 2017: Radio Tamazuj: 9 missing villagers found brutally killed in Yei County; 14 June 2017 <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/9-missing-villagers-found-brutally-killed-in-yei-county>

¹⁷ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 26 of May 2017.

Tom Diko Juma Jackson, a 37 year-old father of seven, was shot dead by soldiers on the morning of 4 May 2017 in Sopiri, a few km south-west of Yei. His cousin, who witnessed the attack, told Amnesty International: “I was looking after the cattle and Tom was digging the land. Some rebels had passed by a couple of hours earlier and then government soldiers came to look for the rebels, but the rebels had long gone. I saw the soldiers coming and I hid but Tom was digging and did not see them coming. They asked him ‘where are the rebels’ and Tom said he doesn’t know anything about the rebels, which is true. We don’t have any relations with the rebels. A soldier told Tom ‘if you won’t tell us where are the rebels, it means you are one of their military intelligence.’ They told him to salute them and he said ‘I’m not a soldier.’ They pushed him down to the ground and they shot him. Several soldiers shot. There were 12 soldiers in all, all in camouflage uniforms and well-armed. Four had AK rifles, six had PKM rifles and two had another kind of rifle with a folding handle. After the soldiers left, I went to Tom’s body. He had several bullet wounds; I saw five: one in the head, two in the upper back and two in the abdomen.”¹⁸

A resident of Yei, who fled the town at the beginning of the year and was sheltering near Mugwo village, told Amnesty International that, in February 2017, government soldiers killed several villagers in a reprisal attack: “I was staying with my brother who lived in the village. A group of three army pick-ups full of soldiers passed in the village looking for rebels and then they found the rebels somewhere outside the village and clashed with them but lost many soldiers. They came back with only one pick-up and the bodies of some of their dead colleagues. They arrested several villagers from their home. Three of them were friends of my brother: one was David Gale, age 22 and a student in senior two class, another was Kiza Bosco, married with two children, and the third was Samsung Robert, aged about 30. They took them to the side of the road and killed them with machetes. We found them slaughtered, the back of their necks had been slashed. We buried them nearby.”¹⁹

Armed opposition forces have also deliberately killed civilians simply because they are Dinkas, as well as refugees from Sudan’s Nuba Mountains region who they consider government supporters. Sara, a Shilluk woman who used to live in Yei, told Amnesty International that, in March 2017, she witnessed the abduction and killing of some of her neighbours in a refugee camp in Nyori, south of Yei: “When the situation became so bad in Yei, I went to join my friend and neighbour Mundulu who was staying in a refugee camp in Nyori. She and her family had left Yei earlier because her husband is a Sudanese Nuba and in Yei the family was at risk from the rebels. I stayed with them in the camp for a week in a makeshift shelter near the edge of the camp, in the bush. One night four, rebels came to our shelter and took us all out to the bush. Me, my children, Mundulu, her husband, AbdulRahman and their four children, two girls aged 14 and four, and two boys, aged about eight and 10. They were Equatorians. They said they were taking us to a ‘mahkama,’ a court. They took other people from the shelters nearby. Most of the people there were Nuba. When they knew that I am Shilluk and my husband is Equatorian, they made me and my children sit in one place and they took Mundulu and her family to another place. I could not see because the grass was tall. I stayed there all night with my children. In the morning, we were released with some other people. The rebels said ‘you go and the others will come later.’ We ran to look for police or someone who could help us. Mundulu came crawling. She had a deep cut in her neck and was alone. She could not stand and could barely speak. She signalled to me that her husband and her children had all been killed because he was Nuba and the children belong to the man so they were also Nuba. Mundulu is Equatorian so she was spared.”²⁰

“Mundulu came crawling. She had a deep cut in her neck and was alone. She could not stand and could barely speak. She signaled to me that her husband and her children had all been killed because he was Nuba and the children belong to the man so they were also Nuba. Mundulu is Equatorian so she was spared.”

Sara, witness of mass killing by opposition forces

¹⁸ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 27 of May 2017.

¹⁹ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 29 of May 2017.

²⁰ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 23 of May 2017.

On 4 June 2017, rebel fighters attacked a convoy of civilian cars and buses, escorted by army vehicles, near Nimule, close to the Ugandan border. The convoy was travelling on the main road to Juba. SPLA-IO Spokesperson, Lam Paul Gabriel, told media they had targeted government forces although civilians were killed in the crossfire and reiterated a warning for civilians not to travel with soldiers: "We are taking the responsibility [for] the ambush. We targeted government groups, those who are escorting the civilians."²¹ The precise number of civilian victims is not known but humanitarian workers told Amnesty International they had seen several civilian dead and injured at a medical facility in Nimule shortly after the attack. Government officials said 14 had been killed but did not specify how many were civilians,²² whereas the SPLA-IO said its fighters had killed 40 people, including at least two Colonels. The Ugandan authorities said five Ugandan civilians travelling to Juba for a wedding were among those killed in the attack.²³



Man wounded in a market shooting on the 15 of May 2017 in Payawa, south-east of Yei © Amnesty International

²¹ See: Reuters: South Sudan rebels claim responsibility for deadly convoy attack; 9 June 2017 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-south-sudan-war-idUSKBN190137>

²² *Ibid*

²³ See: Daily Monitor: Five Ugandans among those killed in South Sudan ambush; 9 June 2017 <http://www.monitor.co.ug/News/National/Five--Ugandans-South-Sudan-ambush-Juba-Moli/688334-3962928-5vx7fg/index.html>.

WOMEN AND GIRLS ABDUCTED, SEXUALLY ASSAULTED

“The only way to be safe for women and girls is to be dead – there is no way to be safe so long as we are alive. This is how bad it is.”

Mary, a 23 year-old mother of five who was raped by government forces, told Amnesty International.²⁴

“The only way to be safe for women and girls is to be dead – there is no way to be safe so long as we are alive. This is how bad it is,” Mary, a 23 year-old mother of five told Amnesty International.

In April 2017, she was raped by two soldiers in her home in Yei. She recalled: “Three of them came to my home in the middle of the night. I was alone with my children because my husband was killed last year when he went to work in the farm where he grew some food. One stood by the door while the other two took turns to rape me. After that I went to stay in another part of town, in one of the abandoned houses [left vacant by residents who fled the town] but, two days ago, again at night, someone came and set fire to place while I was sleeping. I woke up choking, I grabbed my children and we ran out. Those who do these things, there is nothing you can do against them. They have all the power. What can I do to protect at least my children?”

Mary’s case is not exceptional. Cases like hers have become widespread throughout Equatoria region where, over the past year, sexual assaults of women and girls have skyrocketed. Health workers who provide medical care and psychological support to victims of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Yei told Amnesty International there has been a sharp increase in rape and that, in most cases, the women and girls they assist were assaulted by government forces, with a smaller percentage being assaulted by armed opposition forces. That said, armed opposition forces operate mostly in rural areas outside Yei. It is difficult and, in many cases, impossible for civilians from those areas to reach the hospital in Yei. Hence the number of cases of sexual assault by armed opposition forces could be significantly higher.

Women are particularly at risk when they venture out of town to look for food in the rural areas. Sara told Amnesty International how soldiers raped her 60-year-old mother when she went to harvest cassava in a rural area outside Yei: “Me and my mother went out towards Mukaya, on the road to Juba, to harvest some cassava, which is the only way we have to get some food. I was in a different part of the farm when I saw three soldiers attacking my mother. They were very young and they shouted in Dinka language. I thought they were killing her and got so scared that I fainted in the tall grass so they never saw me. After they left, my mother crawled around the orchard looking for me. She woke me up and told me that the three soldiers had

²⁴ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 4 of June 2017.

raped her. She could not stand up. I called my brother and we managed to find a boda-boda [motorcycle taxi] to take her to the hospital in Yei. This happened more than two months ago [15 March 2017] and she is still sick now.”²⁵ Medical workers told Amnesty International the woman suffered a dislocated hip and is still unable to walk unaided.

Twenty one year-old Rebecca recounted how, on 2 March 2017, two soldiers came to her home in Yei in the middle of the night, raped her and then stole all her money and possessions: “They broke into my room and took me outside and raped me by the side of the road and left me there. First they stole everything – all the money which I earned selling the simple food I cook and which I save and send to my parents who are living as refugees in Uganda, my telephone, my cooking utensils and even some clothes. Now I have nothing left, I have no money to buy the tea, sugar, rice and beans I need to cook and run my business and earn a living. They said the soldiers came to Yei to protect the civilians, but they sleep and the civilians suffer.”²⁶



Refugees from Equatoria region of South Sudan in northern Uganda, June 2017 © Amnesty International

Sofia, a 29-year-old mother of three, told Amnesty International: “I lived with my parents and my children in Sopiri [west of Yei] but last year we left because there were soldiers and rebels around and we were scared there would be war there. We moved to a place East of Yei, in Gimunu area. There four soldiers came and threatened to kill us. They said ‘why are you staying in the bush?’ They suspected we were linked to the rebels, but it was not so. Then, one day, when I was coming to Yei to sell tomatoes, I was abducted by five rebels. They were local, they all spoke Kakwa. They took me to a place far away. It took one day to walk there. They suspected that because I was carrying food to Yei, I may be married to a Dinka or an informer or feeding the soldiers in Yei. On the way, the rebels killed three of the five prisoners they were also taking with us. When we arrived at their place in Bereka, on the way to Juba, I found five other women there. We were kept separate but could manage to speak when we went to fetch water. They were all captives, like me. At night, the rebels chose who to sleep with. I told them that I am a mother and a widow, and that my husband was shot dead by the soldiers in Yei, but they didn’t care. I was kept for one month there. When they released me, they escorted me back and gave me a phone number of the man who had kept me as his wife. He later called me and asked me to go meet him or they would come and hurt my family, So I went and I was taken back to Bereka and kept there for one week. It was always the same man who raped me. He was

²⁵ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 3 of June 2017.

²⁶ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 3 of June 2017.

about 45 years old. When they released me the second time, I decided to leave the area and come to Yei because I did not want to be kidnapped again, so I came here to Yei.”²⁷

“I found five other women there. We were kept separate but could manage to speak when we went to fetch water. They were all captives, like me. At night, the rebels chose who to sleep with.”

Sophia, a 29 year-old mother of three who was abducted and raped by opposition forces, told Amnesty International.

Sophia says that, while in the village, she could get some food. In the town she has no money to buy food and so she and sneaks out of town with other women to forage for cassava in the rural areas. They walk in the bush, avoiding the main road where they can be intercepted by soldiers or rebel fighters. It is a dangerous undertaking: “Once, some soldiers shot at us and we hid in the tall grass for hours waiting for the soldiers to go. If they catch us, they will take our food and can rape us, beat us, even kill us. What can we do? This is the only way we have to get some food,” she said.

²⁷ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 4 of June 2017.

WARRING SIDES USING FOOD AS A WEAPON OF WAR

Both government and SPLA-IO forces have imposed restrictions on civilians' access to food, varying from actively preventing food from reaching certain areas, to systematically looting food from markets and homes, to targeting civilians carrying even the smallest amount of food across frontlines – with each side accusing civilians of feeding or being fed by the enemy. Such accusations have often been accompanied by attacks, including sexual assault, killings and destruction of property.

“Three years of conflict have eroded livelihoods and disrupted farming, including in the Equatorias, the country’s breadbasket.”

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General²⁸

In what used to be a food-rich region, which used to be South Sudan’s breadbasket, civilians are now finding it difficult to survive because of lack of food.²⁹ In the town of Yei, which was home to up to 300,000 people but most of whose population has fled in the past year, civilians are under virtual siege. No longer able to get food from the surrounding rural areas, they are facing severe food shortages. Any attempt to travel outside the town exposes them to the risk of attacks by both government forces/militias who control access to the town and IO fighters operating in the surrounding areas. A church leader told Amnesty International: “In May 2016, the IO issued warning to civilians in the rural areas around Yei town to stop taking food to Yei and, at the same time, they were announcing their intention to capture Yei town. The aim was to empty the town of civilians. Indeed, many residents fled the town because they were afraid they would be caught in the fighting. But people continued to go to the markets in the surrounding villages to buy food, because people have to eat. So the rebels put checkpoints on the road to stop people taking food to Yei. One day, rebel fighters stopped our truck and confiscated all the food. They did the same to other civilians who were also taking food to Yei. They said: ‘We have warned you again and again [not to take food into Yei] but you have

²⁸ “The humanitarian crisis continues to deepen. One hundred thousand people are enduring famine, one million are on the verge of that fate, and 5.5 million may be severely food insecure by this summer. Moreover at least 7.5 million people across South Sudan – almost two thirds of the population – need humanitarian assistance. Three years of conflict have eroded livelihoods and disrupted farming, including in the Equatorias, the country’s breadbasket.” Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary General. UN News Centre 23 March 2017, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56412#.WVYs6uvv3g>

²⁹ Improved security is essential to reinvigorating what has been called the bread basket of South Sudan, the head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), David Shearer, has said. “Mr Shearer was making his first field trip to the town of Yambio in the Western Equatoria region of South Sudan, an agricultural region which has typically provided a wide range of food products for the rest of the country. Production has slowed because farmers are no longer able to plant crops due to ongoing insecurity and displacement.” ReliefWeb 23 February 2017, <http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/security-essential-reinvigorating-bread-basket-south-sudan>

not heeded our instructions.’ They forced the driver to take all the food – ours and that of the other people – to the bush nearby.”³⁰

Women rights’ activists and medical workers in Yei told Amnesty International that, with severe food shortages in the town, some of the remaining residents have no choice but to go to surrounding rural areas to look for food.

“If men are caught, they are killed and if women are caught, they are raped.”

Edna, a women’s right activist in Yei³¹

Edna, a women’s right activist, told Amnesty International in Yei: “If men are caught, they are killed and if women are caught, they are raped. Some women continue to go because they have children to feed so they have no choice. We call them ‘the die-hard’ because they take such a big risk. They walk for hours in the bush to get to the fields to look for cassava. If the soldiers or the rebels catch them, they rape them and steal the food. Each accuse them of cooperating with the other side but they are just going to look for food for their children.”

Mary, 30, told Amnesty International what happened when she and her husband, David, 42, were captured last March: “I was going to harvest cassava near Sopiri [west of Yei] with my husband. Two soldiers grabbed us. They were wearing army uniforms and had big guns [rifles]. They blindfolded us. My blindfold came down over my ears so I could not hear much anymore. They forced me to the ground and raped me. Both of them. I don’t know what they did to my husband. While I was being assaulted, I heard shots, I don’t know if they killed him. I have had no news of him since that day. Now I am too afraid to go back to cultivate the land, but I have no food. I rely on my neighbours for food, but I don’t know for how long they will be able to help me because they are also very poor.”³²



Refugees from Equatoria region of South Sudan in northern Uganda, June 2017 © Amnesty International

³⁰ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 3 of June 2017.

³¹ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 2 of June 2017.

³² Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 4 of June 2017.

LOOTING AND DESTRUCTION OF PROPERTY FUELLING DISPLACEMENT

Most of the displaced civilians interviewed in South Sudan and across the border in Uganda said they had fled primarily because of fear, because they or their relatives had been directly affected by the violence or they had witnessed others being victims of attacks. However, many also said the lack of food had forced them to become displaced. Most had been displaced multiple times. Many of them had spent months living in the bush, trying to remain hidden from the soldiers while remaining in the vicinity of their homes and farms.

“For six months, we slept in the bush and only went back home sometimes during the day to cultivate the land and prepare food. But now that the rainy season is upon us, we could not continue to live like this. Since it is not safe to go back home permanently, we came here,”³³ 55 year-old Matata, a father of eight, told Amnesty International in a camp for internally displaced people near the Ugandan border. He said his wife and five of their eight children had gone on a refugee camp in Uganda.

As well as looting, government forces have destroyed property on a massive scale, vandalizing and burning down homes, shops and public structures. In April 2017, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) identified a total of 18,318 destroyed structures within an analysed area of about 3,640 square kilometers.³⁴ Amnesty International’s monitoring of the situation through satellite imagery analysis likewise reveals large scale destruction.

John, a trader from Yei town now sheltering in a camp in Uganda, told Amnesty International he had moved several times since July 2016: “I first fled Yei because my stall in the market in the Dar al-Salam neighbourhood was looted by soldiers. They stole all my merchandise and almost killed me. They shot randomly to make the traders scatter and stole the merchandise. I went to different areas outside Yei, first to the south-west, and tried to continue my trade. But it became more and more difficult. Lastly, I fled to an area west of Yei on the Maridi road. I stayed there until February 2017. One night, soldiers came with three pick-ups and two heavy military vehicles which looked like tanks and shot people, including my nephew who was shot while in his home, and then they started to loot everything – food, utensils, goats and chickens. And finally they started burning houses. I don’t know how many houses they burned because I fled. I went to hide in the bush nearby for two months. I did not want to go too far because I left my elderly parents there. My father is blind and my mother does not have the strength to walk very far.”³⁵

³³ Amnesty International interview, South Sudan, 26 of May 2017.

³⁴ UNITAR, South Sudan Nahr Yei district, Central Equatoria Imagery analysis; 8 April 2017
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNOSAT_A3_CE20131218SSD_NahrYei_5Mar2017_1_final.pdf

³⁵ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 29 of May 2017.

Many of the displaced from different villages gave consistent accounts of soldiers going to markets and shooting randomly and – after traders and shoppers had cleared the area - looting the merchandise. A main aim, if not the main aim, of such raids appears to be specifically to loot property.

“The shooting which caused the killings and injuries was random, just to make people scatter. It did not look like a military operation. They just came to loot.”

Jenny, a witness of looting by government forces³⁶

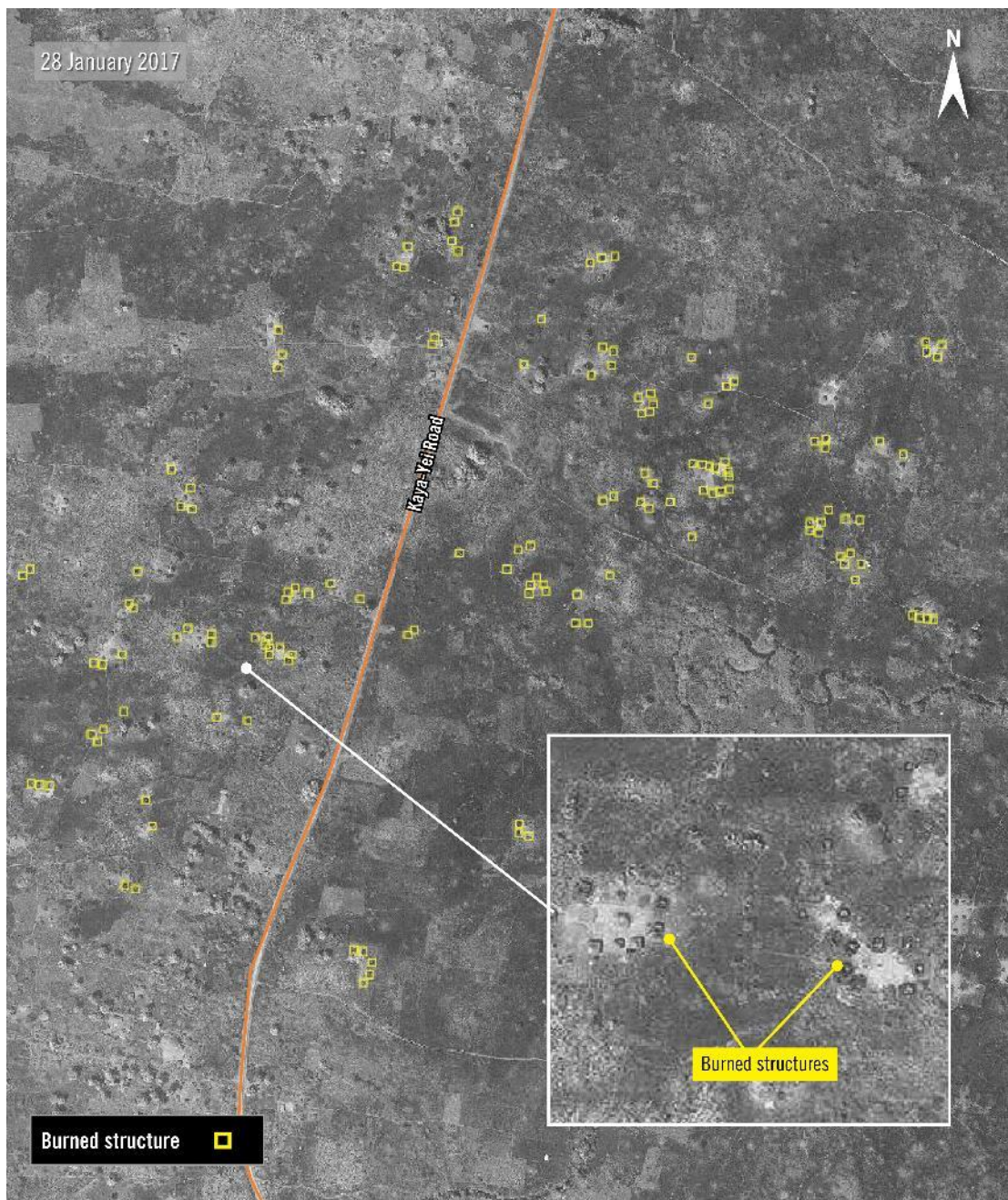
Jenny, a 60 year-old woman who lived by the market in Payawa, south-east of Yei, told Amnesty International about one such raid on 15 May 2017, which she witnessed from her home: “Some 25 or 30 soldiers came into the market in the morning. They were on foot, wearing camouflage and carrying large rifles. They shot randomly. I saw the man who repairs bicycles fall, I don't know if he was dead or injured. After everybody scattered, they proceeded to loot everything. They even used some bicycles and some carts to take things away. As they looted, they also smashed things up. After they left, people said the flying bullets had killed four people and injured four and three women had been raped. The shooting which caused the killings and injuries was random, just to make people scatter. It did not look like a military operation. They just came to loot.”

The violence and insecurity – with residents at risk of attacks in their homes, in their fields, in markets, on roads - have forcibly displaced close to a million people from their homes in the Equatoria region and disrupted food cultivation and trade to such an extent that, in the space of a year, the food-rich region which could feed millions has become a place where even the small percentage of inhabitants who remain are facing acute hunger and malnutrition.



Burnt house in the Gigomoni neighborhood of Yei, June 2017 © Amnesty International

³⁶ Amnesty International interview, northern Uganda, 29 of May 2017.



The imagery from 28 January 2017 shows burnt structures in the Mugwa area, approximately 12 kilometres south of Yei along the Kaya Road. The structures highlighted in this image were burned between 1 January and 28 January 2017. Coordinates: 4.0020°, 30.7364° © 2017 DigitalGlobe, Inc. Source: USG, NextView License

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Government and opposition forces must immediately cease and prevent all violations of international humanitarian and human rights law. In particular, all forces should immediately cease unlawful killings, acts of sexual violence and any other attacks on civilians, looting and destruction of public and private property, and acts that obstruct humanitarian access.
- All parties to the conflict must distinguish between civilians and combatants. In the conduct of military operations, only military objectives may be directly attacked.
- The government should rein in its forces and immediately cease unlawful killings of civilians, sexual assaults on women and girls and looting and destruction of civilian homes and property.
- Armed opposition groups, belonging to the SPLA-IO or other groups, must put an immediate end to attacks on civilians, including attacks which target perceived supporters of the government, Dinkas, Nuba Sudanese refugees and sexual assaults of women and girls.
- Both government and opposition forces should immediately cease restricting civilians' access to food, notably they should put an end to threats and arbitrary restrictions of movement.
- The government should initiate prompt, effective and impartial investigations into allegations of crimes under international law, and should bring suspects to justice in fair trials in civilian courts without recourse to the death penalty.
- Government and opposition force commanders must ensure a comprehensive vetting process of security forces to ensure that individuals for whom there is credible information that they have committed crimes under international law or other serious violations or abuses of human rights are excluded from service, until allegations concerning them can be independently and impartially investigated.
- All parties to the conflict should work to create conditions that would enable the safe return of displaced people.
- The Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission should closely monitor the human rights and humanitarian situation in South Sudan and condemn violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by parties to the conflict; and further ensure that the Ceasefire and Transitional Security Arrangements and Mechanism effectively monitors and reports on the parties' respect for humanitarian law;
- UN peacekeepers [the UN Mission in South Sudan, UNMISS] should increase efforts to realise their mandate to protect civilians, by, for example, deploying forces in areas where civilians are at risk and from where civilians have been displaced and where humanitarian aid is desperately needed. The international community should ensure that UN peacekeepers have the resources to fulfil their mandate to protect civilians, including by providing the security needed for humanitarian actors to deliver desperately needed aid and assistance
- The UNMISS should provide regular and timely public reporting on the human rights situation in the country, including on forced displacement and sexual violence.
- As directed by the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) in its Communique of 17 March 2017, the AU Commission should increase efforts to ensure the speedy establishment of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) in a format that complies with international law, prioritizing the effective operationalization of investigatory and victim and witness protection units.

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“IF MEN ARE CAUGHT, THEY ARE KILLED, IF WOMEN ARE CAUGHT, THEY ARE RAPED”

SOUTH SUDAN - ATROCITIES IN EQUATORIA REGION TURN COUNTRY’S BREADBASKET INTO A KILLING FIELD

In South Sudan’s Equatoria region government and opposition forces have committed war crimes and widespread human rights abuses against civilians. Men, women and children have been shot, hacked to death with machetes and burned alive in their homes. Women and girls have been gang-raped, some after having been abducted.

Homes, schools, medical facilities and humanitarian organizations’ compounds have been looted, vandalized and burned down. Both government and opposition forces use food as a weapon of war.

Such atrocities have already forcibly displaced close to a million people from their homes in a food-rich region which could feed millions but has become a place where even the small percentage of inhabitants who remain are facing acute hunger and malnutrition.

Government and opposition forces must put an immediate end to such atrocities, and UN peacekeepers [the UN mission in South Sudan, UNMISS] should increase efforts to realise their mandate to protect civilians.