

# QUARTERLY BRIEF ON VIOLENCE AFFECTING CIVILIANS

## CONTEXT

This brief presents an overview of trends in violence affecting civilians between January and March 2020, by assessing four major forms of individual harm experienced throughout the conflict (killing, injury, abduction and sexual violence). While the impact of violence extends beyond these forms of harm, they have been the most common incidents documented throughout the conflict in South Sudan.

Since the signing of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018, the overall number of civilian<sup>1</sup> casualties (defined as killed and injured civilians) attributed to conventional parties to the conflict has declined. At the same time, entrenched patterns of violence affecting civilians have persisted. This includes incidents commonly referred to as “intercommunal violence.” Although this violence is rooted in the

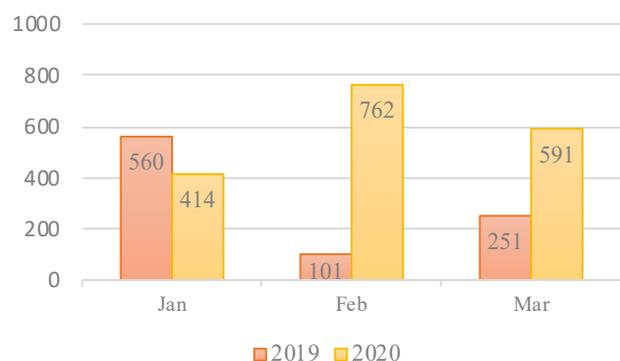
history of South Sudan, over the years it has taken on an increasingly militarized character, with the involvement of elements of conventional parties to the conflict. It therefore cannot be dissociated from local and national military dynamics.

The UNMISS Human Rights Division (HRD) has developed an incident-based tracking mechanism to document conflict-related violations and abuses. This data is disaggregated by the sex and age of victims. Sources of information include victim and eyewitness accounts, as well as reports from secondary sources identified during HRD field missions. All reported incidents, particularly those involving intercommunal violence, are deconflicted with incidents documented by the UNMISS Civil Affairs Division (CAD).

## GENERAL TRENDS

Between January and March 2020, HRD documented more than 275 incidents, involving at least 1,767 civilians who were subjected to one of the four major forms of harm (658 killed, 452 injured, 592 abducted, and 65 subjected to sexual violence). By comparison, between January and March 2019, 159 incidents were documented, involving at least 912 civilian victims (452 killed, 310 injured, 89 abducted, and 61 subjected to sexual violence), the majority arising from intercommunal violence. This corresponds to a 94 per cent increase in the number of victims (mainly killed and abducted), and a 73 per cent increase in the number of incidents between the first quarter of 2019 and the same period in 2020.

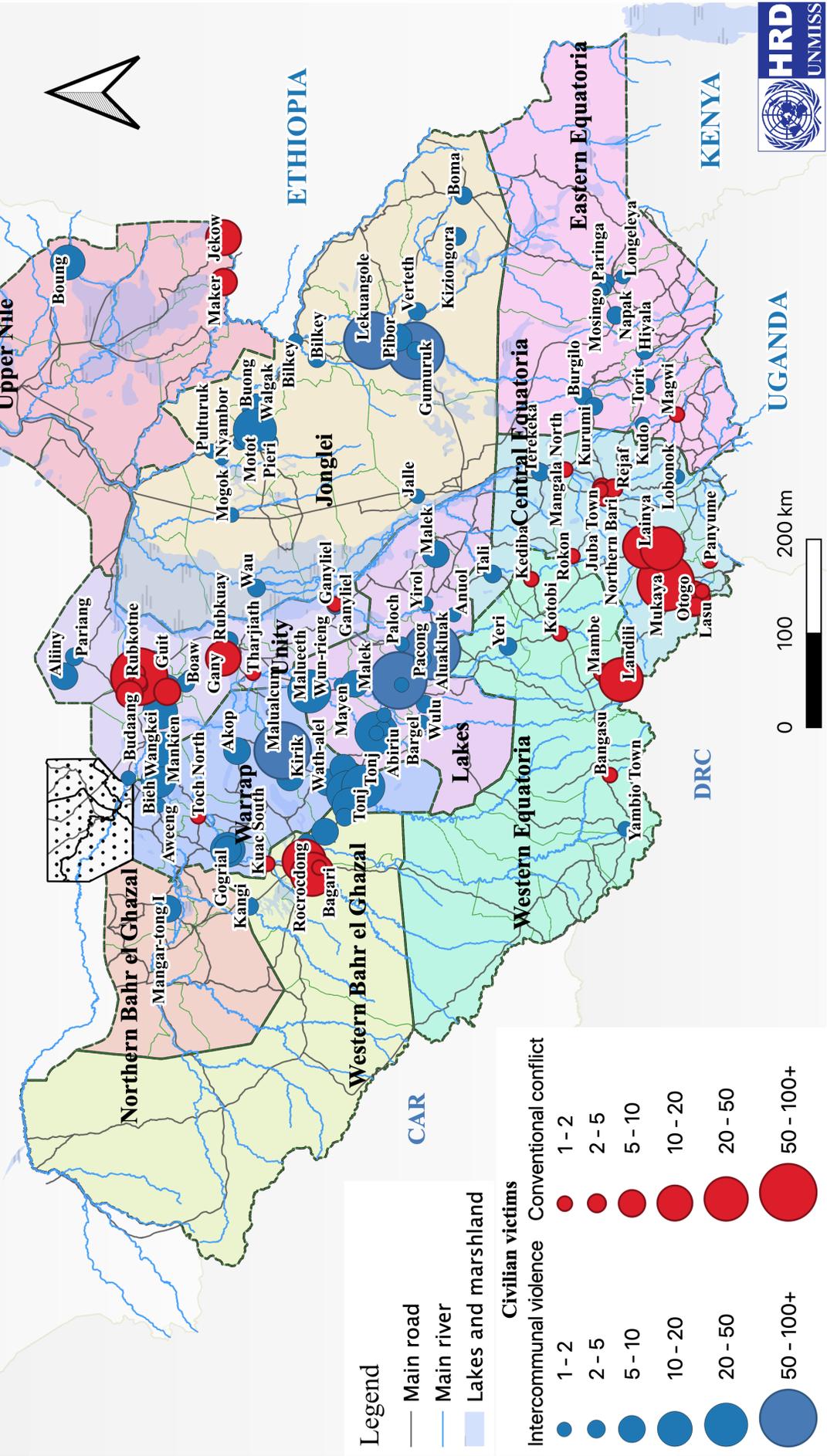
*Number of victims,  
Q1 2019 / Q1 2020*



1. When the distinction between civilians and combatants is not possible HRD presumes that victims are civilians until proven otherwise.

# Incidence of violence affecting civilians in South Sudan January to March 2020

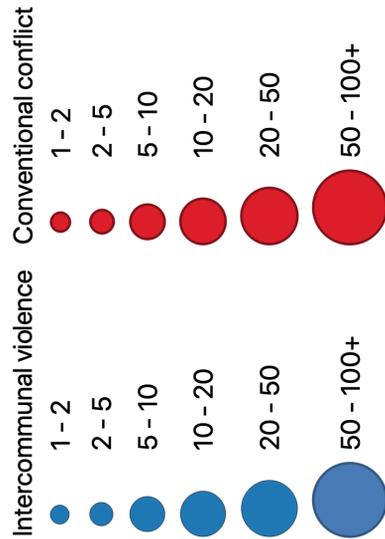
SUDAN



## Legend

- Main road
- Main river
- Lakes and marshland

## Civilian victims



## GENERAL TRENDS

During the first quarter of 2020, intercommunal violence constituted the primary source of violence affecting civilians and accounted for more than two thirds (75 per cent) of civilian victims (1,329). This is a direct result of the evolving nature of intercommunal conflict, which is often carried out with military-style tactics and military-grade weapons. During the reporting period, for instance, at least four separate attacks each claimed the lives of more than 50 civilians.

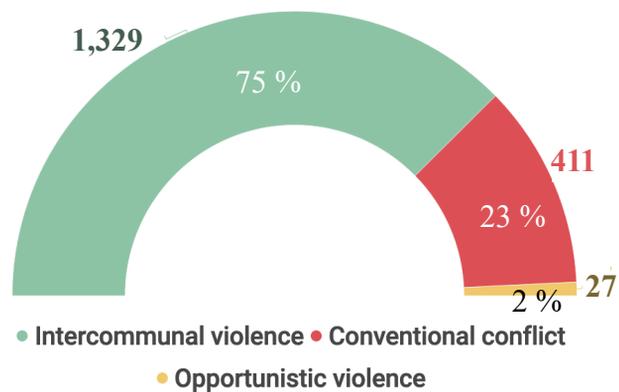
Intercommunal violence varies significantly in scale and intensity. Traditionally, analysts have attributed fluctuations in the frequency of intercommunal violence to seasonal variations, and in particular the arrival of the dry season, when competition for shrinking grazing land intensifies.

While the dry season usually begins in late November or early December, in 2019, it arrived in late December, and was preceded by months of heavy flooding in parts of the country in which thousands of cattle perished, placing economic strains on communities. The delayed onset of the dry season may have contributed to a spike in intercommunal violence documented by HRD from mid-February to early March in the regions of Jonglei and Lakes.

This localized violence, exacerbated by pre-existing communal tensions over access to natural resources, constitutes a destabilizing factor undermining peace in South Sudan.

Meanwhile, as a result of the relatively low number of clashes between Government forces and organized armed groups, violence by these parties affecting civilians remained comparatively low, accounting for 23 per cent of all victims. The cessation of hostilities since the signing of the R-ARCSS is one of the main

*Number of victims,  
by category of violence*



factors explaining this nationwide trend. Exceptions were documented in specific counties in Central and Western Equatoria, Unity and Western Bahr el Ghazal states. By comparison, between April and September 2018 (before the signing of the R-ARCSS), these actors accounted for 75 per cent of victims.

Nonetheless, new trends have emerged in the context of the implementation of the R-ARCSS. Of particular concern are allegations of the forced military recruitment of civilians to boost troop numbers of the R-ARCSS signatory parties in areas surrounding cantonment and training sites.

HRD also documented a relatively small number of incidents of opportunistic violence by unidentified but related armed elements, which do not fall specifically within one of the two categories described above, but which bear a link to the conflict based on the suspected perpetrators, location, modus operandi and other factors.

## GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS

The majority of victims were documented in Jonglei, Lakes and Warrap states, which are also the areas most affected by intercommunal violence. A closer examination reveals, however, that intercommunal violence was not widespread within these regions overall but was concentrated within 49 (of 79) counties that contain vital grazing areas for pastoralists. The heavy flooding that occurred in the last quarter of 2019 led to greater food insecurity and disruption of livelihoods in many areas, which in turn may have prompted increased cattle-raiding

during the dry season, as communities attempted to recoup losses and secure food sources prior to the return of the rainy season (typically arriving in April or May).

Despite the overarching respect of the ceasefire throughout the country, conventional parties to the conflict remained active in the areas of Yei (Central Equatoria) and Maridi (Western Equatoria) near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. These incidents primarily involved Government

forces and elements of the National Salvation Front (NAS). Notably, on 15 January, the Government and NAS (as part of the South Sudan Opposition Movements Alliance) signed an agreement on the cessation of hostilities under the auspices of Sant’Egidio, in Rome.

Notwithstanding, military operations and activities involving Government forces, organized armed groups and their respective proxy armed elements, have continued to place civilians at risk in these areas, as well as in parts of Unity and Western Bahr el Ghazal states.

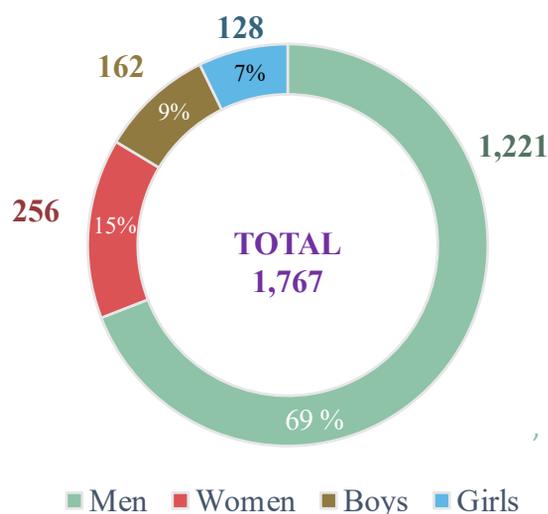
## VICTIMS

HRD has found that men, particularly young men, comprise the majority of victims (69 per cent, or 1,221 individuals). Children are the second-largest group of victims, at 16 per cent (290 individuals), while women account for the remaining 15 per cent (256 individuals). However, beyond the direct impact of violence, women and children are disproportionately affected by the indirect effects of conflict – particularly in terms of access to health care, education and livelihoods in volatile areas.

According to HRD’s findings, most adult male victims (77 per cent) were either killed or injured, largely in the context of intercommunal violence. The remaining 23 per cent of adult male victims were abducted, chiefly for the purpose of forced military recruitment.

Children were primarily abducted (80 per cent) and killed or injured (11 per cent). Most of these abductions occurred in the context of intercommunal violence. HRD also documented that 11 girls were subjected to sexual violence.

*Number of victims, by age and sex*



Women were primarily subjected to killing (35 per cent) and abduction (33 per cent). Most of these occurred in the context of intercommunal violence. Overall, cases of sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage, accounted for 20 per cent of the adult female victims documented by HRD.

## PERPETRATORS

HRD’s investigations have identified three major categories of perpetrators involved in conflict-related violence affecting civilians: i) conventional parties to the conflict; ii) community-based militias and self-defence groups; and iii) unidentified (but related) armed elements.

In the first quarter of 2020, HRD investigations attributed responsibility for 23 per cent of victims to conventional parties to the conflict. This category of perpetrators includes Government defence and security forces, as well as organized opposition armed groups.

Amongst Government forces, acts of violence targeting civilians were mainly attributed to the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF),

including former pro-Taban Deng elements of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO/TD), the South Sudan National Police Service (SSNPS) and the National Security Service (NSS). As for organized armed groups, the pro-Riek Machar SPLA-IO is a signatory to the 2018 peace agreement. In addition, NAS and affiliated armed elements, who are not signatories to the R-ARCSS, also committed abuses against civilians, primarily in the areas of Yei (Central Equatoria) and Maridi (Western Equatoria). Armed elements of the Provisional Military and Political Council (PMPC), a group loyal to former pro-Machar SPLA-IO commander, James Ochan, and reportedly affiliated with the SSPDF, were responsible for several incidents in the Maiwut area of Upper Nile as well.

The distinction between Government forces and organized armed groups should not obscure the extreme fluidity between and within these entities, whose loyalties may shift according to the formation of alliances of convenience, defections and buy-offs.

During the reporting period, a second category of perpetrators—community-based militias and self-defence groups—were responsible for 75 per cent of civilian victims.

These groups are a longstanding feature of pastoralist communities across South Sudan, commonly known by various names such as the “white army”, *gojam* and *gelweng*. Traditionally, their main objective was to protect herds of cattle from external attack. However, as a result of years of armed conflict and the resulting illicit proliferation of small arms amongst local communities, members of these community-based militias and self-defence groups have been co-opted, armed and used as proxy armed elements by all parties to the conflict and by local actors, which has contributed to the progressive militarization of intercommunal violence.

In Jonglei, HRD found that these groups were armed with AK-47s. Some elements were also reportedly equipped with rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), and demonstrated a certain degree of planning and

coordination. The increased militarization of these groups is one of the chief reasons behind the high numbers of civilian casualties documented during intercommunal clashes in February.

Compounding this increased violence is the investment of wealthy elites, both at the local and Juba levels, in cattle ownership. In this context, “intercommunal” violence cannot be dissociated from local, regional and national dynamics and conflicts.

A third category is comprised of unidentified but related armed elements. These actors, who often have a historical affiliation with community-based militias and self-defence groups, have acquired a progressive autonomy from their sponsors and now carry out acts of violence against civilians from their own or rival communities, without any clear strategic or military objectives. In a context of extreme economic deprivation, coupled with the breakdown of the rule of law and the loss of power of traditional institutions, these unchecked elements contribute to a normalization of insecurity, affecting civilians in their daily lives.