

BRIEFING | AUGUST 2023

Tackling conflict drivers for peace and security among communities in Warrap state, South Sudan

The end of the second Sudanese civil war in 2005 did not see the end of violent conflict in Warrap State. Domestic violence, violent cattle raiding, and inter- and intra-communal conflict (fuelled by the ready availability of small arms and light weapons) put the most vulnerable members of the community at risk, particularly women and girls – who grapple with sexual violence, abduction and accidental or intentional killings. Many factors are behind these conflicts, including competition over resources like pasture and water for animals during dry spells, cycles of revenge, and a lack of alternative livelihoods for young people.

Warrap state, located in Bahr el Ghazal region comprises six counties: Gogrial East, Gogrial West, Tonj East, Tonj North, Tonj South and Twic. It is bordered by the Abyei Area in the north, Unity State to the east, Northern Bahr el Ghazal State to the west, Western Bahr el Ghazal State to the southwest and Lakes State to the south. The state is inhabited by the Dinka and Bongo communities.

Communities in Warrap also have a long-standing conflict with neighbouring Mayendit and Mayom counties in Unity state over the 'toch' (wetlands) which sustain Dinka and Nuer herdsman and their livestock. And as cattle-keepers moved from Warrap into Wau and Jur River Counties in neighbouring Western Bahr el Ghazal State, this has brought new, inter-communal violence.

These conflicts have worsened people's standards of living – many people have been forced to leave their homes and seek sanctuary in neighbouring communities, causing tensions between host communities and the new arrivals.

This brief policy paper presents some of the main conflict, peace, security and gender-based violence concerns raised during an inter-county dialogue held on 26–27 November 2022 in Kuajok. The event brought together over 40 participants from the organised forces, members of the Tonj State parliament, state government ministers, commissioners of different counties, state commission chairs, national and international NGOs, community-based organisations, and youth and women leaders. The findings and recommendations are intended to reflect these discussions and the perspectives of participants on potential ways forward for peace and stability in Warrap.

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Security concerns

During the dialogue, participants identified the following security concerns:

1. Proliferation of small arms and light weapons

The civil war in Sudan (1983–2005) and the outbreak of fresh civil strife in South Sudan in December 2013 and July 2016 increased the circulation of illicit firearms among the civilian population, especially young people, who began to acquire weapons to protect themselves, their families, communities, livestock and other assets. Fuelled by easy access to these weapons, violent conflict among communities increased, with women and girls experiencing rape and abduction. More widely, the proliferation of small arms has increased the frequency and level of violent confrontations between communities in Warrap and neighbouring Lakes and Unity States. Violent conflicts between Twic and the Ngok Dinka in Agok in early 2023 as well as conflicts in the state among various Rek Dinka clans have been attributed to the widespread possession of guns among young people.

Participants described how the absence of effective security provision by the government is a significant factor behind civilians acquiring firearms, along with successive failures by state and national governments to implement peaceful and effective disarmament programmes. The devastating consequences of this failure were seen in 2022, when civilians clashed with disarmament forces in Tonj North, leading to the death of 11 civilians and 53 soldiers, including senior officers.

A lack of safeguards on weapons storage facilities has led to guns ending up in civilian hands. Another factor is the economic situation: with some soldiers not being paid their salaries on time, they have sold guns and ammunition to civilians to make ends meet. To make Warrap State and the wider Wunlit a gun-free zone, the government must tighten weapons storage and ensure accountability for ‘leakage’.

2. Cattle raiding and theft Participants identified cattle raiding as one of the main drivers of insecurity in the state and in the wider Wunlit Triangle. According to the participants, armed youths from Warrap or neighbouring states make frequent raids into bordering territories, resulting in deaths and distress, including among women and girls, in Warrap. Cattle raiding has become more common in recent years due to poverty and young people’s desire to acquire more cows – which are needed to pay the increasingly steep bride prices.

Cattle raiders rarely face official justice, as there is little that law enforcement agencies can do to retrieve stolen cows or hand out punishment. This state of affairs does not deter others from taking matters into their own hands. Victims whose cattle have been stolen, or who have lost loved ones, mobilise in order to retrieve their stolen cattle, leading to more loss of lives on both sides. Women

and girls are often indiscriminately targeted in these counter-attacks – or they are killed in the crossfire.

3. Disputes around grazing land and water points

Participants at the inter-county meeting also noted that border and land disputes have been an ongoing issue for many years, particularly over grazing lands and the use of a wetland area (*toch*) – shared by communities from all the three states that are part of the Wunlit Triangle – during the dry season. With more people acquiring livestock, coupled with improvements in animal health services, cattle numbers have increased – and these wetlands are no longer able to sustain them. As a result, some community members have resorted to asserting what they see as their rights through violent means – leading to deaths, abduction of women and girls, and sexual violence. These all have a serious impact on the mental health of young women, girls and the communities in the state and the wider Wunlit Triangle.

Competition over high grounds (which are less liable to flooding) have also become a source of violent conflict among communities, especially between the Luac-jang community of Tonj East, Warrap State and the Pakam community of Rumbek North, Lakes State. In February 2023, over a hundred people died when conflict over contested areas along the county borders became violent. At the time of writing, authorities have made no arrests – leading to fears that people might resort to revenge attacks.

4. Weak legal systems, or ineffective and inadequate law enforcement at local level

Participants deplored the alarming behaviour of law enforcement agencies, including excessive use of force – as seen in disarmament exercises in the state between 2021 and 2022. Some blamed this indiscipline on a lack of properly trained law enforcement personnel at local, subnational and national levels in the country – with the worst conditions experienced at the local level.

South Sudan is still a new country, one that emerged out of a protracted war and immediately found itself plagued by bitter internal conflict and political rivalry among the political elites. Many officers in law enforcement, including the police, wildlife service, fire brigade and the prison services, are former combatants who were assigned to these units after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, without undergoing proper training. Citizens have complained about the way these officers behave and handle civil cases. On top of this, participants claim that the security services respond slowly to emergencies and active violent conflicts, take bribes, and sometimes side with their own communities when these are involved in conflict with other communities. All these factors contribute to increasing conflict between and among civilians and deepen mistrust between the police and the people they are supposed to protect.

5. Revenge related to delays and failures in the justice system Participants felt underserved by the justice system, pointing to a lack of judges sitting at the local level – leading to delays and case overload – and corruption in the system. This has had a number of effects, including emboldening criminals to terrorise communities with impunity, and making people to take the law into their own hands. Some participants drew a contrast between the inadequacy of official justice mechanisms and the effectiveness of traditional approaches to settling intra-communal conflicts peacefully – for example, blood compensation. But these systems of justice – statutory and customary – have areas of overlap, and it can be hard to tell which cases should be handled by judges and which should be tried by local Chiefs at the *boma* and *payam* levels, who often struggle to handle complicated cases.

In summary, participants linked the increase in revenge attacks to the way justice is administered by local and

subnational government institutions. The blame also goes to the national government as well, which has failed to establish a competent court system at the lowest levels of government through adequate resourcing and continuous capacity building.

6. Conflict-related mental health among women and girls Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of conflict. Young men on raids frequently target women for rape, and sometimes burn houses and food stores. Women and girls are forced to flee, thereby becoming vulnerable to hunger and disease. On top of this physical distress, the trauma of being raped in the presence of their loved ones, of losing relatives, of being displaced, of struggling to feed their children – all have devastating effects on women’s and girls’ mental health. Authorities should deal with these conflicts peacefully and amicably – and hold perpetrators to account – participants emphasised, so that these mental health problems do not worsen.

Recommendations

Having identified the issues outlined above, participants at the inter-county dialogue in Kuajok, Warrap State, made the following recommendations to government and civil society organisations (CSOs):

State and national governments:

- State and national governments should conduct comprehensive, uniform and peaceful civilian disarmament across Gogrial East, Tonj East and Tonj North counties, Warrap State as a whole and its neighbouring states across the Wunlit Triangle (Lakes and Unity) to reduce violent conflicts, which are fuelled by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians.
- Illicit firearms collected from civilians should be publicly destroyed or properly stored to avoid recirculation. Governments have carried out several disarmament campaigns in South Sudan, and in Warrap State in particular, but civilians still manage to rearm themselves.
- The government should tighten the way it stores weapons and ensure proper accountability within the security forces to prevent leakages or smuggling of weapons to civilians.
- State and national governments should prioritise creating alternative livelihoods for young people, to provide alternatives to violent cattle raiding and theft.
- Local, state and national governments should work in collaboration with traditional leaders in regulating the number of cows paid as bride price in marriages; this will lessen pressure on men and reduce the incentives to engage in cattle raiding.

- State and national governments should establish joint police forces and mobile courts to settle conflicts related to cattle raiding and competition over land, pastures and water for humans and animals in the Wunlit Triangle.
- To reduce cattle theft, local and state governments should formulate bylaws to regulate cattle movement and ensure proper documentation for cattle traders.

Civil society organisations

- Advocate for peaceful, comprehensive and uniform civilian disarmament in the Wunlit Triangle and encourage state authorities to provide security to disarmed communities.
- Raise awareness among communities about the dangers of illicit firearms in the hands of civilians.
- Disseminate the Firearms Act 2016 to and among communities.
- In collaboration with government, international NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies, construct *haffirs* (water reservoirs) for water storage during rainy seasons, as limited access to water points is one of the main drivers of conflict within the state and its neighbours.
- Lobby the national Ministries of Justice and the Interior to strengthen and financially support law and justice enforcement institutions at local and subnational levels. Resourcing these institutions will enable law enforcement officers to do their work and remain at duty stations at all times.
- With government, INGOs and UN agencies, support cross-border communal dialogues in the Wunlit Triangle to resolve land and border disputes and create a conducive environment for peaceful coexistence.

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Saferworld is an international organisation dedicated to conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming, policy and practice. We collaborate with institutions and work directly with partners across Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe to tackle diverse factors that drive violent conflict, injustice and insecurity. We participate in major global policy debates on peace, justice and security to influence change.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2008. We work with communities, civil society organisations, authorities, traditional leaders and other international and national non-governmental organisations to prevent conflict and build peace. We prioritise working with women, young people and others who are excluded from decisions that affect them. Over the past five years, we have worked in partnership with over 20 CSOs including nine women's rights organisations across ten states to establish and support over 100 community peacebuilding groups to identify, mitigate and resolve conflicts and security concerns. We help our CSO partners to strengthen their resources, provide core and flexible funding, programme accompaniment and peer-peer learning support. We support development of regional and national CSO platforms, and connect people to our advocacy networks so that national and international organisations put the voices of South Sudanese civil society at the heart of what they do. Saferworld South Sudan also hosts the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), which provide advice to donors, policy makers and the aid community and help those working across the aid sector to integrate conflict sensitivity throughout their programmes, operations and policy decisions in South Sudan.

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Cover photo: Warrap state officials visit Tonj to review the security situation and appeal for a dialogue-based, peaceful resolution to escalating tensions in the area.

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