



BRIEF / FEBRUARY 2021

Promoting peace and resilience in Unity state, South Sudan

The town of Bentiu, located in Rubkona County, is the capital of the oil-rich Unity state and is predominately inhabited by the Nuer people. A series of waterways and swamps cover large parts of the state and these provide pasture in the dry season for animals belonging to Nuer and Dinka pastoralists, as well as other pastoralist groups from neighbouring Sudan who migrate with their animals into South Sudan during dry seasons in search of grazing land and water. Unity state also sits on some of the largest oil deposits in South Sudan and a considerable amount of petroleum-related activity takes place in and around Bentiu. The production of oil has contributed to fuelling conflicts in the state, resulting in displacement and environmental degradation.

After independence in 2011, communities in Unity state – as in most parts of South Sudan – were involved in and experienced protracted armed conflicts. People were caught up in confrontations between armed groups and militias and government forces, inter- and intra-communal fights, and cattle raiding, which all had devastating socio-economic consequences for the communities. In December 2013, a long-running political dispute within the ruling party – the Sudan’s People Liberation Movement (SPLM) – erupted into unprecedented violence in Juba and then spread to the majority of the country, including Bentiu and most parts of Unity state. This forced thousands of people to flee their homes to the base of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) in Bentiu.

As a result of the influx of people, UNMISS established a Protection of Civilians (PoC) site in Bentiu in December 2013, to provide protection and security. In October 2020, the UNMISS base in Bentiu was home to the largest number of internally displaced people (IDPs) in South Sudan, with a population of 97,321 individuals,

comprising 11,529 households.¹ Although people living in the PoC site are provided with protection and humanitarian assistance, they still face challenges including economic hardship, being targeted by armed groups, violent crime, revenge killings inside the PoC site, and outbreaks of disease as a result of the crowded conditions in which they live. In July 2020, UNMISS initiated consultations about its intention to re-designate the PoC sites in the country to IDP camps and hand over responsibility of these camps to the government of South Sudan. People living in the Bentiu PoC site expressed concern at this plan – while conditions inside the camp are very poor, IDPs fear the threat of violence and insecurity outside the PoCs if responsibility is transferred. On 28 January 2021, UNMISS formally handed over responsibility of the IDPs in the PoC site in Bentiu to the government of South Sudan in Unity state.

Due to incessant and widespread displacement, governance structures in Unity state, as in other parts of South Sudan, have been weakened: justice and security systems are either absent or ineffective where they do exist; infrastructure including government buildings and roads has been destroyed; and access to basic services and livelihood opportunities is limited. The plight of IDPs has been further exacerbated by increased levels of poverty and unemployment, especially among young people, resulting in the conscription of people into militias and other armed groups that pursue their interests, provide an income and address their grievances through violence. Residents in Bentiu also face challenges such as robbery and road ambushes, high prices of commodities, alcohol and drug abuse, limited access to information on the peace process and governance, and delays in the formation of the state government, among others.

Bentiu residents also face the threat of COVID-19. In May 2020, a case of coronavirus was confirmed in the Bentiu PoC, and this led to the stigmatisation of people living in the PoC and foreigners – including UN staff aid workers – because of their proximity to UN international staff, who were accused of bringing the virus into the country. This was because the first confirmed diagnosed cases of coronavirus in South Sudan were among UN international staff. There were also fears that with the congested conditions in the PoCs, COVID-19 would likely spread quickly both within the sites and eventually to those outside.

This briefing draws attention to some of the safety and security concerns and challenges that are experienced by people in Bentiu, as identified by participants in a two-day roundtable event held in Bentiu on 12–13 November 2020. Saferworld and the Centre for Livelihoods Peace Research and Poverty Reduction organised the event, which was attended by various state officials. These included: the Director of the Peace Commission; the Director of the State Ministry of Gender and Social Welfare; the Deputy Director of the Criminal Investigation Department; county commissioners; and representatives of traditional courts, civil society, and women and youth clusters of community action groups². This brief reflects the views of participants and does not necessarily reflect the views of Saferworld.

Definitions

In this briefing paper, **security** is defined as the protection of people and their assets from violence or theft. It relates to potential harm that may be caused by intentional actions by people, when their actions are intended to harm others directly, or when acts intended to harm others also pose a threat to other people. **Safety** is connected to but is broader than security. Safety is defined as the protection of people from harm. Such harm may arise as a consequence of insecurity but also from accidents, fire, flood, disease or other causes, including threats posed by the environment or animals.

Safety and security challenges

While there were a number of safety and security concerns identified and discussed by the participants in Bentiu as conflict drivers or triggers, the main issues they highlighted were:

Cycles of revenge killings

Revenge killings are a common phenomenon in Bentiu and other parts of Unity state. Participants at the roundtable event decried the recurring cycles of violent clashes between young people within and outside the PoC camp. These tit-for-tat killings are often triggered by cattle raiding and the polarisation of communities since the 2013 civil war. The killings can be small scale, involving a few individuals, or may also involve a large number of armed youth targeting other young people from their own clans and villages as well as young people from different clans and tribes.

Participants recounted that within the PoC, at least two young people lost their lives in 2020 as a result of gang or clan feuds. Outside the PoC camp incidences of intra-

and inter-clan fights have also been witnessed in the community and are often related to competition over resources and cattle raids. On many occasions, these feuds lead to killings and cycles of revenge attacks.

Participants stated that the cycle of revenge killings has been worsened by the deteriorating security situation. Rather than taking cases to the statutory courts of justice, families are opting to resolve differences through traditional systems of redress which, in most cases, involve a compensatory payment of cows from the family or clan of the perpetrators to the family of the deceased. These situations have frequently resulted in disagreements and further fights.

Cattle raiding/rustling

Participants pointed out that cattle raiding – a longstanding practice among pastoralist communities in South Sudan – is a widespread problem in Unity state as well as in neighbouring communities. Traditionally, cattle raiders used rudimentary weapons such as spears and clubs, but the introduction of small arms and light weapons has aggravated the situation. Participants emphasised that cattle raiding is still one of the main drivers of conflict in the state. As with other pastoralist communities, among the Nuer cattle are a source and foundation of socio-economic and cultural life. Cattle provide wealth and are a source of pride, and are exchanged for the payment of bride prices and blood compensation. Cattle influence the way of life and relationships in these communities.

As well as the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the hands of civilians, participants also attributed the increasing rates of cattle raiding to the high rates of bride prices required by the families of brides. They also blamed unemployment, high costs of living and a lack of alternative livelihood sources, the absence of security structures in some communities, and of state authorities for aggravating the phenomenon of cattle raiding by creating a vacuum where young people can raid rival communities with little intervention from authorities.

The participants also reported how many young people lose their lives in cattle raids. Communities also lose their properties and livestock, and family unions break up when a husband-to-be is unable to pay the livestock bride price to the family of the bride-to-be, which ends the marriage arrangement.

High prices of commodities and food insecurity

Participants lamented the high rate of inflation in the country and the increase in market prices of basic commodities like food, water, clothes and other goods and services that are often unaffordable for many people. With the lack of food and other essentials, people are prone to disease and hunger. Some women participants mentioned that women's security and safety are compromised because of the lack of food; as they are burdened with domestic care, they often become victims of domestic violence when they are unable to provide food for their children and husbands. Other participants added that, due to the limited livelihood options, some young men resort to criminality such as theft, cattle raids and robbery to provide for their families. This in turn exacerbates insecurity.

Some communities are also experiencing shortages of food in and around Bentiu because of long droughts during the dry season, as well as flooding during the wet season. Some communities' access to food and other services has been limited because of poor road conditions and insecurity.

Participants also complained about delays in the payment of salaries for civil servants. They stressed that salaries are always delayed and insufficient. Some participants explained that although they are working, they cannot afford to buy essential items for their families. If the government is not willing to increase their salaries or pay them in arrears, they urged the government to – at the very least – pay them on time.

Ineffective law enforcement and justice delivery

Participants expressed concerns about the accessibility, efficiency and effectiveness of judicial systems in Bentiu, which are marred by accusations of corruption, allegations of bribery, a lack of transparency, impunity and delays during proceedings. When asked if statutory courts were functioning, some participants mentioned that these were functional but not effective, while others were not aware of the existence of the courts after the 2013 conflict.

Participants acknowledged the presence of customary courts and the challenges they face. According to one participant, customary courts are usually preferred as they are easily accessible. However, he described how most of the chiefs in the *boma* and *payam*³ courts handle cases according to customs and tradition and often do not know their jurisdiction. They even handle capital offences, which do not fall within their mandates. The participant further stated that the chiefs are prone to bribes because of the government's inability to pay their salaries and other logistical support. Participants also criticised the cost of accessing justice services – most courts are located in Bentiu town, which can be difficult to access for those living outside the town in the PoC camp – as well as a lack of necessary court-related documentation.

Participants also mentioned that the UN, in partnership with other NGOs, had supported the judiciary to set up mobile courts to make justice more accessible and to simplify court procedures to make them more understandable. However, most participants said they were unable to access these courts because they were only temporary and there is limited information about the courts.

A lack of transport and vehicles among the police and other organised forces was cited as a major challenge that prevents police and security agents from intervening in a timely manner to security incidents in communities. Other access impediments include a lack of communication equipment and bad road conditions, and this has led to significant security threats, including road ambushes and banditry in some hotspots. The Criminal Investigation Department Deputy Director also said that communities sometimes do not cooperate with security institutions when sensitive information is required from them.

High bride prices

Bride price/wealth⁴ is a widespread practice in most pastoralist communities in South Sudan. It involves

the delivery of livestock by a suitor or his family to the relatives of a bride-to-be. Across the different communities, there is no fixed amount of money or number of cattle for the bride price. Among the Nuer, a dowry can range from 50 to 60 cattle or more. Participants mentioned that in some instances, more than one person could compete for the same bride and in such cases, the bride price then increases.

Participants argued that although the payment of bride price has some positive aspects – such as cementing relationships between families and earning recognition and respect from others – very high bride prices have a negative impact on the lives of the people involved, as well as the community at large. A participant stated that the payment of a hefty bride price also has detrimental consequences on young girls and women, as it compromises their safety and security. Many women whose suitors are unable to pay the bride price are coerced into marrying a man they do not love, or alternatively opt to elope with the man they love without the knowledge of their families. The families of the girls and young women who elope then start fights with the families of the men, resulting in violent clashes, revenge attacks and killings, and other forms of violence.

Women are seen as a source of wealth. Most parents do not take into consideration the welfare of their daughters but rather the wealth they will acquire by ensuring they get married. This has contributed to a number of cases of forced marriages and cycles of gender-based violence (GBV).

The tradition of paying a bride price can also negatively affect men; for example, those who would like to marry but come from poor families or those who do not own cattle feel compelled to steal cattle from others. One participant stated that often young men raid cattle from neighbouring communities in order to be able to marry the woman they love, and some end up being killed in the process.

Environmental pollution by oil companies

Participants identified crude oil spills in oil fields in Unity state as one of the most pressing security concerns. Unity is one of the major oil-producing states in South Sudan and this generates income for the state. However, the production of oil has been said to have contributed to a number of conflicts and to displacement. Participants claimed that the environment has been polluted and waters contaminated, and this has resulted in an increase in deaths of livestock and a number of diseases affecting people. Some participants also said they had witnessed women giving birth to children with abnormalities. So far, no company or entity operating in the oil sector has been held accountable for the pollution and no compensation has been paid to the communities living near the oil fields.

Unemployment

Participants expressed their frustration with the high rates of unemployment among young people in Bentiu and Unity state. According to the participants, unemployment rates have increased in the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of lockdowns that were imposed by the national government COVID-19 taskforce. Small-scale businesses

were not operational and young people who rely on daily wages lost their jobs. Humanitarian organisations scaled-down some of their programmes as lockdown measures were particularly severe in the PoC. As a result, youth programmes that provide empowerment and training were reduced. Employment opportunities dwindled as most NGOs scaled-down non-essential services and employment contracts were not renewed.

Participants also attributed high levels of unemployment to low levels of education and poor education systems that produce graduates with limited skills for jobs. They also identified a lack of information regarding jobs and limited livelihood and economic opportunities as challenges that affect young people. The security situation and floods also hindered people from farming last year.

As a result of joblessness, many young people are compelled or lured into violent illegal activities. Those who resort to violence engage in robbery and theft to survive, while others abuse alcohol and drugs to cope with their frustrations. Standards of living are very low, with many people unable to acquire basic commodities like food.

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)

Participants noted that there are incidences of rape and other GBV-related cases like early and forced marriages, intimate partner rape and domestic violence, and that this is not only a security concern for women and girls but for the community at large. The participants cited ineffective justice provision, often characterised by impunity and harmful cultural practices, as major contributing factors to the occurrence of SGBV.

One woman participant explained that women and girls are affected by some socio-cultural practices that do not respect women or which violate their human rights, such as the right to inherit property, the right to choose a partner, and the right to education, among others. Prevailing practices include wife and property inheritance in Nuer and Dinka culture – where a widowed wife and any property left behind are inherited by the brother of the deceased – and early and forced marriages to men old enough to be their fathers.

Women also reported that there is limited access to services when faced with cases of SGBV, especially women living outside the PoC and in the neighbouring *payams*, and they have to travel long distances to access hospitals and police stations.

Recommendations

To address the challenges to peace and stability identified at the roundtable event in Bentiu, participants made the following recommendations to state and national governments, international NGOs, civil society and communities.

To state and national government:

- Improve security and restore peace by setting up police posts and deploying police across all counties. Equip security providers and allocate resources to facilitate their work.
- Criminalise cattle raiding and rustling and hold perpetrators to account by bringing them before the relevant courts of justice.
- Organise the comprehensive disarmament of civilians in Unity and neighbouring states.
- Enhance and build the capacity of justice and security providers through trainings, and coordinate and monitor the administration of justice throughout the state.
- The state and national chambers of commerce should regulate the prices of commodities to avoid the exploitation of citizens.
- Set up vocational training centres to equip young unemployed citizens with vocational skills, including women.
- The ministries of health and petroleum should ensure that the environment and the lives and property of citizens are protected from pollution by undertaking environmental and community impact assessments in consultation with communities. They should establish the regulation of oil extraction standards, thoroughly investigate and address community grievances regarding environmental degradation, and hold oil companies to account.
- Ensure that harmful or negative customs and traditions are identified, challenged and ultimately abolished.
- Enact and enforce laws regarding the sale and consumption of alcohol.

To civil society:

- Advocate for and create awareness of human rights, and encourage peaceful coexistence between and among communities.
- Strengthen and facilitate dialogues and peace conferences between and among communities.
- Strengthen the capacities of village chiefs, elders and others to mediate and manage conflicts through peaceful means, such as trainings and sensitisation on issues that affect communities and which may trigger or escalate conflict.
- Address structural violence and promote human security through the monitoring of human rights and development.
- Through advocacy, policy dialogues and campaigns, mobilise political will by demanding the government be more responsive to issues affecting communities.

- Link communities to services and service providers on issues relating to GBV, skills development, justice and other needs.

To communities:

- Work as a collective body with the government, including police and justice providers, to identify and bring to justice perpetrators of violence in communities.
- Chief and elders should regulate the payment of bride prices to prevent exploitation of both young men and women, and ensure the protection of women from harmful cultural and traditional genders norms, roles and practices, like early and forced marriages.
- Chiefs and elders should facilitate constructive communication within the community and act as agents of peace.

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We work in Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2002. We work on community safety and security, peacebuilding, small arms and light weapons control, and conflict-sensitive development. Since 2012, we have implemented community security programmes with eight civil society partners in 16 locations across eight of the former ten states: Central, Western, and Eastern Equatoria; Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal; Warrap; Lakes; and Jonglei.

Since the outbreaks of conflict in December 2013 and July 2016, Saferworld has included peacebuilding and reconciliation programming in our work. Recently, with funds from the European Union and UK Aid Direct projects, we are implementing peacebuilding activities across the country to address intra- and inter-community conflict and gender-based violence.

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- 1 IOM (2020), 'South Sudan — Bentiu PoC Site Population Count (October 2020)' (<https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/dtm-south-sudan-bentiu-poc-site-population-count-october-2020>)
- 2 Groups of individuals from the community comprising women, men, the elderly and young people, which advocate for better community safety and security. The groups identify and prioritise their community security concerns, and plan and implement responses.
- 3 *Payam* is the second-lowest administrative unit at the county level, while *boma* is the third lowest.
- 4 A practice in which a bridegroom and his relatives give cows, goats and money to the family of the bride.

Cover photo: Bentiu PoC site on 15 February 2016. UNMISS