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Author:
Mark Yarnell

SOUTH SUDAN: ON THE PRECIPICE

South Sudan is on the verge of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. Ongoing conflict since mid-December 2013 has forced mass displacement and limited humanitarian access to people in need. Tens of thousands of internally displaced people are living on United Nations' compounds where conditions are poor. At one site in the capital Juba, for example, the cramped living space and flood-prone land make for a disastrous scenario, especially as the seasonal rains begin. Throughout other parts of the country, aid workers are struggling to reach vulnerable populations and pre-position stocks before the rains begin in earnest. A sustained cessation of hostilities is the most critical element to preventing the current situation from becoming worse. But there are also steps that donor governments, the UN Mission in South Sudan, and the aid community can and must take to improve both the protection of and support to the South Sudanese people.

BACKGROUND

Recent violence in South Sudan has forced more than a million people from their homes. On December 15, 2013, fighting erupted in Juba between soldiers loyal to former Vice-President Riek Machar and those loyal to President Salva Kiir. President Kiir claims that Dr. Machar attempted to launch a coup, while Dr. Machar denies this. Regardless, the conflict quickly spread, causing tens of thousands of civilians to seek refuge at UN compounds throughout the country. Hundreds of thousands more are living outside of the compounds with either host communities or on their own in the country-side, and over 350,000 South Sudanese have crossed into neighboring countries as refugees. And the movements have not stopped. During a three day period in May, for instance, 11,000 South Sudanese crossed into Ethiopia for safety.

Though the opposing sides have signed agreements to cease hostilities, brutal violence continues. Salva Kiir is of the Dinka ethnic group, whereas Riek Machar is Nuer.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ☐ Without delay, donor governments must deliver on their humanitarian pledges made at the Oslo Conference in May 2014.
- ☐ Staff with protection of civilians expertise must be urgently deployed to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to support the mission's stated re-focus on protecting civilians, and existing staff must prioritize their role in this effort.
- ☐ UNMISS must increase patrols, both inside and outside of the UN compounds, as well as increase its communication with internally displaced people through the establishment of a community liaison unit to ensure better protection.
- ☐ UNMISS senior leadership must work closely with aid organizations and representatives of troop contributing countries to ensure improved living conditions for the internally displaced population living at the UN compound near Juba International Airport (UN Topping) until a viable alternative location is ready.

Though the conflict is about more than ethnicity, there are multiple reports, including a UN human rights report, of both sides targeting civilians belonging to the other ethnic group. Recently, as government and opposition forces fought for control of towns in the north, such as Bentiu and Nasir, dozens of civilians were killed – some caught in the crossfire, while others were targeted based on identity. Even some who managed to seek shelter within UN peacekeeping compounds were killed. In April, armed men opened fire on the UN base in the town of Bor, killing over 50 people.

After the outbreak of violence in December, the UN Security Council authorized an increase of more than 5,000 peacekeepers (from 7,000 to 12,500) for the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). But these new troops have been slow to arrive.

Meanwhile, the violence and mass displacement is preventing many South Sudanese from planting this season. The conflict also has hindered aid organizations from prepositioning food and supplies ahead of the rainy season (May-October), a time when 60 percent of the country becomes inaccessible by road. The UN estimates that \$1.8 billion in humanitarian funding is needed through 2014 and to preposition supplies for early 2015. But the current response falls hundreds of millions of dollars short, even after a major pledging conference in Oslo on May 20th.

UN PROTECTION OF CIVILIAN SITES – CONDITIONS MUST BE IMPROVED

An RI team visited the South Sudanese capital, Juba, in March 2014, to assess the situation for internally displaced people (IDPs) there.

Of the 900,000 internally displaced South Sudanese, there are currently around 87,000 sheltering at eight UN bases across the country. The UN compounds, which house UNMISS military and civilian staff and serve as office locations for various UN agencies, were not established with the expectation that they might serve as secure locations for South Sudanese fleeing conflict and persecution. But when fighting broke out in December and people came flooding to the bases for protection, the UN opened its gates.

UNMISS deserves credit for the number of lives saved. But now that tens of thousands of IDPs are under the protection and care of international peacekeepers and aid organizations, the living conditions must be dramatically improved. In Juba, there are around 20,000 people crammed in to the UN compound near the airport – known as UN Tomping Protection of Civilians Site 1 (POC 1). The conditions there

are dismal. Thousands of tents are spaced just inches apart and the season's first rains have flooded parts of the camp. RI's team visited the POC 1 site a week after a short rainfall. A number of shelters had been destroyed and stagnant water remained. Health organizations have implemented a campaign to vaccinate children for cholera, but with the seasonal rains now beginning in earnest, the camp residents could face a public health disaster if conditions are not improved.

Despite the rough living situation, the IDPs face threats to their lives if they leave. The majority of residents in POC 1 is Nuer, and could face persecution by SPLA soldiers who patrol the streets of Juba if they leave the compound. RI was even told about shots being fired into the POC 1 site, coming from shooters in surrounding buildings.

While visiting POC 1, RI met an IDP named John who explained that he could not leave the confines of UN protection. John had just returned to South Sudan in early December 2013 after having fled to Uganda as a refugee in 2006 to escape Sudan's North-South civil war. He arrived in Juba on December 8th and was planning to visit his mother in his home state, Unity, in the north. But when fighting broke out on December 15th, he ran to the UN base for protection. Now he does not know when he will make it to Unity. Explaining the predicament that he and his fellow residents face, he told RI, "People feel that it is better to stay here in the water than to leave and be killed."

An UNMISS human rights report on the conflict, released in May 2014, documents how South Sudanese security forces would target Nuer – either by their distinctive tribal facial markings or by their language. According to the report, if a person, "...admitted to being Nuer, could not speak Dinka, or was able to speak Nuer, that person would be shot." Since the ongoing violence makes it unlikely that POC residents will return home any time soon, a key task is to decongest POC 1 and improve the living conditions at the site. There is space at a second UN site in Juba where IDPs have sought shelter, known as UN House (or POC 2) which is about 10 kilometers outside of the city center. Additional space adjacent to the compound also is being prepared (POC 3). The additional space was supposed to be ready to receive IDPs by mid-April, but as of writing it was still not open.

Aid organizations have been talking to camp residents about plans for the relocation from POC 1 to POC 2/3, which are less vulnerable to flooding. However, perceptions amongst the IDPs about insecurity at POC 2/3, as well a reluctance to leave a site in the city center and close to markets, are impacting the willingness of residents to leave

their current location. As such, the relocation has progressed slowly, while conditions in the POC 1 camp are becoming desperate. Ultimately, housing IDPs at UN bases should not be considered a long or even medium-term solution. However, although an eventual relocation to the sites outside of Juba is necessary, this happening within a short time-frame is unrealistic. As of mid-April, only about 1500 IDPs had moved from POC 1 to POC 2. Until this relocation is complete, the living situation at POC 1 must be improved.

Aid workers in Juba spoke to RI about the challenges of working with UNMISS to achieve improved conditions for IDPs on all of the compounds. Since there are units from multiple troop contributing countries based at each of the UN compounds, there is no clear decision-point for the individual POC sites when it comes to logistical issues. For example, building new latrines may require authorization from one unit of peacekeepers occupying that particular part of the compound, while at the same time opening a new gate to facilitate IDP movements within the compound may require approval from a separate unit. It is a cumbersome situation that prevents the establishment of a clear strategy for establishing improved conditions for IDPs. As one aid worker told RI, “There is no captain steering the ship.”

The over-congestion of POC 1 has been a problem since IDPs first sought shelter there in December. Some additional space within the compound was allocated in late April. But the living situation of the IDPs should not have been allowed to deteriorate as much as it has. After visiting the site in May, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon said the conditions, “...are worse than in any of the many refugee camps I have visited around the world.”¹ The UN Secretary General’s representatives in country, who represent the senior leadership of UNMISS, must work closely with aid organizations and representatives of troop contributing countries to ensure that decisions are made in a timely manner and that the living conditions for IDPs are improved.

Basic security within the POC sites must also be addressed. There are reports of violence and fighting among IDPs linked to alcohol consumption. According to a report on POC 2 by a UN-led body that coordinates camp management, there is a belief among some residents that the idleness of the camp population leads to increased alcohol consumption, and that the, “...overall frustration of people, as well as congested living space, fuels arguments that quickly

escalate.”² The security of aid workers is also becoming precarious. During a food distribution at POC 1 in late April, residents attacked aid staff carrying out the distribution, forcing temporary restrictions on the movements of aid workers inside the site. The UN Secretariat must push for the deployment of additional formed police units from UNMISS troop contributing countries to support patrols in and around the camps – to protect both IDPs and aid workers.

An increase in UNMISS patrols, especially at night, could also improve protection for women and girls. This is relevant within the close confines of the IDP sites where minimum gender-based violence prevention standards are reportedly not being met – such as the establishment and respect for separate sanitation facilities for men and women at POC 2.³

While the conditions inside the camps are not safe for women, conditions outside of the UN bases are even more insecure. Women must sometimes exit the compounds for their food and livelihood needs; for example, to access grinding mills for sorghum, to go to the market, or to purchase goods from nearby traders. Aid workers told RI that there have been security incidents along the roads near the UN bases, and women have been assaulted. There is clearly a need for increased patrolling by UNMISS outside the camps, and the frequency of these patrols must be increased.

Given the current constraints on UNMISS capacity, it is understandable that peacekeepers will not be able to conduct 24-hour patrols. Therefore, it is also essential that UNMISS develop a system to inform IDPs and aid workers when a patrol is planned. This way, IDPs can time their movements outside of the camps to coincide with the UNMISS patrols. To this end, and to improve communications with IDPs generally, UNMISS should establish community liaison units and hire local community liaison advisors.

THE EMERGENCY CONTEXT OUTSIDE OF JUBA

The challenges and gaps in protection and humanitarian response at the UN bases in Juba represent only a small piece of the crisis in South Sudan. There are IDPs sheltering at six other UN bases across South Sudan which are more difficult to access than those in Juba. In these areas, insecurity is high and health conditions are dire. In Bentiu,

1 Ki-moon, Ban. “Secretary-General’s Briefing to the Security Council on South Sudan.” May 12, 2014. <http://www.un.org/sg/statements/index.asp?nid=7666>

2 “CCCM Gender assessment report on IDP response at UNMISS UN House PoC based on Focus Group Discussions.” Prepared by CCCM Cluster Gender Focal Point. March 2014

3 Ibid.

in Unity state, recent violence caused an additional 14,000 people to seek refuge at the UN base there, more than doubling the IDP population on the compound. In Malakal, in Upper Nile state, there is severe overcrowding, similar to the airport site in Juba. The UN Special Representative to the Secretary General in South Sudan, Hilde Johnson, warned at a press conference in April that both Malakal and the Juba site are at "...imminent risk of turning into death traps."

Beyond the IDPs who have managed to reach UN compounds, the vast majority of displaced South Sudanese are spread throughout the countryside, many living with host families who themselves are in need of humanitarian support. The UN estimates that 3.7 million South Sudanese are currently at high risk of food insecurity and that 50,000 children could die of malnutrition if services are not ramped up.

Ultimately, the government of South Sudan is responsible for the well-being of its people, and a full cessation of hostilities by all parties to the conflict is necessary to allow people to return home, for farmers to plant, and for aid organizations to reach populations in need. On May 9th, President Kiir and Dr. Machar met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to sign a ceasefire deal. Just hours later, fighting erupted again, with both sides accusing the other of violating the deal. Given this, it is difficult to be optimistic about a sustained return to peace anytime soon.

The UN and donor governments must take actions now to more effectively mitigate the consequences of this conflict. First, the humanitarian funding gap must be shrunk. Many relief assets – including food stores and vehicles – were looted and stolen during the early phase of the conflict. The logistics of re-establishing operations is very expensive, and donor governments must be willing to provide adequate funds. The Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET) has now declared that famine conditions are possible in localized areas of Jonglei and Unity states without urgent action.⁴ The severity of the conflict, combined with obstructionist behavior of the warring parties, is preventing access to certain areas. However, a lack of funding for humanitarian aid must not be a factor that contributes to a potentially catastrophic scenario.

There must also be an emphasis on supporting humanitarian protection programming, including the prevention and treatment of gender-based violence, and protection monitoring activities. At last count, the Protection Cluster

has only 12% of what is required to respond to the needs. It is the most underfunded of all the clusters. In a crisis that is marked by extreme protection violations, this is unacceptable.

On May 20th, at a humanitarian pledging conference in Oslo, donor governments pledged over \$600 million in humanitarian aid, mainly by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union. These donors must fulfill their pledges in their entirety as soon as possible, something that doesn't always happen. At a donors' conference on the Central African Republic in January, for instance, some of the financing that was pledged has either taken months to actually come through, or not arrived at all – delaying a more robust response to the humanitarian crisis there. A similar delay could be disastrous for the people of South Sudan.

In addition to closing the funding gap, there is a need for better physical protection and security for South Sudan's civilian population. In March, the head of the United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, Hervé Ladsous, told the UN Security Council that UNMISS would suspend its state-building and capacity-building role with the South Sudanese government and focus on five priorities, including protecting civilians and facilitating humanitarian assistance. The Security Council's upcoming renewal of the UNMISS mandate is expected to include this reorientation. This shift must be implemented immediately by deploying more civilian staff trained and experienced in the protection of civilians to UNMISS. Further, UNMISS must be properly resourced and peacekeepers must be trained in their protection of civilians role. The Security Council can authorize a new mandate, but if Member States do not provide the troops and equipment, and if those troops are not prepared for their mission, then the mandate cannot be implemented adequately.

Mark Yarnell traveled to Juba, South Sudan in March 2014 to assess the situation of displaced people there.

⁴ Famine Early Warning System Network. "Without urgent action, populations in localized areas could face Famine in South Sudan." May 9, 2014. <http://www.fews.net/east-africa/sud%C3%A1n-del-sur/alert/fri-2014-05-09>