

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	134
Land:	Sydsudan
Kilde:	Minority Rights Group
Titel:	State of the Worlds Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016, South Sudan
Udgivet:	12. juli 2016
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	6. september 2016

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Publisher	Minority Rights Group International
Publication Date	12 July 2016
Cite as	Minority Rights Group International, <i>State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - South Sudan</i> , 12 July 2016, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/5796081fc.html [accessed 6 September 2016]
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Events of 2015

Having achieved independence from Sudan in 2011, making it the world's youngest nation, South Sudan has suffered bitter internal fighting since December 2013 between forces loyal to President Salva Kiir and then former Vice President Riek Machar, of Dinka and Nuer ethnicity respectively. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed since the outbreak of the conflict, primarily by ethnic militias loyal to either side. Close to a million people are estimated to be in a 'catastrophic' situation according to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), its highest ranking of food insecurity, further exacerbated by the threat of economic collapse due to soaring inflation.

Indiscriminate and escalating violence has resulted in sweeping human rights violations such as sexual violence, abductions, widespread property theft and the recruitment of child soldiers by both the South Sudanese army and opposition forces. Politically motivated violence has also divided the country along ethnic lines between the primarily Dinka leadership of the government's forces and the largely Nuer membership of Machar's opposition forces, the two largest ethnic groups in the country. However, other smaller ethnic minorities have also been drawn into the conflict as victims of targeted violence. In April, for instance, reports emerged alleging that government forces had deliberately targeted members of the Shilluk community as punishment for their perceived support of opposition forces.

Though a peace deal was brokered in February 2015 between the factions, the Cabinet passed a resolution postponing general elections and extending the tenure of Kiir's parliamentary term until July 2017, effectively annulling the provision within the agreement to jointly establish a transitional unity government with a 30-month term. Another peace agreement signed in August, after months of negotiations mediated by the regional Intergovernmental Authority on Development, appeared to have limited impact and failed to halt the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis. It was also undermined by Kiir's unilateral and unexpected announcement at the beginning of October that South Sudan's internal borders would be redrawn to increase the total number of states in the country from 10 to 28, with the stated aim of encouraging communities to develop villages through

local resources. Though more devolution of power to local states had been a key demand of Machar's rebels, the move was condemned by the opposition for the lack of consultation preceding the decision.

The traditions of indigenous peoples, pastoralist communities and minority groups are in general strongly linked to the areas in which they have long resided. Cultural practices and traditional knowledge, linked closely to self-sufficiency and local livelihoods, are reinforced by social institutions such as the family, clan and tribe. Conflict related displacement in South Sudan has disrupted this fragile balance, particularly affecting the country's large pastoralist population, who depend upon their herds for economic sustainability, basic nutrition and social interaction. While cattle are the basis of marriage contracts, conflict resolution and wealth generation, insecurity and violence – arising during the decades-long civil war that preceded South Sudan's independence in 2011 as well as the current conflict – has placed this system under threat. As a result, the Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that South Sudan's national herd, amounting to some 11 million cattle, was at significant risk of collapse due to displacement, destruction of traditional grazing lands and migration routes, as well as attendant disease outbreaks. Protracted insecurity has also pushed pastoralist herders into new and unfamiliar areas, at times leading to tensions between them and settled communities. The situation prompted Kiir in April 2015 to issue an order to cattle herders in Central and Western Equatoria to return to their home areas following complaints from sedentary farmers about the destruction of their crops. The herders, who had reportedly fled several years prior due to constant attacks by a primarily ethnic Murle faction of rebels known as Cobra, were drawn from different ethnic groups and were reportedly also competing with each other for access to grazing land and water – a situation that had led to an escalation of raids between Dinka and Mundari herders in particular in the months before. However, several groups refused to comply, citing lack of security, and tensions remained unresolved. These came to a fore in early January 2016 when friction between ethnic Dinka Bor cattle herders and farmers from the Bari community erupted into violence, leaving five dead and thousands temporarily displaced. These incidents reflect the fact that South Sudan's instability, while greatly exacerbated by the recent conflict, is also rooted in competition over scarce resources.

By the end of 2015, after stalled attempts to broker a lasting peace agreement and continued fighting by militias from both sides, the prospects for an end to the conflict looked unpromising. In what was considered a potential step towards reunifying the country, Kiir issued a decree in February 2016 reappointing Machar as Vice President; he made his return to the country's capital contingent upon its demilitarization. Whether these apparently conciliatory measures represent the beginning of greater stability in South Sudan remains to be seen.