

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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| Bilagsnr.: | 115 |
| Land: | Sydsudan |
| Kilde: | Minority Rights Group |
| Titel: | State of the Worlds Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015, South Sudan |
| Udgivet: | 2. juli 2015 |
| Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet: | 22. september 2015 |

State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - South Sudan

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| Publisher | Minority Rights Group International |
| Publication Date | 2 July 2015 |
| Cite as | Minority Rights Group International, <i>State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2015 - South Sudan</i> , 2 July 2015, available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/55a4fa426.html [accessed 26 August 2015] |
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The conflict in South Sudan continued throughout 2014, despite repeated attempts at brokering a lasting peace agreement between the warring factions. The conflict has subsumed and exacerbated ongoing conflicts between ethnic minorities and the national government and army, primarily controlled by the largely Nuer and Dinka ethnic leaders. This has been particularly the case in Jonglei State, where conflict has been a consistent feature of life over the past several decades. By the end of the year, the UN reported that tens of thousands had been killed and 1.9 million people displaced by the conflict.

Jonglei is home to multiple ethnic communities and sub-groups, including Anuak, Dinka, Jiye, Kachipo, Murle and Nuer groups. Bor town, an urban centre and the capital of Jonglei State, is particularly multi-ethnic, including foreign nationals who live in the town to conduct business. Bor was hard-hit during the early days of the fighting. The UN Mission in South Sudan reported that South Sudanese minorities such as Anuak, Murle and Shilluk, as well as foreigners from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda, appeared to be specifically targeted. By the end of 2014, various parts of Jonglei State were still being contested by government forces, opposition forces and an ethnic militia. An August 2014 report noted that Jonglei State had the highest number of displaced people and the highest food insecurity rate in South Sudan. There is substantial concern that as the rainy season comes to an end in 2015, extensive fighting will erupt again.

The national conflict between President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar has exacerbated long-standing tensions between communities over land rights, lack of community-centred development and violent rivalries that have developed over centuries. Research conducted by MRG in 2014 highlighted the underlying grievances among minority communities in Jonglei, including lack of access to water, conflicts over dry-season grazing areas, violent cattle raids and the manipulation of vulnerable populations by local politicians. The national conflict has worsened these underlying problems, given that many development projects have been halted and public assets such as schools, medical facilities

and water access points have been attacked or destroyed. Though the South Sudan peace process continued throughout 2014, it has largely focused on the national-level conflict between Kiir and Machar to the exclusion of many of the other fighting groups that have become part and parcel of the conflict. Concerns have been raised that this strategy cannot lead to lasting peace and will not address many of the concerns of minority communities in the country.

Urban growth in South Sudan has in recent years been accelerated by large-scale displacement. In Yei, for example, previous research has highlighted how increasing pressure on land and the return of the town's Kakwa inhabitants around the time of the country's independence in 2011 exacerbated tensions with the largely Dinka displaced. More recently, however, major urban centres have been devastated and depopulated by renewed conflict. In Bor, for example, after the town was occupied by opposition forces with support from thousands of Nuer militias in December 2013, the largely Dinka residents were targeted and forced to flee. The UN estimated that in Bor town alone 5-10 per cent of housing, as well as the central market, had been destroyed during the early fighting. After changing hands a number of times, the town was recaptured by government forces in January 2014. There were subsequent reports of repeated attacks on displaced Nuer based in the UN-managed camp near Bor by government soldiers. While some of the country's large displaced population has been able to return to their home towns, many remain in a limbo.

Despite the conflict, plans for a new national capital of South Sudan remain on the table. This has come in part because of objections by the Bari community who are the traditional inhabitants of Juba, the current capital. Bari have for several years expressed concerns about Juba's rapid expansion and the resultant land grabbing and absorption of Bari villages. The population of Juba has doubled since the end of the war for independence in 2005. Bari community leaders have petitioned the government to speed up the relocation of the capital to a new site, noting that they agreed to Juba becoming the seat of the government as an interim measure and that their constitutionally protected community land rights are under threat.