

ANNUAL BRIEF ON VIOLENCE AFFECTING CIVILIANS

HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2023, UNMISS HRD documented 885 incidents of violence affecting 3,340 civilians in South Sudan, subjected to killings (1,524), injuries (1,052), abductions (601), and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (163).
- Compared to 2022, this constitutes a 24 percent increase in violent incidents (from 714 to 885) and a four percent decrease in the number of victims (from 3,469 to 3,340). While the number of civilians killed decreased by five percent compared to 2022 (from 1,600 to 1,524), the number of civilians injured increased by seven percent (from 988 to 1,052). Abductions increased by 20 percent (from 501 to 601), whereas victims of CRSV decreased significantly by 57 percent (from 380 to 163).
- Warrap State experienced the highest number of civilian casualties (678 killed and 482 injured), accounting for 45 percent of the total number of civilians killed and injured in South Sudan, while Jonglei State experienced the highest number of abductions (419), accounting for 70 percent of the recorded abductions nationwide.
- 86 percent of the recorded incidents were attributed to community-based militias and/or civil defense groups involving 2,868 victims. These numbers represent a 75 percent increase compared to 2022 (from 1,642 to 2,868). Conversely, the number of victims attributed to conventional parties to the conflict declined significantly by 79 percent compared to 2022 (from 1,674 to 358).

CONTEXT

This annual brief presents an overview of trends in violence affecting civilians from January to December 2023 by assessing four major forms of individual harm – killing, injury, abduction, and CRSV – experienced throughout South Sudan. While the impact of violence extends beyond these forms of harm, these have been the most common incidents documented nationwide.

In accordance with its mandate, UNMISS Human Rights Division (HRD) has issued this annual brief as an advocacy tool to create awareness about the impact of violence on the civilian population and urge concerned stakeholders to take action to reduce the effects of armed violence on civilians. UNMISS also continues to urge the national authorities to hold all perpetrators accountable.

Sources of information include victim and eyewitness accounts, as well as reports from secondary sources identified during field missions.

All reported incidents, particularly those involving sub-national violence, were deconflicted with incidents documented by the UNMISS Civil Affairs Division. Incidents identified as cases of CRSV were corroborated in consultation with the Women's Protection Advisory Unit.

Data presented in this brief should not be considered comprehensive due to various challenges faced by UNMISS HRD in monitoring and reporting on violations and abuses of international human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law. These include limited access to various locations due to security considerations, access denials by parties to the conflict, and inaccessibility due to road conditions. Challenges also include victims' and eyewitnesses' unwillingness to speak due to fear of reprisals and underreporting of sexual and gender-based violence due to stigma.

South Sudan is a State party to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and has ratified six core

United Nations human rights treaties.¹ Pursuant to this legal framework, South Sudan is legally bound to respect, protect, promote, and fulfil the human rights of all persons within its territory or under its jurisdiction or control.

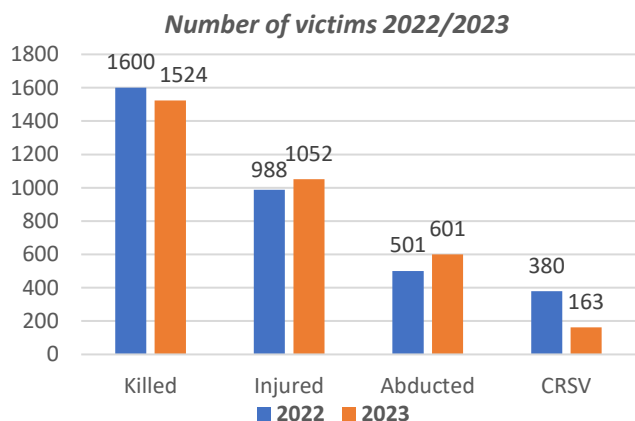
International humanitarian law equally applies to the non-international armed conflict in South Sudan. All parties to the conflict must abide by the relevant rules of customary international law applicable in non-international armed

conflicts, including the principles of distinction, proportionality, and precaution.

In addition, in 2012, South Sudan incorporated the provisions of the Four Geneva Conventions and its Additional Protocols into domestic law. Consequently, acts with a nexus to the non-international armed conflict, which constitute breaches of Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, may be prosecuted before the South Sudanese courts.

GENERAL TRENDS

In 2023, civilians continued to endure the brunt of predominantly sub-national armed violence across South Sudan. Between January and December, UNMISS HRD documented over 885 violent incidents involving at least 3,340 civilians subjected to one of the four major types of individual harm (killing, injury, abduction, and CRSV), constituting a 24 percent increase in the number of violent incidents, and a four percent decrease in the number of victims, as compared with 2022.



As illustrated in the chart, in 2023, the number of killings decreased by five percent (from 1,600 to 1,524) in comparison with 2022, while the number of civilians injured increased by seven percent (from 988 to 1,052). Four among the civilians killed were humanitarian workers providing lifesaving assistance to the most vulnerable population in South Sudan.² The number of abductions increased by 20 percent (from 501 to 601), whereas the number of CRSV decreased significantly by 57 percent (from 380 to 163).

In 2023, Warrap and Jonglei states bore the brunt of violence attributed to community-based militias and/or civil defense groups in 2023. While, in 2022, Unity and Upper Nile states were vastly affected by armed violence involving the parties to the conflict and its proxy armed elements and/or affiliated militia groups.

Community-based militias and/or civil defense groups

The intensity of violence involving community-based militias and/or civil-defense groups fluctuated and was marked by two distinct surges: (1) in Jonglei State during the first quarter and (2) in Warrap State during the fourth quarter of 2023, while a major decline was observed in June and August. During this period, numerous regions across the country faced climate-related crises such as floods and outbreaks of waterborne diseases. These challenges hindered the movements of both civilians and armed elements, potentially contributing to a decrease in armed violence.

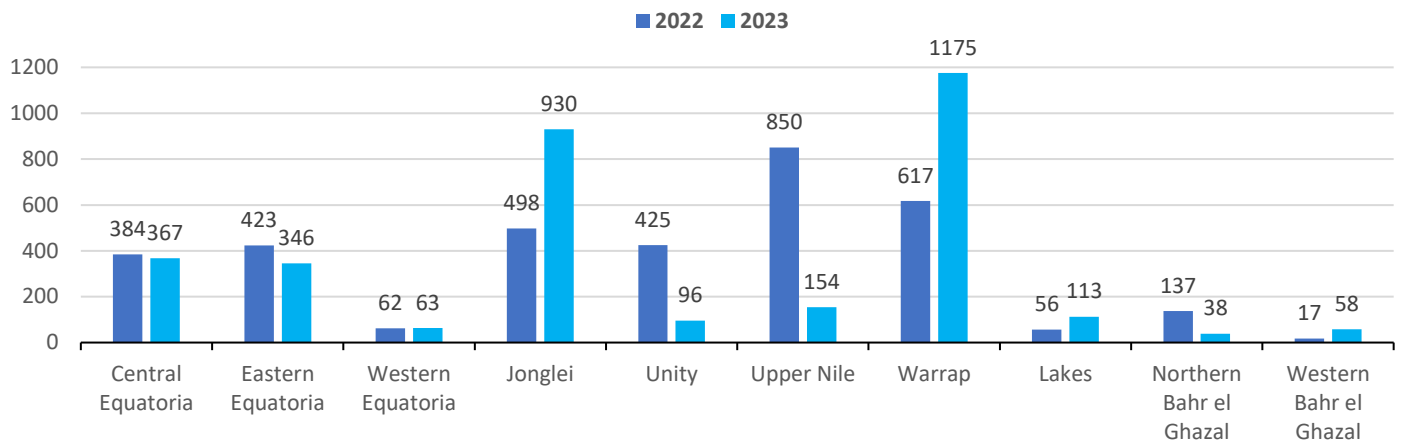
Overall, in 2023, armed violence involving community-based militias and/or civil-defense groups was the leading cause of harm affecting civilians in South Sudan and accounted for 86 percent of all victims. This represents a 75 percent increase in the number of victims attributable to these groups compared to 2022 (from 1,642 to 2,868).

Warrap State experienced the highest number of civilian victims, primarily due to violence from persistent border dispute between the Dinka Twic Mayardit of Twic County and the Dinka Ngok of the Abyei Administrative Area undermining the intercommunal peace initiatives held between the two communities;³ the intra-communal

¹ The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention against Torture and other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

² In 2022, there were nine aid workers killed while delivering life-saving assistance in South Sudan.

³ On 11 Dec 2023, the United Nations Security Council issued a press release condemning the violence in Warrap State and southern Abyei Administrative Area and stressing the need for the transitional government of South Sudan to investigate the killings and attacks; containing the violence; and defusing the tension between the affected communities.



disputes among Dinka sub-groups in the region; recurring cross-border cattle-related and inter-ethnic violence involving Dinka Pakam from Lakes State and the Bul Nuer from Unity State; and the territorial dispute over Manyang village between the Dinka Apuk and the Luo from Western Bahr el Ghazal State. For instance, in November, following heightened tension between the Dinka Twic Mayardit and the Dinka Ngok, at least 100 civilian casualties (59 killed and 41 injured), including 12 women and one boy, were recorded by UNMISS HRD. Similarly, in one of the Bul Nuer incursions to raid cattle in Tonj North County in early June, 20 civilians were killed, and 12 others injured, including three women. Overall, persistent incidents and cycles of violence in Warrap State accounted for 35 percent (1,175 victims) of the civilians harmed in 2023.

Relatedly, Jonglei State recorded the second highest number of civilian victims, particularly due to persistent small-scale armed attacks and cattle-raiding activities allegedly by the Murle armed elements from the GPAA, predominantly from the *Kurenen* age-set, in Akobo, Ayod, Bor South, Duk, Nyirol, and Uror counties; as well as the massive and cyclical cattle-related attack against the Murle communities in GPAA by the coalition of armed elements from Jonglei State, primarily from the Nuer community and aligned armed elements from Gambella, Ethiopia, from 24 December 2022 to 9 January 2023, resulting in at least 742 civilian casualties (308 killed, 131 injured), 299 abducted, and four subjected to CRSV. In 2023, a total of 229 incidents impacting 930 civilians (267 killed, 213 injured, 419 abducted, and 31 CRSV) were documented in the region. This represents an 83 percent increase in violent incidents (from 125 to 229), and an 87 percent increase in the number of victims (from 498 to 930) compared to 2022; and accounted for 70 percent of the overall number of abductions (419 out of 601) documented.⁴ These incidents undermined the

inter-Lou Nuer and Murle peace initiatives organized by the leaders of both communities.

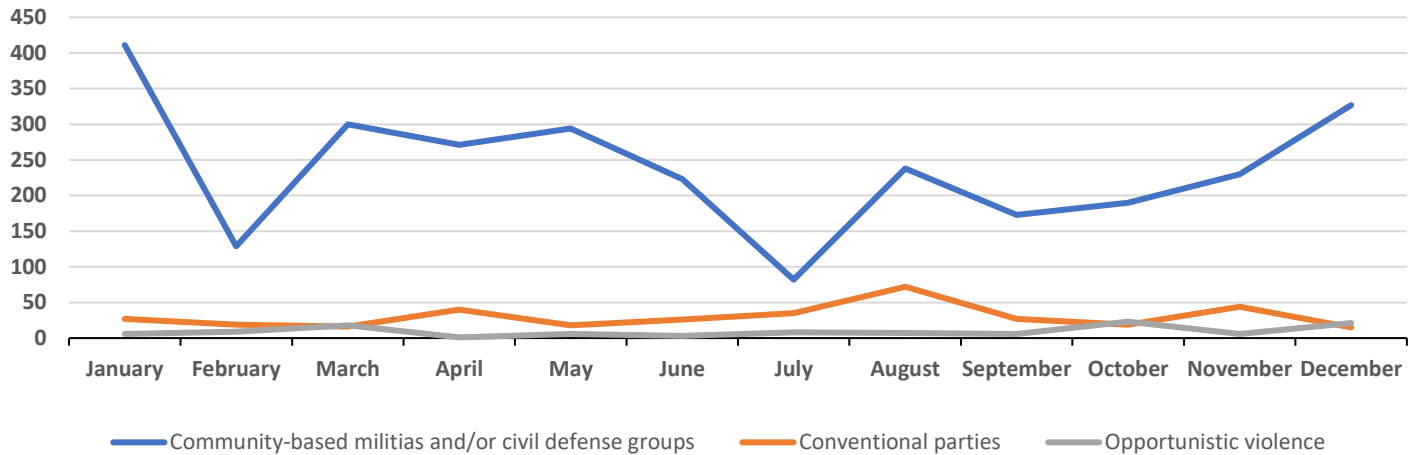
Notably, the alleged presence and armed activities by the Murle elements were also observed in Barmach Payam, Ulang County, Upper Nile State; in Aru Junction, Gondokoro and Mangalla Payams in Juba County, Central Equatoria State; and Greater Kapoeta area and various parts of Eastern Equatoria State. In total, incursions by alleged armed Murle elements accounted for three percent (or 83 individuals) of the victims recorded in South Sudan, of which 43 were abductions (32 boys and 11 girls).

In Eastern Equatoria State, attacks involving civil-defense groups from various communities such as the Acholi, Buya, Didinga, Jie, Lango, Logir, Lopit, Lotuko, Tenet and Toposa armed elements persisted and accounted for 228 civilian victims (153 killed, 65 injured, eight abducted, and two subjected to CRSV). Moreover, cross-border attacks by the armed Turkana elements from the Republic of Kenya against the Toposa communities in Kapoeta East County, as well as intercommunal clashes involving armed Murle elements from the GPAA, resulted in 47 victims (14 killed, 12 injured, and 21 abducted).

While inter/intra-communal violence, particularly in the context of cattle-raiding, is historically common among pastoralist communities in South Sudan, the entrenched patterns of violence among various ethnic groups, tribes, and sub-sections have increasingly seen the involvement and support of conventional parties to the conflict, particular the military. Further, the political and administrative elites at local and national levels have contributed to the intensification of violence, including through instigating and/or participating in the planning of attacks, providing financial and logistical support, as well

⁴ These particular large-scale attacks contributed to the overall increase in the number of civilian victims documented in 2023.

Trends in the number of civilians affected (2023)



as military-grade weapons and ammunition. In this regard, this type of violence cannot be dissociated from the local and national political and military dynamics.

Separately, the influx of South Sudanese returnees and Sudanese refugees following the outbreak of armed conflict in the Republic of Sudan in April 2023 contributed to competition over scarce resources, including humanitarian services. This added to ethnic-related communal conflicts resulting in civilian casualties documented by UNMISS HRD, particularly at transit hubs, and within the protection of civilians (PoC) site in Malakal, Upper Nile State. For instance, in June 2023, UNMISS HRD recorded the killing of 25 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the injury of 64 others inside the PoC site, following the alleged armed dispute between the Nuer and Shilluk communities that reportedly stemmed from the killing of a Nuer IDP by a Shilluk, leading to a retaliatory attack from the Nuer side. Further, 29 individuals were wounded, and one was killed during an ethnic-communal dispute between the armed Dinka and Nuer elements at Upper Nile University, Malakal County, in May 2023.

Conventional parties to the conflict

The Transitional Government’s commitment to the implementation of R-ARCSS generally contributed to the overall reduction of violent incidents and clashes between Government security forces and other organized armed groups. Compared to 2022, a significant decline of 79 percent in the number of civilian victims attributable to the conventional parties to the conflict was observed (from 1,674 to 358). Overall, 158 incidents impacting 358 civilian victims were documented in 2023, of which 109 were committed by the Government security forces, largely in Central Equatoria and Warrap states. 13 incidents were attributed to the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement – in Opposition (SPLA-IO), while 37

incidents were attributed to the National Salvation Front (NAS) mostly in Central Equatoria and parts of Western Equatoria states.

For instance, recurrent hostilities between the South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF) and the National Salvation Front (NAS) across the southern part of Central Equatoria State adversely impacted the protection of civilians, particularly in parts of Juba, Lainya, Morobo, and Yei counties. Notably, the SSPDF’s counter-insurgency operations against the NAS in these areas resulted in 60 civilian victims (28 killed, eight injured, and 24 subjected to CRSV), including the targeting of civilians perceived as sympathizers or collaborators of the NAS. Further, SSPDF operations displaced affected civilians to remote areas near the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo and other areas within Yei River County.

Overall, NAS operations across the Greater Equatoria region resulted in 122 civilian casualties (17 killed, 17 injured, 83 abducted, and five subjected to sexual violence). Further, 83 civilians were abducted by NAS elements in Central and Western Equatoria states for the purposes of forced recruitment and labour and as a punitive measure against civilians perceived as collaborating with the Government.

In Warrap State, abuse of authority by the government security forces resulted in 71 civilian casualties (17 killed and 51 injured) and three cases of CRSV were documented. For instance, in August 2023, 47 civilians were reportedly injured, while three others were killed in Kuac South Payam, Gogrial West County, by an SSPDF soldier who detonated a grenade following an altercation with a local trader. Among the victims were 39 women and five children.

Unidentified and other opportunistic armed elements

UNMISS HRD also documented a relatively small number of incidents by unidentified armed elements, which do not fall specifically within one of the categories described above; however, bear a link to the conflict based on the suspected perpetrators, location, modus

operandi, and other factors (such as the type of weapons used, languages spoken, facial scarifications, etc.). As in the past, these actors were primarily engaged in opportunistic violence. Overall, three percent of the total incidents of violence affecting 114 victims documented in 2023 were attributable to these types of armed elements.

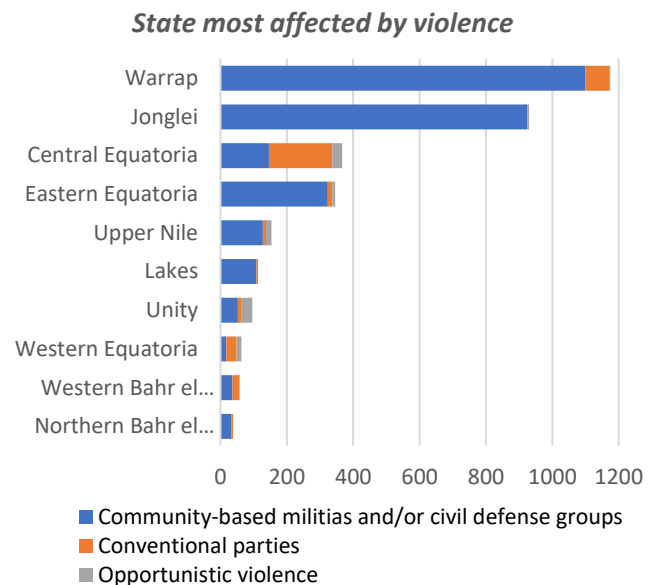
GEOGRAPHICAL TRENDS

In 2023, most of the violence affecting civilians was geographically concentrated in Warrap, Jonglei, Eastern Equatoria, and Central Equatoria states, which together accounted for 84 percent of the total number of victims. Warrap State experienced the highest level of violence, followed by Jonglei State, accounting for 35 and 28 percent of the victims, respectively. Violent incidents were concentrated in specific hotspots, with 124 payams (out of 540) accounting for more than 64 percent of the victims. Notably, the highest number of victims was recorded in Ajak-Kuac Payam, Warrap State, which alone accounted for 291 victims.

Warrap, Jonglei, Eastern Equatoria, Upper Nile, Lakes, Unity, Western Bahr el Ghazal, and Northern Bahr el Ghazal states were primarily affected by sub-national violence involving community-based militias and/or civil defense groups. Conversely, Western Equatoria State was primarily affected by violence involving the conventional parties to the conflict, while Central Equatoria State was affected by violence committed by both the conventional parties to the conflict and the community-based militias and/or civil defense groups.

Warrap State experienced the highest number of killings (678) and injuries (482), accounting for 45 percent of the total victims of killing and injury in South Sudan (2,567). Jonglei State experienced the highest number of abductions (419), accounting for 70 percent of all abductions in the country. Central Equatoria and Jonglei states experienced the highest number of CRSV cases, 55 and 31, respectively. These numbers collectively

accounted for 53 percent of documented cases nationwide.



Notably, Western Bahr el Ghazal State experienced the sharpest percentage increase in the number of victims documented compared to 2022 (241 percent or from 17 to 58), followed by Warrap (90 percent or from 617 to 1175), and Jonglei (87 percent or from 498 to 930). Conversely, Upper Nile State experienced the sharpest percentage decrease in the number of documented victims (82 percent decrease or from 850 to 154), followed by Unity (77 percent decrease or from 425 to 96), and Northern Bahr el Ghazal (72 percent decrease or from 137 to 38).

VICTIMS

As noted earlier, UNMISS HRD's capacity to comprehensively document the number of victims affected by violence was impacted by capacity constraints, safety, and security concerns, as well as access restrictions, particularly in conflict-affected areas, which may have resulted in the underreporting of the number of incidents and victims. Notwithstanding, UNMISS HRD documented 3,340 victims of four main forms of harm experienced in South Sudan - a four percent decrease compared to 2022 (3,469).

Men

As in previous years, men comprised the majority of victims (67 percent or 2,221 individuals). The primary form of harm perpetrated against men was killing (57 percent), followed by injury (39 percent), abduction (three percent), and CRSV (less than one percent). UNMISS HRD has strong grounds to suspect that CRSV affecting male survivors is grossly underreported due to social stigma.

The majority of male victims were killed or injured in the context of inter-communal violence in 10 states (85 percent), followed by the conflict between the SSPDF and the NAS in the Greater Ekuatoria region (87 percent). In 2023, at least 66 men were abducted, primarily for the purposes of forced military recruitment and/or forced labour. Men were primarily abducted in five states by community-based militias and/or civil defense groups (10), NAS (55), and unidentified armed elements (one).

Women

In 2023, women comprised 15 percent (516 individuals) of the total victims. The primary form of harm perpetrated against women was abduction (30 percent or 155 individuals), followed by killing (28 percent or 143 individuals), injury (24 percent or 122 individuals) and CRSV (19 percent or 96 individuals). Female victims were killed or injured across the 10 states primarily in the context of inter-communal violence, while 151 abductions targeting female victims occurred in the areas of Morobo and Yei counties in Central Equatoria State; Lafon and Torit counties in Eastern Equatoria State; and Akobo, the GPAA, Duk, Nyirol and Uror in Jonglei State by the community-based militias and/or civil-defense groups (87 percent) and the conventional parties to the conflict (12 percent). Concerningly, the number of women recorded as victims of killing or injury increased by 23 percent in 2023 compared to 2022.

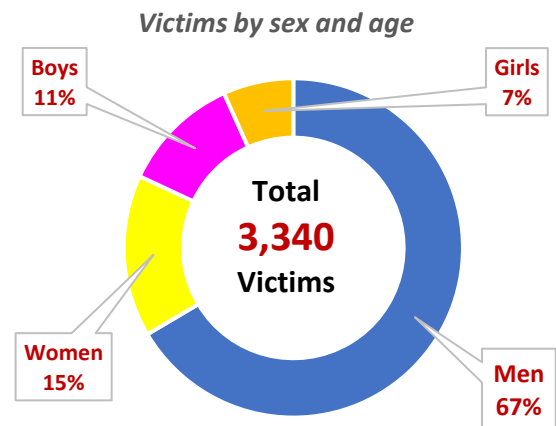
Overall, the number of women recorded as victims of CRSV decreased by 65 percent between 2022 and 2023. Nevertheless, women remain the primary victims of CRSV in South Sudan, accounting for 60 percent of all cases recorded in 2023 (with girls accounting for 31 percent). Further, UNMISS has strong grounds to believe that many abducted women and girls were also subjected to sexual violence.

PERPETRATORS

UNMISS HRD identified three major categories of alleged perpetrators involved in conflict-related violence affecting civilians: i) community-based militias and/or civil defense groups; ii) conventional parties to the conflict; and iii) unidentified and/or opportunistic armed elements, including foreign armed actors.

Children

Violence affecting children remained a significant concern, with children accounting for 18 percent of all victims (or 603 children: 379 boys and 224 girls) in 2023. Abduction was the leading form of harm affecting both boys and girls, accounting for 63 percent of all child victims. Concerningly, UNMISS HRD documented a 138 percent increase in the number of abductions involving children in 2023 as compared to 2022 (from 160 to 380). Among child abductees, 95 percent were abducted in the context of inter-communal violence in eight states,⁵ of which Jonglei State accounted for 80 percent of the victims (or 289 children: 165 boys and 124 girls).



Killing and injury were the next most prevalent forms of harm affecting children, accounting for 28 percent of all child victims (139 boys and 31 girls). The majority of children were killed or injured in the context of inter-communal violence in eight states. Further, girls continued to be severely affected by CRSV, with 50 cases documented in 2023.

Community-based militias and/or civil defense groups

In 2023, community-based militias and/or civil defense groups were the primary perpetrators of violence affecting civilians. UNMISS HRD attributed responsibility for 86 percent of victims to these groups. This represents a 75 percent increase in the number of

⁵ Namely, Central Equatoria, Eastern Equatoria, Jonglei, Lakes, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, Unity, Upper Nile and Warrap States.

victims attributable to these perpetrators in 2023 compared to 2022 (from 1,642 to 2,868). Violence perpetrated by community-based militias and/or civil defense groups accounted for most victims in all states except for Western Equatoria and Central Equatoria states. In Warrap and Jonglei states alone, these groups were responsible for 2,024 victims, which represents 61 percent of all victims across South Sudan.

In violence perpetrated by the community-based militias and/or civil defense groups, the armed Murle elements from the GPAA were accountable for the highest number of victims (27 percent) in Jonglei state, followed by armed Dinka Ngok elements (11 percent) in Warrap State. The primary form of harm perpetrated by these groups was killing (49 percent), followed by injury (32 percent), abduction (18 percent), and CRSV (one percent).

Community-based militias and/or civil defense groups are a longstanding feature of pastoralist communities across South Sudan. Traditionally, their main objective was to protect herds of cattle from external attacks. However, as a consequence of years of armed conflict and the resultant illicit proliferation of small arms amongst local communities, members of these community-based militias and/or civil-defense groups have been co-opted, armed, and used as proxy armed elements by all parties to the conflict and by local actors, which has contributed to the progressive militarization of inter-communal violence. The organization and structure of these groups are complex and often remain unclear to observers. Nonetheless, as evidenced by the localized violence in Warrap, Jonglei, and Eastern Equatoria states, attacks by community-based militias and/or civil defense groups demonstrated a degree of planning and coordination. UNMISS HRD documented that some of these groups were armed with assault rifles, light machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and specialized communication devices.

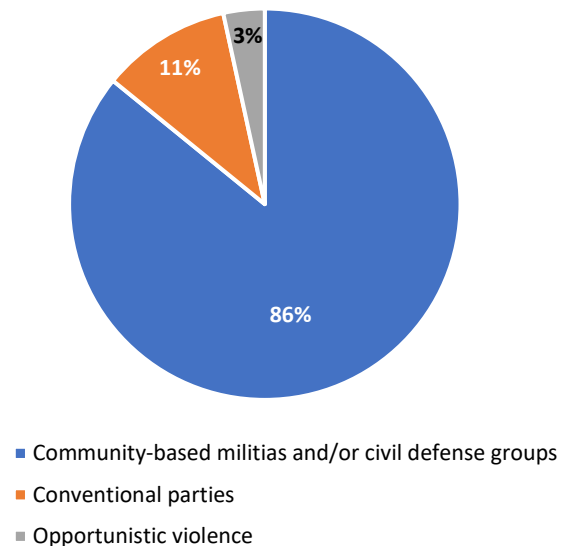
Conventional parties to the conflict

During the reporting period, the conventional parties to the conflict were responsible for the second highest rate of violence affecting civilians, accounting for 11 percent of the total number of victims. Notably, the number of victims attributable to the conventional parties declined significantly by 79 percent compared to 2022 (from 1,674 to 358). Nevertheless, violence perpetrated by the conventional parties to the conflict accounted for the majority of victims in Central Equatoria and Warrap

states. In particular, military operations carried out by government forces to dislodge NAS elements, as well as abuses committed against civilians by NAS elements, triggered violence in areas of Central Equatoria State, including Juba, Lainya, Morobo, and Yei counties.

Among the conventional parties to the conflict, the highest number of victims were attributable to the SSPDF (45 percent) followed by NAS (34 percent). The primary form of harm perpetrated by conventional parties to the conflict was killings (23 percent) followed by injuries (28 percent), abductions (25 percent), and CRSV (24 percent). Among government forces, acts of violence affecting civilians were primarily attributed to SSPDF, SSNPS, NSS, NUF, and CID.

Civilian casualties by type of perpetrators



The conventional parties to the conflict include government security forces, as well as organized opposition armed groups and their allied proxy armed elements who willfully perpetrated the violations under the control and direction of the former. The distinction between government forces and organized armed groups should not obscure the extreme fluidity between and within these entities, whose loyalties often shift according to the formation of alliances of convenience, defections, and buy-offs.

Unidentified and other opportunistic armed elements

Unidentified and opportunistic armed elements were responsible for a minor proportion of violence affecting

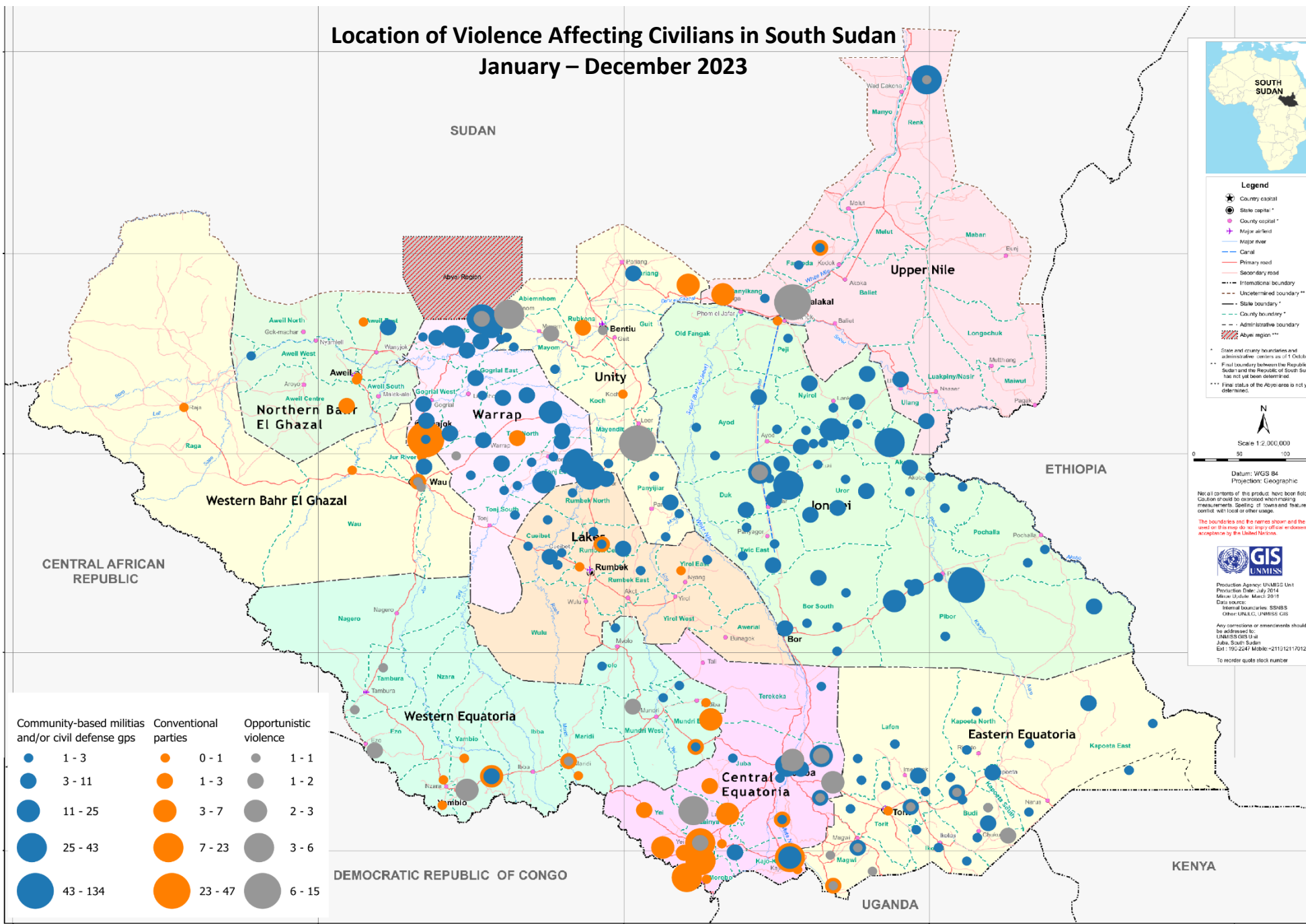
civilians, accounting for three percent of the victims. The primary form of harm perpetrated by these actors was injuries (43 percent), followed by killings (22 percent), abductions (six percent), and CRSV (29 percent). Geographically, the highest number of victims attributable to opportunistic, unidentified, and foreign armed elements were concentrated in Unity (32), followed by Central Equatoria (30), and Upper Nile (17) states.

Among this category of perpetrators, the highest number of victims were attributable to unidentified armed

elements (88 percent), and opportunistic civilians (eight percent), followed by foreign armed elements (four percent).

This category of perpetrators, who often have a historical affiliation with an armed group or community-based militias and/or civil-defense groups, have become autonomous from their sponsors and now carry out acts of violence against civilians from their own or rival communities without any clear strategic or military objective.

Location of Violence Affecting Civilians in South Sudan January – December 2023



Community-based militias and/or civil defense gps	Conventional parties	Opportunistic violence
● 1 - 3	● 0 - 1	● 1 - 1
● 3 - 11	● 1 - 3	● 1 - 2
● 11 - 25	● 3 - 7	● 2 - 3
● 25 - 43	● 7 - 23	● 3 - 6
● 43 - 134	● 23 - 47	● 6 - 15



Legend

- Country capital
- State capital
- County capital
- Major airfield
- Major river
- Canal
- Primary road
- Secondary road
- International boundary
- Uncertain boundary
- State boundary
- County boundary
- Administrative boundary
- Abyei region

* State and county boundaries and administrative centers as of 1 October
** Final boundary between the Republic of Sudan and the Republic of South Sudan has not yet been determined
*** Final status of the Abyei area is not yet determined

Scale 1:2,000,000

0 50 100

North arrow

Datum: WGS 84
Projection: Geographic

None of the contents of this product have been field verified. Caution should be exercised when making measurements. Spelling of towns and features is correct, with local or other usage.

The boundaries and the names shown on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

GIS UNMISS

Production Agency: UNMISS Unit
Production Date: July 2014
Revision Date: March 2018
Data sources: Internal boundaries: SGNIS
Other: UNLAC, UNMISS GIS

Any corrections or amendments should be addressed to:
UNMISS GIS Unit
Juba, South Sudan
E-mail: UNMISS-GIS@unmiss.gov.sd
To receive quote stock number