Despite a January 2020 recommitment by the South Sudanese government and opposition groups to a ceasefire agreement, 2020 and 2021 were marked by increased insecurity and conflict in South Sudan. Security forces have been accused of violence and a general lack of respect for the rule of law. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), between January 2020 and August 2021 there were 694 incidents of violence against civilians in South Sudan, with Central Equatoria, Jonglei, and Lakes states experiencing the highest number of violent incidents due to fracturing alliances and intercommunal clashes.

All armed groups in South Sudan have been accused of committing abuses against civilians, including sexual violence, which is frequently used as a tactic to displace and terrorise rival communities. According to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), 193 cases of conflict-related sexual violence affecting 144 women, 46 girls, and five men were recorded between January and December 2020.

This document by Insecurity Insight analyses a sample of 40 reported incidents of conflict-related sexual violence that occurred in South Sudan between January 2020 and August 2021 in order to provide insight into the patterns and nature of reported conflict-related sexual violence in the country. The incidents in this report do not show the full-scale of sexual violence incidents in South Sudan and we welcome any collaboration in order to enhance monitoring and reporting of these incidents.

A total of 104 women and girls in this sample were affected by sexual violence. At least 19 survivors were girls, with the youngest being only eight years old. The analysed incidents involved at least 104 different attackers. Sexual violence often involved multiple perpetrators and took the form of gang rapes.

State forces were implicated in rape committed during armed clashes with insurgents, during counter-insurgency campaigns, while they were in pursuit of criminal elements, and during unauthorised activities such as looting, affecting many women during a single operation. Non-state armed actors were more often implicated in gang rapes involving a single survivor. These incidents occurred in the bush while survivors were performing ordinary household activities, such as collecting firewood or water.
Summary of findings

- Conflict-related sexual violence is frequently committed by groups of men, highlighting the extent to which acts of sexual violence are not individual crimes, but are closely linked to conflict-related group dynamics.

- Members of state forces committed the majority of reported acts of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, particularly during incidents of more general violence against civilians.

- Women and girls were often attacked by members of state forces during clashes with armed groups and counter-insurgency operations, highlighting the extent to which sexual violence may be part of the strategy to fight insurgents by attacking their families or to strengthen group cohesion among perpetrators.

- Women and girls were also attacked by members of non-state armed groups while collecting firewood. Members of non-state armed actors were more often implicated in gang rapes involving a single survivor.

- Sexual violence often occurred during home invasions and looting by both state and non-state armed actors.

- Sexual violence against women and girls in South Sudan continues largely with impunity, although 46 sexual attackers have been held accountable.

**Conflict-related sexual violence is frequently perpetrated by groups of men**

The majority of analysed incidents involved multiple men (87% of 40 analysed incidents). While it is not clear whether this is representative of all conflict-related sexual violence or the fact that sexual violence committed by multiple men may be more frequently reported, the presence of multiple perpetrators in rape cases is an important characteristic of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan that needs to be better understood. This document hopes to make a contribution to the discussion.

In at least seven of the analysed incidents the group of sexual attackers consisted of more than five soldiers from either the SSPDF or, as in one reported incident, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multiple perpetrators</th>
<th>Single perpetrator</th>
<th>Multiple survivors</th>
<th>Single survivors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>87%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Sexual Violence in South Sudan. Download on our website or on HDX.
Sexual attackers who were a member of a non-state armed group – often described as “unidentified armed men” – also acted in groups of multiple perpetrators in the incidents examined in this document. However, groups of non-state actors committing sexual violence tended to be smaller than groups of state actors. In most reported cases perpetrators presumed to be affiliated with armed groups committed gang rapes in groups of less than five men.

More than half of the analysed 40 incidents were mass rapes involving multiple men and multiple survivors or victims. The majority of incidents involving non-state armed actors were gang rapes of a single survivor or victim, while state actors were often implicated in mass rapes. In over half of the reported incidents of gang rape survivors were under 18 years of age.

Women and girls are attacked by non-state armed groups while collecting firewood

In Eastern and Western Equatoria and Lakes states women and girls were attacked and raped in open areas while collecting firewood, searching for coconuts or fetching water. Perpetrators mainly included armed men and armed pastoralists, and often there were multiple perpetrators. This illustrates how conflict-related insecurity increasingly places women and girls particularly at risk when pursuing daily activities outside their homes.

The frequent occurrence of sexual violence during home invasions and looting by both state and non-state armed actors

In 2020 in Central and Western Equatoria women and girls were attacked and raped inside their homes during armed robberies. The perpetrators included both armed men and men described as wearing military uniforms.

In all of these incidents multiple perpetrators were reported, and in many cases women and girls were raped at gunpoint. This highlights the extent to which women and girls are also not safe in their own homes in South Sudan. It also underlines the extent to which sexual violence is a common and perhaps integral part of conflict-related looting and home invasions that terrorise civilians.

In August 2020 in Mundri, Western Equatoria, two girls aged 15 years and 17 years were raped at gunpoint inside their home by eight armed men, some wearing military uniforms. The men broke into their home during the night, looting three phones, a solar panel, radios and money. The girls were taken into the bush and raped before being released. Six of the men have since been arrested, while the search continues for the remaining two.
Is sexual violence committed under orders?

The incidents analysed here often occurred in the context of security operations by security forces or criminal activities carried out by those participating in military operations such as burglaries or looting. This highlights how conflict-related sexual violence is an element of broader violence and is distinct from interpersonal sexual violence. The extent to which sexual violence is committed by groups of men rather than individuals suggests that sexual violence may be committed under orders from higher authorities of some kind. It is possible that sexual violence is used as an informal mechanism that strengthens commitment to the group, possibly through complex forms of complicity in this type of violence.

Some armed groups may use it as a form of socialisation and social control within the group, including building group cohesion that shapes the behaviour of group members. Sexual violence, particularly rape, may allow groups to form bonds of loyalty and develop intra-group mutual esteem, as well as being an opportunity for combatants to communicate their masculinity within a group, particularly during gang rapes, which are a more frequent form of conflict-related sexual violence.

State armed actors implicated in most conflict-related sexual attacks

In the majority of analysed incidents the accused perpetrators were state forces, particularly SSPDF soldiers, who are named in over a third of reported incidents.

Often they wore military uniforms and carried firearms, or worked in groups with some wearing military uniforms and others wearing civilian clothing.

South Sudan National Police Service officers were also implicated in sexual violence. In one incident a senior state government official was arrested and charged with raping a 17-year-old girl in his home.

Most reported sexual attacks by SSPDF soldiers occurred within a wider context of violence against and abuse of civilians, including beatings, shootings and the looting of homes. Some of these incidents occurred during violent clashes with armed groups, while soldiers were conducting counter-insurgency campaigns, and during raids on villages while the soldiers were reportedly in pursuit of criminal elements. In some cases soldiers reportedly looted houses and killed civilians.

In other cases sexual violence was directed against female family members of those targeted by a counter-insurgency campaign. Many of these incidents involved mass rapes, and in at least three separate incidents more than ten women were attacked and raped.

Incidents involving state armed actors occurred in the Greater Equatoria region and Warrap and Lakes states, where government forces are carrying out counter-insurgency campaigns.

In March 2020 in Yei area, Central Equatoria, five SSPDF soldiers were accused by the National Salvation Front of assaulting and gang raping a woman and her 11-year-old daughter during an attempt to arrest the woman's husband.
Less than half of reported sexual attackers prosecuted

During 2019 the SSPDF, the South Sudan National Police Service and the SPLA-IO all launched action plans to address and eradicate conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan.

On 3 December 2020 South Sudan’s first gender-based violence court was inaugurated, which was designed to provide dedicated and expedited trials of gender-based violence cases.

By February 2021, 126 cases were submitted to the court, and between January and February 2021, 12 perpetrators were convicted of sexual violence against young girls.

However, after the 40 analysed incidents discussed here involving at least 104 different perpetrators, less than half the perpetrators were prosecuted (46 in total).

Prosecuted perpetrators included SSPDF soldiers, National Police Service officers and a senior government official. Incidents were investigated by police officials, and alleged perpetrators were either court martialed or tried in the gender-based violence court.

Convicted perpetrators were given prison sentences and some were ordered to pay reparations to survivors and their families. However, in many incidents involving multiple perpetrators not all the perpetrators involved in the incident were arrested.

One incident was reported as being investigated by the SSPDF at the time it was reported, while another incident allegedly involving SSPDF forces was disputed.

In two incidents members of the local community were involved in bringing the perpetrator to justice. In one of these incidents three women disarmed and beat two soldiers who were attempting to rape another woman in the area. The women handed over the confiscated rifles to authorities for further investigation.

In November 2020 in Eastern Equatoria state a government official and a 30-year-old women accused of aiding the rape of a 17-year-old girl at the official’s residence were arrested and charged.

The man was sentenced to seven years in prison and ordered to pay seven head of cattle and four goats to the girl’s family. The woman was sentenced to three years in jail and a fine of 120,000 South Sudan pounds (approximately 920 US dollars).
Conclusions and recommendations

Addressing sexual violence

- Those wishing to eradicate conflict-related sexual violence need to address the group dynamics that instrumentalise such violence as a tool of group cohesion and control within the wider dynamics of violent conflict.

- It must be made clear to all combatants that individuals are responsible for their own actions during violent conflict and will be held accountable for them.

- However, individuals do not appear to be the main drivers behind the widespread conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan.

- If the group dynamics that permit, instrumentalise and normalise sexual violence do not change, then individuals will continue to commit sexual violence under the influence of such dynamics.

Addressing sexual violence by state forces

- A fundamental change is needed in the culture of state forces. Sexual violence must be seen by all state actors as unacceptable and not as a tool to enforce cohesion within the ranks of the armed forces and to terrorise the populations that state forces seek to control.

- The culture of silence around inappropriate behaviour must be broken and systematic reporting mechanisms must be set up that prioritise the safety of those who report sexual violence.

- There needs to be serious commitment among senior state forces officers to policies and procedures to stamp out sexual violence. This commitment needs to be extended throughout all state forces.

Addressing sexual violence by non-state actors

- Non-state actors wishing to obtain international recognition need to be sensitised to understand the formal prohibition of sexual violence and the consequences of such violence, and should be encouraged to sign up to the Geneva Call Deed of Commitment, which prohibits sexual violence in situations of armed conflict and aims at the elimination of gender discrimination.

- Members of non-state armed groups must be personally held accountable in courts of law for any acts of sexual violence they commit.

- Commanders of armed groups who order or encourage sexual violence for the purpose of group socialisation or to terrorise civilians must also be held personally accountable in courts of law.

The need for more systematic data

- Data on conflict-related violence should be systematically collected and analysed to inform policymaking and address sexual violence committed during conflict.

- By analysing reported incidents of sexual violence in conflict we will begin to understand the dynamics and patterns of this type of violence, and what drives those who participate in it.

- In particular, systematic analysis of this kind will enable us to better understand the extent to which conflict-related violence is occurring under orders from top commanders or through peer pressure among combatants.
Data limitations

The data cited in this report suffers from limitations inherent in the information provided by the sources used. These publicly available sources use different methodologies, and certain biases within individual sources influence the data. The information provided may contain inaccuracies.

Most importantly, the cases referred to are not a representative sample of conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, but merely reflect the attacks that survivors and their families were courageous enough to report.

Definitions used in this report

- State actor: Perpetrators of sexual violence affiliated with or members of a state security force (police or armed forces).
- Non-state armed actor: Perpetrators of sexual violence affiliated with or members of an armed party that is not a state security force.
- Mass rape: refers to an incident where multiple survivors/victims experienced sexual violence in the same location at the same time.
- Gang rape: refers to an incident where a single survivor or victim was attacked by multiple perpetrators.
- Survivor: refers to an individual who has experienced sexual violence.
- Victim: refers to an individual who has been killed during or after an act or acts of sexual violence.

Research

This document was compiled as part of an event-based approach to documenting attacks involving sexual violence.

Event descriptions from multiple sources were cross-checked and consolidated into a single dataset of recorded incidents that were coded using standard definitions. The incidents reported are neither a complete nor a representative list of all attacks involving conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan and have not all been independently verified.

Figures presented in this report can be cited as the total number of publicly available reports of attacks and of the number of women and girls affected by such conflict-related sexual violence in South Sudan, as identified by Insecurity Insight.

The data summarised in this document has been systematically compiled from information available in open sources, as published in the Reporting Sexual Violence Monthly News Brief.

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1 In 18 analysed incidents the exact number of perpetrators implicated was not specified, although reports indicate that multiple perpetrators were involved, therefore the number of perpetrators is likely to be much higher.