



Summary

Following the massacre of four Red Cross volunteers in Central Equatoria state, this research brief presents findings on online public sentiment towards the health programme among social media users in South Sudan. Based on social data extracted from social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, the study finds that most South Sudan-based social media users who engaged in online discussions on the Red Cross between 1 December 2022 and 14 February 2023 hold positive sentiments towards the organisation and its work. Nevertheless, some social media users justified the violent event – which was apparently carried out by cattle herders – in terms of the conflict between the local sedentary agro-pastoralists supposedly supported by the National Salvation Front and armed migrant cattle herders.

Context

On 2 February 2023 in Liri Payam locality, Kajo-Keji county, Central Equatoria state, four Red Cross volunteers deployed in the area in October 2022 to [investigate a suspected Ebola case](#) were [abducted from their residences](#) along with dozens of other local community members and killed in groups. Although the perpetrators have not been officially identified, it is likely that armed migrant cattle herders were responsible for the attack.

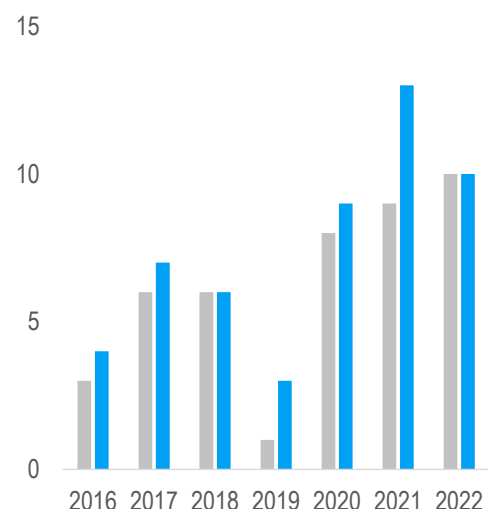
Since 2021 Kajo-Keji county has witnessed an [escalation of tension](#) between the local sedentary agro-pastoralist Equatorian civilians and flood-displaced armed migrant Dinka herders, resulting in repeated deadly skirmishes and acts of reprisal between the groups. At the centre of the conflict is access to fertile land for grazing cattle or farming crops.

The Equatorian agro-pastoralist communities among which the Red Cross volunteers were providing health-related assistance are supported by the Equatoria-based National Salvation Front (NAS) rebel group, which was formed during the South Sudanese civil war and still opposes the government in Juba.

As we shall see below, some social media users referred to the supposed links between the NAS and local Equatorian communities in their responses to the killings of Red Cross volunteers that are the subject of this brief.

The killings in the Liri Payam area raised the number of aid workers killed in the first two months of 2023 in the recently formed African state to seven. South Sudan remains one of the [most dangerous countries](#) in the world for humanitarian workers, and in 2022 at least ten health workers were reported killed and 20 kidnapped.

Incidents where health workers were killed in South Sudan, 2016-2022



■ Health worker killed incident (43)
■ Number of health workers killed (52)

Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

Methodology

The present brief is based on public social media data collected with the use of AI-powered software. This software is fed with Boolean search queries designed to collect social data related to chosen topics. The data is then downloaded and manually cleaned.

Data was collected for a 76-day period between 1 December 2022 and 14 February 2023. Collecting data for such a lengthy period allowed us to also examine public sentiment towards the Red Cross in the months preceding the attack on 2 February 2023, including a possibly sensitive period in which the organisation was engaged in mobilising local communities to decrease the risk of importing Ebola from neighbouring Uganda, where [misinformation](#) played a role in the health crisis.

The public social data was extracted from Twitter and Facebook, and includes original posts and replies. Once the data was manually cleaned, each item was examined individually using an online ethnographic approach.

The study has two main limitations. Firstly, the social data collected is in English. Although English is South Sudan's official language, collecting only English social data excludes posts and tweets written in indigenous languages. Secondly, the data used does not include private social data, thus excluding platforms such as WhatsApp.

A guide to social media

The Red Cross has developed a [guide](#) on how to use social media to engage with people affected by crisis. The 20-page document provides ideas on how humanitarian organizations can use social media to engage and communicate with – not about – affected people.

Main findings

While most South Sudan-based social media users who engaged in online discussions on the Red Cross between 1 December 2022 and 14 February 2023 held positive sentiments towards the organisation, a minority framed the killings in terms of the conflict between the local sedentary agro-pastoralist communities supposedly supported by the NAS and migrant cattle herders.

- **The absence of extensive online dis- or misinformation campaigns targeting the Red Cross**

Although recent experiences have shown that attacks or incidents involving aid organisations tend to be preceded or accompanied by disinformation or misinformation targeting the organisation, there is little sign that this was the case with the attack that killed Red Cross workers in South Sudan. As discussed further below, while some false allegations were identified, they seem to have appeared after the incident on 2 February and may be interpreted as an attempt by cattle herder sympathisers to control the reputational damage the violence may have caused to the herder community in South Sudanese society.

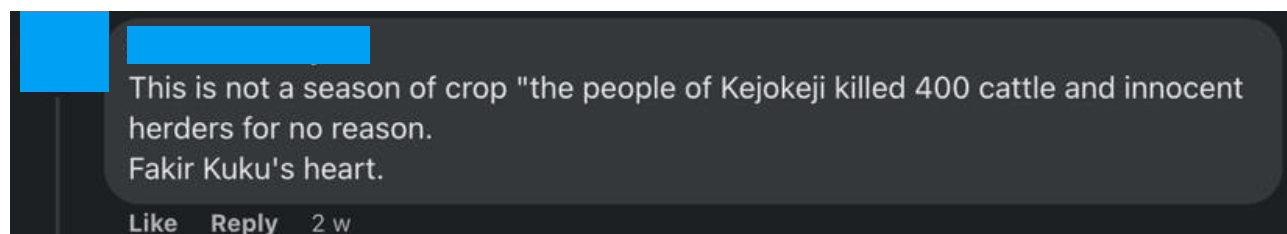
- **Overwhelmingly positive sentiment towards the Red Cross**

A systemic examination of the tone used by social media users when discussing the Red Cross suggests that social media users based in South Sudan hold overwhelmingly positive sentiments towards the organisation. This is also the case when social media users were discussing or reacting to reports of the Red Cross's role in the effort to prevent an Ebola outbreak in South Sudan, a topic that often encourages the [spreading of mis- and disinformation](#) around the intentions of healthcare organisations.

- **The view that the killing of Red Cross volunteers was a tragic consequence of an ongoing conflict between cattle herders and sedentary pastoralists**

Although most reactions to the killings of the Red Cross volunteers demonstrated concern towards the victims, some – presumably sympathetic to the cause of the cattle herders, who were thought to be the source of the attack – sought to advance the view that the incident took place in the context of a conflict between sedentary pastoralists and migratory herders. For example, in reaction to the 2 February attack, one social media user argued that the local community members in Kajo-Keji county had killed herders and cattle for no apparent reason since it is not crop season and therefore the cattle herders would not be encroaching on farming land: “this is not a season of crop ... the people of Kejokeji killed 400 cattle and innocent herders for no reason”.

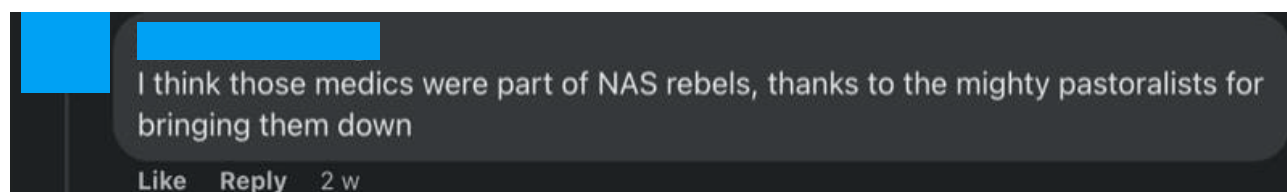
Such views appear to imply that the killing of Red Cross volunteers residing with or possibly even hailing from local communities in the region is seen as a tragic consequence of the ongoing conflict between cattle herders and sedentary pastoralists rather than a deliberate and unprovoked atrocity targeting the health organisation's employees. Indeed, several other social media users complained that the media's focus on the Red Cross killings ignored the wider conflict taking place and the opposing side's respective viewpoints.



- **Allegations that the Red Cross volunteers were NAS members**

A minority of social media users who were clearly sympathetic to the herders' cause alleged that the Red Cross volunteers formed part of the NAS rebel group. One user said, “I think those medics were part of NAS rebels, thanks to the mighty pastoralists [i.e. herders] for bringing them down”.

These allegations may possibly indicate that the herders and their sympathisers equate the Red Cross's aid activity among local Equatorial communities with collaboration with the NAS. Alternatively, by arguing that the victims were all NAS rebels, the allegations may represent an attempt to discredit the widely shared news of indiscriminate mass killings carried out by armed herders.



Profile review

An examination of a sample of the profiles of the social media users whose content provided the data for this brief found no indication that the profiles in question were set up or used to spread a specific opinion or viewpoint, but appeared to be personal accounts of people with a variety of interests. Most – even if not all – users from whose profiles data was taken appeared to represent the educated classes, with some having university education and access to higher-end jobs. Moreover, the users hailed from different regions of South Sudan.

Concluding remarks

The findings reported in this brief indicate that the Red Cross appears to enjoy wide positive sentiment in South Sudan and that there is little indication that the organisation is being targeted on social media through the use of dis- or misinformation.

However, the views expressed here also reflect the perspective of social media onlookers on intergroup conflict and the work of aid agencies. The comments on social media highlight how group or ethnic identities are perceived as more defining than a professional distinctiveness that comes from being an aid or health worker. This perspective also suggests that for many of the social media commentators the actions of individuals are probably not primarily understood in the context of humanitarian principles of neutrality or medical ethics, but are interpreted through the lens of existing intergroup tensions. This discrepancy between the self-identity of aid agencies and the perception of onlookers is important in understanding how any action is easily misinterpreted and how disinformation can spread.

Social dialogue with a wider society about the perceived and expressed identities of aid and health workers is important in an age where onlookers shape opinions via comments from their remote screens without ever interacting directly with aid or healthcare providers.

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