

SOUTH SUDAN

Violence Against Health Care in Conflict

2023



**SAFEGUARDING
HEALTH
IN CONFLICT**



**Insecurity
Insight**
Data on People in Danger

Letter from the Chair



The year 2023 was a grim one for violence inflicted on health care. In 2022, the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition identified the highest number of incidents since we began reporting. Yet in 2023 the number was 25% greater, exceeding 2,500.

The intensity of conflicts characterized by pervasive attacks on health care in recent years declined somewhat in 2023, including in Syria, Yemen, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. As a result, it might also have been expected that the global trend of violence against health care would turn downward. Instead, from the first days of two new and catastrophic wars, one in Sudan and the other between Israel and Hamas, health care came under ferocious assault. In both conflicts warring parties killed health workers, attacked facilities, and destroyed health care systems. Meanwhile, attacks on health care in Myanmar and Ukraine continued at a relentless pace, in each case exceeding 1,000 since the start of the conflicts in 2021 and 2022, respectively. In many chronic conflicts, fighting forces continued to kidnap and kill health workers and loot health facilities.

At the same time, new and disturbing trends emerged. In Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gaza, Lebanon, Myanmar, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen combatants employed drones to attack health clinics, hospitals, and ambulances. In many conflicts, combatants violently entered hospitals or occupied them as sites from which to conduct military operations, leading to injuries to and the deaths of patients and staff. In many conflicts, the conduct of combatants revealed open contempt for their duty to protect civilians and health care under international humanitarian law (IHL). Israel, while purporting to abide by IHL, promoted a view of its obligations that, if accepted, would undermine the fundamental protections that IHL puts in place for civilians and health care in war.

The one consistent feature of the attacks was continued impunity for these crimes. For more than a decade, despite their repeated commitments, governments have failed to follow through on these commitments and reform their military practices, cease arms transfers to perpetrators, and bring those responsible for crimes to justice.

We need a new approach, starting with stronger leadership from UN agencies and governments willing to join with civil society and the health care community to take far more assertive action to end the scourge of violence against health care. Among other steps, they can press prosecutors domestically and internationally to bring cases of war crimes and crimes against humanity committed against health care, to develop political support for special tribunals to circumvent UN Security Council members' vetoes of referrals to the International Criminal Court, and restrict the sale of arms to forces that commit crimes.

There are some sources of hope. After years of lassitude, the World Health Organization has spoken forcefully against vicious assaults on health facilities and health workers. Civil society groups are exerting pressure to stop arms transfers to perpetrators of violence, while some militaries have launched initiatives to reduce civilian casualties in war. Leaders must build on these initiatives. Ending the suffering of millions of people depends on their doing so.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Len Rubenstein". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Len Rubenstein
Chair, Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition

[↓](#) [Executive Summary](#) | [Full Report](#) | [Recommendations](#) | [Methodology](#) | [Data](#)



REPORTED INCIDENTS AND MOST COMMONLY REPORTED CONCERNS



↓ Source: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data

OVERVIEW

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) identified 12 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in South Sudan in 2023, compared to 32 in 2022. In these incidents, at least six health workers were killed and five others arrested. The actual number of incidents and the severity of the problem are likely much greater because of probable under-reporting. This factsheet is based on the dataset [2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data](#), which is available for download on the [Humanitarian Data Exchange \(HDX\)](#).

THE CONTEXT

Conflict and insecurity persisted in South Sudan throughout 2023. According to the [Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project](#), violence against civilians continued in 2023 at similar rates to previous years and was particularly prevalent in the states of Central, Eastern, and Western Equatoria.¹ Armed Dinka Bor tribespeople, and South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and Sudan People's Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO) personnel were accused of violence against civilians, including attacks on and threats to health care.

An estimated 9.4 million people in South Sudan needed humanitarian assistance in 2023, or 76% of the population. The Sudan conflict triggered the influx of refugees, returnees, and asylum seekers to South Sudan. Between April 2023 and January 31, 2024, registered border crossings of over 500,000 people from Sudan to South Sudan were recorded, with most people arriving in remote and hard-to-reach locations that lacked essential services, including health care.

VIOLENCE AGAINST OR OBSTRUCTION OF HEALTH CARE IN 2023

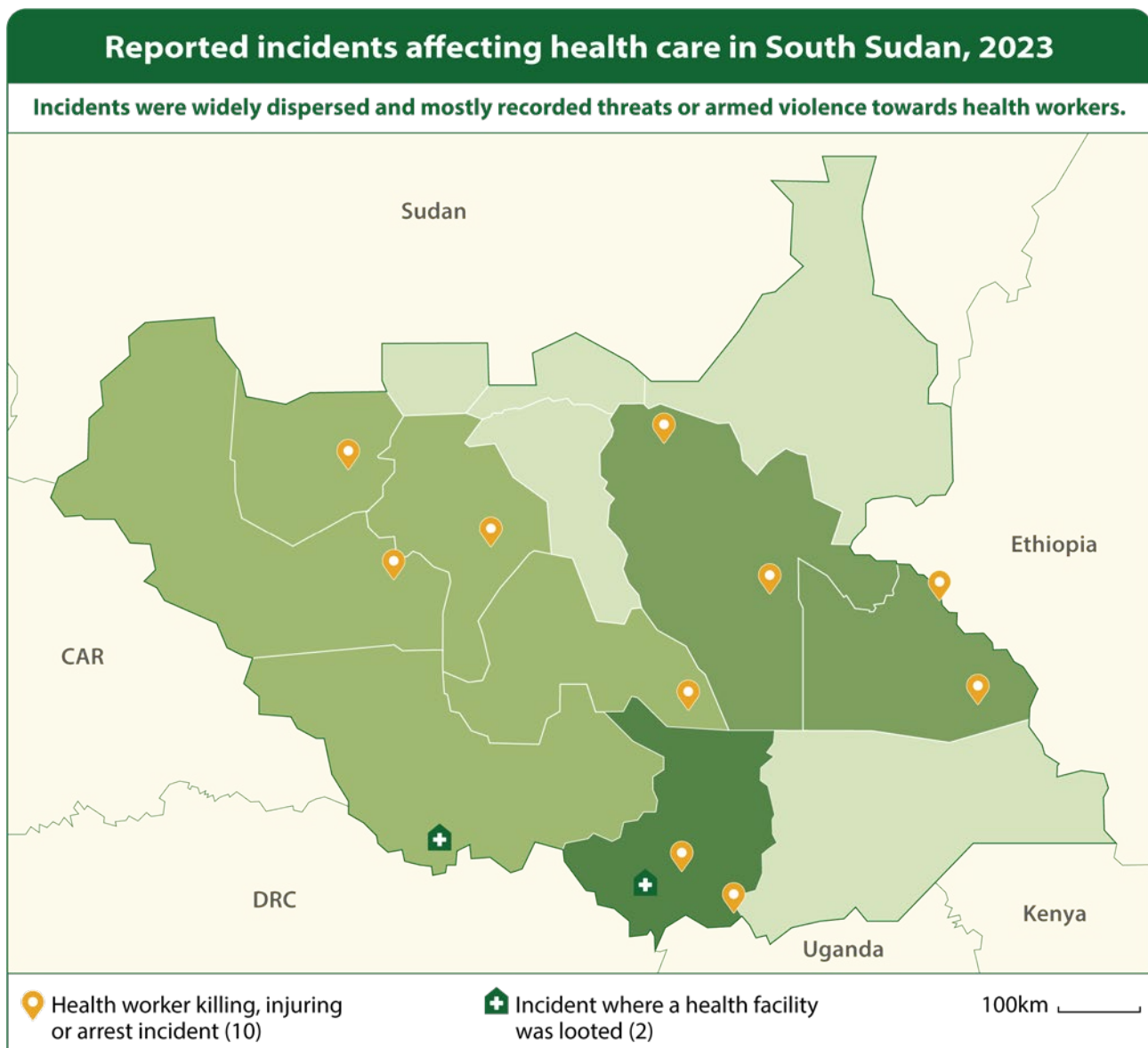
Incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were dispersed over seven of South Sudan's ten states and one of its three administrative areas. Incidents mostly affected NGOs, Red Cross societies, and the United Nations (UN), while four incidents affected national health structures. The majority of cases recorded threats or armed violence towards health workers, while two incidents of medical supplies being stolen from health facilities were reported.² Most incidents were recorded at health facilities or while staff

South Sudan



traveled to provide medical care to remote areas. A male midwife was whipped 150 times with a cane by SSPDF soldiers for inadvertently crossing a checkpoint marked by ashes on the ground while shopping at a market in Awerial county, Lakes state.³ Four Red Cross volunteers working on COVID-19 vaccination and Ebola awareness campaigns were taken from their homes in Central Equatoria by suspected armed Dinka Bor and shot and killed together with other community members.⁴

Two incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care were attributed to armed Dinka Bor cattle herders in Central Equatoria who stole medical supplies from a health center and killed the previously mentioned Red Cross volunteers.⁵ SPLA-IO forces arrested four Women Training and Promotion (WATAP) program staff members as they were traveling to visit a health facility that the program was building in Western Bahr el Ghazal state. They were reportedly freed after paying SSP 250,000 (USD 1,919) as ransom.⁶ In Northern Bahr el Ghazal, the National Security Services temporarily detained a UN staff member over delays in the payment of incentives to locally hired aid workers who had supported the UN organization during a vaccination campaign.⁷ In other attacks, the attackers remained unidentified.





Health workers killed, injured, and arrested

At least six health workers were killed in three incidents in 2023. Along with the Red Cross volunteers mentioned above, a nurse was killed in a road ambush by unidentified perpetrators in Warrap state and a security guard at an NGO-supported health center was stabbed and killed by three men after he refused them entry into the facility in Central Equatoria.⁸ Five health workers were arrested by police in two incidents in 2023, including the previously mentioned four WATAP workers and the UN staff member.⁹ Nine health workers were injured in 2023, including a health worker and female caregiver who were shot and injured by stray bullets during an attack on the Médecins Sans Frontières-run Old Fangak Hospital emergency room in Jonglei.¹⁰



SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

In February 2023, four Red Cross volunteers working on COVID-19 vaccination and Ebola awareness campaigns in Central Equatoria were kidnapped from their homes together with other civilians and killed by suspected armed Dinka Bor herders. Although social media monitoring by [Insecurity Insight](#) did not find any evidence of disinformation targeting the Red Cross prior to the attack, a minority of users who were sympathetic to the herders alleged that the volunteers formed part of the Equatoria-based National Salvation Front (NSF) rebel group. These findings suggested that the herders and their sympathizers equated Red Cross aid activities among local Equatorian communities with collaboration with their enemy, the NSF.

THE IMPACT OF ATTACKS ON HEALTH CARE

South Sudan is facing a severe health crisis, with over 8.9 million people in need of humanitarian assistance to meet their health needs. The under-five mortality rate is approximately 99 deaths per 1,000 live births.

Decades of attacks against health care have eroded the very limited capacity of the health system to cope. According to the Health Cluster, only 25% of health facilities across the country provide the minimum level of services. There is a widespread shortage of trained, skilled health workers.

While up-to-date information on the impact of attacks on communities is scarce, a study showed that for months after an attack, communities faced additional obstacles in accessing health services, including a widespread fear of visiting a health facility that has been exposed to violence.



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- 1 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database attribution policy, accessed April 3, 2024.
 - 2 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 44823; 41741.
 - 3 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 38676.
 - 4 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 37133.
 - 5 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 41741; 37133.
 - 6 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 39628.
 - 7 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 44499.
 - 8 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 43182; 40871.
 - 9 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident numbers 39628; 44499.
 - 10 Insecurity Insight. Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition 2023 Report Dataset: 2023 SSD SHCC Health Care Data. Incident number 38214.

SAFEGUARDING HEALTH IN CONFLICT

The Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition is a group of more than 40 organizations working to protect health workers and services threatened by war or civil unrest. We have raised awareness of global attacks on health and pressed United Nations agencies for greater global action to protect the security of health care. We monitor attacks, strengthen universal norms of respect for the right to health, and demand accountability for perpetrators.

www.safeguardinghealth.org

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