

SOUTH SUDAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Introduction

Conflict broke out in South Sudan on 15 December 2013, and the world's newest nation is now facing a major humanitarian disaster. More than 1.3 million people have been displaced and an estimated 4.9 million are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance.¹ Thousands have sought refuge in United Nations peacekeeping bases (UNMISS) across the country, and many more have fled into the bush or across the border into neighbouring countries. In February, the UN declared the crisis a Level 3 emergency, representing the highest level of humanitarian disaster.²

Humanitarian agencies have raised the alarm around an approaching food and nutrition crisis,³ which the UN has warned could lead to famine.⁴ Despite having the strongest prospects in five years for food security in the months before the conflict began,⁵ violence and insecurity have meant many people in South Sudan have missed the planting season and lost livestock, and markets have been destroyed or are inaccessible.⁶ Millions are at risk as the rainy season begins, during which 60% of the country will be cut off from road access,⁷ shelter needs will become acute, and flooding may cause further displacement.

Humanitarian aid delivery has been challenging, due to high levels of violence, including attacks on UN peacekeeping compounds. As the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, the response remains severely underfunded and there appears to be little prospect for a swift end to the conflict.

Immediate action is needed to address this crisis:

- Humanitarian assistance must reach those in need, and adequate funding and access must be secured to enable emergency response.
- The Cessation of Hostilities, which was signed in January and committed to again on 9 May,⁸ must be respected by both parties to the conflict. A ceasefire agreement is only the first step in a longer-term peace process, requiring sustained commitment to addressing the deeper issues.
- Violence against civilians must stop, and the protection of civilians must be a priority.
- The root causes and outcomes of the conflict must be addressed through an inclusive national dialogue and reconciliation process, with the people of South Sudan actively involved.

Context for the crisis

Recent conflict

Political tensions in South Sudan had been rising for months, with signs of friction within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), when President Salva Kiir sacked his cabinet in July 2013.⁹

On 15 December 2013, fighting broke out in Juba, and rapidly spread across four states: Central Equatoria, Jonglei, Unity and Upper Nile. Thousands of people were killed (estimates suggest at least 10,000)¹⁰ or wounded in the fighting, and hundreds of thousands were displaced.

President Salva Kiir accused ex-Vice President Riek Machar of an attempted coup,¹¹ a charge which the former VP denied.¹² Machar assumed leadership of what he called a 'rebellion', and the army split as clashes occurred around the country. The violence escalated along ethnic lines, though these divisions are not straightforward and the conflict dynamics are extremely complicated.¹³

Despite peace talks convened between the Government of the Republic of South Sudan and SPLM/A (in Opposition) in Addis Ababa by an influential group of African governments – the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)¹⁴ – a tentative truce has been repeatedly violated,¹⁵ and conflict continues to rage in the Greater Upper Nile region. The insecurity has also affected states that have not directly experienced heavy fighting, with implications for markets and supplies, the economy, oil revenues, agricultural cycles, and development programmes.¹⁶ With tensions still very high, many fear that the conflict will spread.

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Acute humanitarian needs

South Sudan is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the current crisis comes on top of the serious development challenges facing the country.¹⁷ Yet in the months before the crisis, South Sudan's food security outlook was the best it had been in five

years.¹⁸ The crisis will set back many of the gains made since South Sudan became independent in 2011.

The humanitarian situation has deteriorated rapidly with the outbreak of conflict. While aid is reaching thousands of vulnerable people across the country, needs continue to grow. Women and children are increasingly bearing the brunt of the conflict,¹⁹ and make up the majority of displaced people and refugees.²⁰ The humanitarian community is deeply concerned about the scale and worsening of what is already a profound humanitarian crisis. The emergency response is severely underfunded, and more aid is needed to address priority needs including: food security and livelihoods, education, health, protection, non-food items (eg cooking utensils) and shelter, and water, sanitation and hygiene.²¹

Getting aid to where it is needed remains a critical issue because of the fighting. The continued lack of access is already having serious longer-term consequences as humanitarian workers have struggled to preposition supplies ahead of the rainy season, during which up to 60% of the country will be inaccessible by road.²² Increasing costs due to the onset of the rains, looting, the commandeering and destruction of humanitarian assets by armed groups, interference in access, and harassment have presented additional challenges.²³

‘Once the rains arrive, two-thirds of the country will be cut off’

Amos Ndiri, Christian Aid Country Manager, South Sudan

Violence against civilians

Since the conflict began, there have been reports of widespread violence against civilians, including human rights violations, targeting of specific ethnic groups as well as indiscriminate killing, family separation, the use of child soldiers, and sexual and gender-based violence, including rape.²⁴ Human rights workers have been attempting to document the multiple cases, and the African Union has established a Commission of Inquiry to investigate the human rights violations.²⁵

The situation presents very difficult protection issues. As the violence spread, tens of thousands sought refuge in UN bases, and many sought protection in other sites such as churches. The UN Peacekeeping Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has a mandate to take ‘all necessary actions’ to protect civilians, including the use of force.²⁶ The decision to open UNMISS bases to allow those fleeing the conflict to seek refuge inside is unprecedented, and potentially saved thousands of lives. However, it also presents substantial challenges in ensuring the security of the bases.

Refugees and IDPs

More than 300,000 people have been displaced into neighbouring countries, including Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Sudan. Refugee camps are over-stretched, and refugees have been arriving in a poor condition, having spent long periods fleeing and surviving only

on wild foods. It is expected that their numbers will continue to increase.²⁷

Prior to 15 December, South Sudan was already hosting a refugee population of more than 230,000, the majority of whom are refugees from Sudan’s South Kordofan and Blue Nile states. Supply lines to these camps have been disrupted by the fighting, and it’s reported that civilians in these areas have also been badly affected. They remain caught between the conflict in South Sudan and the ongoing violence in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.²⁸

‘More than 1.3 million people have been displaced and an estimated 4.9 million need urgent humanitarian assistance’

Understanding the root causes

The current humanitarian crisis is the result of violent armed conflict, underpinned by pre-existing humanitarian and development challenges within a fragile state context. The causes of conflict are complex, and reaching a sustainable resolution to the crisis may rest on untangling that complexity. This crisis has underlined the importance of historic context and a sophisticated understanding of the root causes of conflict.²⁹

Political struggle

The conflict has its roots in political struggle. Since independence, the divisions within the ruling SPLM have become more apparent. The political crisis within the SPLM is the result of long-running disputes and the need to address issues rooted in the party’s history. The crisis has underlined the fragility of governance structures, and the failures around Security Sector Reform (ie the failure to rebuild the security and justice services to be accountable, transparent and operate with full respect for human rights and the law).³⁰

Entrenched divisions

While many were taken by surprise by the outbreak of violence and the speed at which the conflict spread, some have outlined existing signs that failed to be addressed. The security situation has remained volatile since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, and there is a proliferation of small arms. South Sudan experts point towards reports and policy papers written years ago that outline concerns that existing tensions could lead to a crisis such as this.³¹ These long-standing and unaddressed grievances have not been addressed through peace-building and reconciliation activities and processes.

Nation building

Over the past few years, South Sudan’s challenges have been responded to with concerted efforts around building state institutions. The country that needed ‘building from scratch’ made some key achievements in a short space of time in terms of establishing political institutions and state structures. However, much of the approach to South Sudan’s transition into

peace and independence has focused on technocratic state-building at the expense of nation-building and strengthening peace, based on the assumption that greater development leads to peace and stability.³² This approach failed to understand the complexities of the political and social realities within South Sudan, including the causes of conflict, power relations, and the need to build a national identity.

'The crisis will set back many of the gains made since South Sudan became independent in 2011'

Multiple development/humanitarian priorities

South Sudan hosts one of the world's largest humanitarian operations, which prior to the crisis was already worth more than \$1.2 billion. Development indicators were among the worst in the world. Food security was already a key concern, with more than 4.6 million people not able to provide enough food for their needs in 2013, though the situation had been improving.³³ Balancing long-term development with meeting immediate humanitarian needs continues to present a challenge to humanitarian and development agencies, and the complexity of South Sudan's multiple challenges requires long-term commitment.

Overcoming the crisis – recommendations

Emergency aid is needed immediately. Donors must rapidly increase funding, and all parties to the conflict must ensure humanitarian access to displaced people and affected communities in need.

Addressing the basic needs of vulnerable populations, including those in camps and in remote locations, by providing appropriate food, water and sanitation, is a priority.

- Donors must both provide immediate flexible funding and plan appropriate long-term funding, including ensuring that funding for development projects is not stopped or reallocated because they are essential in areas not directly affected by the conflict.
- Unimpeded humanitarian access must be granted to humanitarian agencies. UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations and national non-governmental organisations must continue to coordinate on response, including around the regional needs of refugees who have been displaced by the crisis.
- All parties must refrain from targeting civilians, respect the sanctity of civilian spaces, and permit immediate and unconditional humanitarian access to civilians in the areas under their control, in accordance with international humanitarian law. Violations must be documented and the perpetrators held to account through appropriate justice mechanisms. UNMISS must prioritise the protection of civilians, including those outside Protection of Civilian sites.

The Cessation of Hostilities agreement must be implemented to prevent further loss of life and enable humanitarian access.

The best defence against further humanitarian catastrophe is to end the conflict.³⁴

- The parties to the conflict must cease all hostile activities in accordance with the agreement signed on 23 January, which they re-dedicated themselves to on 9 May, and come to an agreement on a permanent ceasefire.
- International governments must continue to provide long-term support and strong diplomatic engagement in the peace talks, including committed engagement beyond the signing of a permanent ceasefire to facilitate a framework for a truly inclusive peace process and national dialogue.
- The voices of South Sudanese people and wider civil society, including religious leaders, community-based organisations, youth leaders, women's organisations, traditional leaders and others, must play a strong role in the political dialogue and peace process. Ultimately, a longer-term, sustainable political solution to the conflict must be found.

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There is wide consensus that a broad-based and inclusive national dialogue, resulting in a long-term reconciliation process, is now essential.

An inclusive national dialogue is crucial to ensure that the peace talks reflect not only political elites or those engaged in violence, but the population as a whole. The people of South Sudan must lead the process and it must reach deep into communities. The churches and civil society have a strong role to play in driving this forward.³⁵

- Political leaders must commit to a long-term national dialogue and reconciliation process, and guarantee the independence of related bodies. Appropriate truth and justice mechanisms must be put in place, and long-term trauma healing initiatives must be implemented. International governments and intergovernmental organisations must support legitimate South Sudanese-led processes.
- Donors must recognise that this process will require time, resources, funds and long-term commitment. The approach of the international community and national government must adapt to reflect this new context.
- Development and humanitarian programming must be conflict sensitive. Established government structures must accommodate reconciliation and peace-building, including the national budget, governance structures, and policies and legislation. Reconciliation must be connected with a peace dividend, for example provision of basic services, better infrastructure, and a sense that life is improving.

Endnotes

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