

# Addressing peace and safety concerns in Wau, South Sudan



Women and children on their way home in Agok, Wau.  
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## Introduction

Since 2015, Wau State has been affected by the ongoing civil conflict in South Sudan. The conflict started with sporadic gunshots fired by unidentified perpetrators in Wau town in February and March 2015. It escalated in June 2016, when fighting broke out between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (renamed the South Sudan People Defence Forces in early October 2018<sup>1</sup>). Many civilians in Wau town lost their lives or property, and thousands of residents were displaced into UN-run Protection of Civilian sites.

The conflict is largely seen as political and linked to the wider national conflict, given the presence of armed opposition – affiliated with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-In-Opposition – to the west and south of Wau town. However, there is also an ethnic element to the conflict, with reports of harassment and killing of civilians based on their ethnicity. This sits against the backdrop of a history of inter-ethnic violence and tensions in Wau town dating back to the 1980s or even earlier.

This briefing presents findings from a two-day, state-level roundtable discussion organised by Saferworld on 4–5 October 2018, which focused on identifying the causes of and providing potential solutions to conflict and insecurity in Wau State. There were 77 participants (58 men and 19 women), including representatives of communities, government authorities (including

the military and police leadership), civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Civil Affairs Division. The roundtable discussion provided a platform for delegates to discuss issues that obstruct peace and reconciliation efforts in Wau.

## Safety and security

In this briefing, we refer to both safety and security. Security is defined as the protection of people and their assets from violence or theft. It relates to potential harm caused by actions that are either intended to harm specific people or groups, or which indirectly cause harm to other people or groups. Safety is connected to but broader than security. It is defined as the protection of people from harm. Such harm may arise as a consequence of insecurity but also from accidents, fire, flood, disease or other causes including threats posed by the environment or animals.

<sup>1</sup> This was announced at the roundtable discussion organised by Saferworld.

# Safety and security challenges

At the state-level roundtable, while the ultimate focus was forward-looking, the following safety and security concerns were identified as fundamental conflict drivers that communities, government authorities and civil society should address in order to increase opportunities for peace and reconciliation among communities in Wau.

## Cattle migration into Wau State

Since 2012, Wau State has experienced conflict arising from the seasonal migration of pastoralists (cattle herders) during the dry season to Wau State from neighbouring Tonj and Gogrial States. Tensions escalated into violent clashes in May 2017 when the farming community in the former Jur River County refused to let pastoralists bring cattle into their territories, as their crops had not yet been harvested and could have been destroyed. The ensuing violent clashes between the two groups – the Dinka pastoralists and the Luo farmers – resulted in the destruction of property and displacement of many people into Wau and Tonj towns.

The conflict, which took place in Kuarjienna and Roc-rocdong counties in Wau State, was eventually halted by the Tonj and Wau governments, with support from people and organisations working for peace. Although peace conferences were organised between the pastoralists and farmers and resolutions were agreed on and signed by community leaders and government officials (including resolutions to prohibit pastoralists from entering Wau areas before crops had been harvested and compensation for farmers for crops destroyed by pastoralists' cattle), these have remained unimplemented and the potential for the conflict to be reignited in the future still exists.

## Continued movement of armed soldiers

The roundtable participants stressed that the movement of soldiers with heavy weapons and guns in Wau town was creating fear and undermining trust in the military. Civilians are uncomfortable with armed military personnel moving around town. Although commanders of the South Sudan People Defence Forces cited the state of emergency in place in the area as the reason for the soldiers' armed presence, civilians still see this as a threat to their safety and security.

## Ineffective rule of law

Participants stressed that weaknesses in the rule of law are a main safety and security concern in Wau State. The arrest and detention of people for long periods without trial as well as limited space for freedom of expression were cited as examples of barriers to effective justice and security in Wau town. This was seen by participants as an obstacle to peace and reconciliation in the state. Participants noted that ordinary people bear the brunt of failings in the justice

system and unequal application of the law, while family members and friends of high-ranking officials are less affected. An emerging culture of impunity – including among mid-level government officials – was also identified by participants as a potent threat to social cohesion.

The ineffectiveness of the traditional justice system at preventing conflict among communities in Wau was also cited as a contributing factor to conflict escalation in Wau State and in South Sudan. The functions of formal institutions such as the police and judiciary sometimes overlap with functions of customary systems – with customary courts sometimes handling matters related to divorce, early and forced marriages and even serious crimes like rape – leading to ineffective dispute resolution.

## Limited employment opportunities for young people

Limited employment opportunities and a lack of access to decent jobs for youth was seen by participants as contributing to increased crime and insecurity in the state. Many young people in Wau find themselves with little or nothing to do to support themselves and their families. They are vulnerable to recruitment into violent groups/activities by corrupt politicians looking to create instability. Other young people turn to crime as a means of survival.

## Hate speech

As noted by participants, hate speech – characterised by negative ethnic stereotyping in community meetings, social media or on the radio – continues to undermine trust-building among communities in Wau. Social media (especially Facebook) was identified as a source of rumours that can drive communities apart. In the aftermath of the violent conflict in Wau town in 2016, many young people and some political leaders used social media to spread hate speech, which contributed to violence between the various Wau communities.

## Gender-based violence

Cases of gender-based violence are widespread in the state, according to the roundtable participants. This includes rape, sexual abuse, physical violence, and forced and early marriage, as well as controlling women's access to resources. The Ministry of Gender and partners have recorded these injustices, which are mostly directed towards women.

Participants stressed that the practice of letting perpetrators of gender-based violence marry their victims encourages violence and impunity, and denies victims their right to pursue justice. The limited participation of women in public life and decision-making processes in the community as a whole was also mentioned as a barrier to addressing gender-based

violence issues in Wau. Although the state government has appointed women to government ministries, women and girls are still discriminated against with regard to the right to own property, inherit land and hold decision-making positions in many communities in the state.

## Illicit ownership of firearms

Another peace and security issue identified by the participants is the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the hands of unauthorised individuals. South Sudan People Defence Forces commanders who took part in the roundtable cited this as an obstacle to allowing soldiers to move without guns. Other participants decried the widespread ownership of firearms by pastoralists. The presence of illicit firearms poses serious risks to the civilian population, and there have been reports of armed robberies in residential areas and markets.

## Recommendations

In response to the issues identified at the roundtable, participants proposed the following recommendations.

### State government

- The governments of Wau, Gogrial and Tonj should regulate cattle migration as per the provisions of the previous agreements of Bussere and Marial Bai<sup>2</sup> between the farmers and pastoralists.
- The military leadership in Wau should reduce or limit the movement of soldiers with guns and heavy weapons within residential areas.
- The Wau State legislature should enact local laws against hate speech and actively discourage hate speech on social media and through other media outlets.
- The government should explore options for creating jobs for young people, such as opening a vocational and technical institute where young people can learn skills that would help them find employment.
- The state assembly should introduce legislation aimed at protecting women and girls against harmful cultural practices that deprive them of their rights.
- The government should work with chiefs and traditional leaders in order to clarify their roles in justice delivery and where their jurisdiction lies.
- Police and courts should ensure procedures for arrest and detention are followed as per the South Sudan penal code. Prolonged detention and arbitrary arrest is unlawful and fuels conflict.
- The government – at both national and state levels – should embark on a comprehensive, uniform and peaceful collection of firearms from civilians in Wau and neighbouring states.

### Civil society

- Civil society and NGOs should disseminate the resolutions of the Bussere and Marial Bai agreements between the pastoralist and farming communities in Wau and encourage their implementation.

- Civil society organisations, NGOs and UN agencies should engage in awareness-raising campaigns against hate speech. Media outlets, particularly radio stations, should refrain from spreading messages that incite hate and violence.
- Civil society organisations, NGOs and UN agencies should create awareness of referral pathways for victims of gender-based violence, work with communities to highlight the dangers of gender-based violence, and challenge the norms and behaviours that perpetuate inequality and violence against women.

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. With programmes in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, we work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2002. We work on community safety and security, peacebuilding, small arms and light weapons control, and conflict-sensitive development. Since 2012, we have implemented community security programmes with eight civil society partners. These programmes have taken place in sixteen locations across eight of the country's former ten states: Central, Western, and Eastern Equatoria; Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal; Warrap; Lakes and Jonglei.

Since the outbreaks of conflict in December 2013 and July 2016, Saferworld has included peacebuilding and reconciliation programming in its work. Recently, with funds from the United Nations Mine Action Service, we implemented a project on small arms and light weapons management and control in three locations, working with the South Sudan Bureau of Community Security and Small Arms Control, as well as civil society partners. We have started a new project to expand our overall programme to the two remaining former states (Unity and Upper Nile) and to address intra- and inter-community conflict and gender-based violence.

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<sup>2</sup> These are agreements that were reached between the farming community and pastoralists in relation to the movement of cattle into Wau State.