



BRIEF / APRIL 2021

## Enhancing people's resilience to resolve conflicts in Western Bahr el Ghazal state

**Wau – the state capital of Western Bahr el Ghazal – is located in the western part of the country, approximately 900 kilometres from South Sudan's capital city Juba. It is the second-largest city after Juba, and was previously the capital of the Bahr el Ghazal province/region. It is home to multiple different ethnic groups, including the Fertit<sup>1</sup> (a group of over ten different but related ethnic groups) and the Luo, Dinka and Azande.**

Most people in the state depend on agriculture as their main livelihood source, apart from the Dinka who mix farming the land with rearing animals. Differences in people's sources of livelihoods and competing interests related to this are at the centre of conflicts in Western Bahr el Ghazal. The seasonal movement of armed Dinka pastoralists towards the western part of the state, where most farmlands are located, leads to conflict between pastoralists and farming communities as cattle destroy crops and beehives.

Prior to the outbreak of civil war in December 2013 and the escalation of conflict in July 2016, Western Bahr el Ghazal had already experienced state-level conflict resulting from the state government's September 2012 decision to relocate the headquarters of Wau and Jur River counties to Beggari and Nyinakok respectively. Although this conflict was violently put down by security forces, tensions between communities and the state government persisted. When opposition forces who were unhappy with the decision to relocate Wau county headquarters established their footprint in Wau county in 2015 and 2016, some frustrated civilians – particularly young people – who had had difficult experiences with the state's hard security approach, joined the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM-IO).

However, with the signing of the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) in September 2018, relative calm and peace has since returned to the state.

Between October 2015 and February 2020, the number of states in South Sudan was increased from ten to 32. During this period, Wau and Jur River counties came under Wau state, and Raga – one of the three counties of Western Bahr el Ghazal – was annexed to Aweil North and West counties to form Lol state. Communities in Raga resisted the new political set up, as they were placed in one administrative unit with the Dinka without wider public consultation; coming from a different ethnic group communities feared Dinka domination in the state. Earlier, in 2014, some government forces had defected to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLA-IO) from Mapel military garrison south of Wau, and moved westward to Raja with the intention of establishing a base between Sudan and South Sudan. Their presence around Raja led to increased resistance among the local population over the next year, who were unhappy with the annexation to Lol state – leading to violent confrontations. Following the political decision to return the country to ten states in February 2020, the three counties reverted to their original administrative unit (Western Bahr el Ghazal). With the appointment of Sarah Cleto Rial – the only woman governor in the country – hopes for peace and reconciliation among various ethnic groups in the state are high. As a new entrant into politics, people view her as an impartial person who has the potential to make a difference and instil new ways of managing state affairs.

The citizens of Western Bahr el Ghazal, like many other people in South Sudan, are experiencing tough economic times due to the country's political instability, conflict, high inflation, insecurity on the roads, and the closure of the Sudanese border, which limits the flow of goods and services. Prices of basic commodities have soared since civil war erupted in the country in 2013 and since the escalation of conflict in 2015 and 2016 in Western Bahr el Ghazal in particular. Economic hardship, corruption and unemployment are blamed for increases in crime, theft, and drug and alcohol abuse, and for the rise in criminal activity among young people in Wau town.

In November 2020, Saferworld and the Women Development Group (WDG) organised a two-day roundtable event in Wau, funded by the European Union. This briefing highlights the key safety and security challenges facing Western Bahr el Ghazal as identified by participants in the event, who included state government officials, international NGOs, national civil society organisations, women's groups, faith-based groups, youth union members and community representatives from various ethnic groups. The briefing reflects the views of the participants who attended the roundtable event and does not necessarily reflect the views of Saferworld or WDG.

### **Definitions**

In this briefing, **security** is defined as the protection of people and their assets from violence or theft. It relates to potential harm that may be caused by intentional actions by people, either when their actions are intended to harm others directly or when acts intended to harm some people also pose a threat to others.

**Safety** is connected to but is broader than security. Safety 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.

### **Key conflict drivers or security challenges**

While participants at the roundtable event discussed a wide range of issues that drive conflict in Western Bahr el Ghazal state, the following safety and security challenges were identified as being the most pertinent.

#### **Seasonal migration by cattle herders into Western Bahr el Ghazal**

One of the most pressing conflict drivers in the state is the seasonal movement of cattle into Wau and Jur River counties from neighbouring Warrap. This occurs yearly, often as early as December before farmers have had the chance to harvest their crops. Participants explained that the destruction of farms by cattle, coupled with aggressive and violent behaviour by cattle herders towards farm owners, often leads to conflict. In the past, cattle migration was regulated and normally took place between late December and April or May. In recent years, herders have violated this arrangement, leading to tense relationships between farming communities in Western Bahr el Ghazal and cattle-owning neighbours from Warrap.

Participants at the roundtable criticised both the violent and forceful movement of herders from neighbouring states into Western Bahr el Ghazal and the herders' abuse of the generally tolerant and peaceful nature of the people living in the state.

In recent years, cattle movement has also been blamed for increasing insecurity in the toch (swamp) grazing area along the Unity-Warrap state border, which is used by herders as a source of pasture and water for their cows during dry season.

#### **Proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in the hands of civilians**

Participants stressed that the widespread availability of SALW in the hands of civilians and armed criminals in the state constitutes a major safety and security threat to communities in all of the state's counties. A concern is the heavily armed cattle herders from neighbouring Tonj and Gogrial counties in Warrap state, who move into Western Bahr el Ghazal state yearly with their cattle while carrying firearms. Communities from the outskirts of Wau town live with the constant fear of violence from armed cattle herders. Herders threaten host communities when the communities deny them access to some areas and also use force to drive their cows through the communities' farmlands.

Both communities and government officials at the roundtable denounced increased roaming by armed individuals within and outside Wau town, and explained that these individuals could be members of the unified forces currently training at Masna Biira training centre, a few kilometres outside of Wau. Across the country, soldiers at military camps or training sites lack access to basic services, and are therefore compelled to move out of their camps to look for food and other basic necessities in villages and nearby towns, creating an armed presence in the town.

#### **Land disputes**

Land issues within Wau town have increased significantly, particularly following the eruption of conflict and the displacement of civilians in 2016. Many plots and property that were vacated by their rightful owners because of the increase in targeted killings have been grabbed and occupied by others. When people who have been displaced then return from UN protection of civilian sites and other locations in the state, conflict over land and property increase, as some illegal occupants refuse to vacate the homes they are illegally occupying.

Staff in the state Ministry of Physical Infrastructure are believed to have developed a scheme to allocate a piece of land to more than one person, which has subsequently led to conflict. Officials at the ministry are also accused of amassing large areas of land for themselves – taking advantage of a lack of official land records, due to land registration being carried out manually.

There are also land-related conflicts between some villages that border Western Bahr el Ghazal and Warrap states as a result of tense relationships between farmers and cattle keepers. Communities in Jur River county in Western Bahr el Ghazal have accused neighbouring communities in Tonj North and Tonj South counties in Warrap of trespassing on their land with herds of cattle, with the aim of grabbing their land.

## Ethnic tensions

Western Bahr el Ghazal is home to various ethnic groups with diverse cultures and traditions. Some of these ethnic groups were pitted against each other during the 21-year civil war (1983–2005) between the Sudan government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, sowing the seeds for ethnic tensions and conflicts in the state. As highlighted by participants at the roundtable, ethnic rivalry continued after South Sudan became independent, as the then government of Southern Sudan and state authorities did not make any attempt to achieve intercommunal reconciliation and peace prior to the country's independence in 2011. With the December 2013 crisis and the eruption of violent conflict in Warrap in 2015 and 2016, ethnic polarisation manifested itself further through targeted ethnic killings and hate speech from some people in government and members of opposition forces. Ethnic stereotyping, and unfounded accusations by pro-government sympathisers that certain ethnic groups were either supporters or sympathisers of rebel movements, led to communities deserting their ancestral homes and seeking refuge in different locations.

## Unemployment among young people

Since the eruption of conflict in the country in December 2013, job opportunities have become even more limited and this is a major contributor to insecurity in the state. The inability of the government to create job opportunities, coupled with limited foreign direct investment in South Sudan, means that there are few opportunities for young people to access decent employment.

Participants at the roundtable meeting attributed the increase in crime and insecurity in the state to the fact that young people find themselves with little or nothing to do to support themselves and their families. They are vulnerable to recruitment into gangs, or are used by unscrupulous politicians to create instability by recruiting them into militia groups. Other young people turn to petty crime to make ends meet.

## Recommendations

In order to make inroads into resolving the above myriad challenges to peace and stability identified in the roundtable, delegates including senior state and county government officials made the following recommendations to state and national governments, international non-governmental organisations, civil society and communities in the state.

### To state and national government:

- State and national governments should ensure security and protection for cattle herders in toch grazing areas – including the toch between Unity and Warrap states – in order to reduce cattle migration into Western Bahr el Ghazal.
- State and national governments should embark on uniform, timely and comprehensive civilian disarmament, beginning with cattle herders.
- Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal governments should regulate cattle migration in accordance with previous Bussere and Marial Bai dialogue resolutions.<sup>2</sup>

- The government, with support from international donors and international NGOs, should construct hafeers (water storage dams) and boreholes in drought-prone cattle-keeping areas in Warrap, to reduce cattle migration to farming areas in Wau.
- State and national governments should explore options to create jobs for young people, including attracting foreign direct investment.
- The state Ministry of Physical Infrastructure should conduct land audits in order to address irregularities in land allotment by surveyors at the land department.
- The state government should introduce electronic and/or biometric land registration systems to avoid corrupt practices by surveyors and others of issuing land to multiple people.
- Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal state governments, with support from the Council of States, should ensure the proper demarcation of administrative borders between states.

### To civil society:

- Disseminate content of the R-ARCSS among communities in the state to raise awareness of the agreements
- Carry out wider dissemination of the Bussere and Marialbai cattle migration agreements in Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal.
- Sensitise communities on the dangers of firearms in the hands of civilians, particularly in public places such as schools and water points.
- Advocate for uniform, peaceful and comprehensive civilian disarmament of SALW in Warrap and Western Bahr el Ghazal.
- Organise and facilitate communal dialogues between and among various ethnic groups in the state to foster healing and reconciliation.
- Campaign against hate speech and ethnic stereotyping in communities by spreading peace and unity messages via the media, social media and other appropriate methods.
- Lobby the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure to adopt electronic and/or biometric systems for the allotment of land.

### To communities:

- Together with churches, community leaders should embark on communal dialogues, which include young people and women representatives, to diffuse conflicts and build peace.
- Community leaders, including chiefs and elders, should encourage intercommunal visits and exchanges to promote trust and confidence-building within the state.
- Encourage interethnic marriages where possible among various ethnic communities in the state, to promote unity and social cohesion.
- Community leaders in Wau and Jur River counties should encourage interaction with cattle herders from Warrap state to tackle early cattle migration to Western Bahr el Ghazal.

## About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organization working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. 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. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity. We are a not-for-profit organisation working in 12 countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

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 ten civil society partners in 16 locations across eight of the ten states: Central, Western, and Eastern Equatoria; Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal; Warrap; Lakes; and Jonglei. We extended our programming to Unity and Upper Nile states in 2019.

Since the outbreak of conflict in December 2013 and expansion of conflict in July 2016 to previously peaceful parts of the country, Saferworld has included peacebuilding and reconciliation programming in our work. At present, with funds from the European Union and UK AID Direct, we are implementing peacebuilding activities in 14 counties to address intra and intercommunity conflict and gender-based violence.

For more information, contact:

Peter Machar M. Deng at [pmachar@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:pmachar@saferworld.org.uk)  
or Kuol Alberto Makuach at [kmakuach@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:kmakuach@saferworld.org.uk)

Saferworld Juba: UAP Equatoria Tower, Juba South Sudan  
Registered Charity no 1043843  
Company limited by guarantee no 3015948  
Tel +211 922 500 743  
Email: [sscountryoffice@saferworld.org.uk](mailto:sscountryoffice@saferworld.org.uk)  
Website: [www.saferworld.org.uk](http://www.saferworld.org.uk)

- 1 Dār Fertit (also spelled *Dar Fartit*) is a historical term for the lowlands south of Darfur and east of the highlands in the east of the modern-day Central African Republic that contain tributaries of the White Nile River. This region included parts of southwestern Sudan and northwestern South Sudan. In the present era, Fertit is a catch-all word for non-Dinka, non-Arab, non-Luo, non-Fur groups and tribes in Western Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan. Even though these groups often speak different languages and have a history of inter-tribal violence, they have become more unified over time.' See: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%81r\\_Fertit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C4%81r_Fertit)
- 2 The Bussere and Marial Bai dialogue resolutions of 2012 and 2013 commit cattle herders to avoid movement of cattle to Western Bahr el Ghazal before crops have been harvested from farms.

Cover photo: Traditional chiefs from different ethnic groups work together to promote peace, Wau, 2014. Marcus Perkins/Saferworld