



BRIEF / JANUARY 2021

Contributing to people's safety and peace in Cueibet, South Sudan

Cueibet – a county in Lakes state – is the current epicentre of intra-communal violence in the state. Although most people living in the county are from the Gok Dinka sub-tribe, relations among people from various clans within the Gok Dinka have been conflict-ridden, exacerbated by an abundance of small arms and light weapons in civilian hands.

Cattle raiding and revenge killings have been rampant in the county in recent years due to a breakdown in the rule of law and a vacuum in security and governance at *payam*¹ and *boma*² levels. Many people in the county have lost their lives in revenge killings, which spare no one including individual community members, religious leaders, teachers, police personnel and humanitarian workers.

The situation in other parts of Lakes state is no different. Conflicts relating to cattle raiding among the various communities in the state and with neighbouring communities in Unity and Warrap states are a common occurrence, fuelled by sub-tribe or clan rivalries and the proliferation of weapons. In Cueibet, cattle raiding/theft between Cueibet county and Tonj South county in Warrap happens regularly – with little state intervention.

Politically, Cueibet was the state headquarters of the defunct Gok state when South Sudan had 32 states (October 2015 until February 2020) and remains the only place in the county with some basic services such as health, education and commercial activities. Following the political decision to return the country to ten states in February 2020, Cueibet/Gok reverted to being a county in Lakes state. This decision did not go down well with some local elite power holders who lost their constitutional posts in the new setting.

Cueibet residents, like many other South Sudanese, are experiencing tough economic times due to the country's political instability and conflict. People also face insecurity on the roads to Cueibet. Prices of basic commodities have soared since civil strife erupted in South Sudan in 2013 and escalated in 2016. Economic hardships and unemployment are blamed for the increase in crime, theft, and drug and alcohol abuse especially among young people in the county and in the state in general.

This brief highlights some of the safety and security challenges identified by participants in a two-day roundtable event conducted in Rumbek for Cueibet county by Saferworld and our partner, Disabled Agency for Relief and Development (DARD), on 21–22 October 2020. It reflects the views and aspirations of the participants from Cueibet and does not necessarily reflect the views of Saferworld or DARD. Government officials from the state, Cueibet county authorities, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), national civil society organisations (CSOs), women's groups, faith-based groups and youth union members from Cueibet and Rumbek attended the event.

Safety and security

In this brief, **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, when their actions are intended to harm others directly, or when acts intended to harm others also pose a further threat to other people. 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.

Safety and security challenges

While there was a wide-ranging discussion on conflict drivers at the meeting in Rumbek – focusing on Cueibet county – participants highlighted the following safety and security issues as the most pressing.

Cattle raiding

Participants highlighted cattle raiding and theft within Cueibet and between Cueibet and other counties in Lakes – as well as with the neighbouring states of Unity and Warrap – as one of the core conflict drivers in Cueibet county and Lakes state at large. Cultural norms that equate owning more cows with ‘real manhood’, wealth and strength are a significant driver of cattle raiding/theft. High bride prices – paid in cattle – are another driver of cattle raiding/theft among Gok Dinka communities. Participants noted that in some cases, paying a bride price of up to 100 cows is forcing young men to steal cows from other communities and this in turn leads to conflict.

Participants condemned the commercialisation of stolen cattle by *Gelweng*³ youth, which to some extent community members condone. Youth in Cueibet and other areas are involved in the business of exchanging stolen cattle whereby cattle stolen in faraway *payams* or *bomas* are exchanged for money with the knowledge and acquiescence of community leaders (who can indirectly benefit financially from the practice). Unless tribal chiefs and other local leaders such as *boma* and *payam* administrators deter cattle raiding/theft and hold perpetrators to account, cattle theft and raiding are likely to continue for the foreseeable future in Lakes – and in Cueibet in particular.

Participants argued that cattle raiding and theft are thriving largely due to a reluctance from state and county government authorities to enforce punitive measures against perpetrators. Participants stressed that without the imposition of remedial measures – such as lowering bride prices and heavy penalties for anyone proved to have raided or stolen cattle from other communities – a change in the practice will not be possible.

Weak judicial system

Participants criticised weaknesses in the county and state court systems, and stressed that delays in settling cases by the courts have contributed to the cycles of revenge killings in Cueibet and Lakes as a whole. When cases are not promptly resolved – or when aggrieved parties are dissatisfied with court decisions – some people take the law into their own hands in the form of revenge killings to redress losses of human lives or property. One participant remarked during the event, “It’s painful and sad when a family loses dear ones and no meaningful actions are taken by judicial officials in Cueibet.” This, according to him, is responsible for many revenge killings.

Participants equally acknowledged the challenges facing providers of justice services at state, county, *payam* and *boma* levels – as the government struggles to pay salaries of civil servants and the judiciary is no exception. This in turn has affected the ability of the justice system to function effectively. According to participants, judges at lower levels of government are vulnerable to bribery, and some of them have been accused of seeking to extort money from accused individuals.

Participants also blamed delays in facilitating compensation payments for the families of people killed in revenge or communal violence. They stressed that authorities are slow to implement the collection of cows and even sometimes ask for payment from the victims’ families before executing arrest warrants. Some communities have also demonstrated a tendency to select old or sick cows for compensation, which has at times angered the aggrieved families, who resort to seeking revenge to redress the loss of their family members.

Participants also noted that in many cases, conflict stemmed from overlapping mandates between customary and statutory courts – where chiefs with no competency and authority to handle and/or preside over criminal cases have stepped in to mediate and/or adjudicate on criminal matters.

Prevalence and access to small arms and light weapons

Participants attributed many of the conflicts among communities to the easy availability of firearms in Cueibet county and across Lakes state. With guns easily accessible, almost all young men in Gok are armed – at times better than state and county police personnel. This state of affairs has worsened the safety and security situation across the county and made it more difficult for government authorities to disarm civilians.

Participants stressed the need for effective governance at all levels, in particular the disarming of civilians in Cueibet to restore peace and tranquillity. The use of firearms by youth for revenge killings, violence and criminal acts – such as cattle raiding/theft, highway robberies and targeted killings based on past grievances – are manifestations of deeper societal malaise. The government needs to urgently institute uniform and comprehensive disarmament across the state and neighbouring Unity and Warrap states.

Lack of security service provision at local government levels

Participants agreed that lack of security service provision at the lower levels of government in the county has exacerbated insecurity in Cueibet. They stressed that there is barely any presence of police or security personnel in *payams* and *bomas* and this creates a security vacuum, which is exploited by armed youth and others. Where there are security personnel, they are often relatives of those in the *payams* and *bomas* and some can be influenced by communal allegiances.

At the county headquarters, citizens often accuse police personnel of asking for money to apprehend suspects or respond to emergency calls from the public. There are also weaknesses stemming from the lack of training and motivation for police personnel, as well as a lack of logistical support from state or national governments for the police. Participants remarked that prison services are almost non-existent in many *payams* in Cueibet county. As a result, convicted individuals at the *payam* level remain in their homes, which in turn allows aggrieved people to seek revenge for crimes committed against their communities.

Alcohol and drug abuse

Participants added that alcohol and drugs were contributing to conflict and violence in Cueibet county and Lakes state in general. High levels of alcohol consumption – especially in rural areas – are thought to increase violence and trigger many of the sub-national conflicts and family disputes. Participants felt that alcohol and drugs were behind many avoidable gunshot injuries and deaths caused by unauthorised gun usage. When these incidents occur, they ignite further violence and revenge killings by relatives of the victims, who in the absence of effective policing services take the law into their own hands.

Recommendations

Lakes state – and Cueibet county in particular – faces myriad conflict drivers including lack of security service provision in *payams* and *bomas*, cattle raiding, weak justice systems, wide availability of firearms, and alcohol abuse. These interrelated issues have contributed immensely to insecurity and conflict among clans in the county, in Lakes state and in neighbouring communities in Warrap and Unity states. Any recommendations taken forward by national and state government, civil society and communities must recognise the interconnectedness of these issues and people with power, influence and resources must work together to prioritise and sequence them if there is to be any chance of success.

To solve the above wide-ranging challenges to peace and security identified in the roundtable discussions, participants made the following recommendations to state and national governments, international organisations and civil society, and the communities of Cueibet county and Lakes state.

To state and national government

- To restore peace and stability, state and national governments should strengthen the judiciary and courts at county, *payam* and lower levels by increasing the number of trained judges and other court officials and creating mechanisms for the timely resolution of cases.
- Revise pay and benefits of the officials that provide justice services to communities so that these are in line with regional/international levels, as well as make provisions for specific contextual challenges facing these officials, such as security threats coming from armed civilians or groups.
- State and county authorities should institute laws and regulations governing imported and locally brewed alcohol in Cueibet county.
- Clarify, through legislation and/or policy, the mandate, status, role and remit of customary/traditional and statutory courts, especially where there is existing conflict between the roles of the two systems of justice administration.
- National government should carry out a comprehensive, uniform and peaceful disarmament initiative in Lakes and adjacent states.
- Government at national and state levels should offer cash and cows to incentivise communities and individuals, including youth, for disarmament or exchange of guns.
- Organised forces should ensure proper storage of weapons owned by their members to prevent weapons falling into the hands of unauthorised individuals and/or opposition groups, through increased monitoring of storage facilities and adequate and appropriate vetting of staff and personnel responsible for providing security to weapons storage facilities.
- Government at all levels should formally criminalise cattle raiding and establish effective courts to try cattle raiders.
- Government at the state level should improve the capacity of law enforcement agencies, especially the police at *payam* and *boma* levels where the majority of citizens live.
- State government should regulate the production and sale of alcohol and/or illicit drugs through appropriate licensing, regulation of opening hours of places selling/serving alcohol and enforcing age restrictions.

Civil society

- CSOs in Cueibet county and Lakes state should conduct awareness raising for communities on the importance of trust in the rule of law, including in the judiciary and the court system to limit revenge killings.
- CSOs and INGOs working in Cueibet county and Lakes state should engage communities in communal dialogue on the drivers of conflict, including revenge killings, cattle raiding, bride prices, alcohol and drug misuse and other issues.

- CSOs should conduct awareness raising on the dangers of small arms and light weapons and on proper handling of them so that people understand dangers related to possession of firearms.
- CSOs and INGOs should advocate for peaceful, inclusive and uniform civilian disarmament that takes into account the safety concerns of communities.

Communities

- Chiefs and traditional leaders should exhort youth to refrain from violence, cattle raiding and communal conflict.
- Chiefs, community elders, women and youth leaders should work with communities to facilitate the timely payment of blood compensation in their communities, especially for longstanding claims.
- Communities should cooperate with local government and the police to identify perpetrators of violent conflicts in their communities.
- Chiefs and cattle camp leaders should ensure that stolen cows are returned to their rightful owners and that perpetrators are held to account to deter cattle theft.
- Chiefs and community elders should reduce and regulate bride prices to reasonable numbers (not exceeding 50 head of cattle).

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation 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 work in Asia, Africa 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 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 Commission and UK Aid Direct, we are implementing peacebuilding activities in 14 counties to address intra- and inter-community conflict and gender-based violence.

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¹ *Payam* is the second-lowest administrative unit at the county level.
² *Boma* is the third-lowest administrative unit in a county.
³ *Gelweng* means ‘cattle’s protectors/guidance’ – a Dinka word used to refer to civilians in possession of weapons (usually young men in the cattle camps) in Bahr el Ghazal region.