

# ANNUAL BRIEF ON VIOLENCE AFFECTING CIVILIANS

## HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2020, at least 5,800 civilians were individually affected by violence. This represents an increase of 120% as compared with 2019, when 2,631 victims were recorded.
- The vast majority of violence was geographically concentrated in 72 *payams* (13% of the 540 *payams* in the country), accounting for more than 79% of the victims.
- The number of killings and abductions increased significantly as compared with 2019, while the number of recorded cases of conflict-related sexual violence declined slightly.
- Violence involving civil defence groups and/or community-based militias accounted for 78% of victims.

## CONTEXT

This annual brief presents an overview of trends in violence affecting civilians from January to December 2020, by assessing four major forms of individual harm experienced throughout the country (killing, injury, abduction and conflict-related sexual violence). While the impact of violence extends beyond these forms of harm, they have been the most common incidents documented during the conflict in South Sudan.

Sources of information include victim and eyewitness accounts, as well as reports from secondary sources

identified during field missions by the UNMISS Human Rights Division (HRD). All reported incidents, particularly those involving sub-national violence, are deconflicted with incidents documented by the UNMISS Civil Affairs Division (CAD). In accordance with its UN Security Council mandate, UNMISS has issued this annual brief as an advocacy tool to reduce the impact of armed violence on civilians. UNMISS also continues to urge national authorities to hold all perpetrators accountable.

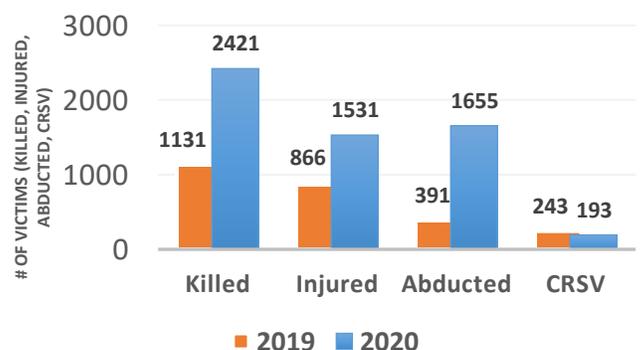
## GENERAL TRENDS

In 2020, local populations continued to bear the brunt of predominantly sub-national armed violence in South Sudan. HRD documented more than twice as many victims and incidents as were recorded in 2019. Between January and December, there were more than 1,197 incidents (487 in 2019) involving at least 5,800 civilians (2,631 in 2019) subjected to one of the four major forms of individual harm (killing, injury, abduction and conflict-related sexual violence). This constitutes a 146 per cent increase in the number of incidents and a 120 per cent increase in the number of victims, as compared with 2019. It is important to note that COVID-19-related restrictions on movement hindered HRD's capacity to thoroughly document all incidents, which may have led to under-reporting of the number of victims.

As illustrated by the following chart, three forms of harm affecting civilians increased as compared with 2019:

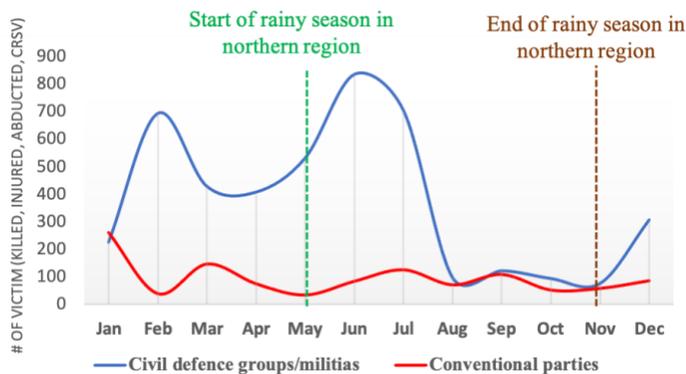
Killings rose by 114 per cent (from 1,131 to 2,421), cases of injury by 77 per cent (from 866 to 1,531) and abductions by 323 per cent (from 391 to 1,655), while the number of victims of conflict-related sexual violence declined by 21 per cent (from 243 to 193).

Number of victims, 2019 - 2020



In 2020, sub-national violence accounted for the vast majority of victims (78 per cent) documented across the country. The intensity of this violence fluctuated throughout the year but was marked by two distinct surges in February and between May and July—clearly indicating that the violence did not end with the onset of the rainy season in May. In reality, a major decline in sub-national violence was only observed from mid-August onwards. Around this time, severe floods, in particular in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA), impeded the movement of armed elements, and likely contributed to the reduction in armed engagements at this time.

**Number of victims in 2020, by month and attribution**



While sub-national violence, particularly cattle-raiding, is historically rooted in the social fabric of pastoralist communities in South Sudan, the violence now being documented involves civil defence groups and/or community-based militias with a level of organization, capable of conducting planned and coordinated military-style attacks, independently as well as with the support of members of Government or opposition forces. This sub-national violence therefore cannot be dissociated from national political and military dynamics.

**GEOGRAPHIC TRENDS**

In 2020, Jonglei and the GPAA were the regions most affected by violence, accounting for 33 per cent of the victims recorded throughout South Sudan, followed by Warrap and Lakes, which together accounted for approximately 30 per cent of the victims. These four regions were mostly affected by sub-national violence involving civil defence groups and/or community-based militias. However, it is important to note that this violence was concentrated in specific *payams* (sub-divisions of counties), with 72 (out of 540) *payams* accounting for more than 79 per cent of victims.

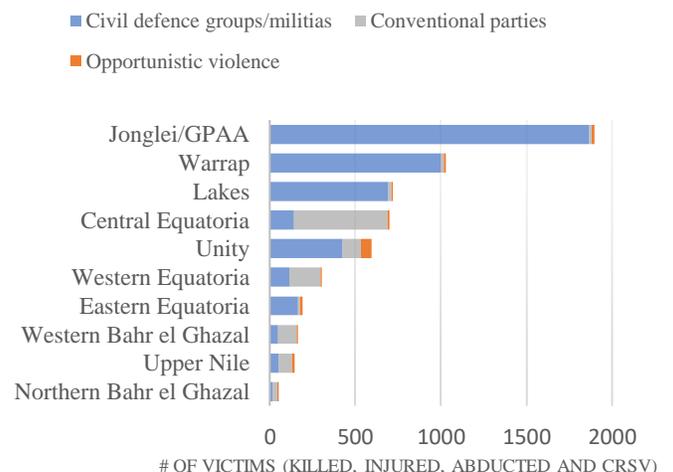
For instance, 13 *payams* in Jonglei and GPAA were devastated by intense violence, which led to the killing and wounding of at least 1,058 persons from the Murle, Nuer and Dinka communities and the abduction of 686 women and children, mainly from the Murle community.

As a result of the widespread adherence to the 2018 Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), the overall number of victims attributed to violations and abuses by conventional parties has remained lower (19 per cent) than those attributed to civil defence groups and/or community-based militias. However, the number of victims harmed by conventional parties in 2020 increased by 42 per cent (from 787 to 1,119) as compared to 2019. The majority of these victims were subjected to abduction (62 per cent), primarily for the purpose of forced military recruitment and/or forced labour.

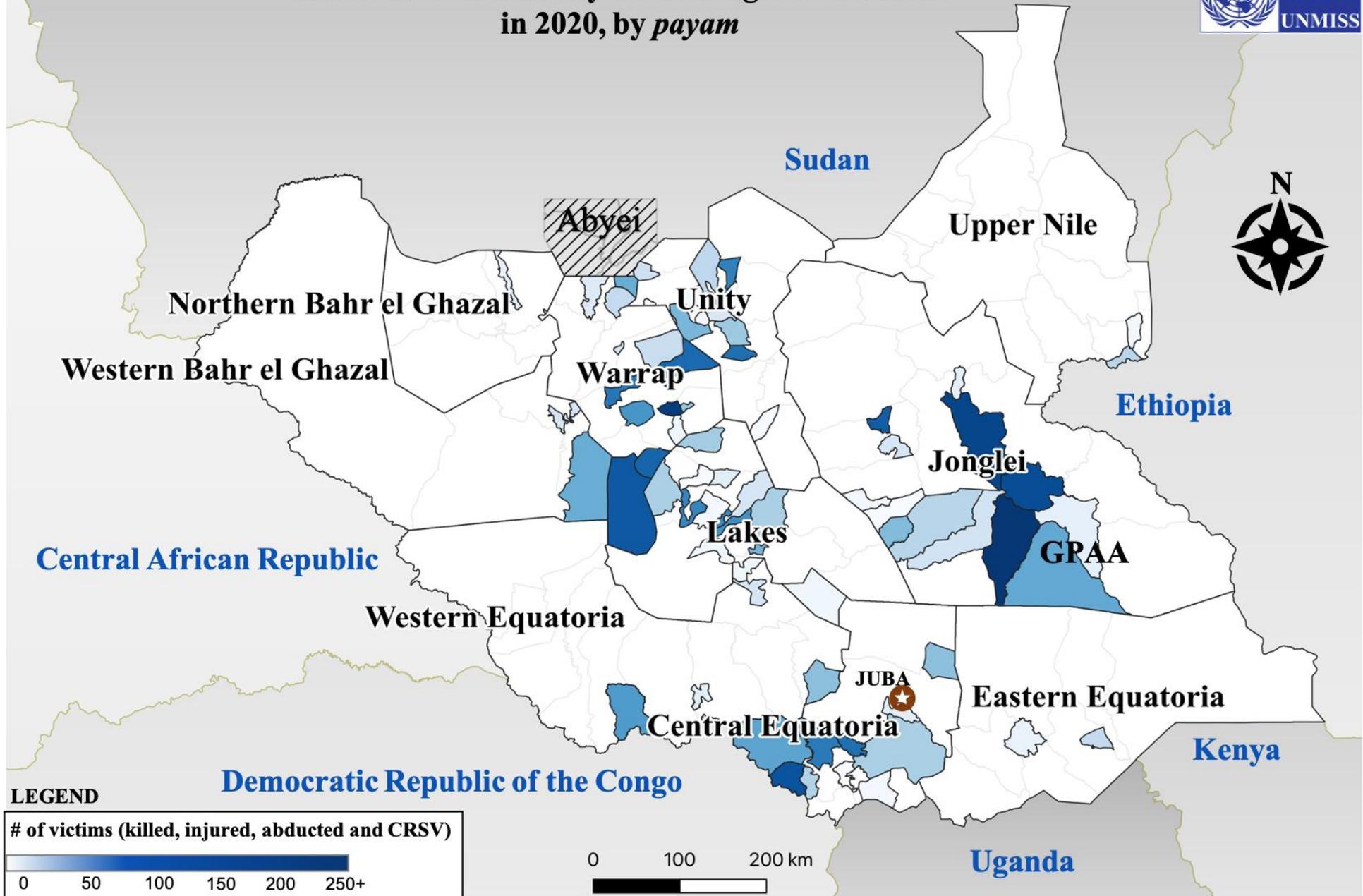
Incidents involving conventional parties were triggered primarily by tensions between the South Sudan People’s Defense Forces (SSPDF) and pro-Machar Sudan People’s Liberation Army in Opposition (SPLA-IO/RM) on the one hand, and the National Salvation Front (NAS) on the other, in parts of Central and Western Equatoria states. They were also fueled by defector groups from the SPLA-IO/RM reportedly used as proxy armed elements by Government forces to carry out attacks against their former group. These groups included forces loyal to Maj. Gen. James Ochan (Upper Nile), Maj. Gen. James Nando (Western Equatoria), Maj. Gen. Moses Lokujo (Central Equatoria) and Maj. Gen. Joseph Dongo (Western Bahr El Ghazal).

HRD also documented a relatively small number of incidents by unidentified but related armed elements, which do not fall specifically within one of the two categories described above, but which bear a link to the conflict based on the suspected perpetrators, location, modus operandi and other factors. These actors were primarily engaged in opportunistic violence, and were responsible for three per cent of all affected victims documented in 2020.

**States most affected by violence**



# Areas most affected by violence against civilians in 2020, by *payam*



Meanwhile, 25 *payams* in Warrap and Lakes were marred by chronic armed violence among Dinka communities, resulting in 1,647 victims, including 77 women and 39 children—amounting to 36 per cent of all victims attributed to civil defence groups and/or community-based militias in 2020.

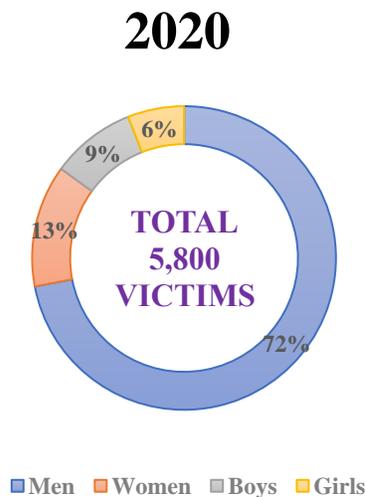
By contrast, Central Equatoria, the fifth most violent state (with 12 per cent of all victims), was mainly affected by violence involving Government forces and opposition

groups. In particular, 16 *payams* in the southern part of the state (Greater Yei), as well as in the counties bordering Western Equatoria state, accounted for 65 per cent of the victims attributed to conventional parties. Violence involving these actors was also documented in Unity and Western Bahr el Ghazal, which each accounted for 10 per cent of victims attributed to conventional parties, while the remaining 15 per cent were recorded throughout the rest of the states.

## VICTIMS

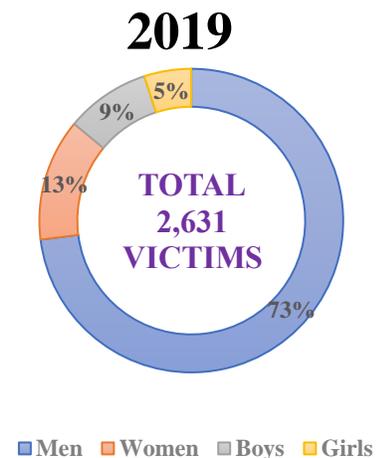
As previously noted, HRD’s capacity to comprehensively document the number of victims affected by armed violence was seriously impacted by COVID-19 movement restrictions and heavy flooding across several states, in particular during the third quarter of 2020, which may have led to some under-reporting in the number of incidents and victims. Notwithstanding, HRD documented at least 5,800 victims of one of the four main forms of harm experienced in South Sudan, a marked increase (120 per cent) as compared with 2019 (2,631).

Women were primarily subjected to abduction (41 per cent) and killing (28 per cent), for the most part during localized violence. Conflict-related sexual violence, including rape and sexual slavery, accounted for 18 per cent of adult female victims (142). Nearly a quarter of these CRSV cases were documented in the Yei and Lobonok areas (Central Equatoria), involving conventional parties, and more than 30 per cent during localized violence involving civil defence groups and/or community-based militias. For instance, at least 39 Murle women were raped during armed violence in Jonglei between January and August 2020.



Men continued to comprise the majority of victims among local populations (72 per cent or 4,184 individuals), followed by children (15 per cent or 839 individuals) and women (13 per cent or 777 individuals).

In line with trends observed in 2019, HRD’s findings established that the vast majority of men (82 per cent) were killed or injured as a result of localized violence, while the remainder were mostly abducted for the purposes of forced military recruitment and/or forced labour. In 2020, at least 725 men were victims of abduction, primarily in the areas of Yei (Central Equatoria) and Mundri (Western Equatoria), and largely attributable to NAS.



Overall, the number of women recorded as victims of CRSV decreased slightly (13 per cent) between 2019 and 2020. However, UNMISS has reason to be concerned that women and girls were subjected to sexual violence in cases of abduction as well.

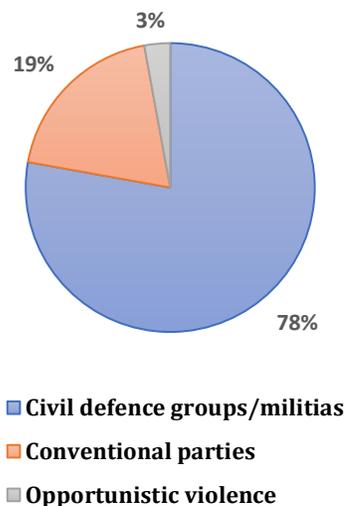
Children were primarily abducted (73 per cent) and killed (15 per cent). Seven per cent were injured and five per cent (46 children) were subjected to sexual violence. As compared with 2019, there was a sharp increase in the number of abductions involving children in 2020 (from 122 to 612). Of these 612 victims, 92 per cent were abducted during localized violence, primarily in Jonglei and GPAA.

# PERPETRATORS

Among the three main categories of alleged perpetrators involved in armed violence in South Sudan, civil defence groups and/or community-based militias remained the primary actors causing harm to civilians, illustrating that conventional parties to the conflict do not possess a monopoly on the use of violence in South Sudan.

In 2020, civil defence groups and/or community-based militias involved in sub-national violence were responsible for 78 per cent of victims. This corresponds to an increase of more than 150 per cent as compared with 2019 (from 1,841 to 4,514). Although the structure of these groups remains complex and rooted in the social fabric of local communities, HRD found that some groups have a degree of organization, with established command structures headed by identified leaders.

*Victims, by category of perpetrator*



Civil defence groups and/or community-based militias are also bolstered by the support of national and local actors driven by political or economic interests. For instance, during the armed violence in Jonglei and GPAA, HRD found that traditional and spiritual leaders, as well as

political and administrative elites, were involved in supporting these groups. In addition, some rank-and-file personnel and officers of the SSPDF and SPLA-IO/RM have supported or actively participated in the fighting alongside civil defence groups and/or community-based militias, in their individual capacity and according to their community kinship. Others have provided material support as part of a gambit to reinforce political alliances or widen divisions in the context of a slow and fragile implementation of the R-ARCSS, including the power vacuum created by delays in the establishment of state and local governments. The relationship between Government/opposition forces and civil defence groups and/or community-based militias in areas such as Jonglei and GPAA has further exposed the permeability of the boundaries between the military apparatus and the community loyalties of its personnel.

The second category of perpetrators causing the most harm to civilians remained the conventional parties to the conflict. Government forces and opposition armed groups, such as SPLA-IO/RM and NAS, were responsible for 19 per cent of victims. As illustrated in the section on geographic trends, some specific hotspots were affected by the presence of these armed actors (Central Equatoria, Western Equatoria and Upper Nile).

Overall, most of these victims were attributed to NAS (46 per cent), primarily in the context of abductions for forced military recruitment and/or forced labour, followed by SPLA-IO/RM (24 per cent) and SSPDF (23 per cent). Groups of SPLA-IO/RM defectors not fully integrated into Government forces accounted for five per cent of victims.

Unidentified but related armed elements also continued to account for a small proportion of victims, primarily in the form of opportunistic violence. HRD found that these actors were responsible for three per cent of all victims documented.