



BRIEF / FEBRUARY 2021

Enhancing people's resilience in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan

Northern Bahr el Ghazal, situated in the northern part of South Sudan, is one of the country's states that experiences fewer incidences of sub-national conflict, cattle raiding and revenge killings, and has experienced relatively less political violence than other states since the eruption of civil war in South Sudan in December 2013.

The government of South Sudan increased the number of states in the country from ten to 32 between October 2015 and February 2020. Northern Bahr el Ghazal was split into two states (Aweil and Aweil East) and two of its counties (Aweil North and Aweil South) were given to Raja county in Western Bahr el Ghazal to form Lol state. When the government reversed this decision in February 2020 and returned to the original ten states, Northern Bahr el Ghazal reverted to its former status. As per the power-sharing arrangements in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (the R-ARCSS), the state is allocated to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement in Government (SPLM-IG). President Salva Kiir appointed Tong Akeen Ngor as governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal in July 2020 – a move that was welcomed by many across the state.

In early 2018, the activities of the South Sudan United Front – operating under the former governor of Northern Bahr el Ghazal and Army Chief Paul Malong – led to political violence, with the national army clashing with armed elements affiliated with the South Sudan United Front in Aweil North county. Since then, the situation in the state has remained stable. Overall, people living in Northern Bahr el Ghazal welcomed the return to one state in February 2020.

The major sources of livelihoods in Northern Bahr el Ghazal are cattle rearing, small-scale agriculture and trade, especially in Aweil town – the capital of the state – and in the *payams*¹ near to the border with Sudan. Due to a long dry spell between May and July 2020, followed by heavy rains between July and September – which led to flooding in many of the state's counties – low harvests and food insecurity are anticipated in 2021.

Like their fellow citizens in other parts of the country, people in Northern Bahr el Ghazal are facing a dire economic plight. Several factors have accentuated this situation, including poor road network connections, the closure of the South Sudan-Sudan borders due to disagreements over the border line, multiple taxation on roads connecting the state to the country's capital Juba, and the high prices of basic commodities resulting from the steep depreciation of the South Sudanese pound and runaway inflation.

In November 2020, Saferworld and partners Community Initiative for Partnership and Development (CIPAD)² and the Action for Children Development Foundation (ACDF)³ organised a two-day roundtable discussion in Aweil, funded by UK AID Direct and the European Union, to discuss safety and security in the state and recommendations going forward. This briefing paper summarises the key safety and security concerns facing Northern Bahr el Ghazal state that were voiced by participants in the event, who included government state and county officials, representatives of international NGOs, national civil society organisations, women, faith leaders and members of youth unions from across the state.

This briefing does not necessarily reflect the views of ACDF, CIPAD or Saferworld.

Safety and security

In this briefing paper, **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 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 in Northern Bahr el Ghazal during the roundtable event, participants identified the following safety and security issues as being the most pertinent and requiring intervention from various people and organisations, including communities.

Food insecurity

People are currently food insecure in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, due to the long dry season that occurred in 2020, which led to poor harvests. Because of this and because of the changes in rain patterns seen in 2020, it is anticipated that people will also face food insecurity in 2021.

The reduced flow of goods and commodities from Sudan to Northern Bahr el Ghazal has further contributed to food insecurity in the state. With restrictions on the movement of commodities from Sudan into the state as a result of border closures, items are being smuggled into Northern Bahr el Ghazal at illegal border crossings and prices of basic items have skyrocketed. People can no longer afford the increased prices and their purchasing power has further diminished because of the economic slump and runaway hyperinflation, coupled with the decline in the value of the South Sudanese pound.

A weak justice system and the absence of effective law enforcement

Participants at the roundtable event highlighted weaknesses in both local and state government judicial and security services, including in Northern Bahr el Ghazal. They acknowledged that delays in concluding cases by the courts have contributed to a lack of trust and confidence in the government's ability to administer justice in the state. One participant recalled that it sometimes takes judges as long as five years to conclude cases in the state court in Aweil town, and that such delays lead to frustration and, at times, to people taking the law into their own hands.

Participants attributed weaknesses in the judiciary system to a lack of motivation on the part of judges and state prosecutors, resulting from insufficient salaries which are often not paid for months on end. With the current economic conditions, some individuals within the judiciary may be tempted to solicit or accept bribes, compromising their professional ethics to make ends meet.

Security service providers, especially the police, have been accused of demanding money from communities before responding to community security concerns – sometimes the police request fees for fuel for their vehicles or as cash. Such practices have led to a reluctance by individuals and communities to approach law enforcement agencies if disputes arise.

Gender-based violence and discriminatory gender norms

Gender-based violence in Northern Bahr el Ghazal is one of many factors contributing to conflict in communities – in towns as well as in rural areas. Deep-rooted patriarchal cultural norms fuel violence against women and children, such as husbands beating their wives and the neglect or abandonment of children by fathers. Participants at the roundtable event blamed the practice of polygamy for the rising number of children living on the streets of Aweil town and other county administration headquarters like Gok Machar and Wanyjok. Due to the difficult economic situation people find themselves in, polygamous families are separating, resulting in an increase in the number of children without parental care.

Participants also criticised the increase in early and forced marriages of girls in the state. Parents secretly arrange marriages for their girls, often without their consent. Despite the commitment by the government of South Sudan to fight early and forced marriages – as provided for in the Child Act 2008 – early and forced marriages in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, as well as in other parts of South Sudan, have continued to undermine the human rights of girls and young women.

Participants also expressed concern over the continued exclusion of women at local, sub-national and national government levels. Although parties to the R-ARCSS have committed to allocating 35% of political positions to women, this has not been achieved. Of the nine state governors appointed by the president in July 2020, only one is a woman.

At the community level, discriminatory cultural norms deny women and girls the right to own and/or inherit the estates of their parents or deceased spouses. "When husbands die, wives do not have the right to inherit what their spouses have left behind; instead, brothers or other close relatives of the deceased assume responsibility and ownership", one participant emphasised.

Land and border disputes within Northern Bahr el Ghazal and at the South Sudan-Sudan border

Participants noted that in Aweil town, disputes over land have been a source of conflict for a long time, because of inadequate land regulation and policies. Community representatives and local government officials who attended the roundtable argued that loopholes in the process of land acquisition have led to the fraudulent sale of land by individuals connected to surveyors in the state Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and the municipal council. Participants added that there are many unresolved cases in both statutory and customary courts in Aweil town and in other county headquarters regarding disputes over land.

While participants recognised that land disputes in town settings are one of the drivers of conflict in the state, tensions and land disputes stemming from the creation of more administrative units under the former 32 states also remain unresolved.

Cross-border disputes between South Sudan and Sudan threaten the peace and security of communities living in Aweil North and Aweil East counties, especially in the Mile 14 area which encompasses the areas of Kiir Adem and Majok Yimthiou, where the two countries' armies clashed in the past. The closure of the borders between the two countries and the presence of armed tribal militias have impacted the flow of goods from Sudan in border towns such as Gok Machar.

Recommendations

Northern Bahr el Ghazal is facing a myriad of peace and security challenges – including but not limited to food insecurity, inadequate justice services at local government levels, gender-based violence, and land and border disputes. These interrelated issues have contributed to instability and prevented people from living in peace and engaging in productive activities to improve their livelihoods.

To address the challenges to peace and stability identified at the roundtable, participants recommended the following actions for the state and national government, international NGOs, civil society and communities.

To state and national government

- The Northern Bahr el Ghazal Relief and Rehabilitation Commission should work closely with humanitarian agencies on programmes to address predicted food insecurity.
- The government of South Sudan and the state government should initiate bilateral discussions with the government of Sudan for the reopening of the border between the two countries, so that the flow of goods and services into the state can resume.
- National and state governments should strengthen efforts to secure border villages from attacks by Sudanese armed groups.
- National and state governments should enhance the capacities of judges and state prosecutors through on-the-job training and learning exchange programmes.
- The national government should review the salaries of judges, state prosecutors and police personnel to reduce the temptation to solicit or accept bribes.
- Authorities should improve and facilitate the mobility and transportation of law enforcement personnel – providing them with motorcycles if cars are too expensive for the government to afford during the economic crisis.
- The government should introduce a proper land registration system to reduce corrupt practices by town planners and officials in land departments.

■ State and national governments should implement the Child Act 2008 and hold accountable any parents who force their children into early and/or forced marriages.

■ State and national governments should ensure the adequate representation of women at all levels of government. In addition to 35% of positions being allocated to women as stipulated in the R-ARCSS, the government and employers should support women to compete for leadership positions at state and county levels.

Civil society

- With support from international NGOs/UN agencies, civil society should ensure that food security and livelihoods programmes reach populations affected by floods.
- Civil society should train and encourage communities to adopt easily available farming methods such as ox ploughing and the planting of drought-resistant crops to improve food production.
- Civil society should conduct awareness-raising campaigns among communities across the state on the Child Act 2008, which guarantees the protection of children from abuse, to ensure communities are more aware of the Act.
- Civil society should advocate to state government the need for and the benefits of electronic land registration to avoid corrupt practices by officials in the land department.
- Civil society should also advocate to state and national governments to improve legal and justice systems by establishing more magistrate courts in the various counties of the state.

Communities

- Chiefs and traditional leaders should discourage the practice of early and forced marriages within their communities.
- Chiefs and elders should ensure adequate representation of women in customary courts in all counties of the state.
- Parents should support both boys and girls to enrol in schools.

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 country's 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 the 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 inter-community conflict and gender-based violence.

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- 1 A *payam* is the second-lowest administrative unit at the county level.
- 2 CIPAD is Saferworld's partner in Aweil North county implementing the project funded by UK AID Direct.
- 3 ACDF is Saferworld's partner in Aweil East county implementing the project funded by the EU.

Cover photo: Group discussion during an authorities and youth dialogue in Majakkar, a village near Gok-Marchar, Northern Bahr el Ghazal in June 2019. Credit: Saferworld