

Elections Face Tribal Violence Threat

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Sixteen million people register for elections, but continued conflict could still derail the process. Human rights groups say that recent flare-ups of violence in parts of South Sudan could still disrupt national elections due to take place on April 11 next year.

More than 16 million people – over 75 per cent of the voting-age population – have been registered for the election. While the process, which concluded on December 7, has been largely peaceful, the past 12 months have seen growing tension in parts of the country.

In fact, aid organisation Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF, says this year has seen the worst violence in the region since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, CPA, was signed four years ago.

“What we are seeing is violence that goes beyond inter-tribal cattle rustling and suggests a deliberate targeting of villages,” said Karima Hammadi, MSF operational coordinator for Sudan. “MSF has been treating many women and children for gunshot wounds, and we have spoken to lots of witnesses and patients who have described the violence as different from the usual ethnic clashes.”

If the violence was centred on cattle-rustling, Hammadi said, one would expect to see less women and children shot, since cattle herders tend to be men.

Violence has been particularly prominent in the Western and Central Equatoria region – where remnants of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army, LRA, are believed to be operating – as well as in Jonglei, Lakes, and Upper Nile states.

The United Nations says that 250,000 people have been displaced this year by the violence in South Sudan.

Fouad Hikmat, Sudan special adviser for the International Crisis Group, said the violence is being exacerbated by a local power struggle between rival political and tribal groups, who hope that next year's national elections, scheduled for April 11, will provide them with a louder voice in the country.

He said that many local tribal leaders were left out of the coalition government between the former southern rebels and the north, which was set up under the CPA, and they now see a chance to become more involved.

Hikmat also pointed out that many South Sudanese soldiers have not been paid in months, and this has led to many trying to find alternative ways of earning an income.

“Some of the soldiers sell their arms to make money,” he said. “Others take sides in the conflicts, based on tribal allegiances, and have participated in raids on villages.”

A researcher from Human Rights Watch, HRW, working undercover in the country, says that there is some evidence that groups of LRA fighters are causing trouble in Western Equatoria, but that it is impossible to tell whether such violence is part of a wider insurgency.

MSF claims that LRA activity in Western Equatoria has increased this year, following a joint military operation that was launched against the LRA by the Ugandan, Congolese and southern Sudanese armies earlier this year.

The south has long accused the north of backing the LRA in the country's 20-year civil war, something that Khartoum consistently denies.

Anne Itto, secretary-general for the southern sector of the SPLM, told IWPR that the ruling National Congress Party, NCP, is seeking to destabilise the south in the run-up to next year's election.

But Hikmat says that there is no concrete evidence to support this line of argument.

Nevertheless, those in the south report that the violence is having a devastating effect on their livelihoods.

Bishop Eduardo Hiiboro Kussala from Tambura-Yambio, not far from the border with the Central Africa Republic, said that suspected rebel soldiers from the LRA recently staged several attacks on a church in the area and vandalised the building before abducting 17 people, mostly in their teens and 20s.

One of the young men who went missing was later found dead, tied to a tree and mutilated.

The bishop said that, less than a week later, six others were ambushed and killed in the nearby town of Nzara. They were nailed to pieces of wood fastened to the ground, like something from a crucifixion scene, he said.

HRW says that the local authorities should do more to end the cycle of violence, which could undermine the efforts to hold elections next year.

Jemma Nunu Kumba, the governor of Western Equatoria, told IWPR that the government is doing what it can to offer protection in such a vast territory, but that they need more support from the international community.

"The people of [Western Equatoria] are shedding tears while the international community watches the situation without intervening," she said. "Neither the African Union nor the UN have been able to address the situation. They only discuss things about Darfur, and do not touch upon things that are going on here."

But the UN's mission in South Sudan does not see ending the current violence as part of its mandate, which is primarily to make sure that the CPA is properly implemented.

“These conflicts can often be best understood in very local terms – tribal terms – and not necessarily in the larger dynamic context of the CPA itself,” David Gressly, regional coordinator for South Sudan, said during a recent press conference.

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