

BRIEFING | NOVEMBER 2024

Conflict drivers and priorities for peace among communities in Central Equatoria State, South Sudan

Central Equatoria, part of the Equatoria region, is home to South Sudan's capital and largest city, Juba. It shares borders with Eastern Equatoria to the east, Western Equatoria to the west, Lakes State to the north, Jonglei State to the northeast, and Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the south. In addition to the major tribes of Central Equatoria – including the Mundari, Pojulu, Kakwa, Keliko, Kuku, Avukaya, Nyangwara, Adio, and Lulubo – Juba hosts members from nearly every ethnic group in South Sudan and serves as the seat of the national government.

In December 2013, South Sudan was plunged into civil strife that began in Juba and quickly engulfed most parts of the country. A temporary truce was reached in 2015, but another wave of conflict erupted in July 2016, ravaging the entire country. In Central Equatoria, some areas remain inaccessible due to insecurity caused by hold-out groups like the National Salvation Front (NAS), led by former Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) Deputy Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Thomas Cirillo Swaka. These violent conflicts have had severe repercussions on the civilian population, with women, children and older people suffering sexual violence, torture, displacement and killings.

Beyond violence related to the national conflict, Central Equatoria has faced ongoing insecurity due to disputes over occupied land, creating tensions and violence in the outskirts of Juba. Shrinking civic space is another critical issue, marked by an increase in the arbitrary arrest and detention of activists and political commentators. Reports of disappearances and torture in detention facilities further exacerbate the climate of fear. Cattle movement and migration have also been identified as significant causes of violent conflict among communities in the state.

On 8 May 2024, Saferworld hosted a roundtable in Juba that brought together civil society, academia, faith-based groups and others to delve into the conflict drivers in Central Equatoria. The aim of the dialogue was to identify the root causes of conflict and propose realistic and achievable solutions. This briefing captures the essence of the discussions and the recommendations made by the participants.¹ It outlines the main themes from the roundtable discussions and offers a glimpse into the complex issues and proposed solutions for fostering peace and stability in Central Equatoria.

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The following security concerns were identified during the roundtable:

1. Cattle migration and farm destruction

Cattle migration has become a significant source of conflict in Central Equatoria. This issue primarily stems from the movement of people from Jonglei State and the Bahr el Ghazal region into Equatoria. These areas, heavily impacted by climate change, have experienced increased rainfall and subsequent flooding, forcing pastoralist communities to seek new grazing lands in neighbouring counties.

As predominantly cattle-keeping communities, people displaced by climate impacts in the north of the country bring large herds of cattle into Equatoria, a region where the local population primarily practices agriculture. This clash of livelihoods – agriculture versus pastoralism – has led to the destruction of crops and farms in Equatoria, exacerbating tensions between the communities.

The destruction of farms not only affects food security but also fuels animosity between the different communities. Farmers see their hard work destroyed, leading to economic hardship and increased vulnerability. On the other hand, pastoralists, desperate to find grazing lands for their cattle, view migration as a necessity for their survival. This has become a serious conflict issue in Central Equatoria.

Participants in discussions highlighted the need for laws to be enacted to create appropriate channels for seeking justice for crop destruction. They also noted the lack of designated areas for keeping cattle away from farms. Even when such places are allocated, cattle keepers are reluctant to use them, citing the distance from settlements, insecurity and fear of cattle raiding. Participants also expressed concerns about the presence of small arms in the hands of cattle keepers. Armed to defend their animals from rustling, cattle keepers pose a significant challenge for communities attempting to negotiate compensation when their crops are destroyed. Host communities reported that armed cattle keepers walk away without agreeing to pay fines or make reparations.

In summary, the migration of cattle into Central Equatoria due to flooding in other regions has led to significant farm destruction and heightened tensions between agricultural and pastoral communities. The lack of legal frameworks and adherence to designated grazing areas, combined with the presence of arms in the hands of cattle keepers, complicates efforts to address these conflicts and seek justice for affected farmers.

2. Land grabbing

Since 2005, when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement and Juba became the seat of the government of Southern Sudan, communities from across the country moved to Juba. Some came to work in the national government while others came to the city to seek economic opportunities. This influx into Juba led to a scramble for land. At the same time, it became clear that the host community was not ready to facilitate an orderly settlement of other people in and around Juba, citing their rights under the Land Act 2009.

The civil war from 1983–2005 displaced hundreds of thousands of Juba residents to other parts of the country or to neighbouring

countries. The new arrivals into the city settled on land belonging to those people who had been forced to flee, and when the owners returned to reclaim their properties, the new occupants resisted eviction. Participants noted that armed individuals have demarcated land and given away plots, even renaming areas, without involving relevant authorities. Disputes over land acquisition has turned violent, at times resulting in deaths.

The issue of unauthorised land allocation in Central Equatoria has led to significant violence among ethnic groups. For instance, in Mangala, clashes between the Dinka from Jonglei State and local communities from Central Equatoria occurred between 2020 and 2021 due to illegal land allocations, and the area remains contested to this day.

3. Small arms and light weapons

Participants in the roundtable dialogue identified the following issues regarding small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Central Equatoria state:

- **Proliferation and destabilisation:** The widespread availability of SALW has deeply destabilised Central Equatoria, intensifying conflicts and disputes over land. The unchecked spread of weapons has facilitated land grabbing, with armed groups and individuals forcibly taking land from communities – areas like Yei and Juba, for example, have experienced violent confrontations over land, largely due to the presence of SALW. The lack of robust legal frameworks and enforcement has allowed these weapons to proliferate through illicit trafficking.
- **Impact of SALW on communities:** The proliferation of arms among civilians, a legacy of prolonged conflict, has led to increased violence. The failure of the government to provide adequate protection to its citizens has impelled many communities and individuals to arm themselves to protect their assets. In some cases, weapons are used for intimidation, extortion or harassment, resulting in violent conflicts, loss of lives and displacement. Women and children, being the most vulnerable during conflicts, suffer disproportionately.
- **Ineffective disarmament:** Conflicts have also arisen from disarmament exercises that lacked consideration of local dynamics and were poorly coordinated. In 2018 and 2019, disarmament efforts caused tensions between the South Sudanese government and armed communities, such as the Kuku and Madi. These exercises, intended to curb armed violence, sometimes led to forced weapon surrenders, provoking resistance and clashes, especially when perceived issues of fairness and security concerns were not addressed. The presence of various armed factions and sensitive local power dynamics further exacerbated these conflicts.

4. Weak governance

One major conflict issue which was cited by the participants is weak governance. They noted that the absence of effective laws covering the acquisition of guns, the movement of cattle and the resolution of land disputes – as well as any effective management of these issues by government – is perpetuating impunity and fuelling insecurity.

The judicial system was also seen as compromised, with judges and law enforcement personnel and institutions seen to be controlled by powerful individuals in the system. Participants

believed that average citizens do not get justice because they do not have the connections or resources to smooth their way.

Participants also noted that public sector salaries are low, and are either not paid on time or paid over a protracted period. With public sector employees sometimes going months without pay, they can't afford basic needs, leading to food insecurity and prompting migration to neighbouring countries and other locations within the country. They also sometimes turn to crime – there are frequent reports of deadly night robberies and road ambushes by armed personnel.

5. Intimidation and unlawful arrest

During the roundtable discussion, participants emphasised the pervasive issues of intimidation and unlawful arrests in Central Equatoria State. They noted that both local authorities and armed groups frequently use their power to intimidate civilians, particularly those who oppose their interests or are perceived as threats. Reports from Juba and surrounding areas indicate that arbitrary detentions by security forces or militias are rampant, often occurring without due process. These unlawful arrests are typically intended to suppress dissent or control local disputes, with detainees enduring harsh conditions and abuse. This pervasive climate of fear and intimidation undermines trust in legal institutions and hampers efforts to address grievances through formal channels. Organisations such as Human Rights

Watch and Amnesty International have documented these issues, emphasising the lack of accountability and oversight in law enforcement practices, which exacerbates existing tensions and obstructs progress towards stability and justice in the region.

Since the conflict began in late 2013, people in Central Equatoria State have experienced extensive intimidation and unlawful detention. Participants discussed various manifestations of intimidation, including verbal threats from unknown callers warning of severe consequences for criticising the ruling government. In other cases, masked and heavily armed individuals visit targets' homes at night to deliver similar threats. More severe cases involve abductions without warning, with individuals taken to undisclosed locations where they face torture and prolonged detention without trial. This abuse often targets those with political differences, including activists who challenge systemic injustices. Victims are frequently held for extended periods without legal proceedings, reflecting a systemic failure to uphold fundamental legal and human rights. An illustrative case discussed involved Kalisto Ladu, the former Mayor of Juba City Council, who was abducted from his home in March 2024 by unidentified gunmen, presumed to be National Security Service personnel. He was later released without charge. His arrest and detention was believed to be linked to his criticism of the government's handling of Bari community land in Central Equatoria.²

Recommendations

Following discussion of the issues contributing to conflicts in the roundtable meeting in Juba, Central Equatoria state, on 8 May 2024 participants put forward the following recommendations to government and civil society organisations (CSOs) as priority areas for attention:

To national and state government

- National and state governments should enforce land laws, which participants believed would discourage land grabbing. They also called for campaigns to increase public awareness of these laws through radio, rallies, seminars and workshops.
- State and national governments should implement the cattle relocation order issued by the President in April 2015, which calls for herders and their cattle to return their home states, but which has not been respected. Participants also wanted the national government to disarm cattle keepers.
- The national government should carry out uniform and peaceful civilian disarmament within Central Equatoria and neighbouring states to reduce violent conflicts. Arms that are collected should be publicly destroyed. The government should also ensure maximum security and protection of people's lives and property. This would assure the people of their safety and security and, as such, discourage them from acquiring arms for self-protection.
- State and national governments should ensure strict adherence to the laws of the country enshrined in the constitution. All political forces should agree to finalise a permanent constitution to replace the existing interim constitution, taking into consideration the views of South Sudanese citizens. There is a need to improve and support law enforcement agencies to effectively discharge their duties without intimidation from the executive branch of the government.

- Participants also underlined the need to combat gender inequality and challenge the harmful gender norms that perpetuate violence against women.
- Finally, participants stressed the need to implement proper security arrangements in areas that often experience violent conflicts. The government should implement reforms to the army and relocate barracks to locations outside towns, far away from civilian areas.

To civil society organisations (CSOs)

- CSOs, international NGOs (INGOs) and UN agencies should support and facilitate dialogues over conflict issues within Central Equatoria state and with neighbouring states and raise awareness on the importance of peaceful co-existence.
- CSOs and INGOs should support economic empowerment through capacity strengthening, skills training, the provision of start-up support/job creation, and help to communities to invest in agriculture.
- CSOs should lobby relevant institutions and individuals for the implementation of the recommendations of the Economic Conference as well execution of a unified tax model in the country.
- Lastly, participants also recognised the high level of trauma that communities have experienced as a result of the conflict and insecurity they have experienced, encouraging CSOs, INGOs and UN agencies to support training on mental health and psychosocial support for communities.



About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent, not-for-profit international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives in countries and territories across Africa, Asia and the Middle East. We work in solidarity 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.

Saferworld has been working in South Sudan since 2008. We work with communities, civil society organisations, authorities, traditional leaders, and other international and national NGOs to prevent conflict and build peace. We prioritise working with women, young people and others who are excluded from decisions that affect them. Over the past five years, we have worked in partnership with over 20 CSOs across ten states – including nine women’s rights organisations – to establish and support

more than 100 community peacebuilding groups to identify, mitigate and resolve conflicts and security concerns. We help our CSO partners to strengthen their resources, and we provide core and flexible funding, programme accompaniment and peer-to-peer learning support. We support the development of regional and national CSO platforms, and connect people to our advocacy networks so that national and international organisations put the voices of South Sudanese civil society at the heart of what they do. Saferworld South Sudan also hosts the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), which provides advice to donors, policymakers and the aid community and helps those working across the aid sector to integrate conflict sensitivity throughout their programmes, operations and policy decisions in South Sudan.

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Cover photo: Civilians seeking protection at the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) compound adjacent to Juba International Airport, December 2013.

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Notes

- 1 Note that these views do not necessarily reflect those of Saferworld.
- 2 Akile EJ (2024), ‘Kalilsto’s wife says informed about husband’s release’, Eye Radio, 6 September (<https://www.eyeradio.org/kalistos-wife-says-informed-about-husbands-release/>)