

Protection Situation Update
Mundri West and East Counties, Western Equatoria State
(1 May – 10 December 2015)

A. Background

In Mundri West County, tensions between local populations on the one hand, and Dinka SPLA soldiers and migrant cattle-keepers on the other, had been brewing for some time following the influx of cattle-keepers from Jonglei and Lakes states. The security and humanitarian situation deteriorated in early May 2015 when cattle-keepers were attacked by unknown armed men in Kotobi Payam, and five people were reportedly killed. Then, two Dinka SPLA soldiers were killed by unknown gunmen on 21 May near Mundri town, and the County's Executive Director was shot dead on 22 May while investigating the incident.¹ These events prompted an escalation in violence between SPLA soldiers and the local community. Estimates suggested that up to 130 civilians had been killed by the end of May, and about 30,000 individuals were reportedly displaced into surrounding areas.² Some civilians began returning in early June after safety assurances from the county commissioner, but it is estimated that no more than 10 per cent of the town's population (about 3,400 individuals) returned at this time, notably due to the heavy militarization of the area.³ In Mundri East County, local populations in Jambo, Lanyi, Lui and villages along the road to Mundri were first displaced in mid-September following fighting between armed groups from 15 to 17 September 2015.⁴

More clashes were reported from 4 to 6 October, when an armed group attacked the SPLA barracks in Mundri town, displacing its entire population as well as civilians in villages and towns along the roads to Maridi, Mvolo and Juba. According to estimates by humanitarian partners, about 50,000 individuals were displaced (30,000 from Mundri West and 20,000 from Mundri East) into villages and bushes outside the main centres. However, population figures are difficult to estimate given the fluidity of the situation and challenges in distinguishing between host communities and the displaced.

There was a brief flicker of optimism on 15 November, when a faith-based delegation composed of several bishops and reverends brokered a peace agreement between the SPLA and local residents in Mundri West County.⁵ However, on 25 November, aerial attacks by gunship helicopters on armed youth believed to be hiding 30 km from Mundri town reportedly killed 50 civilians and injured 100.⁶ Then, on 28 November, armed youth reportedly ambushed SPLA soldiers on the Karika-Mundri road, killing five SPLA soldiers and one youth.⁷ Local partners reported that all urban areas in both counties were subsequently deserted, and that most of the civilian population remained displaced and in hiding as of early December.

¹ South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Trends Paper No. 5 (April-June 2015)*, July 2015.

² Displacement figure reported by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) during an assessment mission. See ADRA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West Counties, Western Equatoria State*, 5-10 June 2015.

³ The population of Mundri town was reported as 33, 975 in the 2008 Population Census.

⁴ See OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State, 27-30 October 2015*, and South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Trends Paper No. 6 (July-September 2015)*, November 2015.

⁵ Agreement between The Community of Greater Mundri and SPLA Division 6, Brigade 16, Mundri Battalion on the resolution of the Mundri Conflict, 15 November 2015. See UNMISS, "Peace agreement signed in Mundri West", <http://unmiss.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=3481&ctl=Details&mid=6047&ItemID=10464244&language=en-US>, 15 November 2015.

⁶ Juba Telegraph, "50 killed in Mundri gunship attack", 30 November 2015, and Sudan Tribune, "SPLA-IO two top commanders killed by government forces in Mundri air raids", www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article57189, 27 November 2015.

⁷ UNDSS, *Daily Situation Report*, 30 November 2015.

Around 9 December, some civilians who had returned to Mundri town again fled to the bush after SPLA soldiers began arresting youth, prompting fears of further clashes. Tensions were also reported in Karika Boma, Mundri West County, after SPLA soldiers began attempting to take food from civilians by force, causing an unknown number to flee towards Kotobi.

B. Protection Concerns

The basic safety and security of civilians are the key protection challenges, as insecurity both caused mass displacement and is a source of protection threats for displaced individuals. Recent assessment missions found that men are especially at high risk of being shot at by soldiers or other armed actors, and are therefore avoiding the main urban areas.⁸ The disabled and elderly are also particularly vulnerable, as they were reportedly left behind when people fled in haste. As of the end of October, service facilities, markets and livelihood activities had stopped functioning in the most-affected areas, including Mundri town, further increasing the vulnerability of civilians. IDPs who attempt to access their homes and gardens around Mundri town report being shot at, beaten, or victims of theft by armed men in uniform.⁹ The threat of looting by armed groups has also led commercial vehicles to avoid the Mundri counties, leading to the closure of local markets and placing further strains on families' food security.

Host communities in towns have been sharing food, water, shelter and essential household items with IDPs.¹⁰ However, partners report that conflicts are now emerging over water resources, notably in Kotobi (Mundri West County), which is served by only two boreholes. IDPs who are in the bush rely on greens and wild vegetables collected from the forest or gardens at night. Most are living under trees or in open areas in harsh conditions.

On 9 September, UNMISS responded to rising insecurity by establishing a Temporary Operating Base (TOB) in Mundri town. Civilians began arriving in search of protection and assistance around 16 September. As of 2 December, about 800 IDPs were staying around the TOB, where they live in makeshift shelters shared by 20-25 people. According to reports, SPLA soldiers around the TOB regularly threaten and harass IDPs, and have looted their belongings and livestock.

Access constraints continue to be a serious challenge that hampers the deployment of timely assessments and responses, notably in hard-to-reach areas such as Bangolo and Amadi payams in Mundri West County.¹¹ Due to insecurity, humanitarian partners must rely on armed escorts provided by UNMISS, but regular escorts are not possible due to logistical constraints and the relatively small number of troops deployed in the state.

GBV and sexual violence are a serious risk for women and girls, especially when they return to their cultivation plots and previous dwellings in search of food. Fearing that they might be seen and attacked by soldiers or other armed men, women and girls are accessing crops and gardens only during the night, although this still exposes them to potential harassment, abuse or sexual violence.¹²

Dozens of GBV incidents have been reported by protection actors. For example, reports were received of rape, including of children, both during the May and October security incidents. Seven

⁸ UNHCR, *Protection Assessment Report: Conflict-Affected IDPs in Mundri West County, Western Equatoria State*, October 2015.

⁹ OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

¹⁰ OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

¹¹ OCHA, "South Sudan: Humanitarian access situation snapshot – October 2015", http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/access_snapshot_20151113.pdf.

¹² OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

rape cases were reported during the violence of 4-6 October alone.¹³ Women also reported killings, shootings and harassment by armed elements.¹⁴

Both IRNA and UNICEF assessments suggest that a high number of children have been separated from their families, although access constraints have prevented the systematic gathering of data. IDP women reported in late October that most of the children who had been separated were being taken care of by other women in the community.¹⁵

In addition to the physical threats unaccompanied and separated children face, they also struggle with psychological distress after losing their loved ones, witnessing violence and/or living in deprivation. Children's well-being has been negatively affected overall, as they have not been able to access education, recreational activities or psychosocial support services.

Furthermore, like much of the Equatorial region, the Mundri counties are heavily impacted by landmines. Together with unexploded ordnance, landmines have littered vast swathes of land, threatening safe freedom of movement, inhibiting the delivery of humanitarian aid, and precluding socio-economic development.

C. Protection Response

At the time of writing, no protection assistance had been provided for IDPs in the two counties since mid-October due to security constraints.¹⁶ Humanitarians have requested that security protocols be revised to enable a more timely response.

There are no protection partners with a static presence in Mundri East or Mundri West counties. UNHCR is coordinating the overall protection response. Two local NGOs – Lacha Community for Economic Development (LCED) and Mundri Relief Development Association (MRDA) – have mobile teams that are able to deploy to the area. They have been able to conduct assessments, but targeted protection assistance remains lacking. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is providing medical assistance in the main IDP settlement sites.

Social workers from the State Ministry of Gender, Child and Social Welfare are present in both counties, but only a few joined the IRNA mission on 27-30 October due to ongoing insecurity and a lack of resources and capacity to respond. Other GBV partners with a response capacity include MRDA, Mundri Active Youth Association (MAYA), and the Sudan Evangelical Mission (SEM).

UNICEF and the South Sudanese Red Cross are the main child protection partners in the counties. Insecurity and related access constraints have prevented the implementation of their priority programming, notably Family Tracing and Reunification (FTR) activities and the provision of community-based psychosocial services.

UNMAS deployed survey and clearance teams to both counties from January to June 2015. The teams uncovered a number of previously unknown hazards, including minefields, and recorded stockpiles and cluster munitions. After the rainy season in early October, UNMAS attempted to re-deploy teams to the area, but access was denied by the SPLA. Recent fighting may have resulted in additional explosive hazards, but UNMAS has not yet been able to conduct surveys.

¹³ ADRA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West Counties, Western Equatoria State*, 5-10 June 2015, and OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

¹⁴ OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

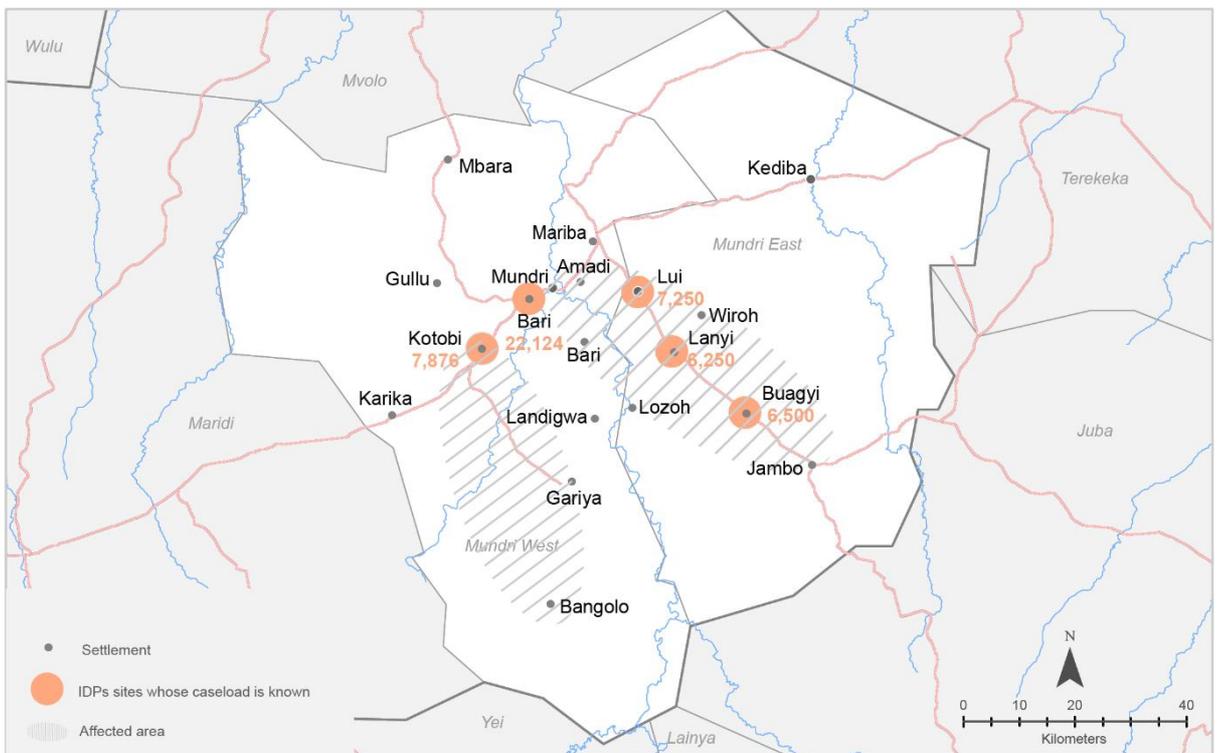
¹⁵ OCHA, *IRNA Report: Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria State*, 27-30 October 2015.

¹⁶ OCHA, *Situation in the Equatoria States as at 25-11-2015*, 25 November 2015, unpublished.

D. Recommendations

- Local and state authorities should guarantee the safety and security of IDPs in all displacement sites, work towards creating conditions so they are able to safely return to their homes, and ensure humanitarian access and law and order to enable the delivery of assistance, including assurances of access for displaced populations.
- County administrators, state authorities, inter-faith leaders and other civil society members should renew their efforts to promote peace and reconciliation.
- Humanitarian actors should prioritize urgent and immediate basic assistance through a multi-sectoral response, and enhance their coordination with UNMISS, the SPLA and other armed actors to ensure the safe passage of humanitarian convoys in a timely manner.
- Humanitarian actors that are able to provide basic services should work towards enhancing their protection response, notably in the areas of protection monitoring, the identification of individuals with specific needs, child protection services (FTR and PSS for children), and GBV response.

Map: Mundri West and East Counties, Western Equatoria State



Source: OCHA

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