

Country Update

South Sudan

(March 2, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of February 10, 2021, South Sudan has registered 8,010 cases of COVID-19, including 94 deaths, although the number of cases is expected to increase as more testing is done. The government has imposed a number of precautionary measures, including the suspension of flights, land border restrictions, passenger bus prohibitions, evening curfews, and social distancing.

Summary of impact:

The UN refugee agency warned of potentially devastating consequences for millions in South Sudan – which could compound an already fragile population due to wide-spread poverty, weak healthcare structures, years of war and conflict which has caused 1.7 million displaced people, and recent natural disasters.

The rise of communal violence amid COVID-19 is a real threat. On May 21, 2020, more than 300 people were killed in the Jonglei state after communal violence broke out between Lou Nuer pastoralists and Murle farmers over cattle and land. Communal violence has also been escalating in the Warrap and Lake states, and there are reports of violence between government forces and the National Salvation Front (one of the militia groups fighting the government), exposing more civilians to the danger of both the virus and of displacement. The lockdown and inter-states travel ban has limited the ability of civil society organizations to prevent communal and ethnic violence and address its impact. Experts worry that these

spikes in violence will derail progress towards peace, including the February unity deal and proposed unity government between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar.

GNWP partners also report that with the imposed curfew by the government, the right to freedom of speech, expression and assembly has been compromised. There are instances in which army personnel harassed citizens including those raising awareness about COVID-19 prevention measures. With the militarization of most major cities and towns in the country, many members of civil society, women's group, youth groups are exposed to violence, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention, torture and harassment.

The COVID-19 outbreak has also disrupted the implementation of the 2018 Revitalized peace agreement, including its important provision of 35% quota in women's representation in political institutions, (as well as the reconstitution of the transitional legislative assembly, appointment of state governors, and security arrangements.) Trainings of the unified forces of South Sudan – which bring together government and opposition groups' troops – have been suspended. This will likely delay the unification of the forces, which is a key part of the power-sharing agreement included in the R-ARCISS and a pre-requisite for the formation of a joint government. According to GNWP partners, the COVID-19 pandemic is a contributing factor to the already existing lack of political will by the parties to proceed to implementation of the Revitalized Agreement. A press release by the UN Security Council on September 16, 2020 affirms that: "Despite the urging of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) heads of State in July, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly is yet to be reconstituted, so necessary new laws are not being passed and progress on the Constitution has also been delayed. COVID-19 has slowed implementation of the peace agreement, including meeting key benchmarks, but the pandemic is not entirely to blame."

Widespread food shortages are causing the worst food insecurity crisis since South Sudan gained its independence in 2011. The Initial Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) projections estimate that around half of South Sudan's population will be in need of humanitarian food assistance due to poor macroeconomic conditions, rising food prices, an increase in desert locusts which destroy crops, and disrupted supply chains across the Horn of Africa. Women in particular are disproportionately affected by this – as the majority of



women depend on farming, fishing, and herding for food and income to support their families. UN Women reports that in the context of rising prices for basic goods, women-owned businesses have been drastically impacted and are adopting adaptive measures as non-essential businesses have re-opened.

Due to deeply entrenched traditional gender norms, women and girls in East Africa are among the most vulnerable groups exposed to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As frontline workers and primary caregivers in health facilities and in homes, women are more directly exposed to the virus. They face additional burdens of unpaid domestic work (an average of around 4 hours per day) due to lockdown measures and school closures, and at the same time, are at higher risk of income and job loss, and higher risk of domestic violence and abuse. GNWP partners have reported that young women and girls are also more exposed to sexual exploitation and abuses, which have resulted in unwanted pregnancies, coupled with a lack of access to medical care such as contraceptive and family planning measures. In July 2020, authorities in Eastern Equatoria states recorded at least 125 teenage pregnancies since the COVID-19 began in South Sudan, which has spurred worries about the connection between unwanted pregnancies and school dropouts.

Women in the protection of civilian sites (PoCs) and IDP camps are more vulnerable as a result of the nature of their confinement, and together with a lack of sufficient humanitarian assistance, they are further exposed to acts of violence and security risks.

Responses led by women peacebuilders:

In partnership with GNWP, Eve Organization for Women Development, is fighting misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic by raising gender-responsive awareness on preventative measures and distributing protective face masks in local markets in Juba through caravans.

