

[South Sudan: 'Outraged' UN experts say ongoing widespread human rights violations may amount to war crimes](#)

United Nations investigators on Wednesday denounced a raft of gross human rights violations being perpetrated in South Sudan, where over the past year, incidents of rape have surged and abductions, sexual slavery and brutal killings “have become commonplace.”

“There is a confirmed pattern of how combatants attack villages, plunder homes, take women as sexual slaves and then set homes alight – often with people in them,” Yasmin Sooka, Chair of the [Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#) said in Nairobi at the launch of the three-member expert-body’s [third report](#).

“Rapes, gang rapes, sexual mutilation, abductions and sexual slavery, as well as killings, have become [commonplace in South Sudan](#),” she continued. “There is no doubt that these crimes are persistent because impunity is so entrenched that every kind of norm is broken.”

While a lack of accountability during the country’s struggle for independence has helped to fuel the current conflict, the report stresses that sustainable peace requires tangible and credible accountability and justice.

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“We do acknowledge the efforts of the Government to hold some perpetrators accountable for gross violations of human rights and serious violations of international humanitarian law,” Commissioner Andrew Clapham said in Geneva.

“However, we also have to note that pervasive impunity remains the norm.”

The Commission, set up in 2016 by the [UN Human Rights Council](#), urged the Government, the region and the international community to “take urgent steps” to respect the cessation of hostilities, implement the Revitalized Agreement signed five months ago and “push to silence the guns completely.”

South Sudan, the world’s youngest nation, has been mired in instability and conflict for nearly all seven years of its existence.

Earlier in 2018, President Salva Kiir and his former Vice-President and long-time political rival, Riek Machar, signed a new peace accord, and hopes have been high that the deal would finally end the crisis and deliver better and safer conditions for millions that have been left homeless and hungry.

A downward spiral

Since its December 2017 update, the Commission said the magnitude of rape and sexual violence has worsened markedly, with a surge in rapes between November and December.

According to [UNICEF](#), 25 per cent of those targeted by sexual violence are children, including girls as young as seven. Elderly and pregnant women have also been raped, and sexual violence against men and boys remains underreported as the stigma attached to it is higher than that of raping and killing the young and the elderly.

Portrait of a woman resident of Wau Shilluk, South Sudan. The town has been reduced to dust, as ongoing conflict has seen the complete destruction of homes, the school and hospital., by © UNICEF/UN0236862/Rich

The Commission also investigated sexual exploitation and abuse allegations committed by UN peacekeepers.

Cases in 2018, which involved 18 alleged perpetrators of the [UN Mission in South Sudan](#) (UNMISS), were registered in the UN Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Database, and peacekeepers from one of the Protection of Civilians sites were repatriated.

The Commission also noted a link between the conflict and the country's political economy – pointing to the misappropriation of natural resources, and “a total lack of transparency and independent oversight,” that has allegedly diverted revenues to Government elites.

Victims and vulnerable communities – especially women, the internally displaced and refugees – must be included in designing and implementing mechanisms for the transitional justice agenda, which the Commission deemed “essential for building sustainable peace.”

As it continues to document violations, build dossiers on perpetrators, and collect and preserve evidence for future accountability processes, the Commission has detailed three case studies documenting war crimes, which will be handed over to the Right Commission in Geneva.

“This evidence may be used beyond South Sudanese bodies – it may be available on request to regional and state parties for future prosecutions,” said Commissioner Barney Afako.

“With sustained political will and effective leadership,” concluded Ms. Sooka, “the transitional justice framework and mechanisms can help to bring accountability, reconciliation and healing as South Sudanese deal with the past and secure their future stability and prosperity.”

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[Prospect of lasting peace 'fading by the day' in Gaza and West Bank, senior UN envoy warns](#)

The spectres of violence and radicalism in the Occupied Palestinian Territory are growing, and the prospect of sustainable peace is fading by the day, a senior UN envoy in the region told the Security Council on Wednesday.

The Council was briefed by [Nickolay Mladenov](#), Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, as well as [Ursula Mueller](#), Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs.

In a [sombre assessment](#), Mr. Mladenov characterized the hope of a peaceful two-state solution as “slim.” Extremists are on the rise and that the risk of war looms large, he explained.

Against this backdrop, the immediate challenge is the prevention of an economic and humanitarian implosion in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinian people, he continued, need the support of the international community more than ever, as a range of issues are exerting a “heavy toll” on those living in Gaza and the West Bank. These include ongoing violence, the lack of progress towards peace, financial pressures and unilateral measures by the Government of Israel.

Mr. Mladenov cited a recent decision by Israel to withhold some \$140 million in Palestinian tax revenue transfers (the equivalent of money paid to Palestinians convicted of terrorism or security-related offences, and their families), and the decision of the United States Government to halt funding for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees ([UNRWA](#)) as factors driving financial instability in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

Ms. Mueller [also described](#) the “rising vulnerability” of Palestinians in Gaza, with salaries for public sector employees reduced or withheld, including in the health and education sectors, unemployment at over 50 per cent, and the fact that most citizens are dealing with food insecurity.

Funding cuts have forced the [World Food Programme](#) (WFP) to suspend assistance to some 27,000 people and reduce rations to another 166,000 beneficiaries. There is still, she continued, a considerable funding gap, and she urged Member States to step up and increase their support for humanitarian operations.



UN Photo/Loey Felipe

Ursula Mueller, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy Emergency Relief Coordinator in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), addresses the UN Security Council on situation in the Middle East.

A number of political steps, said Mr. Mladenov, are necessary for the establishment of peace, including an end to the designation of land for exclusively Israeli use, as well as the cessation of Israeli settlement construction and expansion, and the creation of opportunities for Palestinian development in the West Bank. Demolitions and seizures of Palestinian-owned structures have continued across the West Bank, with some 900 Palestinians in East Jerusalem facing eviction.

The Special Envoy condemned violence and terror in the region over the past few months, which has seen the deaths of 40 children killed by Israeli forces, and the firing of 18 rockets towards Israel by Palestinian militants. There has been an upsurge in settler violence over the past year, he reported, with 20 recorded incidents of Israeli settlers injuring Palestinians or damaging their property.

The casualty figures are “stretching the capacity of health care providers” in the territory, said Ms. Mueller, putting the entire system at the risk of collapse: “Since the start of demonstrations in March 2018, over 27,000 Palestinians have been injured, more than 6,000 of them by live ammunition. According to the [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#), 122 amputations have taken place since the start of the mass demonstrations, including 21 paediatric amputations.”

An international community committed to supporting both parties, leadership, and political will for change are, contended Mr. Mladenov, of primary importance and, until they are found, “Palestinians and Israelis will continue to slide into increasingly hazardous territory.”

[UN chief urges India and Pakistan to dial down tensions in wake of Kashmir attack](#)

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres on Tuesday called on India and Pakistan to take steps [to defuse tensions](#) in the wake an attack in Kashmir late last week that left dozens of Indian security forces dead.

“The Secretary-General has been following with great concern the situation in South Asia,” UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric said in a statement on the 14 February terrorist attack that took place in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir.

According to media reports, tensions have been rising between India and Pakistan following the attack, which took place in a disputed territory that separates the two countries and resulted in the deaths of 40 Indian security personnel and the attacker.

Mr. Guterres reiterated his strong condemnation of the attack and stressed that it is essential that there be accountability under international law and the perpetrators of terrorist acts be brought swiftly to justice.

At the same time, the Secretary-General urgently appealed to the Governments of both India and Pakistan to exercise maximum restraint to ensure the situation does not further deteriorate.

“It is the belief of the Secretary-General that all difficult challenges can be resolved peacefully and satisfactorily through meaningful mutual engagement,” said the Spokesman.

The UN has long maintained an institutional presence in the contested area between India and Pakistan. According to the Security Council mandate given in resolution 307 of 1971, the UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan ([UNMOGIP](#)) observes and reports on ceasefire violations along and across the Line of Control and the working boundary between the South Asian neighbours in Jammu and Kashmir, as well as reports developments that could lead to ceasefire violations.

[UN agriculture agency chief calls on world's mayors to make 'global commitments local realities'](#)

At a time of rapid urbanization, cities face challenges that are global in nature but require “the full engagement of local authorities” for multilateral solutions, the head of the United Nations agriculture agency told a special gathering of mayors on Tuesday.

It is important to make “global commitments local realities,” José Graziano da Silva, Director-General of the [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO), told the meeting and UN Headquarters, discussing common challenges to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), such as climate change and food security.

The special event, [From Global Issues to Local Priorities](#) was co-hosted by María Fernanda Espinosa Garcés, President of the UN General Assembly, alongside Mr. Graziano da Silva.

About 68 per cent of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas by 2050 – mostly in Africa and Southeast Asia, where hunger and poverty are highest.

He said that it is essential to engage local authorities to achieve [SDG 11](#) –promoting sustainable cities and communities – fundamental for achieving all the other goals.

Focusing on [SDG 2](#), which calls for the eradication of hunger and all forms of malnutrition, as well as the development of sustainable agriculture, he pointed out that the number of people suffering from both hunger and obesity has increased over the last three years, especially in urban areas where “people are more likely to eat cheaper processed food high in trans fats, sugar and salt.”

“We urgently need to transform our food systems,” he underscored. “We need to put in place food systems that offer healthy and nutritious food for everyone, while preserving our natural resources and biodiversity” by integrating actions “from the production to the consumption of food.”

City dwellers can no longer be considered food consumers and rural communities food producers.

“Sustainable development calls for the strengthening of rural-urban linkages based on a territorial approach,” he said, pushing for “a rural-urban continuum.”

Turning to the [New Urban Agenda](#), which was adopted at [Habitat III](#) in 2016 during the Quito Conference, Mr. Graziano da Silva said the FAO Framework for the Urban Food Agenda would be launched in Rome on 7 March.

Sustainable development requires “a systems thinking, rather than granular responses,” he argued, adding that the Framework presents ideas to generate employment, strengthen local food value chains and reduce the high levels of food waste found in many cities.

Indicating that some 80 per cent of all food produced globally is now consumed in urban areas, he said that urban consumers would be “a very effective entry point in promoting the transformation to more sustainable agricultural production and value chain development.”

“Implementing the food systems approach may be challenging”, he concluded, “but it is fundamental to ensure healthy and nutritious food for all while safeguarding the planet for future generations.”

Also speaking at the meeting was UN Habitat Executive Director Maimunah Mohd Sharif, who delivered her remarks through video message.

A host of mayors, former mayors, economists and urban development experts

shared experiences of effective local practices, innovative strategies and lessons learned in addressing global challenges including climate change, food insecurity and malnutrition, food supply and consumption sustainability, and people's wellbeing from a sustainable and resilient food system perspective.