

Hearing 'horrific' testimonies from rape survivors in South Sudan, UN envoy says they yearn only for peace

Since the start of the conflict in South Sudan, widespread and systematic sexual violence has been a pervasive tactic of war and terror, said a high-level United Nations envoy, after visiting the war-torn country and hearing "horrific" testimonies.

Pramila Patten, UN [Special Representative](#) on Sexual Violence and Conflict, told reporters that she had been "alarmed to hear about the increasing climate of intimidation" in which civil society organisations work, "including attacks against those providing [services to sexual violence survivors](#)."

The world's youngest country, South Sudan has been wracked by violence and humanitarian crisis since late 2013, following a descent into faction fighting between forces loyal to the President and then Vice-President.

As part of a joint UN–African Union visit, led by Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed from 3 to 7 July, Ms. Patten met government officials and religious leaders, among others.

She toured sites protecting displaced civilians in Malakal and around the capital Juba, and spoke with survivors of sexual violence, who continue to live in acutely vulnerable situations.

"The testimonies I heard were horrific: men being systematically killed, the elderly and sick being burned alive, the genitals of young boys being mutilated or cut off, and women and girls being gang-raped – often to death," she continued.

"In this context, sexual violence serves as a lethal tactic of war and a 'push factor' for forced displacement," she added.

Ms. Patten spoke to women in the protection camps who lamented the lack of food, health services and opportunities to make a living for themselves and their families. The main hope and desire of these women was "the desire for peace," she stated.

Although the women walk in groups collecting firewood to reduce attack risks, they need to venture beyond camp, still frequently assaulted by soldiers lurking in the high grass.

"Yet," she explained, "they have few alternatives, as they cannot ask male community members for help."

In the words of one woman: "Our men would get killed, whereas we only get

raped.”

“All of the women I spoke with said that they wanted to see the perpetrators punished,” said the Special Representative, “yet sexual violence is fueled and exacerbated by impunity on a massive scale.”



UNMISS

Pramila Patten, Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, gives a press conference during her visit to South Sudan, 6 July 2018.

Government officials affirmed their willingness to implement an agreed Joint UN Communiqué to end sexual violence and Cessation of Hostilities, she said, and to measure progress, an action plan had been drawn up to hold perpetrators of sexual violence within the army to account, she said.

This month, she said she would deploy experts to South Sudan to provide technical assistance; and also brief the Security Council and South Sudan Sanctions Committee on her findings, including sexual violence among the criteria for sanctions.

She underscored that a “permanent ceasefire” must be respected by all sides, and should also include the cessation of all forms of sexual violence.

Ms. Patten said it was “critical” that the authorities investigate all alleged violations of international humanitarian and human rights law committed, as well as other alleged atrocity crimes.

She commended the UN and AU efforts towards facilitating a lasting peace, recognizing the “extremely challenging” environment and called for increased donor support.

A disturbing report

The [Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (OHCHR) and the [UN Mission in South Sudan](#) (UNMISS) released a report on Tuesday revealing indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Southern Unity State in which at least 120 women and girls, as young as four-years-old, were raped and gang-raped by the army and associated forces in Koch and Leer county. Witnesses indicate that those who resisted rape were shot.

The report further documented 15 incidents of abduction involving at least 132 women and girls, for the purposes of sexual slavery and forced labor.