South Sudan: Peace process under threat as violence surges across country, warns UN Mission

Surging violence in parts of South Sudan is putting thousands of war-weary civilians at risk and endangering the fragile peace process in the world's youngest nation, the United Nations peacekeeping mission there has warned.

"Innocent civilians are being caught in the crossfire, including many women, children and elderly people," David Shearer, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan and the head of the UN Mission in the country (UNMISS) said.

"Our teams on the ground are reporting incidents of killing, sexual violence, homes being burnt to the ground, cattle raiding, and the looting of hospitals and schools."

Intense fighting has been reported in Nhialdiu, Mayendit, Rupchai, Thaker, and Mirinyal, in the vicinity of Leer and Bentiu in the Unity region, as well as around Motot and Akobo in Jonglei.

In Leer, in the northern part of the country, armed clashes have occurred near a temporary UNMISS operating base and peacekeepers have placed on high alert to protect some six hundred internally displaced persons who sought sanctuary nearby, said the UN Mission.

The hostilities have forced the relocation of 30 humanitarian workers resulting in disruption of aid services.

"This surge in violence […] is at odds with the cessation of hostilities agreement that was signed just a few months ago," explained Mr. Shearer.

"We urge the warring parties to lay down their guns, put the interests of the people first, and work together to build lasting peace."

In addition , with the upcoming peace talks at the High Level Revitalization Forum, the head of UNMISS underscored the need for all parties to stop fighting and "come together in good faith."

"Political leaders must demonstrate they are willing to compromise and resolve this conflict which is causing terrible harm to their people."

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has spent much of its short life mired in conflict, as what began as a political face-off between President Salva Kiir and former Vice-President Riek Machar erupted into full-blown war late in 2013.