Beat: News

IMPUNITY DRIVES CYCLES OF 'HORRIFIC' CRIMES IN SOUTH SUDAN

U.N. HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL HEARS

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ARAC International Strategic Communications - Impunity is a major driver of the human rights and humanitarian crises in South Sudan, which continue to cause immense trauma and suffering for civilians in the country, the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan said on Tuesday.

"It is hard to imagine peace while State actors continue to be involved in gross human rights violations," said Commission member Barney Afako, presenting the latest report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

"A true demonstration of the Government's stated commitments to peace and human rights would involve dismissing the responsible officials and initiating prosecutions."

Based on investigations undertaken in South Sudan and the neighbouring region throughout 2022, the report identifies widespread attacks against civilians, systematic sexual violence against women and girls, the ongoing presence of children in fighting forces, and State-sponsored extrajudicial killings.

Change is possible

Commission members told the Council that South Sudan "can be different", and that the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement, which ended a brutal civil war, remains the framework to address the conflict, repression, and corruption.

The Agreement also charts a pathway for South Sudanese to make a permanent constitution that should strengthen rule of law and respect for human rights, thus laying a foundation for national stability, they said.

"The challenge of advancing peace and human rights in South Sudan is very heavy, and international attention and support must not flag," Mr. Afako said.

Vanishing civic space

While long-delayed progress on a constitution and elections are planned in the next 18 months, the civic space needed to make these meaningful has virtually disappeared, he said. At the same time, activists and journalists operate under threat of death and detention.

"We demand that the authorities immediately end the harassment of civil society, and protect political space," he said.

Commission member Andrew Clapham said that senior public officials and military officers should be held accountable for serious crimes, "or we will never see an end to the gross human rights violations".

Attacks on civilians

"Attacks against civilians persist precisely because perpetrators are confident they will enjoy impunity," he said.

The report's findings describe multiple situations where State actors are the primary perpetrators of serious crimes under South Sudan's laws, as well as under international law. Members of non-State armed groups have also committed violent crimes carried out in various areas of conflict.

Established in 2016, the UN Commission is tasked with addressing alleged gross violations and abuses of human rights and related

crimes, including sexual and gender-based violence and ethnic violence, with a view to ending impunity and providing accountability.

Its three members are mandated to determine and report facts and circumstances of rights abuse, collect and preserve evidence, and clarify responsibility for alleged violations.

Systematic rape, sexual violence

“We have documented human rights violations in South Sudan for many years, and we continue to be shocked by the ongoing violence, including horrific sexual violence, targeting civilians, and perpetrated by members of the armed forces, different militia, and armed groups,” Mr. Clapham said.

Recalling a recent visit, he said Commission members met with brave survivors who shared their experiences of trauma, loss, and hunger.

“Faced with persistent cycles of violence and insecurity, many told us they are disillusioned and losing hope,” he said.

The report detailed specific incidents, including an operation in Leer County, where Government officials directed militias to carry out widespread killings, systematic rape, and forced displacement against civilians in an area considered to be loyal to the opposition.

Mr. Clapham said that although the Government has announced special investigation committees on several situations the Commission has examined, only one such body appears to have carried out inquiries, no reports have been published, and no related criminal trials have taken place.

Critical juncture

“The world’s youngest nation stands at a crossroads,” UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk told the Human Rights Council on Tuesday, “but the Government, with the support of the international community, has the opportunity to choose a path of healing and sustainable peace. Strengthening accountability and civic space are critical.”

Currently, he said the number of victims is “staggering”. In 2022, the Human Rights Division documented 714 incidents of violence affecting 3,469 civilians. Some 1,600 were killed, 988 injured, and 501 abducted.

Despite calls for a ceasefire and the implementation of the Peace Agreement, conflict and clashes across the country are resulting in a raft of documented human rights violations and abuses against its people.

“Generations of South Sudanese have endured lives of fear, extreme violence, and chronic instability,” he said, urging the Government to uphold its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law, including by protecting civilians from attack and ensuring accountability for violations.

Source: UN News & ReliefWeb press releases

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