Interstate Conflict in South Sudan: A Case Study in Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping



Nonviolent Peaceforce

www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org

South Sudan- Mvolo County and Yirol West County Reconciliation Process

Background

In Greater Mundri, home of NP South Sudan's first field site, violence occurs virtually every year during the dry season, when Dinka cattle keepers from Yirol West County in Lakes State migrate across the border to Mvolo County in Western Equatoria State (WES) to graze their cattle. Because there is insufficient grass and water in Yirol West to keep their cows alive during dry season (approx Dec- May), Dinkas move south where there is more grass available. However, as they move south, they cross over into Mvolo County, where Jur farmers reside year-round. According to the Jur, the Dinka and their cattle trespass on their land, destroy their crops, steal their fish nets and scare away animals that are hunted. However, usually the violence is relatively contained and short-lived, as the Mvolo and Yirol West communities have a history of peaceful coexistence, including shared schooling, health care facilities and intermarriages.

But 2011 was different. Fighting started abruptly on the 9th of February after a youth was killed while traveling through Mvolo. Although it was never clear who committed the murder, or what the motives were, a series of retaliatory attacks immediately resulted. As South Sudan has been at war for most of the past fifty years and only became its own country on 9th July 2011, its legal structure is still evolving, and often violence is still the reflexive response to any type of conflict. Initially, the Maduynyi Cattle Camp was attacked which was located in Mvolo but the cattle camp members were Dinkas from Yirol West. The fighting at first was restricted to two villages in Mvolo, but it soon spread to affect the entire county and into Yirol West. Youth from both sides were moving along the borders and violently attacking communities from the other side. According to parties on both sides, the conflict escalated far more in 2011 than it had since 2005, when Sudan's civil war ended. The violence was more brutal; it affected a larger geographical area and lasted for a longer period of time than it had since the end of Sudan's civil war.

Large scale destruction of property and attacks on civilians ensued: between 9th February and 3 April 2011, over 6,000 homes were burned down, over 76,000 people were displaced, dozens of civilians including children were killed or injured, and hundreds of cattle and goats were raided.[1]

Those who NP interviewed reported that children were hiding in the bushes and are dying from dehydration, meningitis and attacks by bees, while a mission team from the South Sudan Legislative Assembly (SSLA) found that "children, women and elderly were under trees without food, water and

[1] Jur-Atuot Conflict South Sudan Legislative Assembly Mission Team Summary Report, 3 April 2011.

health services and there is a high danger of outbreak of disease such as malaria, pneumonia and diarrhea".[2]

The governors of Lakes States and Western Equatoria met four times between February and May in order to address the conflict, where they resolved to deploy neutral forces to establish security, form a committee of investigation to examine the conflict, and hold a peace conference. Some of these resolutions were implemented to varying degrees and with limited success. Despite the high level interventions, the violence continued on the ground.

Nonviolent Peaceforce' Intervention

As the only civilian protection agency working in the area, Nonviolent Peaceforce became involved from the early days of this conflict, utilizing the various aspects of unarmed civilian peacekeeping to improve security for civilians affected by the fighting and to support the development of a sustainable peace agreement. Providing civilian protection in a conflict such as this is complex. While on the surface, the conflict presented as intercommunal it was occurring across a state border, thereby developing a significant political aspect to it. Additionally, the violence was occurring in a very remote area that was difficult to reach by road and impossible to reach by phone. The NP team designed a protection strategy that encompassed the range of actors from the grassroots communities to the national level government.



Figure 1 Traveling the roads of South Sudan

Information Gathering, Analysis and Strategy Building

Effective protection necessitates a rigorous and ongoing process of information gathering, fact checking, analysis, strategizing and re-strategizing. As soon as the NP team received word of the first incident occurring, they reached out to local partners and contacts to gather information. As the communication network in South Sudan is severely limited, the team had to travel in person to the villages to triangulate the information. The roads in South Sudan are atrocious, severely limiting access to communities particularly during the rainy season when it can take 4 hours to travel 50 kms. NP is deeply immersed in

[2] Ibid.

the communities we work in, the teams travel through the bush into remote villages when many other organization do not recognize the importance of gathering reliable information in difficult environments.

Working together with local government authorities, NP was the first INGO to locate many of the civilians who were displaced when the first fighting broke out in Lesi and Dari, soon finding the IDPs had traveled to Ngoronya and Lakamadi; NP literally being the first to find groups of primarily women and children who had been hiding in the bush without food or water for days. NP analyzed the security situation looking at both concerns regarding imminent physical violence and basic needs. Working in remote locations generally with very little international presence, NP plays a key role in linking humanitarian service providers with populations in need. For those suffering from the impact of sudden displacement, NP alerted its partners , participated in interagency IDP assessments and advocated for humanitarian agencies to provide emergency support while developing strategies to mitigate the violence.

Non-Partisanship

Non-partisanship is a foundational principle of NP's protection work. It is imperative that NP works equally with parties associated with a conflict, demonstrating that NP is a neutral, impartial and independent party advocating for the safety and security of civilians rather than favouring any particular outcome. Non-partisanship is an essential aspect of being able to build the trust and confidence with parties to a conflict, both armed and unarmed, necessary to be able to increase the security of civilians.

Because NP has an office in Western Equatoria, but not in Lakes States, addressing the conflict presented unique challenges. NP had to ensure that both sides of the conflict would perceive NP as a trusted and nonpartisan actor. Over the past year, NP already established strong relationships with all actors on the Western Equatoria State side yet had little contact in the Lakes State. Thus, NP undertook trips to Lakes States, where it began to build relationships with communities and government officials, thereby laying the groundwork for NP's intervention. By May, NP had established trust with community leaders, chiefs, elders, youth, police, government and military on both sides in order gain a comprehensive understanding of the conflict dynamics and needs of all parties involved. The need for peace was becoming increasingly urgent, as rainy season had begun, and the displaced communities needed to return home to begin cultivation, or risk having no food for the rest of the year. As one Paramount Chief said, "We need to begun cultivation. If we wait any longer, we will all die of hunger."

Multi-Level Diplomacy

Not only was it important to develop relationships on both sides of the conflict but to also identify key actors on all levels of the conflict. The strategic first step was spending time visiting the affected areas and the communities directly affected to the conflict and the local government such as commissioners and payam administrators. NP worked with partners such as Mundri



Figure 2 NP Team Meets Lakes State Governor

Relief and Development Association (MRDA) in actively participating and coordinating the three Peace Conferences that MRDA held in April, July and September. Following the initial groundwork NP had done and concurrently to the constant protective presence within the communities, NP sent teams to the state capital of WES and Lakes to meet with the governors, ministers, and the Juba headquarters met with members of the national legislative assembly.

Facilitated Dialogue and Protective Accompaniment

At the beginning of May, NP learned of an initiative coming from the chiefs on each side to meet. Three occasions a meeting was scheduled but all failed. On 25th May, NP sent two temporary teams along the borders of Mvolo and Yirol West to meet with local government officials, chiefs, elders, youth and the recently deployed Joint Integrated Unit (JIU) forces[3] and inquired as to why the meetings were canceled. During the meetings with the local government and chiefs it was clear the community feared to travel to each other's side of the border to meet. Two days later, NP coordinated with the JIU and local government to arrange peace talks, and accompanied chiefs and local leaders from Kokori to Mapourdit, two of the most affected areas, to meet. This was the first time since the start of the conflict in February that chiefs crossed the border from one side to the other.



Figure 3 NP Team Meets Chief in Conflict Affected Community

The dialogue was remarkably successful. Not only was peace and freedom of movement officially declared between the communities of Kokori and Mapourdit, but concrete measures were also established to improve the current situation for civilians affected by the conflict and strengthen relations between the groups. Specifically, both sides agreed the main hospital would be open with immediate effect to the ill from Mvolo who since February were too fearful to travel into Mapourdit and schools in the region , which have historically served residents from both Yirol West and Mvolo, but are located in Lakes State were also re-opened. Chiefs agreed to encourage their displaced communities to return home. A structure of accountability between the youths, chiefs and local government was agreed upon in order to ensure maintenance of the peace process, with any breaches of the agreement to be reported to the JIU.

Despite this progress, more dialogue was still necessary. In order for the peace talks to be sustainable and effective, the chiefs of the other affected areas, in addition to Paramount Chief Madit Maker and Paramount Chief Nyonyo, the most respect leaders in Yirol West and Mvolo would need to participate and buy in to the peace agreements.

[3] The JIU were neutral forces composed of soldiers from outside this conflict area, who have been specifically deployed to support security for these communities



Figure 4 Reconciliation

Nonviolent Peaceforce organized and accompanied a convoy of four vehicles to carry chiefs, elders and youth from Mvolo to Yirol West to the second round of peace talks on 7th June. Chief Maker interrupted his medical treatment in Nairobi, flying back to south Sudan to participate in the peace talks. Because he is one of the most respected local leaders in Yirol West, Chief Maker's presence at the peace talks was essential for success, and he was personally strongly affected by the conflict- Chief Maker's twelve-year old son was shot to death while he was sitting in a mango tree in April- a random killing that demonstrates even the most vulnerable of civilians were targeted in the conflict.

This second round of peace talks was emotional and intense. Chiefs on both sides expressed a strong desire to restore peace. As a result of the talks, peace and freedom of movement were officially declared between all communities along the border, and IDPs would be encouraged to return home and begin cultivation. The chiefs also agreed to meet again to draft guidelines on how the different communities would interact, such as cattle-keepers obtaining and carrying letters of permission from local government officials when they entered other villages.

Finally, on 10th June NP accompanied chiefs from Yirol West into Mvolo and monitored a meeting where a peace agreement was officially signed by all participating chiefs.

Impact

Evidence of the success of the ceasefire agreement was already apparent the following day of the first meeting in on May 27th, when NP observed nurses returning to the hospital to resume their work. The ceasefire agreement also included provisions to allow IDPs to safely return home without the threat of further attack so that they could begin cultivation immediately (as rainy season had just started, cultivation needed to commence immediately in order to ensure food security for the coming year). In the days following the first peace talk, NP observed small groups of men returning to the deserted communities to begin cultivation and by the end of the second peace-talk, families were observed walking home with their belongings. The chiefs from the border communities estimated that approximately half of their people were returning in those days.

When NP returned to Mvolo for a follow up visit on 21st June, one man approached NP's civilian peacekeepers to thank them, saying that he was a businessman who had been forced to close his shop in Mvolo for months because of the conflict, but now he has re-opened it again without any problem because peace has been established.



Figure 5 Children Affected by Conflict in Mopourdit

Honorable Simon Malual Deng, a member of parliament from the South Sudan Legislative Assembly, met with NP that what it had accomplished "was a miracle" and that he had thought the chiefs who were involved "would never be willing to meet each other again". Due to the success, he asked NP to conduct a similar intervention in his county in Lakes State, where cattle conflicts were beginning to emerge, and even urged NP to consider establishing a permanent office in Lakes State, saying it would be appreciated by many people including the state governor.

At the MRDA conference in September, the Commissioner of Yirol West announced "I want to thank Nonviolent Peaceforce for their tireless efforts of moving through rough roads from Mvolo to Anoul to Yirol West to Mapourdit when no one else would; I owe you a lot of appreciation because the rescue of lives and properties is because of you."

Accompanying the Process

Peace is as complicated as conflict. While it is a challenge to bring about a peace agreement, it is an even bigger challenge to implement. It is very common for incidents of violence to occur sporadically which if not handled well, can endanger the whole peace process and cause a return to violence. Interactive monitoring where NP's civilian peacekeepers work with the community to monitor the agreement, respond quickly to avoid escalation and provide effective crisis management

On the 22nd of June, the peace process faced its first challenge. There was news that five unidentified youth went into two payams, Lesi and Dari looking for their cattle that was stolen in the first major incident on February on the Madunyi cattle camp where 11 people were murdered, 300 cattle were stolen, 60 cattle and 9 dogs were shot dead.

Once the youth realized there were no cattle in the area for them to reclaim they killed 5 people including one boy. Response of the local authorities was immediate. The investigator for the South

Sudan Police Service (SSPS) in Greater Mundri, lead an investigation team to collect information informing the local community to not take the law into their own hands.

NP arrived on the 23rd and stayed until the 25th to meet with authorities and community leaders. There was an enormous sense of frustration and anger by the communities who felt the other side was not keeping their part to the peace agreement. Although relationships and communication with the other side were there it was still quite weak and chiefs did not know who to contact to find out why they were attacked. Because NP had already spent time building relationships with both sides, NP traveled into Yirol West (Lakes State) to meet with the community and authorities to gather information.

On June 27-30th a team was deployed first to meet with the Mvolo side again to advise them of the trip to Yirol West so that they understood and were aware of NP's movements around the area. Once in Yirol West, NP quickly found out that the communities of Yirol West were appalled by incident in Lesi and Dari. The payam administrator of Mapourdit as well as Paramount Chief Madit Maker both had sent letters of condolences to the communities and advised they had nothing to do with the attack. The commissioner of Yirol West had immediately sent out an investigation team to Anuol when he got word of the attacks and picked up two youth who had confessed to the attack. The boys, who were from Abang Payam, were being held in the local prison, where NP visited them. Leaders of Abang stated the incident was in isolated criminal act and by no means was a representation of the community as a whole. They, together with the administrator of Anuol also wrote letters to the communities of Mvolo to express their condolences.



Figure 6 Working with the Military

Once NP returned to Mvolo and the information was shared, the general community tension was eased and later members on the Lesi and Dari side advised to NP they were then willing to try and contact the other side and build better relationships with Chiefs of Yirol West to prevent future incidents. NP focused on identifying the actors most committed to the peace process to encourage them to influence those who were losing confidence in the process to avoid a re-escalation of the conflict.

NP is continuing to provide follow up support, visiting tribal chiefs to ensure that information of the ceasefire has been properly disseminated, planning for a follow-up conference to ensure buy-in from all tribal chiefs in the affected areas and preparing to provide accompaniment for returning IDPs and monitoring presence in the affected areas. Finally, NP is supporting the leadership from both communities to document their resolutions and mutually agreed upon code of conducts to guide communities through difficult issues such as cattle movement and land use. The leadership between

the communities, signed by the paramount chiefs on each side signed a Memorandum of Understanding in September.

Conflict Prevention: Building Local Capacity for Nonviolent Conflict Resolution

Throughout the peace process, stakeholders repeatedly shared with NP's team that they needed to learn how to deal with conflicts without violence. As a component of conflict prevention, NP has developed a capacity building program which is designed to provide communities the skills and confidence needed to engage in nonviolent conflict resolution and develop unarmed community protection mechanisms. As a follow-up to this process, NP is currently implementing this training program in the communities affected by this conflict focusing on developing local early warning and early response capacities. The training is designed as a Training of Trainers, ensuring sustainability by having community members take on the responsibility of training within their communities.

Epilogue

Unarmed civilian peacekeeping is complex work that is based on relationships, trust, acceptance and commitment. Reducing violence, protecting civilians and supporting a sustainable resolution to this conflict required NP to engage in 115 separate interventions between February and September 2011. NP's work on this conflict came to the attention of the GoSS at both the state and the national level, and officials have been actively advocating for NP to establish a full time presence in Lakes State as a result.