Preventing Gender-Based Violence through the protective presence in Sikasi area

Case study | November 2019



Photo: NP team during patrol in Sikasi area

Sikasi, an area that starts outside of Bentiu POC that stretches for approximately 10 KM north of the POC, is visited by about three hundred people daily. Residents of Sikasi village, Bentiu POC, and Rubkona come to Sikasi to collect firewood and produce charcoal. Due to its isolation and heavy military presence, civilians, especially women and children, are frequently at risk of gender-based violence and other crimes. Although joint patrols of SSPDF and SPLA-IO have made overall security situation in the area better, heavy militarization of the area poses protection concerns for especially women and girls.

The purpose of patrolling in firewood collection areas is two-fold. Firstly, to provide protective accompaniment to women and children, and secondly, to build relationships with influential actors operating in the area such as the Commander of the local barracks and the Chiefs of the territory. Having built a relationship with these actors, NP then attempts to engage local authorities them in efforts to protect women moving through the area. The Commander of the local barracks encouraged to prevent protection threats including for women collecting firewood and detain those who do. The local Chiefs encouraged to look out for armed strangers in the area and notify UNMISS or the local military and police if they suspect there is a threat to women.

At meetings with the local Chiefs and other actors, NP team learned that villages in the area are deprived of essential services such as water and only rely on ponds during the rainy season or collecting clean water from the POC. As a result, women and children have to walk in Sikasi area even more often, exposing themselves to increased likelihood of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Recognizing the urgent need to address protection concerns in Sikasi area, all while making sure community ownership over it, NP supported a number of discussions and advocacy forums with communities, authorities and partners which resulted in the decision for: (1)the Chief, who has developed ties with military leaders to report any issues of harassment to the Commander, with UNMISS support if the problem persists; and (2) UNMISS to increase patrols in Sikasi with a water tanker during the dry season in order to address protection concerns as well as water shortages leading to increased movement to unsafe areas*.

This will serve two purposes: Provide a basic need for the community and increase security for women in the area. Additionally, NP advocated UNMISS the necessity of female language assistants when engaging with women in the area, and the need to speak more with residents in general while on patrol.

When on 3 October 2019 NP arrived in Sikasi village to follow up on the issue, NP witnessed soldiers leading women into the bush. Young women had been separated from older women. The older women alerted NP to the fact that the women were in danger. Two of the soldiers walked back towards the parked convoy to speak with NP team. Although the soldiers said they were forcing the women to carry charcoal, NP believes that this was an attempt to mislead the team. The men were overheard "choosing" women amongst themselves. NP's immediate intervention and active engagement with soldiers disrupted their plan to take the women as they were afraid to abduct the women in front of the INGO staff, in the same time gave women time to leave the scene unharmed.

Although the situation in Sikaki is complicated and to address it will take time and collective efforts of all actors, the value of NP protective presence, like illustrated in the examples above, is undeniable in addressing immediate threats to civilians.

*NP advocacy in New York that resulted in changes in UNMISS mandate, allowed NP's Bentiu POC team deliberately involved UNMISS and persuaded them to lead the activities in Sikasi ensuring more comprehensive and effective approach in addressing protection concerns in this area. As UNMISS are now required by their mandate to complement unarmed peacekeeping activities, they were happy to cooperate.