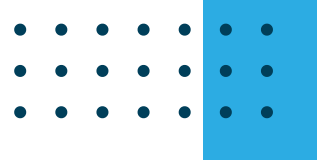




## *Case Study*

# **A Long Day at Juba's IDP Camp: A Case study of Violence Prevention Through Proactive Engagement with Youth Gangs**

South Sudan



On the evening of January 16th, 2025, there was an outbreak of widespread violence against Sudanese communities in Juba, the capital of South Sudan. This unrest arose in response to reports of ethnically motivated killings of South Sudanese civilians in Wad Madani, Sudan, on January 10th. The violence against Sudanese people spread to all corners of Juba, including in the communities bordering Juba's camp for internally displaced people (IDPs). Such a development heightened the fears of further violence and retaliation within the already vulnerable IDP populations, who also host a small population of Sudanese refugees.

Tensions were high across Juba, yet several IDPs committed to nonviolence, particularly ten amazing young people, played a key role in interrupting violence in and around Juba's IDP camp, and possibly further in the country.

When the attacks on Sudanese nationals started on the night of January 16th, the Juba IDP Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) committee\* learned that some gangs in the camp were organizing to attack Sudanese traders at the adjacent marketplace where IDPs, refugees, and host communities can meet and do business. They were planning to target the market checkpoint through which Sudanese people would be arriving to work the following morning. The EWER committee immediately informed the community-based protection groups with whom they cooperate.

**\*The EWER committee in Juba's IDP camp is composed of about 25 men and women from across the camp, who have been trained in Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) by Nonviolent Peaceforce to identify early signs of violent conflict within and outside the camp, and to intervene non-violently to prevent escalation of conflict through dialogue facilitation, negotiation, and advocacy.**

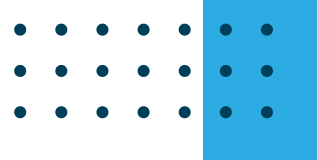
In response, ten young IDPs, members of the camp's Youth Protection Teams (YPTs)\*\*, decided to take action. Despite the tense atmosphere, these four young women and six young men put on their bright yellow YPT visibility vests and walked very early on that morning to the marketplace. When they arrived, they discovered that one of the gang members was distraught after losing contact with his three brothers in Sudan, and feared that they had been killed. Claiming that his life was meaningless without them, the mourning youth implored his fellow gang members, saying, *"Let's attack the Sudanese business people at market checkpoints, kill them, and exact revenge on our loved ones if you are all experiencing the same pain as I am."* They gathered their weapons and began advancing towards the checkpoint.



Youth Protection Team, Juba IDP Camp, South Sudan ©NP

**\*\*Youth Protection Teams (YPTs)** are, groups of about 30 young women and men per team, between 16 and 25 years old, who have been trained by Nonviolent Peaceforce in Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), including nonviolent communication, conflict management, SGBV prevention and response, and positive masculinities. These youth strive to identify community concerns and work with community leaders to develop locally-driven solutions. Acting on a voluntary basis, they usually dedicate two days per week to their YPTs role but are often solicited by their communities on a continued basis. Nonviolent Peaceforce has supported the establishment and sustainability of 27 Youth Protection Teams across South Sudan, through training, mentoring, and cooperation on joint activities.





The ten YPT members were not unfamiliar with the camp gangs.<sup>1</sup> For several years, they had been engaging with them, participating in activities organised with Nonviolent Peaceforce, such as focus group discussions on the root causes and drivers of gang violence, training on nonviolent communication, positive masculinities, and child protection. Over time and through multiple interactions, they had established relationships and trust with gang groups. Several former gang members who had renounced violence had even joined the YPTs—three of whom were present that day.

Easily recognizable with their bright yellow vests, and building on the relationships already established, the ten YPT members started talking with the gang leaders at the checkpoint. They advised against retaliation and pointed out that the Sudanese community were themselves survivors of a vicious conflict and were in no way complicit in the Wad Madani incident in Sudan. The gang leaders started realising that the Sudanese people they had sought to target were simply going about their daily lives in innocence, and had nothing to do with the deaths of South Sudanese loved ones. As one YPT member begged,

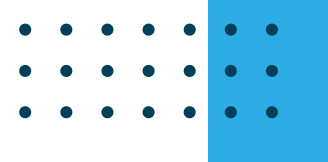
**“...one more life lost will be one too many.”**

After a lengthy and emotive engagement, the gang leaders were convinced by the peace message and persuaded their members to return to the camp without engaging in further violence. Together with the YPTs, they engaged in dialogue with other gang members from various factions, underscoring the need to refrain from retributive justice and rather become ‘peace ambassadors’ (a term coined by former gang members) with the Sudanese community and beyond. The process contributed immensely towards de-escalation, helping interrupt another potentially destructive wave of violence.

To ensure the gangs would live up to their promise, the ten YPT members remained by the market checkpoint. All market shops closed down due to the security situation, and as the day continued, the youth could only get water from the checkpoint borehole. But they stayed the whole day to provide protective presence and accompaniment to

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1. See [‘Interrupting Gang Violence, Lessons Learned from Juba IDP Camp’](#), Nonviolent Peaceforce (January 2024)



whomever would need it. This helped save the lives of other Sudanese people, notably a Sudanese baker, who had been stranded in his shop before the violence outbreak, and was facing threats from members of the host communities adjacent to the camp. Through their presence, the young IDPs deterred any would-be attackers and escorted the baker to the police for protection.

The police officers in charge of the checkpoint also knew the YPTs. They had interacted many times with their members during or outside activities conducted with Nonviolent Peaceforce. Aware of their de-escalation skills and nonviolent methods, the police officers welcomed the presence and engagement of the youth in yellow vests.

In the meantime, in various parts of the IDP camp, other community protection groups were actively preventing fellow IDPs from going (or returning) to the market. Women Protection Teams\* in particular spent the day going door-to-door, and to water points across the camp, urging youth not to resort to violence. They explained at length the need to promote peaceful co-existence with Sudanese nationals, and for gang-affiliated youth to channel their long-standing frustrations into constructive actions rather than violence.

Furthermore, this de-escalation in Juba's IDP camp may have had wider repercussions. If several Sudanese people had been killed in this marketplace, a very likely scenario would have entailed a strong-handed response from the South Sudanese security forces, similar to what was seen in other parts of Juba that day. Military reinforcements to the local police officers would have been more prone to resort to indiscriminate use of force against IDPs, triggering a new cycle of violence. The ethnic groups present in Juba's IDP camp are also widespread in various parts of

**\*Women Protection Teams (WPTs)** are groups of about 30 women volunteers of all age, who have been trained and mentored in Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) to identify security and protection concerns (including but not limited to SGBV), respond to protection threats and escalation of conflict, and serve as leaders for peace and protection in their communities. Nonviolent Peaceforce has actively supported 56 WPTs throughout South Sudan.

South Sudan. Whereas little violence against Sudanese people was reported in these regions at the time, retaliations on a large scale could have been expected if violence had erupted between IDPs, refugees, and security forces in and around Juba's IDP camp.

While it can be challenging to measure the exact scale of the harm that was prevented that day, the civilians who took action were instrumental in interrupting the cycle of violence. And despite the engagement being emotive, complicated, and protracted, it demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of nonviolent means, based on long-term and strategic relationship-building (i.e., the methodology of Unarmed Civilian Protection), in enhancing human security and sustaining peace outcomes in conflict-affected contexts.



Women Protection Team, Juba, South Sudan ©NP