



## South Sudan Crisis: Sexual Violence around UN House Understanding the Numbers and Risk Mitigation Needs

In the week following the outbreak of fighting in mid-July, protection and medical partners observed a spike in reported cases of sexual violence occurring around UN House. The increase came at a time when much higher numbers of women than usual were moving along Yei Road to access food at Custom market, the General Food Distributions (GFDs) having been delayed as a result of the crisis and population influx. The areas around UN House had become heavily militarized during the clashes, and dozens of women and girls reported being harassed, abducted, and raped by men who were often in military uniform.

The Protection Cluster, UNMISS, and others spoke publically about the need for urgent attention to this sexual violence, and took various steps towards improving prevention, risk mitigation, and response activities. Protection actors increased messaging around risk mitigation measures, developed referral pathways, and worked to ensure that basic services, including emergency medical care, were available for survivors. UNMISS increased its vehicle patrolling along main roads. Engagement also occurred at the political level with government authorities and the SPLA.

In the weeks that followed, the number of cases recorded by humanitarian actors in and around UN House has reduced. However, protection actors caution that this shift should not automatically lead to the conclusion women and girls are no longer experiencing sexual violence. Below is a brief overview of key facts about interpreting data on sexual violence and possible factors contributing to a decline in reporting. Based on available information, protection actors firmly believe the risk of sexual violence is high and additional prevention and risk mitigation measures are needed in order to effectively improve safety for women and girls in and around UN House.

### Understanding Data on Sexual Violence: Key Facts

- **Numbers of *reported* incidents do not correlate to numbers of *actual* incidents.** Sexual violence is under-reported everywhere in the world, and recorded cases often represent only a small fraction of total incidents.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true in countries like South Sudan where stigma, cultural barriers, and fears of retaliation are particularly severe.
- **Globally accepted standards clearly state that the number of known cases should not be used to determine the prevalence of sexual violence,** and that basic prevention, risk mitigation, and response services must be put in place from outset of an emergency. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee has said that “all humanitarian personnel ought to assume GBV [gender based violence] is occurring and threatening affected populations [and] treat it as a serious and life-threatening problem regardless of the presence or absence of concrete ‘evidence’.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, the benefits of GBV risk mitigation are not limited to GBV and protection outcomes – they extend to families and communities as a whole. For example, if women and girls feel safe travelling to and from water point, more clean water reaches the family and health and hygiene outcomes are likely to improve.
- **Understanding the nature and extent of sexual violence, as well as associated risks, requires regular community engagement by protection specialists.** Protection partners use a range of tools to assess levels of threats, many of which rely on conversations with the people themselves and having an established trust and relationship with the affected communities. While the qualitative information generated by these methodologies does not always fit into tidy graphs and charts, it is the only way to have a comprehensive understanding of the context and to properly inform prevention and response interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> South Sudan GBV Sub Cluster Advocacy note on GBV Data, October 2014

<sup>2</sup> *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action* (IASC, 2015).

## The Current Situation in UN House

A note of context: even at the height of the July crisis, the figures publically reported by UNMISS were significantly higher than the number of survivors who chose to come forward and seek support from humanitarian partners. A few dozen cases were reported to humanitarian actors (which represents a significant increase from the norm), and of those, only handful sought medical treatment at the clinic. As such when we talk about a drop in numbers, humanitarians have observed a drop of a few dozen, not a drop of 100+ cases. Nevertheless, this is a significant change and humanitarian protection actors are currently examining factors that may be contributing to this trend (more on this below).

- **Protection actors believe sexual violence remains a serious problem.** There are a number of reasons this continues to be of significant concern:
  - Focus group discussions indicate that women still have significant fears of travelling outside the POCs to access food, firewood, and other basic commodities, and continue to face threats and harassment.
  - Many of the conditions have not fundamentally changed today from when cases were reported to be the highest. The hostile checkpoints around UN House have not been dismantled and in some locations have increased (for example, the new checkpoint at the entrance to the eastern/POC 2 access road).
  - The government has stated publically that they are not in full control of all the uniformed men in Juba,<sup>3</sup> and as such the government's ability to control the conduct of some of these soldiers appears to be limited.
  - There continues to be a high degree of impunity around sexual violence. While investigations and Court Martials have been promised, to date humanitarians are not aware of any prosecution of perpetrators of the sexual violence.
- **UNMISS vehicle patrols are ongoing in some areas, but women report that they are not reaching the most dangerous locations.** The areas where there have reportedly been the most incidents (Checkpoint and the bush areas en route to the pedestrian gates of the POCs) are not currently being patrolled. Checkpoint is accessible by vehicle, but UNMISS has been blocked from using APCs and feels unsafe moving through the area in unarmored cars. The bush areas on the way to the POC pedestrian gates cannot be accessed by vehicle, and as such have not benefitted from patrols to date. Humanitarian actors are not aware of any foot patrols having been conducted thus far, although UNMISS Force has committed to doing one before the end of the week (before 21 August).

## Possible reasons for reduced reporting in UN House

Protection actors are currently in the process of conducting an assessment on issues that may be preventing women from accessing services, the results of which will help give a better understanding of the current context within the POC Sites. In the meantime, however, currently available information indicates that the factors below could be contributing:

- **Survivors may be coming under increased pressure from perpetrators or others not to talk or access services.** After the public attention on the GBV issue, perpetrators may be issuing more significant threats to the survivors about what will happen if they try to get help.
- **Survivors may not have necessary information – and/or there may be misperceptions – about available GBV services.** Protection actors are proactively disseminating information to the IDPs on this, and are working to develop other strategies for how to make women and girls feel more comfortable getting help.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example the quote from SPLA Spokesperson Lul Ruai included here: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/237fa4c447d74698804be210512c3ed1/rampaging-south-sudan-troops-raped-foreigners-killed-local>

- **Something could be wrong, or perceived to be wrong, in the protection or medical response.** All it takes is one rumor to scare women and prevent them from seeking care. The ongoing barriers to services assessment will help us to better understand any such issues.

### Recommendation

- **Foot patrols are urgently needed by UNMISS to provide protection in the areas of greatest threats.** Vehicle patrols don't reach the most affected areas, and as such women in focus groups say that they provide only limited protection. Some of the areas identified as being the highest priority are the following:
  - The "Checkpoint" area along Yei Road between the UN House main gate and the turn off to the western gate of POC 1.
  - The bush areas along the northern perimeter of UN House and POC 1, between the UN House main gate and the western gate to POC 1.
  - The eastern perimeter of UN house, in the bush around the eastern access road towards the old POC 2.
  - The bush area along the southern perimeter of UN House between the southeastern corner of the base (the old east gate/POC 2 entry) and the pedestrian gate to POC 3.
  - Yei Road between UN House and the Eye Radio junction, with particular attention to the activity around Falcon Warehouse.
- **Static presence is also needed in areas around hostile checkpoints.** Importantly, this includes the new checkpoint at the Yei Road junction to the eastern access road (towards the old POC 2), where soldiers are harassing women and controlling who is allowed to board buses to town.

Below is a map of some of the highest risk areas in the immediate vicinity of UN House. The circles show the main pedestrian gates used by POC 1 and POC 3 residents respectively, and the arrows show the paths they are taking (and therefore the areas in greatest need of patrolling). Women are also traveling into the areas just beyond the gates to collect firewood, so patrols in these areas would also be useful.



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