POLICY INSIGHTS

Hiding in plain sight: IDP's protection strategies after closing Juba's protection of civilian sites

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Abstract

This article examines how former Protection of Civilian site (PoCs) residents are staying safe and protecting themselves after the United Nations Mission in South Sudan's (UNMISS) handing over of the PoCs to the Revitalised-Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). Using key informant interviews, questionnaires, and observations, we establish that those still residing in the PoCs do so with less humanitarian assistance, increased insecurity, and few authorities they can rely upon or turn to for protection. In response, it is shown how camp residents have developed their own safety and protection strategies at the cost of their ability to pursue livelihoods, move freely outside of the camps, and publicly express their identities. Although broadly stable, this situation is unsustainable and risks the safety of camp residents and the wider ongoing peace process. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for humanitarians and R-TGoNU policymakers interested in their welfare.

1 | FROM POCS TO IDP CAMPS

On September 4, 2020, David Shearer, the United Nation's Special Representative of the Secretary-General for South Sudan, who doubled up as the head of United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), announced the progressive withdrawal of armed peacekeeping and police forces from Bor and Wau Protections of Civilians sites (PoCs). The announcement was seen as the beginning of a gradual handing over of the country's five PoCs to the revitalised-Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU). It paved the way for the redesignation of the PoCs into internally displaced people's (IDPs) camps in October 2020. Even though these developments were largely condemned by the human rights activists, civil society organisations and the IDPs themselves who cited ongoing protection concerns, the transfer of responsibility went ahead largely without incident (Craze & Pendle, 2020).

To put this change into context, it is necessary to briefly overview longer-running developments in humanitarian protection practices and South Sudan's civil war. Beginning with the former, the 2005 World Summit saw United Nations member states commit themselves to the Responsibility to protect doctrine. It recognised that all states have a responsibility to protect their citizens from genocide, war crimes, torture, arbitrary arrest, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Furthermore, it held that the United Nations should help states to discharge this responsibility using either peaceful means or enforcement actions when they are found wanting.

The declaration of a responsibility to protect formalised steps that United Nations peacekeeping missions had been taking across conflicts towards physically protecting civilians and upholding their human rights by establishing safe zones and actively taking on aggressors. It was also undoubtedly a response to the United Nations' failures to protect civilians that had fled to its bases in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the 1990s, and the horrific massacres that followed. Lastly, it accorded with the contemporary African Union calls for a right to intervene in situations where states were failing to discharge their protection responsibilities. This all

acted to pave the way for armed United Nations missions to have far more robust protection-focused mandates than had previously been the norm.

Conflict erupted in South Sudan's capital Juba in 2013, barely 2 years after it had gained its independence following the end of the 21 year-long Sudanese civil war. The young country's troubles stemmed from a power struggle between South Sudan's President Kiir and his former deputy Dr. Machar. The two men hail from the country's two biggest ethnic groups—the Dinka and Nuer. The fighting quickly took on an ethnic character with the majority of Dinka supporting President Kiir and the majority of Nuer backing Dr. Machar. This prompted the defection and flight of Nuer soldiers, leaving many Nuer civilians unprotected and soft targets for armed Dinka groups. Moreover, it caused major displacements of civilians in the capital and elsewhere across the country, leading to atrocities and war crimes as groups fought running battles and targeted supposed civilian supporters of either side.

No one wanted to see another atrocity on the scale of those in the 1990s. Accordingly, UNMISS decided to open the doors of its bases to those looking for protection. By the 18th of December 2013, over 20,000 Nuer had arrived at UNMISS bases in Juba alone, and civilians from multiple ethnic groups were also seeking shelter at bases in places such as Bor and Wau. In the capital, people initially fled to the two main bases of Tongping and Unhouse in Jebel. An overstretched UNMISS also sought to place people next to its House base to the west of the city's perimeter. Each camp was protected by high walls supplemented with barbed wire and patrolled by armed peacekeepers.

The bases' commanders were emboldened to take such action due to UNMISS' protection mandate. Yet, they could not have known that due to repeated failures to definitively end the conflict, the 200,000 civilians they found under their ward would stay at these sites for 7 years. Moreover, the government and warring parties would take until 2018 to negotiate a political settlement, with power and resource sharing the main points of contention. This largely left humanitarian issues, including protection, to the United Nations and other organisations working inside and outside of PoCs. All the whilst, the armed opposition, the government's own forces, militias, community protection groups and criminals would continue to make life insecure for ordinary people. This included attacks on PoC sites in Bor in late 2013 and 2014 that led to civilian deaths, and an upswing of violence in 2016 that saw civilians once again targeted by all sides (UNMISS, 2017).

UNMISS handed control of all but one of the PoCs to the R-TGoNU in October 2020. This raised many questions for onlookers. For example, who would have the capacity to and interest in maintaining the camps' security infrastructure and services after the handover, and would they provide them fairly? Indeed, the majority of those living in the PoCs were Nuer accused of being rebel sympathisers and fighters, and they were increasingly encouraged to return home by humanitarian and government authorities. They now effectively found themselves living in IDP camps controlled by the forces that they had previously agitated and fought against. Camp residents themselves questioned the plan and its timing, arguing that they were not consulted or involved in the process. The protection of civilians also remains one of the items on the list of responsibilities and roles accorded to UNMISS, so many wondered why now the R-TGoNU was trusted by the international community to take over the PoCs (Hayden, 2020; Kilroy, 2018)?

Whatever the reasons, United Nations peacekeepers and military equipment withdrew, and R-TGoNU security forces took up their positions in and around the camps. Over the next 2 years, the entire look and feel of the camps changed from the previously well-built and secure perimeter walls, to shattered, broken and wireless fences. Sanitation infrastructure also quickly degraded leading to poor hygiene in and around the camps, and health services began to be characterised by discrimination (PC, 2002). Increased rates of crime and gender-based violence, the forced recruitment of youth to armed groups and the kidnapping of individuals from the camps by unknown parties have all been reported (Sullivan, 2022). For the estimated 37,000 people remaining in the camps, life also became a daily struggle to find livelihoods that can put food on the table. This all took place against a backdrop of funding gaps for humanitarian assistance in South Sudan, with the recent global pandemic and war in Ukraine diverting the international community's attention (OCHA, 2022).

Before the handover of the PoCs, several studies sought to explore life inside and outside their perimeters. Those looking inside often concluded that residents were generally—although not always—safe from organised armed groups and provided with a range of vital humanitarian services (Kilroy, 2018; Sassi, 2021). Nonetheless, poor governance of daily life within the camps often left women and girls vulnerable to sexual violence and afforded criminals free reign (Murphy, 2017; Murphy et al., 2019) This was exacerbated by complex clan-based leadership structures that in some camps amassed great personal wealth by monopolising resources and openly challenging humanitarians working in the PoCs (IOM, 2016). Overtime, researchers also documented episodes of vigilante justice and the emergence of more institutionalised community justice mechanisms overseen by public authorities such as chiefs or former war leaders (Ibreck & Pendle, 2016; Rhoads & Sutton, 2020). Those looking beyond the PoCs often suggested that tensions between the longer-term visions of the humanitarian organisations' aiding residents and the UNMISS soldiers guarding them were the cause of incoherent policies and the camps' poor relations with government

authorities (Munive, 2021; NRC, 2017). However, few studies offered proposals for how the PoCs would be safely closed and few have documented dynamics inside the camps since the handover.

With the broad aim of beginning to fill this gap, the field research for this paper was conducted in Juba's PoC turned IDP camp From July 2021 to August 2022 by the first author. With the help of friends and relatives residing in the camp, he used 50 questionnaires (29 women and 21 men), seven key informant interviews (2 women and 5 men) and 3 group discussions (9 women and 18 men) with community representatives and leaders to collect data on governance structures, residents' livelihoods and security perceptions, and their self-protection strategies. Access was enabled by his dual roles as a researcher and humanitarian worker involved in projects in the camp since 2014. Despite being Nuer, this identity gave him the ability to move freely and utilise his longtime familiarity with the camp's residents for this research. Care was taken to describe the purpose of the research and communicate the limited ability of the researcher to affect camp or R-TGoNU policies. All interviewees declined to be recorded due to fear of reprisals should their identities be uncovered by authorities.

Interviewees were selected using a snowballing method and based on their ability to speak on the researched issues. For example, community leaders were interviewed due to their roles as representatives and their regular engagements with decision makers (UNMISS and R-TGoNU). Additional efforts were made to speak to women as it was suspected that they suffered the most from the camp closures, whilst a focus on youth and former civil servants emerged during the research. In some cases, it was suspected that residents did not speak openly due to fears that humanitarian workers are not neutral parties to the wider conflict. In such instances, the lead researcher used acquaintances in the camp to help build trust.

2 | SELF-PROTECTION STRATEGIES

The condition of those remaining in the camps is an important question, not only to the IDPs themselves but also to concerned civil society organisations and members of the international community who are still mandated to protect them. Worries that the R-TGoNU and its security forces will be unable or unwilling to fulfil their responsibilities are compounded by delays in implementing chapters of the peace agreement that contain wider security arrangements and continuing national-level debates over the return of IDPs to communities from which they fled in 2013 and 2016.

Before the handover, Juba's PoC was externally protected by a mixture of UNMISS soldiers and a private security firm that regulated traffic at its entrances and exits. The camp was internally governed by community leaders, including elders, chiefs, and women's representatives, from 16 different counties. They organised themselves into a council called the *Nuer ka Nguen* (N4); a name that references the four branches of the Nuer tribe: the Bentiu, Fangak, Bieh and Latjor. Whilst NGOs supported by the international community provided basic services, N4 took on the role of community policing and justice provision. Cases of out of marriage pregnancies, adultery, theft, and other social and political issues were divided amongst the community elders for resolution. Their courts used traditional methods to adjudicate cases and ensure social harmony. Apart from the provision of relief aid, some NGOs took to capacity building and training the camp's community leaders in leadership, rights and good governance.

These internal structures are still functioning after UNMISS' withdrawal, albeit with a reduction in services, and an upswing in crime and inter-clan disputes. However, now the camp's external security is firmly in the hands of the R-TGoNU. For many, this presence has most visibly consisted of periodic incursions by security forces into the camp, with two high-profile community members disappearing overnight in 2020 shortly after the transfer. Others feel exposed and unprotected and worry about violence from new security forces outside the camp. Such fears are especially acute for former Nuer soldiers and security personnel who now must regularly leave the PoCs for training centres designated by the R-TGoNU to reintegrate them into the national army. There is also a widespread belief amongst residents that government agents are monitoring daily life inside the camp and searching for former combatants and dissidents. Many interviewed for this research also argue that they could drive residents out by force at any moment. They pointed to how government representatives and the media are constantly reminding them that they are no longer welcome in Juba. As one interviewee put it:

> We're being told to come out of the PoCs and to go home and sometimes we wonder which home these people are talking about. Our places of origin, our villages in the country, were burnt to ashes and in Juba our plots have been taken over by the same officials telling us to go home. Nobody likes to stay here but what option do we have? Be killed or survive under this deplorable situation in the PoCs with the hope that things will improve in the future.

A pervasive sense of insecurity permeates everything residents do and has changed the way they conduct themselves and their aspirations. At one level, there was evidence that camp residents are trading their political

rights for safety and protection. Between arbitrary arrests of vocal government critics outside the camp and the disappearances and rumours of surveillance inside the camp, many fear to advocate for their entitlements or an improvement in their situation. This means previously active community members no longer openly meet to debate national politics or contentious camp issues that involve state authorities. Instead, they keep their conversations to quotidian topics. A young man explained:

> I used to be a political commentator and activist but after I noticed mistreatment, torture and the jailing of some political commentators, I decided to lay low for my safety, especially after the redesignation which gave the government security agents the right to enter and exit the PoC. That has made it worse for us.

This self-censorship or silencing extends to the Nuer community's retreat from social media platforms that were previously alive with political debates and organising. They argue that the state has caught onto the platforms' use for mobilisation and gathering of support for the causes of opposition political parties. A youth leader claimed:

> Young people are spending almost all their time on Facebook and the security agents have been deployed on Facebook to monitor what people are saying about the Government. Some people are now in Blue House National Security prison because of Facebook posts. The agents are keeping an eye, especially on idps in the PoC.

As part of this, many in the camp have decided not to demand or try to reclaim their assets, jobs and property taken during conflicts in 2013 and 2016. To ensure their safety and protection in the face of a fragile peace agreement, they prefer not to draw attention to themselves for fear of being seen as agitators. This makes returning to their old lives difficult if not impossible, with no places to live, land to farm or jobs to take up. Such issues are particularly complex for those that originally lived in Juba and the surrounding area. They argue that their property is now in the hands of powerful state officials and government representatives. As an interviewee confided:

> Before 2013, I was a busy and well-off person living a normal life with my family. On the 16th of December everything changed. The armed forces, numbering about 30, came into our compound and begun beating and looting our property. They threatened to come back and kill us if we didn't relocate from Jebel residential to other places. I can recognize some of them now. In fact, I meet them sometimes in Juba, but I can't open mouth. I just let it go for my safety.

Those with the education and means focus their search for livelihood opportunities in and around the camp by seeking jobs with NGOs or UN agencies. Aside from the good wages, it was argued that such employees avoid harassment and mistreatment from security services and can move about more freely. Others survive through trading everyday goods brought in markets outside of the camp; a journey which entails a risk of harassment by security forces or petty crime, especially for those who are clearly Nuer. For most, therefore, humanitarian assistance is the only viable option.

The fear of the world beyond the camp's perimeter has led residents to adopt potentially harmful self-protection strategies. Some try to hide their identities as members of ethnic groups that are believed to oppose the government or to be contemporary belligerents. Many of South Sudan's tribes distinguish themselves with facial markings. For Nuer men, this consists of 6 scars (called *gaar*) cut across the head as part of their initiation into adulthood. When moving about outside the camp many use caps or other head coverings to avoid unwanted attention. They also limit their use of their home communities' language or dialects in public places. The changing of their identities extends to the abandonment of their original names, and the unique prefixes many use to distinguish themselves as a member of a particular community. In their place, camp residents have adopted religious or other common names that give little away about their origins. As one man we spoke to argued: 'You cannot distinguish Nuer from the Dinka, especially those without marks on their foreheads. But you can easily differentiate Nuer from Dinka because of their names' special prefix'.

Women from the camp can receive extra unwanted attention from security services and men. Some have therefore resorted to wearing a pullover locally known as a *'toff'*. It is an item of clothing common to the Muslim community in Khartoum where women and girls are expected to conform to *purdah* (traditions governing female seclusion) and to cover their entire bodies whenever they are in the public. This imported dress code has now become a form of protection and camouflage for female IDPs keen to integrate themselves without being singled out. Others have taken to bleaching their skin to obtain a lighter appearance common to those from the country's southern—and generally more pro-government—counties. They argued that this makes it easier for them to mingle with other South Sudanese women and girls without being targeted based on their ethnicities: 'It never came to mind that I would bleach myself, lightening my skin to look to be brown and hide my real black skin to conceal my identity. I've no choice

but to hide to survive in South Sudan and in Juba to be precise'.

For some, these self-protection strategies are an imposition too far. Indeed, they require amending or denying key aspects of their identity. Accordingly, the number of people being recorded at border points leaving the country for neighbouring Uganda and Sudan is reported to be up. The slow pace of the implementation of the RARCSS process is also a major push factor, with individuals who were previously associated with rebels or positions in opposition political groups before 2013 and 2016 feeling that they are at risk now, especially if ongoing talks collapse.

3 | EASING FEARS AND REINTEGRATING CAMP RESIDENTS

It is clear from our research that those remaining in the camps live in fear of the intentions of those who now govern them and nominally provide security. Indeed, many have adopted harmful self-protection strategies to avoid the attention of authorities, pursue livelihoods and move between the city and camp. These are ultimately unsustainable and risk causing tensions that could threaten ongoing moves towards a sustainable peace in South Sudan. Although many of these issues likely stem from a poorly thought through handover of the camps from UNMISS to the R-TGoNU, in this section we offer short- and longer-term recommendations for policymakers interested in the IDPs' welfare.

The issue of security within and outside of the camps could be addressed by deploying mixed units comprised of former rebels and government forces. This would help to address fears that the security services are biased against Nuer residents, seeking to carry out reprisal attacks on former belligerents or hunting for those opposed to the state. This is vital in a context characterised by tribal tensions that have had, and continue to have, very real consequences for so many.

The government and, to some extent, the international community seek the return of residents to their former communities. However, many cannot do this without also reclaiming their former lives and livelihoods or finding alternatives that maintain their dignity. Two steps are needed to help ensure this is possible:

The first, which humanitarian organisations are best placed and resourced to assist with, is to provide returnees with basic financial and practical packages with which to give them a start in their new locations and lives. Donor countries could fund this with UN agencies already working with IDPs helping the state to administer the packages. Similar schemes have been used elsewhere, such as "Rudi Nyumbani" in Kenya after 2007/8 post-election violence when many Kenyans were uprooted, and could be rolled out for camp residents.

The second concerns those IDPs that have lost their assets and property, including their homes and businesses, to those who remained outside the PoCs during the 2013 and 2016 conflicts. To rebuild their lives and feel protected, a commission or committee to recover their lost assets, property and businesses is required. It should offer anonymity where possible and include a fully funded investigatory branch. The Revitalised Transitional National Legislative Assembly (R-TNLA) should take the lead in establishing such a mechanism in consultation with the Ministry of Justice and supported by international technical specialists.

Does the case of South Sudan's PoCs hold lessons elsewhere? Their story strongly illustrates why the international community must be prepared to receive those seeking protection in times of crises and why it must have plans in place for what to do once violence subsides. Without both, the risks to civilians' lives and well-being, and to humanitarians' claims to protect, are great.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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