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Media Briefing by Adama Dieng, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on his visit to South Sudan

(Juba, 11 November 2016), I arrived in Juba on Monday in response to growing concern about developments here, including reports of targeted ethnic violence against multiple ethnic groups. My aim was to better understand the landscape of ethnically-fuelled violence – including hate speech and incitement to violence – and to provide assistance, where requested.

The role of my Office is to strengthen the role of the United Nations in protecting populations from atrocity crimes and their incitement – by which I mean genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, as well as ethnic cleansing – by collecting and assessing relevant information, advocating for preventive action, and raising awareness about the causes and dynamics of these atrocities. I work within the United Nations and with Member States, regional and sub-regional organizations, and civil society to develop more effective and possible courses of action.

In the course of this week I have spoken to United Nations colleagues, senior government officials, civil society groups, religious leaders, and community members. I visited a protection of civilian site in Juba and travelled to Yei to meet with members of the community and government there. I have enjoyed good cooperation with all actors with whom I have met, and would like to express my appreciation to the Transitional Government of National Unity and to UNMISS for facilitating this visit.

That being said, I am dismayed to report that what I have seen and heard here has confirmed my concerns that there is a strong risk of violence escalating along ethnic lines, with the potential for genocide. I do not say that lightly. In place of the development of a South Sudanese national identity, I have seen that there is extreme polarization between some tribal groups, which has increased in certain places since the outbreak of violence in July this year.

Inflammatory rhetoric, stereotyping and name calling have been accompanied by targeted killings and rape of members of particular ethnic groups, and by violent attacks against individuals or communities on the basis of their perceived political affiliation. The media, including social media, are being used to spread hatred and encourage ethnic polarization, and letters threatening specific groups have surfaced in the last month. I am particularly concerned by the involvement of the youth of this country in this dangerous spread of hatred and hostility, as they are particularly susceptible to divisions within society.

The perpetrators and victims are not homogeneous, which makes an assessment of the risk of atrocity crimes in South Sudan very complex. But the patterns are there. Throughout the week, conversations with all actors have confirmed that what began as a political conflict has transformed into what could become an outright ethnic war. With the stalling of the implementation of the Peace Agreement, the current humanitarian crisis, a stagnating economy and the proliferation of arms, all of the ingredients exist for a dangerous escalation of violence.

In speaking to people here, I heard of tremendous mistrust between the civilian and military populations. Many people referred to an undisciplined army that was formed out of what had once been two opposing forces, and has now splintered into multiple armed groups, gangs and bandits which cannot be controlled by the central government. People no longer seem to see the military as their protector, but rather an entity to be feared – or to be joined as one of the few potential employers. One elder I met summed up the current ethnic polarization: he said that he could see fear in the eyes of some, and enthusiasm in the eyes of others.

I was last in South Sudan in 2014, and serious commitments made at that time to end violence have been unfulfilled. I am extremely saddened and disturbed to see South Sudan in its current state and I fear for its people. Even as the conflict becomes ever-more complex, the effects of the December 2013 outbreak of violence linger, and human rights violations committed at that time have not been accounted for. On the contrary, there is renewed violence on a daily basis, and any hope of reconciliation is elusive. Justice and accountability were common themes in my discussions during my visit, but there seems to be little hope of either at the moment.

I must emphasize that genocide is a process. It does not happen overnight. And because it is a process and one that takes time to prepare, it can be prevented. Action can and must be taken now to address some of the factors that could provide fertile ground for genocide. What surfaced over and over in my discussions this week was the presence of long-standing anger, combined with misconceptions and preconceived notions. These need to be addressed if there is to be a chance of peace.

My intention in reporting this assessment is to provide impetus for preventive action. I was encouraged by the receptivity, among the actors with whom I met, to my suggestion that there was an urgent need for reconciliation, as well as a willingness to engage in both community and national level dialogue.

I would like to highlight the situation in Yei River State, which I visited briefly this week. Until recently, Yei has been spared the widespread violence of other areas. Over the last few months, however, reports detail the expulsion of farmers from their agricultural plots into Yei town. These farmers have lost their homes and belongings, livestock and land. Property has been looted and villages have been burned. Yei has been subject to severe access restrictions, despite a grave humanitarian situation and the alarming targeting of civilians. Residents are confined to a small area within the town, or risk attacks by armed forces.

I heard reports of violence that included targeted killings, assault, maiming, mutilation, rape, and the barbarous use of machetes to hack families to death. Bodies have been found in the river.

There is widespread fear among the population. One person reported desperately to me, “Tonight I don’t know what will happen to me.” Another elder expressed terror that his community would be “finished.”

Even on the day I visited, I saw families packing up the few belongings they have left and waiting on the side of the road for transport – either to Juba or to neighbouring Uganda for refuge. The gravity of the situation in Yei merits immediate intervention – a full scale fact-finding investigation and enhanced humanitarian support. The population has been forced into town without access to food and they and the refugee population which Yei hosts are suffering.

Yei is but one urgent example among many. The signs are all there for the spread of this ethnic hatred and targeting of civilians that could evolve into genocide, if something is not done now to stop it. I urge the people of South Sudan to take action.

The State has the primary responsibility to protect its populations. That means all South Sudanese, irrespective of their ethnic, national or political affiliation. Other States, regional organisations and the international community can assist its protection efforts, however. I plan to do my part by informing the international community of my assessment and calling for action. I will speak with members of the African Union and the Security Council, as well as IGAD.

As I leave Juba, I will repeat what I said two years ago: South Sudanese, your leaders, the regional and the international community, I beseech you to take immediate measures to end the violence and uphold our collective responsibility to protect the populations of South Sudan from atrocity crimes. Ethnicity or political affiliation should not be used as a reason to incite violence or demonise and exclude any community or section of the population. We must all put strive for peace in South Sudan.

Thank you.

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on the Prevention of Genocide