



**“IT WAS AS IF MY VILLAGE  
WAS SWEEPED BY A FLOOD”**

THE MASS DISPLACEMENT OF THE SHILLUK POPULATION FROM THE  
WEST BANK OF THE WHITE NILE, SOUTH SUDAN

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# INTRODUCTION

Tens of thousands of civilians in South Sudan's Upper Nile region were forcibly displaced in January to May 2017, as government forces burnt, shelled and looted their homes.

Aided by Dinka militias, government forces undertook a ground offensive in the Upper Nile region in early/mid 2017, retaking territory that had been under the control of armed opposition forces. They attacked numerous towns and villages on the west bank of the White Nile, an area belonging to the traditional kingdom of the Shilluk ethnic minority.

In addition to massive forced displacement, government forces and allied militia were responsible for deliberate killings, indiscriminate attacks, and systematic looting.

## BACKGROUND

### FOUR YEARS OF CONFLICT

The armed conflict in South Sudan began in December 2013, and has been marked by widespread attacks on civilians by both government forces and members of the armed opposition. Much of the violence has a strongly ethnic character, with government forces viewed as supporting the Dinka population, and as collaborating with Dinka ethnic militias.

While SPLA-IO forces, the armed opposition, began as a largely ethnic Nuer movement, its support base has broadened to include other ethnic groups. In the Upper Nile region, forces led by Johnson Olony are largely Shilluk. Olony was previously allied with government forces but defected and allied with the SPLA-IO in 2015.

### GOVERNMENT OFFENSIVE IN UPPER NILE

Tensions between the Shilluk and Dinka populations of the Upper Nile region predate the establishment in 2011 of South Sudan. The conflict between the two groups is largely over land and resources, with many Shilluk feeling that the government has sided with the Dinka.

The December 2015 presidential order changing South Sudan's state boundaries exacerbated ethnic tensions. The order named a total of 28 states when there were previously 10. More than just administrative divisions, the redrawn state boundaries were perceived as determinative of which ethnic group would control land and politics in any given state. With this element in mind, many Shilluk were unhappy that Malakal, the largest city in the region and previously multi-ethnic, as well as all land on the east bank of the White Nile, was

allocated to the newly-created Dinka-dominated Eastern Nile State and not the newly-created Western Nile State, understood as being for Shilluk.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of the year, the government launched a major offensive, moving north from Malakal town and crossing the White Nile, taking over a series of towns and villages along the western bank of the river that had been under the control of armed opposition groups. Government forces began by attacking villages just south of Wau Shilluk town on 25 January, and by late April they had reached the towns of Lul, Fashoda and Kodok (where many Wau Shilluk's residents had taken refuge when they fled Wau Shilluk and surrounding areas). The region in which the offensive took place is within the Shilluk kingdom, and almost entirely populated by members of the Shilluk ethnic group.

# ABUSES AGAINST CIVILIANS BY GOVERNMENT FORCES

Government forces and allied Dinka militia carried out indiscriminate attacks on civilian towns and villages, killed Shilluk civilians in both indiscriminate and deliberate attacks, systematically looted civilian property, and forcibly displaced tens of thousands of civilians from their land. In some areas, as well as looting, government forces and allied militias vandalized and burned down civilians' homes, NGO compounds, and public structures, including in Wau Shilluk.

## KILLINGS

Amnesty International researchers documented several killings of civilians by government forces and Dinka militias during the offensive. Some were clearly deliberate. The precise circumstances of others, including the deaths of elderly and vulnerable civilians whose charred bodies were found in their homes, are not fully known.

Two Shilluk civilians, a man and a woman, were killed not far from Yony village on approximately 25 April, when the government offensive reached that area. The man, Othow Adwok (also known as Othow Deng and Othow Bany), age 55-65, lived in Tholong village, near the towns of Lul and Yony. His daughter said that he was a fisherman, and was returning from the river to his village when he was killed. Apparently when he saw soldiers he tried to run

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<sup>1</sup> In January 2017, South Sudan president Salva Kiir issued another presidential proclamation creating four additional states, which raised the total number of states to 32. The changes included dividing Eastern Nile State into Northern Upper Nile State, with Renk as its capital, and Central Upper Nile State, with Malakal as its capital.

<sup>2</sup> The land east of the river has historically been shared by both the Shilluk and Dinka population – with the latter mostly residing further inland but regularly accessing the river to water their cattle – but tensions over ownership and access have recurred periodically.

away and was shot. A local chief who directed the burial of the body said that Othow had been shot in the back.

The woman, Nyachong Nyereth, age 45-50, who was reportedly from the village of Lul, was also shot by government soldiers as she was fleeing down the main road toward Yony. People who helped bury her body said that she had been shot in the chest.

Dak Amun (not his real name) described how his brother Ngino Amun was deliberately killed by SPLA forces in Kodok town on the morning of 25 April. Ngino, age 31, was a labourer who lived with his brother in a house on the north side of Kodok. His brother recalled:

“We heard shooting from afar. It quickly got louder and nearer. Then two soldiers came into the house and two stayed outside by the door. One of those who came in asked, ‘Where is the IO?’ My brother said he didn’t know. The soldier said, ‘you know.’ My brother repeated that he didn’t know. The other soldier shot him in the back—not the soldier who asked him where the IO was. The bullet struck him in the back of his neck, and exited from his chest. He died instantly. We could not even bury him because we ran away there and then.”

Numerous witnesses said that members of a Dinka militia, which some called the “White Army,” rampaged freely through the region during the government offensive. Its members were armed with automatic weapons and wore military uniforms, and at least some of them wore white bandanas.<sup>3</sup> While engaging in massive looting, they harassed, threatened and killed civilians.

Amon Yor, age 55, was captured and killed by Dinka militia near Nyigir village in late April. One of his sons described how the family fled their home in Nyigir when fighting reached the town. Early the next morning six men, mostly members of Yor’s family, went back to the area to see if they could retrieve money and personal items from their homes, and bring their cattle to the river to drink.

One of the six men snuck into the village first and quickly returned to the group, saying that everything had been looted. The men decided to head for the river, but before they reached it they were ambushed by a large group of Dinka militiamen.

“They were wearing military uniforms and carrying guns,” said Yor’s son. “I knew they were White Army because they wore white bandanas.”

Yor’s son said that the militiamen made the group sit down on the ground, and questioned them. After a time, three of the men took Yor about 100 meters away and shot him. “I saw him killed,” said Nyabil Deng (not his real name), one of Yor’s cousins, who was among the six men captured by the Dinka militia. “I saw the Dinka put a gun to his head and shoot him.”

Because most of the militiamen were busy rounding up the cattle, the other five Shilluk men managed to flee when Yor was killed. “We ran for our lives,” Deng recalled, “we were afraid they would kill us next.”

Deng said that although he did not know any of the specific individuals involved in the killing, he was quite familiar with the militia. “They’re Dinka,” Deng explained, “but some of them know how to speak Shilluk, because they have Shilluk mothers.” He said that the militia was

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<sup>3</sup> The term White Army usually refers to a Nuer militia. The use of the same term to refer to the Dinka militia members can be explained by the white bandanas they wore, and by what the Shilluk interviewed saw as similar behaviour, particularly the massive looting, that was perpetrated by the Nuer White Army during the first months of the conflict.

based in Akoko town, on the east bank of the White Nile, and that it had carried out cattle raids in the area in the past.

A Dinka militia member was also accused of killing Awol Ajagiker, age 45-50, near Lul village in late March, just before the government took over the area. Ajagiker was fishing at the river with some other men in the evening, when the men heard a shot. When the others approached Ajagiker's body, they saw Dinka militiamen on boats. The fishermen ran away, returning later that evening to find that Ajagiker's body was gone, but that blood marked the area where he was killed.

In some cases, it is unclear who the perpetrators were. For example, in early February Obach Otur, age 45, disappeared after returning to Padit village to collect food and money from his house. He and his brother Ngor Otur (not his real name) had fled Padit the previous day when the government offensive had reached the area. The two hid in the bush overnight, and then Otur returned to Padit to try to retrieve his belongings. Six days later, worried about Otur, his brother returned to Padit and found Otur's body near his house. The body was badly decomposed, making it difficult to ascertain the cause of death, but Otur's brother saw a bullet hole in the shirt. He buried his brother nearby.

Similarly, the body of Nyachong Wang, age about 25, was found near her home in Yony in late April. Wang had reportedly fled Yony with other villagers, but had later returned there to try to retrieve things from her home. Her body was found near her home the next day: she had been shot in the throat.

## **INDISCRIMINATE ATTACKS AND DESTRUCTION OF CIVILIAN HOMES**

Government forces carried out numerous indiscriminate attacks on Shilluk towns and villages during their advance to the north between January and May 2017. The pattern of their attacks was to begin by shelling in and around civilian towns and villages, despite the fact that mortars cannot be targeted with sufficient precision for use in civilian residential areas. Numerous civilian homes—some empty, some inhabited—were struck by mortars.

Nyathom, a woman of about 40, was reportedly killed by a shell as she ran out of her house in the village of Ogod on 25 January. One of her neighbours, who was close by when Nyathom was killed, said the shelling took place in the morning, and that he and others buried Nyathom near her house.

On the following day, a father and son were killed by shelling in the neighbouring town of Wau Shilluk. Daniel Olak, age about 50, and Obach Daniel, age 16, were killed in their home in Wau Shilluk's Koum (or Kwom) neighbourhood at approximately midday. "Their house was completely burned up," said Olak's brother Ogod Olak (not his real name).

A resident of Makal village, south of Wau Shilluk, said that a large number of houses in the village caught fire during heavy SPLA shelling in late January. He claimed that there were no SPLA-IO forces in Makal during the shelling, as the SPLA-IO were in their base in Bokiény, about 15 minutes away by foot.

Besides shelling towns and villages, which are not military objectives, government forces also carried out indiscriminate bombing in at least one instance. Residents of Ogod, just south of Wau Shilluk, said that an airplane dropped several bombs on the village in late January.

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Some civilian houses were destroyed in the initial shelling of villages and towns; others were burned after government forces entered the areas. Some neighbourhoods of Wau Shilluk, in particular, suffered large-scale burning at the beginning of February, after the government took control of the town. During this period, several elderly people who were unable to flee the fighting burned to death in their homes. (Most people in the region live in thatched-roof huts, called tukuls, that are highly flammable.) Satellite images obtained by AI (dated 10 March 2017) show numerous burned structures.



*Imagery taken before 27 December 2016 shows the neighbourhoods of Wau Shilluk, Coordinates: 9.661509, 31.742713, ©DigitalGlobe 2017, NextView License*



*Imagery taken after 10 March 2017 shows burning and extensive damage of Wau Shilluk (at the bottom). The IDP camp has some damage as well. Coordinates: 9.661509, 31.742713, ©DigitalGlobe 2017, NextView License*

Nyabany Atenyang, age about 75, died in her home in the Tumir neighbourhood of Wau Shilluk at the end of January. Her daughter Nyamum Jokino (not her real name) said most of the family ran away when the fighting reached Wau Shilluk, but that Atenyang was unable to flee. A couple of weeks later, Jokino's brother returned to the family home, which had been burned, and he found their mother's bones in the ruins.

Another old woman who reportedly died in her house in the same neighborhood of Wau Shilluk was Nyabany Aban Ayik, age about 70. Her grandson passed through Wau Shilluk in late May, stopping at her house because he had been told by others that she had burned to death in it.

“We found her tukul completely burned and her bones there in the ashes,” he told Amnesty International.

Nyagang Ogam, age over 60, burned to death in her home in Ogod village, near Wau Shilluck, during the same period. One of her relatives, Nyamet Aywok (not her real name), said that she was returning to the village from the market when she heard gunfire and then saw Ogam’s house, located on the edge of the village, on fire. She said that Ogam, who lived alone, could only walk short distances. That night, Aywok said, some men snuck back to the village and found Ogam’s remains inside her burned house.

At least one person died at home from hunger or lack of water after others fled without him. Olwak Deng, age about 60, suffered from leprosy and was unable to walk. His emaciated body was found in his house in Ogod by some family members in February, three weeks after the fighting there ended. “Everyone ran away from the village and my uncle was left behind,” his nephew told Amnesty International.

Amnesty International interviewed several other elderly people who were left behind in towns and villages in the region, unable to flee the fighting. Some of them were taken care of by government soldiers who brought them food and water. The SPLA also gathered a number of elderly people together in Ogod village and Wau Shilluk, allowing humanitarian agencies to transport them to the UN’s protection of civilians site in the nearby city of Malakal.

One very elderly, nearly blind, woman from Ogod said that when the fighting started in late January she tried to escape by crawling away on the ground. She did not get very far, but some Dinka-speaking soldiers found her and brought her to Wau Shilluk, giving her food and water until a humanitarian agency picked her up.

Another elderly woman from Ogod described how when the fighting started she and about 20 other old people fled into the bush not far from the village. Soldiers found the group the next day and returned them to Ogod. She recalled:

“The soldiers told us, ‘don’t fear, you can come back to your home, don’t be afraid, nobody will harm you, we have no problem with you; we only have problem with men with guns who do bad things.’ Once one soldier hit one of our group with a stick and other soldiers scolded him and told us not to worry that nobody would harm us and after that no soldier mistreated us again. But then we were surprised that after saying these good words to us the soldiers came and stole our things. They stole everything; food, clothes, utensils/furniture, everything. We went to look for food in other people’s houses but the soldiers also looted everything from all the other houses.”

“What is the point of telling us we can stay in our homes if then they steal our food and leave us with nothing? We can’t stay if we have no food.”

**“What is the point of telling us we can stay in our homes if then they steal our food and leave us with nothing? We can’t stay if we have no food.”**

**Elderly woman from Ogod**

## FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The government forces' indiscriminate attacks on towns and villages, combined with residents' overwhelming fear that soldiers would deliberately kill civilians if they had the opportunity, resulted in massive forced displacement. Most people fled as soon as the shelling of their areas began, trying to escape with their lives.

Many of the people whom Amnesty International interviewed were displaced multiple times during their search for a safe haven from the attacks. Some fled Ogod village for Wau Shilluk, for example, and then fled Wau Shilluk for Kodok, and then fled Kodok for the small inland village of Aburoc. People sometimes walked for days without food or water, often taking longer inland routes through the bush to avoid government troops.

A young man named Judo Adwok, in his mid-20s, died while fleeing the town of Tonga toward Wau in January. One of the people who accompanied him recalled:

We had been walking for three days with no water and no food. He lied down on the ground and said I cannot go on; you go ahead. We stayed with him all day trying to convince him to keep walking with us but he did not, and he died. We had no tools and no strength to bury him so we left him there where he died, and we continued toward Aburoc. His father was fleeing with another group and only learned that his son had died when we told him here in Aburoc.

Many displaced people ended up congregating in Aburoc, north of Kodok, where a very small contingent of UN peacekeeping forces deployed to protect the delivery of humanitarian aid. At one point in early May, an estimated 40,000 Shilluk were sheltering in horrific conditions in Aburoc, and cases of cholera were reported. That number has shrunk significantly as people have left the area, many of them for Sudan.



*UN peacekeepers in an IDP camp in Aburoc, June 2017 ©Amnesty International*

The poor conditions in Aburoc have led many displaced Shilluk to flee the country entirely. Sudan's Humanitarian Aid Commission has reported large and continuing influxes of South Sudanese refugees from the Upper Nile region since late January. In mid-May, UNHCR reported that nearly 20,000 South Sudanese refugees had crossed the border from the Upper Nile area into Sudan's White Nile state in a single week.

## SYSTEMATIC LOOTING

Both government troops and allied Dinka militia looted the towns and villages whose inhabitants had fled. Many people blamed the militia for the bulk of the looting, which was extremely widespread, though it is difficult to ascertain in any particular instance which group — regular soldiers or militia members — was responsible. In most cases, people discovered the looting after it was over, when returning to their homes days or weeks later to see what was left.

"I can't say whether it was government soldiers or militia that did the looting," a local chief from Nyigir explained to Amnesty International. "It was as if my village was swept by a flood: one can't know which drop of water did the damage."

A man from the village of Lul, near Fashoda, said that he returned to Lul in May after government soldiers had left the area and found that everything in his house was gone. "They took my bed, chairs, clothes, cooking utensils, water container, and sorghum," he told Amnesty International. "I'm a fisherman, and they stole my good nets, though they left me some bad nets that I use now."

Nyachan Deng (not her real name), age over 65, who stayed behind in Ogod with other elderly and vulnerable residents told Amnesty International:

The soldiers stole everything from us, food, chicken, eggs, goats, clothes, furniture ... For the first few days we had our food, then after soldiers stole everything it became difficult to find food in the Ogod, even even in houses abandoned by residents, as soldiers looted everywhere. We had no more food, nothing.

Many other people told similar stories, some describing how even the front door had been removed from their house.

Several sources said that Dinka militia looted the compound of the Shilluk king in Fashoda town, the traditional capital of the Shilluk kingdom. The looting was reportedly done the day after the government forces took the town. A man who worked for the king explained, however, that he had moved some of the king's most important belongings to a hiding place in the bush prior to the attack on Fashoda. Residents of Ogod and Wau Shilluk told Amnesty International that soldiers burned a traditional temple, known as a Radd, in Wau Shilluk. "We saw the smoke from the burning houses/structures from Ogod and when we were taken to Wau Shilluk we saw that even the Radd had been burned down," an elderly woman resident of Ogod told Amnesty International.

Looters even stole villagers' food stores, exacerbating the region's humanitarian crisis and creating another obstacle to the inhabitants' possible return. A blind old woman who was unable to flee Wau Shilluk told Amnesty International that when the shelling ended, Dinka militiamen from the village of Attar entered the house where she was staying. "They stole everything from the house," she said, "including the food. They told me, 'you're an old

woman, we won't kill you—but you'll die of hunger.” Fortunately, an elderly man who was staying with her could walk sufficiently well to go to the river to fetch water, and to hunt for sorghum. “He saved my life,” the old woman exclaimed. “If not for him, I'd be dead.”

A man from Pabur village, between Wau and Kodok, said that he would not be able to return to live there because there was no food. In March, fearing that war was coming to his area, he dug a deep hole in the floor of his home, hid a large sack of sorghum in it, and then plastered the hole over with mud. When he visited Pabur in May, after the fighting was over, he found that someone had dug up his floor and taken away the sorghum. “I don't know how they figured out where it was,” he said, “but they found it.”



*In Aburoc Shilluk IDP waiting to board trucks, South Sudan, June 2017 ©Amnesty International*

## PROSPECTS FOR RETURN

The massive displacement of the Shilluk population is unlikely to be remedied in the near future.

At present, some 10,000 displaced people are believed to be staying in Aburoc, where conditions remain extremely difficult. The onset of the rainy season severely complicates the delivery of aid, and while Amnesty International was in the region, many humanitarians felt that the situation in Aburoc was unsustainable, and that the displaced people staying there would end up having to leave.



*A long queue to get tiny quantity of filthy and contaminated water in the IDP camp in Aburoc, South Sudan, June 2017 ©Amnesty International*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government should rein in their forces and ensure that they put an immediately end to the unlawful killing of civilians, and to the looting and destruction of civilian homes and property, which has caused the forced displacement of tens of thousands of Shilluk people.
- UN peacekeepers (the UN Mission in South Sudan, UNMISS) should increase efforts to enforce their mandate to protect civilians, for example, by deploying forces in areas where civilians are at risk and in areas from where civilians have been displaced, and the international community should ensure they have the resources to do so.
- All parties to the conflict must distinguish between civilians and combatants and their attacks may only be directed against combatants. In addition, attacks may only be directed against military objectives, to the exclusion of any civilian object.
- All parties to the conflict should work to create conditions that would enable the safe return of displaced people.
- The government should initiate prompt, effective and impartial investigations into allegations of crimes under international law, and should bring suspects to justice in fair trials in civilian courts without recourse to the death penalty.

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