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## **South Sudan/Sudan: UN must step up security efforts to allow civilians displaced from Abyei to return**

The United Nations must step up efforts to provide the security required for tens of thousands of civilians stranded in makeshift camps in South Sudan to return to their homes after fleeing fighting in Abyei more than six months ago, Amnesty International said today.

More than 100,000 people – virtually the entire population - were displaced by the violence in May 2011 and ongoing insecurity, the presence of armed forces and militias and the danger posed by landmines are preventing them from returning.

“The Sudanese Army and allied militia have driven virtually the entire population out of Abyei and burned down their homes so as to prevent their return,” said Donatella Rovera, Amnesty International’s Senior Crisis Response Adviser who visited Abyei at the end of November – the first visit to Abyei by an international organization since the May 2011 events.

“Charred homes and the shells of looted buildings testify to the horrors that took place in Abyei, which is now a ghost town. Everything of any value has been looted, including humanitarian organizations’ facilities and now the only signs of life are the soldiers and UN peacekeepers.”

What happened in Abyei has not been adequately investigated and so far there is no clear picture of how many people died or were injured, and who is still missing.

The UN should ensure that a proper investigation is carried out and in the meantime it should release whatever information was gathered by the UN mission deployed at the time in Abyei or by other UN bodies during and after the events.

The UN Security Council and Secretary General should also ensure the human rights monitoring component of the current UN mission’s mandate is implemented without further delay.

Most of those displaced by the fighting are now living in dire conditions in hastily set up camps or crowding in with relatives in communities with little or nothing to share. They are dependant on international humanitarian organizations for shelter, food, water and healthcare.

“We have hardly any food and nothing else,” Angelina Aguir a mother of two small children sheltering in a camp in the village of Mayen Abun told Amnesty international. “I don’t know what has happened to our home. We cannot go back so long as the army is there.”

Security fears have also prevented international humanitarian organizations from returning to Abyei, making it even more difficult for the displaced residents to return because they have lost their homes and crops and desperately need assistance to rebuild their lives.

Peacekeepers from the UN Mission in the Sudan (UNMIS) were stationed in Abyei when the violence and destruction took place last May but failed to take any meaningful action to prevent the attacks which resulted the displacement of more than 100,000 civilians.

Former UNMIS personnel told Amnesty International that a decision was made not to militarily engage with the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) because SAF was better equipped.

When the Sudanese army blew up the bridge which linked Abyei to South Sudan, in an apparent attempt to prevent the population's return, UNMIS' peacekeepers did not intervene.

A new UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA), is present in Abyei Since July 2011. It has, among other tasks, a mandate to protect civilians. The Security Council gave UNISFA additional tasks related to the de-militarization of Abyei on 14 December and will extend its mandate for another six months before it expires on 27 December.

“It is imperative that the UN learns from the failures of UNMIS and ensures that UNISFA is fully deployed and given the necessary human and material resources to enable it to fulfil its mandate to protect the civilians” said Donatella Rovera.

“The first step is to create the necessary security conditions in Abyei for the safe return of the population and to put in place robust mechanisms to implement the protection of civilians and human rights monitoring aspects of UNISFA's mandate”, said Rovera.

The status of Abyei remains highly contentious, with both Sudan and South Sudan claiming it as part of their territory and both trying to consolidate their hold on the area. A referendum to determine the future of Abyei was scheduled for last January, but has been indefinitely delayed due to disagreements on voter eligibility of the two main ethnic groups- the southern ethnic Dinka Ngok, and northern semi-nomadic Misseryia.