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South Sudan: Arms supplies fuelling violations in forgotten conflict

A ready flow of military weapons from China, Sudan and Ukraine has triggered indiscriminate attacks by both the South Sudanese Armed Forces and armed opposition groups, Amnesty International said today in a new briefing.

Amnesty International's briefing *Overshadowed Conflict, Arms supplies fuel violations in Mayom County, Unity State*, examines the impact of irresponsible supplies and misuse of weapons, munitions and armaments resulting in civilian casualties and thousands of people being displaced.

Scores of people have been killed or injured, had their homes destroyed, or have been forced to flee due to indiscriminate attacks on civilian areas by the South Sudanese Armed Forces, known as the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) and the armed opposition group, the South Sudan Liberation Army (SSLA), in Mayom County, in South Sudan's Unity State in 2010 and 2011.

Ahead of the first anniversary of South Sudan's independence and just days before the world's governments gather for the crucial Arms Trade Treaty negotiations at the UN in New York, Amnesty International calls for a strong and robust treaty with rules to end irresponsible arms transfers to those likely to use them for serious violations of human rights and war crimes.

"Governments must immediately stop supplying South Sudan with conventional arms which have been used to commit violations of international humanitarian and human rights law until adequate systems of training and accountability are in place," said Erwin van der Borcht, Amnesty International's Africa Director.

Amnesty International has documented serious human rights violations, committed by all sides using an array of weapons including:

- Pristine 2010 Sudanese-manufactured ammunition used by the armed opposition;
 - Chinese manufactured anti-vehicle mines freshly laid on Unity State's roads;
 - New 2010 manufacture mortar shells, likely of Sudanese manufacture, used by armed opposition groups that indiscriminately shelled civilian areas;
 - The first confirmed combat use of Ukrainian-supplied T-72 main battle tanks by South Sudan armed forces to indiscriminately shell civilian settlements.

There have been repeated incidents of civilians being killed or injured during fighting between the SPLA and the SSLA. Residents described a pattern of indiscriminate firing and shelling.

The SPLA appears to justify attacks against civilians and their property because the communities have shown support for the armed opposition.

In one episode on 29 October 2011, scores of civilians were killed and injured and several houses were destroyed during fighting between SPLA and SSLA forces in Mayom town.

Ukrainian supplied T-72 main battle tanks have been used in such attacks by the SPLA. These battle tanks are entirely unsuitable for urban fighting as they cannot distinguish between military and civilian objects in urban areas.

Amnesty International confirmed the presence of five main battle tanks including three of the T-72M1 in the centre of Mayom town earlier this year.

The clandestine delivery of these battle tanks from Ukraine to South Sudan in 2009, involved transfers via Kenya and Uganda and included shipping companies from Germany and Ukraine, and UK and Isle of Man-registered shell companies.

A former senior SSLA member also told Amnesty International that his forces had received significant numbers of Kalashnikov-type assault rifles “new from the boxes,” as well as ammunition, light and heavy machine-guns, B10 recoilless rifles plus mortars.

Evidence suggests that ammunition used by SSLA is manufactured in Sudan and rifles include new Chinese-manufactured Type 56-1 rifles.

Many civilian deaths and injuries reported by residents were due to gunshot wounds sustained after intense fighting inside major towns in the region, including Mayom, Mankien and Riak.

These attacks included troops using machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, rifles, vehicle-mounted anti-aircraft guns and armoured vehicles.

Over the past 12 months the SSLA has also laid Chinese made anti-vehicle landmines on major roads in Unity State.

Scores of civilians have been killed or injured in the past year due to the laying of these mines by the SSLA and this also increases food and fuel costs as the mines hamper access in the region.

The conflict in Mayom County underlines the need for governments to agree an effective Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) when final negotiations start at the UN in New York on Monday.

An effective ATT would require all governments to stop the international transfer of arms where there is a substantial risk those arms are likely to be used to commit serious human rights violations.

“The ATT talks are an unprecedented opportunity to stop arms getting into the hands of human rights abusers. A strong treaty could help prevent many other communities suffering from the horrific cost of the irresponsible arms trade, in the way the people of Mayom County have,” said Erwin van der Borgh.

Notes to Editors:

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