Witnesses Say South Sudan Soldiers Raped Dozens Near UN Camp

July 27, 2016

By Jason Patinkin, AP

Yahoo News

<https://www.yahoo.com/finance/news/witnesses-south-sudan-soldiers-raped-dozens-near-un-081600135.html>

South Sudanese government soldiers raped dozens of ethnic Nuer women and girls last week just outside a United Nations camp where they had sought protection from renewed fighting, and at least two died from their injuries, witnesses and civilian leaders said.

The rapes in the capital of Juba highlighted two persistent problems in the chaotic country engulfed by civil war: targeted ethnic violence and the reluctance by U.N. peacekeepers to protect civilians.

At least one assault occurred as peacekeepers watched, witnesses told The Associated Press during a visit to the camp.

On July 17, two armed soldiers in uniform dragged away a woman who was less than a few hundred meters (yards) from the U.N. camp's western gate while armed peacekeepers on foot, in an armored vehicle and in a watchtower looked on. One witness estimated that 30 peacekeepers from Nepalese and Chinese battalions saw the incident.

"They were seeing it. Everyone was seeing it," he said. "The woman was seriously screaming, quarreling and crying also, but there was no help. She was crying for help." He and other witnesses interviewed insisted on speaking on condition of anonymity because they feared reprisals by soldiers if identified.

A spokeswoman for the U.N. mission, Shantal Persaud, did not dispute that rapes took place close to the camp. She did not immediately address why peacekeepers didn't act to prevent the rapes, saying she was looking into the issue.

The reported assaults occurred about a week after rival government forces clashed in Juba, forcing opposition leader Riek Machar from the city and killing hundreds of people. As a cease-fire took hold, women and girls began venturing outside the U.N. camp for food.

The camp houses over 30,000 civilians who are nearly all ethnic Nuer, the same ethnicity as Machar. They fear attacks by government forces who are mostly ethnic Dinka, the same as Machar's rival, President Salva Kiir.

As the women and girls walked out of the U.N. camp, they entered an area called Checkpoint, in the shadow of a mountain on Juba's western outskirts. That stretch of road along one side of the camp saw some of the heaviest fighting and is lined with wrecked shops and burned tanks. It is now inhabited by armed men in and out of uniform.

In interviews with the AP, women described soldiers in Checkpoint allowing them to leave to buy food but attacking them as they returned.

"When we reached Checkpoint, the soldiers come out and called the women and said, 'Stop, please, and sit down,' so we stopped and sat down, and they took one woman inside a shop," a woman said. "Four men went inside the shop and they raped the woman while we three stayed outside."

In another incident, one woman said a group of soldiers pulled two women and two underage girls from their group and gang-raped them in a shop, with more than 10 men to each victim. One girl later died, she said.

"I saw the men taking their trousers off and the ladies crying inside," said a middle-aged woman. As she spoke, she began to cry. "They said, 'This one belongs to me, this one belongs to me,'" she added.

Multiple Nuer women said soldiers threatened them because of their ethnicity or accused them of being allied with Machar. The women identified the soldiers as ethnic Dinka because of the language they spoke.

"One soldier came and he turned the gun to us. He said, 'If I kill you now, you Nuer woman, do you think there is anything that can happen to me?'" one woman said. She said the soldier slapped her before another soldier intervened, allowing her to escape.

The number of rapes that took place outside the U.N. camp was unclear. The AP interviewed more than a dozen witnesses of rapes or people who spoke with victims, both one-on-one and in small groups.

The Protection Cluster, a group of aid workers that monitors violence against civilians in South Sudan, noted a "significant spike in reported cases was observed on 18 July when large numbers of women began leaving (the camp) to travel to markets in town in search of food."

The Protection Cluster said at least two victims are known to have died as a result of their injuries.

Civilian leaders in the U.N. camp have given estimates ranging from 27 to over 70 rapes from the time that women started venturing out for food. The United Nations says it received reports of dozens of cases. A South Sudanese rights group, the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, said it is investigating 36 reported rapes.

Hospitals inside the camp received four rape cases last week, including an underage girl who said she had been gang-raped by five men and a woman who said she had been gang-raped by five men and beaten, according to medical staff who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The number of victims reporting to clinics is believed to be lower than the actual total because of the stigma in Nuer culture attached to rape.

The rape of civilians has been a near-constant in South Sudan's civil war which began in 2013, with both sides accused of using sexual assault, based on ethnicity, as a weapon of war.

Army spokesman Lul Ruai Koang did not deny that rapes occurred after the latest fighting but said the military has yet to receive any formal complaints from victims.

Witnesses and aid workers accuse the armed U.N. peacekeepers, who are mandated to protect civilians with lethal force if necessary, of failing to act.

The U.N. spokeswoman, Persaud, said the recent rapes were not limited to Checkpoint.

"For a fact, uniformed soldiers were involved, heavily involved, in horrific acts of violence against civilians," Persaud said.

This is not the first time that U.N. peacekeepers have been accused of failing to act.

Last year, over 1,300 women and girls were raped by government forces and allied militias during a scorched-earth campaign in Unity state, according to the Protection Cluster. Doctors Without Borders accused the U.N. mission of "complete and utter failure" to protect civilians there. The medical aid organization also blamed the peacekeeping mission over a government attack on the U.N. camp in the town of Malakal in February that killed about two dozen civilians. A U.N. investigation found confusion in command and control by U.N. forces.

In the latest clashes in Juba, residents of the U.N. camp accused peacekeepers of running away when the camp was shelled. Two Chinese peacekeepers were killed.

Aid workers said they asked the U.N. to increase patrols July 17-18 along the camp where women were most vulnerable, but that patrols in the area did not begin until July 21.

The U.N. said in a statement it had increased patrols outside the camp in response to reported rapes.

One local woman, Christmas David, who said she was beaten by government soldiers but not raped, said the limited patrols were not enough.

"When the U.N. is moving, (the government soldiers) just stop the women and tell them to sit down," she said. "When the peacekeepers leave the road, then they do the things."