

# South Sudan 2024 Human Rights Report

## Executive Summary

In September, the government delayed elections scheduled for December by two years. This action represented the third time the government postponed elections mandated in the 2018 peace agreement that ended South Sudan's civil war.

Significant human rights issues included credible reports of: arbitrary or unlawful killings; disappearances; torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment; arbitrary arrest or detention; transnational repression against individuals in another country; serious abuses in a conflict; unlawful recruitment or use of children in armed conflict by the government and nongovernment armed groups; serious restrictions on freedom of expression and media freedom; trafficking in persons, including forced labor; and significant presence of any of the worst forms of child labor.

The government did not take credible steps or action to identify and punish officials who committed human rights abuses, despite isolated examples of prosecution for human rights abuses.

Nongovernment armed groups, including the forces of peace-agreement signatories and other opposition armed groups, perpetrated serious human

rights abuses, which, according to the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, included unlawful killings, abduction, rape, sexual slavery, and forced recruitment of children and adults into combat and noncombat roles. The government did not investigate and prosecute such actions.

## **Section 1. Life**

### **a. Extrajudicial Killings**

There were numerous reports the government or its agents committed arbitrary or unlawful killings during the year. Security forces, opposition forces, armed militias affiliated with the government and the opposition, and ethnically based groups were responsible for widespread extrajudicial killings. The security services sometimes investigated alleged abuses by members of their respective forces, although impunity remained endemic and prosecutions were infrequent.

According to UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) August and October reports covering the first half of the year, 557 violent incidents were recorded nationwide, resulting in 910 deaths and 625 injuries. The August UNMISS report stated that members of the South Sudan's People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) killed 18 persons. On June 20, two SSPDF soldiers died in clashes with armed individuals in Nasir County, Upper Nile State. The SSPDF responded by shelling villages, wounding at least three individuals on July 3. Between February and August, UNMISS reported at least 100 civilians died

in Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area in at least 58 attacks by armed youths from both areas.

## **b. Coercion in Population Control**

There were no reports of coerced abortion or involuntary sterilization on the part of government authorities.

## **c. War Crimes, Crimes against Humanity, and Evidence of Acts that May Constitute Genocide, or Conflict-Related Abuses**

Government forces and armed militias affiliated with the government, frequently prompted by opposition ambushes of government soldiers, engaged in a pattern of collective punishment of civilians perceived to be opposition supporters, often based on ethnicity.

UN agencies and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that interviewed victims reported widespread killings, mutilations, and sexual violence committed by government forces, rebel groups, and irregular militias.

Government forces, opposition forces, other armed groups, armed militias affiliated with the government and the opposition, and allegedly peacekeepers tortured, raped, and otherwise abused civilians in conflict

areas. Violence against women, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage, remained a common tactic of conflict. Impunity for conflict-related sexual violence remained widespread.

## **Section 2. Liberty**

### **a. Freedom of the Press**

The transitional constitution provided for freedom of expression, including for members of the press and other media. The government and its agents, however, frequently violated these rights in the name of national security. In a report published in 2023, a UN commission found the transitional government “treats journalists and civil society members who expressed criticism as enemies of the ruling political party, reflecting its extreme intolerance of all forms of public scrutiny and critical views.”

The government regularly attempted to impede criticism by monitoring, intimidating, harassing, arresting, or detaining members of civil society who criticized the government. Civil society activists, including from the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization, INTREPID South Sudan, the Dialogue and Research Institute, and the Center for Peace and Advocacy, expected the July 2024 amended law expanding the National Security Service (NSS) warrantless arrest authority would restrict further freedom of expression.

The NGO End Blasphemy Laws stated several provisions of the law criminalized “insults” to religion or “abuse” of religious feelings and provided for sentences of up to three years in prison or fines. There were no reported cases of authorities enforcing the law during the year.

### **Physical Attacks, Imprisonment, and Pressure**

Security forces routinely intimidated or detained journalists whose reporting they perceived was unfavorable to the military or government. In January, security forces confiscated or damaged two journalists’ equipment and restricted their movements. During the year, security forces threatened death, interrogated, harassed, detained, and imprisoned journalists, forcing some to go into hiding. On several occasions, high-level officials used intimidating language directed toward media outlets and representatives.

In July, local media reported the June 29 detention of a photojournalist affiliated with the state-run television station who reportedly helped organize two June protests in Bor by the public sector and organized forces with employees regarding delayed salaries and worsening economic conditions. The journalist’s wife claimed he was subjected to torture and deprived of essential health care and basic services. He was later released due to an apparent lack of evidence.

### **Censorship by Governments, Military, Intelligence, or Police**

## **Forces, Criminal Groups, or Armed Extremist or Rebel Groups**

The government maintained strict control of media, both print and electronic. Government officials or individuals close to the government regularly interfered in the publication of articles and broadcasting of programs. Nonetheless, some print and radio media regularly reported on international and domestic criticism of the transitional government.

Most organizations practiced self-censorship to ensure their safety. Journalists in Juba frequently experienced threats and intimidation and routinely practiced self-censorship. Authorities directly reprimanded publishers and removed articles deemed critical of the government. Many print media outlets reported NSS officers forced the removal of articles at the printing company where all newspapers were printed, often inserting a government announcement, advertisement, or recycled or international news where the article was originally meant to appear.

## **b. Worker Rights**

### **Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

The law provided for the rights of every employee to form and join unions, bargain collectively, and strike with restrictions. The law prohibited antiunion discrimination. The law excluded from these protections military and police personnel but included a broader list of civil service occupations,

including the prison service, fire service and wildlife forces, than the international standard. While labor courts adjudicated labor disputes, the minister of labor could refer them to compulsory arbitration.

The law provided a regulatory framework to govern worker trade unions, but it restricted workers' rights to form and join organizations of their own choosing, allowing only one union per sector or geographical area, and restricted trade unions' rights to organize their own administration. The largest union, the South Sudan Workers' Trade Union Federation, had approximately 65,000 members, operating mainly in the public sector. Unions were nominally independent of the governing political party but there were reports of government interference in labor union activities. The government did not effectively enforce the law. Administrative and judicial procedures were subject to lengthy delays and appeals, and penalties were not commensurate with those for other laws involving denials of civil rights. Workers across the country were vulnerable to exploitation. Years of conflict, political turmoil, climate shocks, and crime disrupted livelihoods and basic infrastructure in every sector.

## **Forced or Compulsory Labor**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Acceptable Work Conditions**

### **Wage and Hour Laws**

The law specified the Ministry of Labor could establish and publish a minimum wage, or wages, for different categories of employees. There was no public information that this occurred. Few workers were engaged in formal wage employment, with more than 80 percent of the population engaged in nonwage work, including subsistence or small-scale agriculture not covered by labor law. The law specified normal working hours should not exceed eight hours per day and 40 hours per week and should provide premium pay for overtime.

In a related development, in late July, the Ministry of Finance and Planning paid salaries for one month to the country's civil servants and security forces, according to sources throughout the transitional government. Meanwhile, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly summoned Finance Minister Marial Dongrin to explain why only one month's salary had been paid, despite arrears dating back to at least November 2023. The government promised to begin paying the arrears in increments of three months. By year's end, the government had not paid salary arrears.

A civil service provisional order applied to the public sector and outlined the rights and obligations of public-sector workers, including benefits, salaries, and overtime. The law provided the Ministry of Labor with authority to



issue the schedule of salary rates according to which all civil servants, officials, and employees were to be paid. This pay scale had not been adjusted for several years, and due to recent inflation and the rapid depreciation of the South Sudanese pound, most civil servants did not receive enough income to support themselves, even when their salaries were delivered on time and in full, which was infrequent. By law, only unskilled workers were eligible for overtime pay for work of more than 40 hours per week. Civil servants, officials, and employees working at higher pay grades were expected to work necessary hours beyond the standard workweek without overtime pay. When exceptional additional hours were demanded, the department head could grant time off in lieu of reimbursement.

### **Occupational Safety and Health**

There were no occupational safety and health (OSH) standards. Workers could not remove themselves from situations that endangered their health or safety without jeopardy to their employment. The Ministry of Labor had an Occupational Safety Branch, which consisted of an office director and no staff.

Widespread oil spillages and other chemical pollution, exacerbated by sustained, multiyear flooding that damaged oil producing infrastructure, negatively affected the health of workers and others who lived nearby.

## **Wage, Hour, and OSH Enforcement**

The government did not effectively enforce minimum wage, overtime, and OSH laws. The government neither investigated nor prosecuted wage and hour violations. Violations of wage and hour laws were common.

More than 66 percent of workers were in the informal sector in 2019, according to African Futures research from the Institute for Security Studies. Labor laws did not apply to informal workers.

## **c. Disappearance and Abduction**

### **Disappearance**

There were reports of enforced disappearances by or on behalf of government authorities.

Security and opposition forces, armed militias affiliated with the government or the opposition, and ethnically based groups abducted an unknown number of persons, including women and children.

In August, the International Committee of the Red Cross reported tracking more than 6,000 cases of missing persons since the initial post-independence conflict began in 2013.

In May, the Roman Catholic Church declared Father Luke Yugue and his driver were dead. Father Yugue disappeared in late April in an area

controlled by the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement-in-Opposition.

The government did not make efforts to prevent, investigate, and punish disappearances.

## **Prolonged Detention without Charges**

The transitional constitution prohibited arbitrary arrest and detention and provided the right of any person to challenge the lawfulness of their arrest or detention in court. The government did not observe these requirements.

In July, the Transitional National Legislative Assembly passed a law allowing the National Security Service to conduct arrests and detentions without warrants. That law took effect in August. In media reports, human rights activists, including from prominent organizations such as the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization and the Dialogue and Research Initiative, among many others, criticized the law, fearing an increase in arbitrary arrests and condemning the strengthening of warrantless arrest powers. On August 14, Nicholas Haysom, special representative of the UN secretary general and head of UNMISS, stated that the passage of the amendment granting the NSS powers of arrest without warrant was “incompatible” with the spirit of the country’s transitional constitution and the 2018 peace agreement.

While the law required police to present arrested persons before a public prosecutor, magistrate, or court within 24 hours, judges assigned to

statutory courts were not always present, and poor coordination with other justice officials contributed to case backlogs. Court dockets often were overwhelmed, and cases faced long delays before coming before a judge. Police could detain individuals for 24 hours without charge. A public prosecutor could authorize an extension of up to one week, and a magistrate could authorize extensions of up to two weeks. Authorities did not always inform detainees of charges against them and regularly held them past the statutory limit without explanation. Police sometimes ignored court orders to take arrested persons before the court. Police, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and judges were often unaware of the statutory requirement that detainees appear before a judge as quickly as possible. UNMISS reported cases taking months or even years to be brought to court.

Police commonly conducted arrests without warrants, and warrants were often irregular, handwritten documents. Warrants were commonly drafted in the absence of investigation or evidence. There were multiple reports of arrests, including of foreigners, in civil cases where a complainant exerted influence upon police to arrest someone as a negotiation tactic. The government routinely failed to notify embassies when detaining citizens of other countries, even when the detainee requested a consular visit.

The NSS expanded its authority to hold detainees, including at sites not designated as detention facilities under the law. NSS officers did not

conduct arrests based on warrants or court orders and routinely held detainees for long periods without charge and without access to lawyers or visitors. Detention periods lasted from hours to years.

The law allowed bail, but this provision was widely unknown or ignored by authorities, and they rarely informed detainees of this possibility. Because pretrial appearances before judges often were delayed far past statutory limits, authorities rarely had the opportunity to adjudicate bail requests before trial. Those arrested had a right to an attorney, but the country had few lawyers, and detainees were rarely informed of this right. The transitional constitution mandated access to legal representation without charge for the indigent, but defendants rarely received legal assistance if they did not pay for it. Authorities sometimes held detainees incommunicado.

Security forces arbitrarily arrested opposition leaders, civil society activists, businesspersons, journalists, and other civilians due to possible affiliation with opposition forces. Many citizens were arbitrarily arrested for being in the vicinity when crimes occurred, being of a certain ethnicity, or being relatives of suspects.

An Eastern Equatoria State National Assembly member in August expressed concern regarding a rash of unlawful arrests and the intimidation of civilians by security agents in the Imodonge Payam area. In June, Abraham Aleu Anyieth, a photographer associated with the South Sudan Broadcasting

Company, was arbitrarily arrested following peaceful protests in Bor, Jonglei State, and held for nearly a month without formal charges. Citizens spent several days protesting economic hardship, the failure of the transitional government to pay salaries, and rising costs due to inflation. A human rights organization, INTREPID South Sudan, told media following the arrest that security officers targeted those who were sympathetic to the protesters.

Lengthy pretrial detention was a problem, due largely to the lack of lawyers and judges; the difficulty of locating witnesses; misunderstanding of constitutional and legal requirements by police, prosecutors, and judges; and the absence of a strong mechanism to compel witness attendance in court. The length of pretrial detention commonly equaled or exceeded the sentence for the alleged crime.

The United Nations and international NGOs reported multiple accounts of government soldiers or other security service members arbitrarily detaining or arresting civilians, sometimes leading to unlawful killings.

#### **d. Violations in Religious Freedom**

See the Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* at <https://www.state.gov/religiousfreedomreport/>.

#### **e. Trafficking in Persons**

See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at

<https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Section 3. Security of the Person**

### **a. Torture and Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment**

Although prohibited under law, security forces mutilated, tortured, beat, and harassed political opponents, journalists, and human rights activists. Government and opposition forces, armed militia groups affiliated with both, and fighting ethnic groups committed torture and abuses in conflict zones.

According to the UN Panel of Experts and several independent human rights advocates, the NSS Operations Division maintained at least three facilities used to detain, interrogate, and sometimes torture civilians. Most NSS facilities were not publicly known. According to the panel, there were numerous reported abuses at NSS-run sites, including gender-based violence, beating and torture of detainees, and harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders and humanitarian workers. The Small Arms Survey documented that International Monetary Fund assistance to the transitional government was diverted to pay NSS salaries. Human Rights Watch, the United Nations, and other organizations documented cases of torture and other mistreatment detainees suffered during arrest and while

in NSS custody. Detainees described being beaten with sticks, whips, pipes, and wires, subjected to electric shocks, burned with melted plastic, raped, and subjected to other forms of sexual violence.

Impunity within the security services remained a serious problem. Although the NSS created an internal disciplinary tribunal to conduct investigations of alleged abuses by its members, neither the results of such investigations nor any disciplinary actions taken were made public. The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan reported the existence of police special protection units to investigate gender-based violence, operating with financial and logistical support from the United Nations. Some members of the army and police were investigated for misconduct.

## **b. Protection of Children**

### **Child Labor**

See the Department of Labor's *Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor* at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/findings>.

### **Child Soldiers**

There were reports government and nongovernment forces continued to recruit forcibly and use child soldiers, although reports of government recruitment dropped considerably from prior years. Since 2013 the United Nations verified more than 13,000 serious abuses that included 6,300 cases



of recruitment and use of children. During the same period, more than 3,700 children associated with armed forces and armed groups were released.

The 2018 peace agreement mandated specialized international agencies work with all warring parties to demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers from the SSPDF, the SPLA-IO, elements of the South Sudan Opposition Alliance, the Nuer White Army, and other groups, usually those involved in community defense. There were reports of child soldier recruitment associated with intercommunal and intertribal violence carried out by splinter groups and smaller factions of larger, well-established groups.

The Secretary of State determined South Sudan had governmental armed forces, police, or other security forces that recruited or used child soldiers during the period of April 2023 to March 2024. See the Department of State's annual *Trafficking in Persons Report* at <https://www.state.gov/trafficking-in-persons-report/>.

## **Child Marriage**

The law provided that every child had the right to protection from early marriage but did not explicitly prohibit marriage before age 18. The government did not enforce the law effectively. Child marriage remained common. NGOs reported fathers often forced daughters, generally children, to marry older men in exchange for cattle or money. Early marriage

sometimes reflected efforts by men to avoid rape charges, which a married woman could not file against her husband. In other cases, families of rape survivors encouraged marriage to the rapist to avoid public shaming. Many abducted girls were often repeatedly subjected to rape or sexual slavery, or they were forced into marriage.

### **c. Protection to Refugees**

The government cooperated with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations in providing protection and assistance to refugees, returning refugees, and asylum seekers, as well as other persons of concern. Overall, coordination with the government continued across all sectors, including with the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Management, Commission for Refugee Affairs, and Relief and Rehabilitation Commission.

### **Provision of First Asylum**

The law provided for protection of refugees as well as the granting of asylum and refugee status. The government allowed individuals to access asylum processes, allowed refugees from neighboring countries to settle, and generally did not treat refugees differently from other foreigners. While most refugees in the country were from Sudan, the government also granted asylum to refugees from Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, Eritrea, the Central African Republic, Burundi, and Somalia.

## **Resettlement**

According to UNHCR, between 2018 and 2022, more than 600,000 South Sudanese had returned to the country since the signing of the revitalized peace agreement. The government accepted refugees and returnees for reintegration. No national procedures were in place to facilitate the provision of identity documents for returnees or the naturalization of refugees beyond procedures that were in place for all citizens and other applicants.

## **d. Acts of Antisemitism and Antisemitic Incitement**

There were no official figures regarding the number of Jewish persons in the country. There were no reports of antisemitic incidents.

## **e. Instances of Transnational Repression**

### **Extraterritorial Killing, Kidnapping, or Violence or Threats of Violence**

There were credible reports of persons killed and kidnapped in other countries, and persons forcibly returned from other countries, for purposes of politically motivated reprisal. Individuals in other countries received threats of violence during the year. Civil society reported government

intelligence officials were active in neighboring countries and harassed critics there.

In February 2023, Morris Mabior Awikjok, a human rights defender and government critic, reportedly was forcibly returned from his home in Nairobi, Kenya. On April 24, Mabior was taken before a court in Juba and charged with criminal defamation against the NSS director. The court granted him bail in April, but the NSS refused to release him under the pretext of investigating him for additional offenses committed against the state, according to Amnesty International and his lawyer.

### **Threats, Harassment, Surveillance, or Coercion**

There were credible reports the government continued to target specific individuals for politically motivated reprisal outside the country, including in Kenya and Uganda. The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan reported on the “ongoing pervasiveness of extraterritorial operations by State security forces,” targeting journalists, civil society members and advocates, and their family members, as well as other critics and opponents of the government.