

South Sudan rebels kill more than 200 at mosque in ethnic massacre: UN

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USPA News - Soldiers who joined rebel forces killed more than 200 civilians at a mosque in the South Sudanese oil town of Bentiu last week, the United Nations (UN) said on Monday, making it one of the worst ethnic massacres since the world's newest state descended into civil war. The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) said its human rights investigators confirmed several mass killings took place on Tuesday and Wednesday last week when SPLA soldiers who have joined rebel forces captured the oil town of Bentiu in Unity State.

Killings were reported at Bentiu Hospital, the town's Kali-Ballee Mosque, a Catholic church, and the vacated WFP compound. The United Nations said rebel forces searched a number of places where hundreds of South Sudanese and foreign civilians had taken refuge, killing hundreds after determining their ethnicity or nationality. "These atrocities must be fully investigated and the perpetrators and their commanders shall be held accountable," UNMISS Officer-in-Charge Raisedon Zenenga said. According to the investigators, SPLA soldiers in opposition forces entered the Kali-Ballee Mosque on Tuesday and separated individuals of certain nationalities and ethnic groups. Some groups were escorted to safety while more than 200 civilians were killed and more than 400 others were wounded, the UN said. Also on the same day, individuals from certain South Sudanese communities and civilians from the Sudanese region of Darfur were specifically targeted and killed at Bentiu Hospital, the investigators said. Several men, women and children belonging to the Lou Nuer ethnic group were also killed for hiding at the hospital and declining to join other Nuers who had gone out to cheer rebel forces as they entered the town. Rebel forces also slaughtered several people at a Catholic church and the vacated WFP compound after asking civilians to identify their ethnic origins and nationalities. The total number of deaths from the ethnic massacre remained unclear on Monday, with the UN reporting more than 200 deaths at the mosque alone. Some media reports claimed the death toll in the town from Tuesday and Wednesday's violence was no less than 400. After last week's massacre, UNMISS rescued hundreds of civilians who were facing threats of violence after taking refuge in several places in Bentiu and Rubkona, the organization said. More than 500 civilians, many of them injured, were extracted from Bentiu Hospital and other locations, while thousands more walked to the UNMISS base, where the mission is currently protecting more than 12,000 civilians. The current crisis began on the evening of December 15 when gunfire erupted at the end of a meeting of the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) party, followed by an attack on the army headquarters near Juba University. Heavy gunfire and artillery fire in Juba and its suburbs continued the next day, prompting hundreds of terrified civilians to seek shelter at United Nations (UN) compounds. President Salva Kiir, dressed in military uniform and accompanied by senior officials, addressed the nation on December 16 and attributed the violence to a "failed coup attempt" by soldiers loyal to former Vice President Riek Machar Teny. Machar, along with the country's entire cabinet, was sacked in July 2013 in Kiir's apparent struggle to maintain control of the SPLM, but the exact extent of Machar's role in the conflict remains disputed. Fighting intensified on December 17 and spread to other parts of the country that is prone to ethnic instability, with Kiir being from the Dinka ethnic group and Machar being a Lou Nuer. The International Crisis Group estimates more than 10,000 people have so far been killed in the conflict, which led to the signing of a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement in January, though it was violated almost immediately and fighting continues. South Sudan became the world's newest country when it broke away from Sudan on July 9, 2011, as a culmination of a six-year peace process which began in January 2005 with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

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