

Box 4 Inter-ethnic fighting in Jonglei State

In and around Jonglei State, resource competition and cattle raiding between ethnic groups—among them the Lou, Jikany, and Gawaar Nuer, Murle, Bor Dinka, and Anuak—is common.⁶⁶ But since March 2009, the nature of inter-communal violence has shifted from the targeting of armed youth typically involved in raiding, to attacks on communities, including the elderly, women, and children.

Tensions between armed Lou Nuer and Murle rose considerably following a series of raids in January and February. In one of these attacks, on 30 January, 29 people were reportedly killed, 15 injured, and 3,000 cattle stolen from the Lou Nuer.⁶⁷ A large group of Nuer youth, described as being part of an 'unknown armed civilian group', retaliated in a series of attacks between 5 and 13 March,⁶⁸ starting with cattle camps in Gumuruk payam, Pibor County, and moving to the town of Lekwangole, which they held for two days. Up to 1,000 people were reportedly killed in the fighting and the aftermath, many of them women, children, and elderly as most of the men were with their cattle in the toic (grasslands).⁶⁹ The Nuer also abducted Murle children, apparently in retaliation for their own children being abducted in previous attacks. Schools, clinics, NGO compounds, and churches were looted in the town, some of them destroyed in the process.

Murle survivors described the Nuer as being heavily armed with AK-47s, PKMs, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, and hand grenades. There were reports that weapons were redistributed to Lou Nuer (the white army, which was the target of the 2005-06 disarmament) from SPLA stores in the period before the attacks.⁷⁰ Southern Sudan Police Service and SPLA uniforms were found on some of the dead bodies.⁷¹ This suggests that ethnic Lou Nuer within the SPLA were deserting to join their kin in the violence, pointing to problems of disaffection and command and control within the army. Furthermore, the SPLA—which had battalions in both Gumuruk and Pibor Counties and a smaller contingent about 1 km from Lekwangole town—did nothing to stop the attacks.⁷² Neither did the state authorities.⁷³ There were similar accusations that the Murle, frequently allies of the SAF during the war, with a history of difficult relations with the SPLA, were receiving ammunition from the SAF.⁷⁴

The Nuer attack on Lekwangole town was unusual in its targeting of communities rather than individuals or small groups. It is unclear who led the attacking force, and what motivated it apart from revenge for previous Murle raids. The governor of Jonglei State reportedly met with the GoSS president to request support from the SPLA to stop further retaliatory attacks,⁷⁵ however, this kind of intervention probably would have fuelled accusations of GoSS bias against the Murle. The perception among the Murle is that state authorities were behind the attack.⁷⁶

The violence continues. On 18-19 April, the Murle conducted a major attack on Lou Nuer communities in Akobo County, leaving at least 170 confirmed dead; the total death count could be as high as 300.⁷⁷ Murle rearmament combined with the possible resurgence of the Lou Nuer white army greatly increases the potential for future violent confrontations.⁷⁸