

Mass graves found in South Sudan as govt troops retake key town

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USPA News - A mass grave believed to contain the bodies of up to 75 ethnic Dinka soldiers has been found in the northern region of South Sudan, which is on the brink of all-out civil war after a sudden outbreak of violence earlier this month, the United Nations (UN) said Tuesday. The mass grave was discovered in the town of Bentiu in Unity State, which is inhabited predominantly by a majority ethnic Lou Nuer group and a minority Dinka group.

At least two other mass graves are reported to have been found in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, but these reports were not yet verified. "Mass extrajudicial killings, the targeting of individuals on the basis of their ethnicity and arbitrary detentions have been documented in recent days," said Navi Pillay, the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights. She also expressed concern about hundreds of civilians who were reportedly arrested during house-to-house searches in Juba. Ravina Shamdasani, a spokeswoman for the UN's human rights office, said a UN official visited the mass grave in Bentiu on Monday and counted at least 34 bodies. "The UN official who visited saw 14 bodies in the grave and another 20 at a river side nearby, but reportedly there are 75 SPLA soldiers, reportedly Dinka, who are unaccounted for and feared dead," she said. Pillay said two other mass graves are believed to be located in Juba, but it was not immediately known how many bodies they may contain. "We are still working to verify but it is very difficult, and there are reports that some bodies may have already been burned," Shamdasani explained. The news of the mass graves came on the same day South Sudan President Salva Kiir declared that government troops had retaken control of Jonglei state capital Bor, a key town that was seized by rebelling soldiers last Thursday. "Forces loyal to the government have taken Bor and are now clearing whatever forces that are remaining there," Kiir said, as quoted by the BBC. It also comes on the same day the UN Security Council is set to vote on a resolution that would significantly increase the force strength of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) to improve its capability to provide protection to civilians. The proposed resolution would increase the force from 7,000 to 12,500 troops and from 900 to 1,323 civilian police officers. In other developments on Tuesday, two UN officials expressed deep concern at the escalating violence and the targeting of civilians in various parts of the country. "Targeted attacks against civilians and against United Nations personnel, such as those that have occurred in Juba and Jonglei, could constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity," said Adama Dieng, the UN's Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. 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 in Kiir's apparent struggle to maintain control of the SPLM, but the exact extent of his 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. Approximately 2,000 ethnic Lou Nuer youth attacked a UN base in Akobo last Thursday, killing 2 Indian peacekeepers and as many as 30 civilians who had sought refuge inside the complex. It is believed as many as 1,000 people have been killed since the outbreak of violence. International mediation efforts are being led by the regional political body the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the African Union. In a meeting with U.S. Ambassador Donald Booth on Monday, Kiir reiterated his willingness to begin unconditional talks with Machar to end the crisis, and Machar confirmed on Tuesday that he had formed a delegation to participate on his behalf. 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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