

South Sudan atrocities need full investigation: Human Rights Watch



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Decomposing bodies of fourteen women and two men are seen packed inside body bags at the St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Leodar district in Bor, South Sudan.
Photograph by: GEORGE PHILIPAS

Human Rights Watch demanded a full investigation into atrocities committed in war-torn South Sudan, reporting that in one town alone scores of both unburied bodies and fresh graves.

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"Horrendous crimes have been committed here and across South Sudan, including in the capital, Juba, which saw widespread killing... members of both ethnicities in several towns have been killed in cold blood," Human Rights Watch (HRW) researcher Skye Wheeler described in a report Thursday.

Wheeler described Thursday some of the atrocities she had seen in the devastated town of Bor, where bodies of women lay across a church compound, as well "scores of bodies and fresh graves".

Bor swapped hands four times during the brutal fighting between government and rebels.

"The woman's curled hand sticks out from beneath the bed she hid under in one last, futile act to save herself," the report reads.

"Outside in the church compound, four other women lie dead, one with an obvious bullet hole in her head."

Thousands are believed to have been killed in the fighting pitting forces loyal to President Salva Kiir against a loose coalition of army defectors and ethnic militia nominally headed by sacked vice president Riek Machar, a seasoned guerrilla fighter.

"Accountability is crucial for South Sudan to move forward and stop the cycle of violence," HRW added.

"A thorough, impartial investigation, identifying the perpetrators, could help South Sudan break with the past and begin a healing process."

The fighting has seen waves of brutal revenge attacks, as fighters and ethnic militia use the violence to loot and settle old scores, with the United Nations and rights workers reporting that horrific atrocities have been committed by both sides.

Both sides implemented a ceasefire last Friday, but combat has only eased, not ended, with reports of continuing clashes. The crisis has left thousands dead and forced almost 800,000 to flee their homes.

Those killed should be carefully photographed and the information catalogued, both to help family members identify the bodies, but also to help investigators reconstruct the events, HRW added.

"Of course, people need to bury the dead and begin the arduous process of rebuilding homes and lives, but there is essential work that needs to happen now," HRW said.

"Mass grave sites should be marked and other important evidence, such as bullet casings or other munitions evidence, needs to be carefully collected by professionals," it added.

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