

South Sudan soldiers raped children, hunted and burned people alive in ongoing civil war, UN says

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Photo: The conflict in South Sudan has reopened ethnic fault lines. (Reuters: George Philipas)
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South Sudanese soldiers have raped children, burned people alive in their homes and hunted others for days in an increasingly brutal war, United Nations experts say.

A panel of experts who monitor UN sanctions on South Sudan found that a government offensive in oil-producing Unity State between April and July this year had been "intent on rendering communal life unviable and prohibiting any return to normalcy following the violence".

A witness from [Sudan] has said that she saw government forces gang-raping a breast-feeding mother after tossing her baby aside

UN aid chief Stephen O'Brien

"The intensity and brutality of violence aimed at civilians is hitherto unseen, in what has been so far — without a doubt — an incredibly violent conflict, where civilians have been targeted by all parties to the conflict," the experts wrote in an interim report submitted to UN Security Council members.

Under a so-called "scorched earth policy" government-allied forces razed entire villages, sometimes with people inside their homes, raped women and abducted children, the experts said.

UN aid chief Stephen O'Brien told the Security Council on Tuesday that the scope and level of cruelty in the attacks against civilians "suggests a depth of antipathy that goes beyond political differences".

Referring to examples of the recent violence in Unity State, Mr O'Brien said: "A witness from Rubkona County has said that she saw government forces gang-raping a breast-feeding mother after tossing her baby aside."

South Sudan was plunged into a civil war in December 2013 when a political crisis sparked fighting between forces loyal to president Salva Kiir and rebels allied with his former deputy Riek Machar.

The conflict has reopened ethnic fault lines that pit Mr Kiir's Dinka people against Mr Machar's ethnic Nuer people.

Mr Kiir is expected to sign a peace deal on Wednesday to end the conflict. Mr Machar signed the deal last week.