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UNHCR condemns attacks on refugee settlement in South Sudan

The UN Refugee Agency strongly denounces spreading violence in South Sudan's Greater Equatoria region over the past weeks, including recent attacks on Lasu settlement, in which a young Congolese refugee was killed. His body was found by a group of refugee leaders nearby the settlement, which lies some 40 kilometers south of Yei.

In recent days, armed groups have repeatedly entered the settlement and fired shots, assaulted refugees, looted and destroyed humanitarian assets, goods and property. Fearing for their lives, some 8,000 refugees fled in panic and dispersed in different directions.

Nearly 6,500 people have reportedly found refuge in a farmland at Kukuyi, some 6 kilometers north of Lasu, while another 1,400 refugees have scattered along the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Refugee representatives told UNHCR that 100 people have crossed into DRC and settled near the border at Aba, joining another 2,000 Congolese nationals who escaped from Lasu in early September.

Before fresh violence broke out in the country on July 8, Lasu used to host over 10,000 refugees, mostly from DRC with smaller numbers from Sudan and Central African Republic (CAR). They escaped violence at home several years ago and hoped that they had found a place of safety in this border town in South Sudan - then security deteriorated rapidly.

On Monday (19 September), armed groups penetrated the settlement and ransacked the primary health care centre, stealing drugs, medical supplies and furniture. They also seized radio communication equipment and solar panels used to pump water to private and public facilities in the settlement, leaving the population without drinking water. A day earlier (18 September), a patient was tortured in the same health centre and medical staff threatened at gunpoint.

Refugees reported that violence had already intensified in the week of September 12. Armed men in uniform went on a looting rampage for days, firing guns in the air, breaking into the homes of dozens of refugees and seizing their food, personal belongings and livestock.

During the raids, a Congolese woman was raped and another one managed to escape attempted rape. Two Sudanese women were abducted and remain in captivity in an unknown location.

"UNHCR decries these horrific acts that have caused death, fear and suffering of innocent people. We urge all armed parties to respect the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum and refugee settlements and call upon the Government of South Sudan to protect the lives of civilian populations, including refugees," says Ahmed Warsame, UNHCR's Representative in South Sudan.

Renewed insecurity in South Sudan has forced more than 195,000 people to flee the country since July 8, bringing the number of South Sudanese refugees in neighboring countries to over 1 million. In South Sudan, more than 1.61 million people are internally displaced and another 261,000 are refugees from Sudan, DRC, Ethiopia, and CAR.

For further information, please contact:

In Juba, Rocco Nuri, PI/Communication Officer | Mobile +211 927 725 535 | Email nuri@unhcr.org