

South Sudan: Senior UN human rights official condemns the deplorable rights situation in the country and calls for prompt establishment of a court to prosecute atrocity crimes:

JUBA/GENEVA/NEW YORK (17 February 2017) – At the end of a four-day visit to South Sudan, the UN Assistant Secretary-General for human rights, Andrew Gilmour, called for the rapid establishment of a hybrid court to prosecute atrocity crimes committed in the country.

“This is a war that has been waged against the men, women and children of South Sudan”, he said. “And the only way of ending this relentless onslaught will be when the perpetrators recognise that they will be held to account for what they keep doing”.

Andrew Gilmour held meetings in Juba with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Minister of Information, the Chief of General Staff of the SPLA, the Director of the National Security Service, representatives of the South Sudan Human Rights Commission, local authorities, religious leaders, UN and humanitarian partners, as well as NGOs, victims and civil society actors.

During his visit Andrew Gilmour also travelled to Malakal, where he received further information concerning the extreme suffering of the civilian population in the area.

“Although this is the fourth time I’ve been in South Sudan since 2011, I wasn’t prepared for the shocking devastation I witnessed in Malakal and even more by the clear pattern of systematic and harrowing human rights violations and abuses suffered by the population”, Andrew Gilmour said.

He was informed of the appalling risks that women who have been displaced, are forced to take in order to be able to earn the most meagre livelihood. When leaving the UN protection of civilian site they are frequently subjected to rape by militias and SPLA on their route to the market in Malakal town. Rape and gang rape is present in the testimonies of numerous women in the area, though this was categorically denied by the SPLA Division Commander with whom Andrew Gilmour spoke.

“It is utterly abhorrent that women in this area have to choose between getting raped or getting a livelihood”, Andrew Gilmour said, “But this is the brutal reality of what South Sudan has become”.

In March 2016, the UN human rights office issued a detailed report which documents the horrendous patterns of sexual violence in the country.

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AfricaRegion/Pages/SouthSudanReport.aspx>

In his meetings with the authorities in Juba, Andrew Gilmour raised concerns about the unspeakable human rights situation throughout the territory. He urged the authorities to combat the worrying rise of hate speech and he urged them to do more to protect human rights defenders. In his meeting with the Chief of General Staff of the SPLA, General Paul Malong, Andrew Gilmour emphasized the severe restrictions on access that the UN faces when trying to protect civilians, provide humanitarian assistance and monitor the human rights situation in the country and the concern that elements of the SPLA had engaged in what could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. On the other hand he welcomed the recent start of UN human rights and conflict related sexual violence training for SPLA and the appointment of focal points on conflict related sexual violence within the SPLA.

Andrew Gilmour urged the Director of the National Security Service to put an end to the practice of arbitrary and prolonged detention and immediately bring detainees in their custody before the courts, allowing them access to their lawyers and family and respecting their due process rights.

He underlined to the Government authorities the imperative need to avoid carrying out reprisals and issuing threats against human rights defenders who have cooperated with the United Nations. In this connection, he drew attention to a specific incident last September in which human rights defenders were threatened following the visit of the UN Security Council.