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**STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN
FOR THE 54TH SESSION OF THE
UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW**

The European Centre for Law and Justice (ECLJ) was founded in 1998 and is a non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights around the world. The ECLJ also holds Special Consultative status before the United Nations Economic and Social Council. This report discusses the status of human rights in the Republic of South Sudan (South Sudan) for the 54th session of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).

www.ECLJ.org
4, quai Koch
67000 Strasbourg, France
Phone: +33 (0)3.88.24.94.40

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Background

1. South Sudan is a country located in northeastern Africa and has a population of approximately 16.367 million people.¹ The population is predominantly Christian, with approximately 60% of the population identifying as Christian and 40% as other.²

2. South Sudan's last review was held on January 31, 2022.³ As a result of the review, South Sudan received 258 recommendations, 222 of which it accepted.⁴ It was recommended by Indonesia, and supported by South Sudan, that the government "[t]ake further measures to ensure full respect for the rights of freedom of religion or belief"(113.199).⁵ It was also recommended by Indonesia, and supported by South Sudan, that the government "[r]atify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (113.8).⁶ In our last report we expressed concern over attacks being perpetrated against Christians. In its 2026 World Watch List, Open Doors International ranked South Sudan as the 64th worst country for Christians to live in.⁷ This ranking stems from the fact that Christians and other civilians have been victimized by ongoing violence in the region.⁸

Legal Framework

3. Under Article 8 of the 2011 Transitional Constitution of South Sudan, "[r]eligion and State shall be separate. All religions shall be treated equally and religion or religious beliefs shall not be used for divisive purposes."⁹

4. In 2024, South Sudan acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Under Article 18 of the ICCPR:

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.

2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.¹⁰

Christian Persecution

5. In our last report on South Sudan, we expressed concern over the persecution of Christians in the country. Since the last UPR cycle, South Sudan has acceded to the ICCPR, which was recommended by Spain. Unfortunately, Christians continue to be targeted and attacked because of their faith. South Sudan has an obligation to protect the right to freedom of religion not only under the ICCPR but also under its Transitional Constitution.

6. Although Christians make up the majority of the population in South Sudan, Christians still face difficulties because of ongoing conflict, ethnic divisions, and weak governance. In most cases, Christian persecution is not a result of government policy, but instead of clan loyalties, local power structures, and ongoing insecurity in the country. Additionally, Christians who challenge traditional beliefs, convert from other faiths, or belong to a minority denomination are at the most risk of being persecuted. Further, Christians, particularly converts from Islam and people belonging to other traditional African faiths, are vulnerable to persecution from non-State actors, including from family members and their communities.

7. Ethnic and clan affiliations are deeply entrenched in South Sudanese society. In some communities, Christians are expected to participate in traditional practices and ceremonies that conflict with their Christian beliefs. Those who refuse to participate may be viewed as rejecting their community's culture and identity. Further, Christians who openly share their faith can experience social exclusion, with converts being denied access to communal resources like grazing land, water sources, or other forms of community support. In more extreme cases, Christian converts have been expelled from their communities altogether.¹¹

8. Christians also face persecution from their families. Traditional African religious practices are often closely connected to family life and community status. When someone converts to Christianity, relatives see the decision as a rejection of ancestral traditions. As a result, some converts are excluded from their inheritance or cut off from family support unless they return to their family's traditional beliefs.¹²

9. Converts from Islam also face serious challenges and persecution. While South Sudan is predominantly Christian, Muslims represent a majority of the population in some northern regions. In these regions, Christian converts may face hostility from family members and neighbors. Reports have also indicated that there are restrictions on Christian worship in Renk and Abyei.¹³

Violence Against Civilians and Christians

10. Additionally, as we discussed in our last report on South Sudan, ongoing conflict and instability in the region continue to impact churches, clergy, everyday Christians, and civilians. In South Sudan, religious freedom is undermined by ethnic divisions, and tensions between churches, armed groups, and tribal leaders. Although the constitution provides protections for religious freedom, many Christians continue to face significant challenges. Ongoing instability has created an environment that has left churches and religious leaders vulnerable to attacks. As a result, attacks on church leaders, churches, and Christians, continue to occur. According to UN statistics, more than 1,561 civilians were killed and 1,299 were injured across 1,019 violent attacks in 2024.¹⁴ The number of attacks in 2024 increased by 15% since 2023.¹⁵

11. Christians in South Sudan continue to face a range of security threats. Members of the South Sudan People's Defense Forces (SSPDF) loot churches, assault clergy, and detain religious leaders. Christians have also been affected by incidents of sexual violence. Ongoing ethnic and political conflicts have also resulted in the destruction of churches, attacks on religious leaders, and the displacement of thousands of people. At the same time, the government's limited response and failure to adequately protect Christian communities have left many Christians vulnerable to danger.¹⁶

12. For example, on March 28, 2026, gunmen carried out an attack in Khor Kaltan and killed thirty-seven people. Security forces were not able to capture many of the gunmen.¹⁷

13. In March 2026, more than 169 people were killed after insurgents had raided a village in a remote region of South Sudan. In addition to those killed, 1,000 people were forced from their homes in order to seek safety.¹⁸

14. In January 2026, police and security personnel were involved in a violent attack against multiple Moru churches during Sunday worship services. Worshippers reportedly suffered serious injuries after being assaulted with sticks, iron bars, and other weapons. Church leaders further reported that injured worshippers were removed from a hospital and detained by police instead of being able to receive medical treatment.¹⁹

15. In 2025, violence against Christians persisted as tensions between government forces and opposition-linked groups increased. Fighting was particularly severe in Upper Nile State, where renewed clashes displaced hundreds of thousands of people²⁰ and raised fears that the country could be entering into broader conflict.²¹ During the first three months of 2025 alone, 739 civilians were killed, 679 were injured, and 149 were abducted, making it the deadliest quarter in South Sudan since 2020.²²

16. Churches and religious leaders have also been directly affected by the violence. In 2025, gunmen killed one person and injured another in an attack on Our Lady of Assumption Parish in Lao, Magwi County.²³

17. On July 5, 2025, seventeen Seventh-day Adventist members were attacked at their church in Turalei Payam. Seven individuals were hospitalized after sustaining injuries during the attack.²⁴

18. In March 2025, South Sudan deployed air-dropped incendiary weapons that destroyed infrastructure and killed more than fifty-eight people.²⁵

19. In the 2025 World Watch List reporting period (October 1, 2023 – September 30, 2024), at least ten churches and church properties were attacked across Torit (Eastern Equatoria State), Jonglei State, Yei River County (Central Equatoria State), and Gogrial East County (Warrap State).²⁶

20. In August 2023, church leaders in Central Equatoria State accused members of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) of looting a church in the diocese of Yei River County and detaining and abusing religious leaders. The spokesman for the SSPDF later stated it was not the policy of the army to arrest, loot, and torture civilians.²⁷

21. In February 2022, members of the Tuj Ajakjch tribe attacked the town of Aneet claiming ownership of the area and ordering residents to leave. The violence resulted in destruction of buildings belonging to the Pentecostal Church and the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church. A church elder was also killed in the attack.²⁸

22. In January 2022, Islamic extremists attacked a Christian community in Yith Pabol, Aweil East County. The attack resulted in deaths of twenty-eight people and the destruction of fifty-seven houses.²⁹

23. That same month, armed men attacked Episcopal Church of South Sudan Archbishop Justin Badi Arama and two of his colleagues in Bor, Jonglei State. Thankfully, everyone survived the attack, but church property was destroyed.³⁰

Recommendations

24. Before South Sudan's next review, we ask that the government implement measures to protect the right to freedom of religion by preventing and responding to violence and discrimination against Christians, including by promptly investigating and prosecuting attacks on churches, clergy, and worshippers. Further, South Sudan must hold perpetrators accountable and strengthen protections against abuse by State and non-State actors. This is critical in ensuring that freedom of religion is guaranteed for all its citizens, including converts.

25. Further, the SSPDF must implement policy prohibiting its personnel from entering, occupying, or using churches and church property for military purposes, except when specifically asked to provide protection by religious leaders. The government must also investigate all alleged attacks against church and clergy by SSPDF personnel and those responsible accountable. To strengthen public confidence, findings of these investigations must be made public.

26. Additionally, military personnel responsible for looting, assaulting, detaining individuals, or occupying church property must be prosecuted through military courts. Disciplinary measures should be publicly disclosed to demonstrate that misconduct will not be tolerated.

27. We also ask that churches that have been damaged or destroyed by SSPDF or other state-aligned actors are rebuilt and the government should provide appropriate compensation to the victims and affected communities.

28. Additionally, the government should actively promote intercommunal dialogue among religious leaders, elders, and civil society to foster cooperation, mutual respect, and lasting tolerance. Immediate and decisive action is essential to halt ongoing violence that has claimed thousands of lives and devastated communities. Upholding these commitments is vital for the protection of human rights and the long-term stability of South Sudan.

¹ Jay L. Spaulding, *South Sudan*, BRITANNICA (Apr. 9, 2026), <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Sudan>.

² *Id.*

³ *Universal Periodic Review Third Cycle – South Sudan*, OHCHR, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ss-index> (last visited July 15, 2026).

⁴ *South Sudan*, OHCHR,

<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/ss/2022-12-23/South-Sudan.pdf> (last visited July 15, 2026).

⁵ *UPR of South Sudan (3rd Cycle - 40th Session)*, OHCHR 52¶ 133.199.

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/ss/2022-09-22/UPR40_South%20Sudan_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.doc (last visited July 15, 2026).

⁶ *Id.* at ¶ 113.8.

⁷ *WWL 2026 Compilation of all Main Documents (Excluding Country Dossiers)*, OPEN DOORS INT’L 5 (2026) <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/wwl-documentation/WWL2026-Compilation-of-main-documents.pdf>.

⁸ *South Sudan: Persecution Dynamics*, OPEN DOORS INT’L 6, 8 (2025), <https://www.opendoors.org/research-reports/country-dossiers/WWL-2025-South-Sudan-Persecution-Dynamics>.

⁹ THE TRANSITIONAL CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH SUDAN, 2011, art. 8, <https://ssembassydc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/South-Sudan-Constitution-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 18, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>.

¹¹ *South Sudan: Persecution Dynamics*, see *supra* note 8, at 13.

¹² *Id.* at 15.

¹³ *Id.* at 13.

¹⁴ *Rise in Violence Against Civilians in South Sudan*, U.N. NEWS (Apr. 17, 2025), <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/04/105445/rise-violence-against-civilians-south-sudan>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Church Leaders in South Sudan Warn that Escalating Violence Could Lead to a Full-Scale Civil War*, SERVAFRICA (Mar. 17, 2026), <https://servafrica.org/news/church-leaders-in-south-sudan-warn-that-escalating-violence-could-lead-to-a-full-scale-civil-war/>.

¹⁷ *Religious Leaders Urge Calm After Khor Kaltan Killings*, RADIO TAMAZU (Apr. 4, 2026), <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/religious-leaders-urge-calm-after-khor-kaltan-killings>.

¹⁸ *169 People Killed, Including Women and Children, After Insurgents Raid a Village in a Remote Area of South Sudan*, PBS NEWS (Mar. 2, 2026, at 12:48 EDT), [https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/169-people-killed-including-women-and-children-after-insurgents-raid-a-village-in-a-remote-area-of-south-sudan#:~:text=JUBA%2C%20South%20Sudan%20\(AP\),of%20full%20Dbrown%20civil%20war](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/169-people-killed-including-women-and-children-after-insurgents-raid-a-village-in-a-remote-area-of-south-sudan#:~:text=JUBA%2C%20South%20Sudan%20(AP),of%20full%20Dbrown%20civil%20war).

¹⁹ *Moru Congregation Accuses Juba Diocese of Violent Attacks on Churches in Juba*, RADIO TAMAZUJ, (Jan. 14, 2026), <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/moru-congregation-accuses-juba-diocese-of-violent-attacks-on-churches-in-juba>.

²⁰ *WFP/South Sudan Displacement Hunger*, UNIFEED (July 7, 2025),

²¹ See Vibhu Mishra, *South Sudan on the Brink as Peace Deal Falters*, UN Warns, UN NEWS (Apr. 16, 2025), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/04/1162321>.

²² Benjamin Takpiny, *Over 700 Civilians Killed in South Sudan Between January, March: UN Report*, ANADOLU AJANSI (July 2, 2025).

²³ Paul Samasumo, *South Sudan: Diocese of Torit Disturbed by Attack on the Parish of Loa*, VATICAN NEWS (Apr. 4, 2025, at 10:04), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/africa/news/2025-04/south-sudan-diocese-of-torit-disturbed-by-attack-on-the-parish.html>.

²⁴ Emanuel Pelote, *In South Sudan, Seventh-day Adventists Face Violence Amid Rapid Church Growth*, ADVENTIST REV. (July 14, 2025), <https://adventistreview.org/news/in-south-sudan-seventh-day-adventists-face-violence-amid-rapid-church-growth/>.

²⁵ *South Sudan: Incendiary Bombs Kill, Burn Civilians*, HUM. RTS. WATCH (Apr. 9, 2025, at 23:00 EDT), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/04/09/south-sudan-incendiary-bombs-kill-burn-civilians>.

²⁶ *South Sudan: Persecution Dynamics*, *supra* note 8, at 21.

²⁷ *SSPDF Accused of Torturing Religious Leaders in Central Equatoria*, SUDAN TRIBUNE (Aug. 26, 2023), <https://sudantribune.com/article/276550>.

²⁸ *Church Elder Killed and Religious Buildings Destroyed in Abyei Attack*, CHRISTIAN SOLIDARITY WORLDWIDE (Feb. 23, 2022), <https://www.csw.org.uk/2022/02/23/press/5586/article.htm>.

²⁹ *At Least 28 Killed in Islamist Attack on South Sudanese Christian Community*, BARNABAS AID (Jan. 11, 2022), <https://www.barnabasaid.org/us/news/at-least-28-killed-in-islamist-attack-on-south-sudanese-christian-commun/>.

³⁰ *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: South Sudan*, ECOI (May 15, 2023), <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/2091901.html>.