

Review Article

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Conflict, Gold and Civilian Vulnerability: Evidence from Khor Kaltan, South Sudan

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of artisanal gold mining in fragile and conflict-affected settings has generated new economic opportunities while simultaneously intensifying insecurity and civilian vulnerability. This article examines the 28 March 2026 attack at Khor Kaltan, Central Equatoria, South Sudan, drawing on preliminary field findings from the Khor Kaltan Response and Recovery Initiative (KKRRI). The study analyzes the intersection between informal extractive economies, weak state presence, and patterns of organized violence. It documents the scale of civilian victimization, including fatalities, injuries, and destruction of livelihoods, and situates the incident within broader debates on resource governance and conflict economies. The findings demonstrate that unregulated mining hubs can become high-risk environments where economic concentration, social fragmentation, and security vacuums converge to produce conditions conducive to violent predation. The article argues for integrated policy responses combining security sector reform, regulation of artisanal mining, and community-based resilience mechanisms.

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Introduction

Natural resource extraction in fragile states has long been associated with both economic opportunity and violent conflict. In contexts characterized by weak governance, informal mining economies often emerge as alternative livelihood systems while simultaneously creating new arenas of contestation [1-2].

South Sudan exemplifies this dynamic, where artisanal gold mining sites have expanded rapidly in recent years amid limited state regulation and persistent insecurity.

The attack on Khor Kaltan on 28 March 2026 represents a stark illustration of the vulnerabilities inherent in such environments. Located in Central Equatoria, Khor Kaltan has evolved into a significant artisanal mining hub attracting a heterogeneous population of miners, traders, and transporters. Its weekly market cycle generates temporary concentrations of wealth and population, creating both economic vitality and exposure to organized violence.

This article examines the Khor Kaltan incident as a case study of civilian victimization within a resource-driven informal economy. Drawing on preliminary findings from a rapid assessment conducted by KKRRI, the study seeks to address three key questions:

- (1) What were the patterns and scale of civilian harm during the attack?
- (2) How did structural vulnerabilities contribute to the severity of the incident?

- (3) What implications does this case hold for policy and peacebuilding interventions in similar contexts?

By situating empirical findings within broader theoretical debates on conflict economies and state fragility, the article contributes to ongoing scholarship on the governance of artisanal mining and the protection of civilians in conflict-affected regions.

Background and Context

Khor Kaltan, located in the Jebel Irqa area of Central Equatoria, has emerged as a prominent artisanal gold mining and trading center. Like many informal mining hubs across sub-Saharan Africa, it operates largely outside formal regulatory frameworks, relying instead on localized systems of organization and informal governance.

Economic activity at the site follows a cyclical pattern anchored around a weekly Sunday market. Traders typically arrive on Saturday evening, while miners from surrounding areas converge to exchange gold and purchase goods. This temporal concentration of economic activity results in high liquidity and population density, increasing both opportunity and risk (Hilson, 2016, p. 12). Social organization within the site reflects broader communal identities, with individuals clustering into camps based on regional or ethnic affiliations. While such arrangements facilitate mutual support, they can also reinforce divisions and create identifiable targets during episodes of violence [3].

Crucially, the absence of formal security provision, regulatory oversight, and emergency infrastructure has rendered Khor Kaltan highly vulnerable. These structural deficiencies align with broader patterns observed in fragile states, where peripheral economic

zones often operate beyond effective state control [4].

Methodology

This study is based on a rapid field assessment conducted by KKRRRI between 1–5 April 2026. The methodology combined qualitative and descriptive approaches, including direct observation at the incident site, semi-structured interviews with survivors and witnesses, consultations with medical personnel, and review of burial and hospital records.

Given the urgency of the situation, the methodology prioritized speed and triangulation rather than exhaustive data collection. As such, the findings should be understood as preliminary, though grounded in cross-verified evidence from multiple sources.

Civilian Victimization and Human Impact

The attack resulted in significant civilian casualties. Verified data indicates a total of 41 fatalities, including 37 individuals killed during the attack and four who died from injuries sustained [5]. A disproportionate number of victims 34 individuals originated from Aweil, suggesting potential patterns of targeted vulnerability.

In addition to fatalities, 31 individuals sustained injuries, many of them severe gunshot wounds requiring surgical intervention. Limited medical infrastructure and delayed evacuation contributed to increased mortality among the injured.

The handling of the deceased further underscores the scale of the crisis. Twenty-one bodies were buried in a mass grave at Khor Kaltan due to logistical constraints, while others were transported to Aweil and Juba. The use of mass burial reflects both the intensity of the violence and the absence of institutional capacity to manage large-scale fatalities.

Beyond human loss, the attack devastated livelihoods. Victims lost cash, gold, merchandise, and equipment, effectively erasing their economic base. The targeting of the Sunday market suggests an intentional strategy to maximize economic extraction through looting [6].

Nature and Dynamics of the Attack

Testimonies consistently indicate that the attack was organized, coordinated, and strategically timed. Assaultants reportedly entered the area during peak market activity, opened fire indiscriminately, and engaged in systematic looting while pursuing fleeing civilians.

The pattern of violence suggests prior knowledge of the site's economic rhythms and spatial organization. Such characteristics align with broader patterns of predatory violence in resource-rich informal economies, where armed actors exploit concentrations of wealth [2].

Allegations regarding the perpetrators point to involvement of armed groups affiliated with opposition movements, though these claims require independent verification. The reported collaboration between armed elements and local actors further highlights the blurred boundaries between economic and military networks in conflict settings.

Structural Drivers of Vulnerability

The Khor Kaltan incident reflects deeper structural vulnerabilities that extend beyond the immediate event. First, the informal nature of the mining economy creates regulatory gaps that enable both economic exploitation and violent predation. Second, weak state presence in peripheral areas limits the provision of security and

justice, increasing reliance on informal systems. Third, high levels of mobility and anonymity among participants complicate accountability and facilitate infiltration by armed actors. Finally, the concentration of economic resources in predictable temporal cycles creates opportunities for organized attacks.

These factors correspond with established theories linking resource wealth to conflict under conditions of weak governance [1].

Humanitarian Response and Community Resilience

In the absence of immediate state intervention, community-based mechanisms played a critical role in responding to the crisis. KKRRRI coordinated evacuation, medical treatment, and logistical support, while diaspora networks mobilized financial resources.

Although external factors such as the Red Cross provided assistance, the scale of the crisis exceeded available resources. The response thus underscores the importance of localized resilience mechanisms in fragile contexts.

Policy Implications

The findings highlight the need for multi-layered interventions. Immediate priorities include strengthening emergency medical response and providing psychosocial support to survivors. Medium-term measures should focus on establishing security arrangements at mining sites and improving coordination between communities and state authorities.

In the long term, regulating artisanal mining sectors is essential to reduce vulnerability. This includes formalizing operations, enhancing oversight, and integrating community-based conflict resolution mechanisms into broader governance frameworks.

Conclusion

The Khor Kaltan attack represents a profound instance of civilian victimization within an informal resource economy. It illustrates how economic opportunity, when coupled with weak governance and insecurity, can generate environments conducive to violence.

Addressing such challenges requires not only immediate humanitarian intervention but also structural reforms aimed at strengthening governance, enhancing security, and promoting inclusive economic systems. Without such measures, similar incidents are likely to recur in other unregulated economic zones.

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