With my bags packed: the perspective of a UN Volunteer leaving South Sudan after four years

"One thing is abundantly clear: everyone is tired of war. The people cry and hope for peace." This is the feeling that lingers in the mind of United Nations Volunteer Marko Miljevic as he prepares to leave South Sudan after four years of service as a Civil Affairs Officer. Originally from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Marko Miljevic joined the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) at a time when the country was emerging from the 2016 violence and beginning its long journey towards peace and recovery.

"Four years ago, I realized that the very idea of peace seemed almost mythical to citizens in South Sudan."
This was understandable given the country had been experiencing conflict for a protracted period of time. However, one thing is clear – there is unlimited potential for development once peace is established in this resource-rich country. --Marko Miljevic, UN Volunteer Civil Affairs Officer with UNMISS, South Sudan

This potential has inspired Marko throughout his time in South Sudan. "With a particular focus on protecting civilians, my efforts have been geared towards communicating with parties to the conflict and bringing them together to mutually identify community-led solutions," he explains.

Most of Marko's days are spent in dialogue on the value of peace and the pathways to achieving it. “I have met many people, from government representatives to women traders in the local towns and villages as well as monyomijji (youth) from different tribes to discuss the challenges and opportunities presented by the peace process,” he shares.

One project he is particularly proud of is bringing together youth from the Imurok Payam region to engage in peacebuilding through sports and art. "What stood out to me was the huge turnout and enthusiasm of the communities," Marko shares

More than 200 people turned up and demonstrated tremendous spirit and a sense of togetherness. It was clear that they were tired of fighting and desperately wanted peace, so they could rebuild their lives.

While Marko is deeply passionate about his work, there have also been many challenges. "Deeply rooted customs, mixed with low educational attainment, presented major obstacles for peaceful coexistence among some South Sudanese communities," he says. "One thing I often had to
bear in mind was that conflict was almost always imminent and it was my role, and that of my colleagues, to help prevent it rather than to manage its consequences."

As he prepares to leave the country, Marko is proud of the efforts made by his team to bring people together during the difficult transition from war to peace.

"It is my hope that our collective efforts and service will go beyond bringing peace to the country, to also give the people of South Sudan prosperity and hope for a better future. --Marko Miljevic

He is particularly proud and honoured to have served as a UN Volunteer. "To me," Marko says, "being a volunteer often means going beyond the description of an assignment by utilizing different, innovative approaches to tackling challenges, in order to make a positive difference to the lives of local communities.

His inspiration? A quote from Mahatma Gandhi that triggers him to keep volunteering for humanity, in the hope it will motivate those he is leaving behind: "There is no way to peace - peace is the way."

• Peacekeeping operations

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals