

# Emergency Situation Overview: Sudan-South Sudan Cross Border Displacement

June 2023 | Renk County | Upper Nile State | South Sudan

## KEY MESSAGES

- At the time of data collection (23 May - 2 June), Renk Town hosted an estimated 20,000 to 40,000 displaced people from Sudan. This number will plausibly increase in the coming months, as factors with the potential to impede onward movement – the onset of the rainy season, difficulty of riverine transport to and beyond Malakal, and difficulty of Malakal as a transit location for displaced people wishing to travel to more distant parts of the country, including Unity State and Greater Bahr el Ghazal – become more pronounced.
- The Joda/Wunthow border point in Renk will likely continue to receive the majority of new arrivals. The road is paved between Khartoum and Renk, and FGD participants reported a widespread perception that alternate routes into South Sudan were unsafe. As a result, contingency planning – which amongst implementing partners in Renk reportedly anticipates a 10,000-15,000 person increase in the town's population during the rainy season – may be conservative, according to a humanitarian response coordinator KI.
- Participants in most focus group discussions (FGDs) reported encountering protection issues during their journeys. Participants described instances of robbery, sexual- and gender-based violence, and in one group, killing, along the route. The vulnerability of displaced people was corroborated by humanitarian response coordinator KIs, who estimated that between 20% and 30% of new arrivals at the border meet protection vulnerability criteria.<sup>1</sup>
- Increased demand due to arrivals, disrupted supply chains, and continued devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP) has seemingly had a significant impact on markets, with mixed-method data collected during a Joint Rapid Market Assessment (JRMA) on 26th and 29th May suggesting that prices for basic commodities in Renk Town have increased substantially. Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI) data indicates that the price of the multi-sectoral survival minimum expenditure basket (MSSMEB) in Renk rose from 91,439 SSP to 142,628 SSP between the first week of April and the first week of May.<sup>2</sup>
- In turn, the host community in Renk, which reportedly relies almost entirely on market purchases to access food, has seemingly faced higher financial barriers to food access since 15th April.
- Notwithstanding the impacts host community FGD participants attributed to the impact of the Sudan conflict on markets and the arrival of displaced people, participants in most groups reported that the relationship between the two communities is good; and that many in the host community are actively providing food, water, or shelter to displaced people, or would like to if they had access to more resources themselves.
- The expansion of the conflict in Sudan, particularly to White Nile State, would likely precipitate notably expanded displacement to South Sudan. As of September 2022, roughly 250,000 South Sudanese refugees live across nine refugee camps in White Nile State, while roughly 100,000 additional refugees live in out-of-camp settings.<sup>3</sup> Further, humanitarian KIs in Sudan estimate that up to 100,000 refugees on secondary displacement may have arrived in White Nile since 15th April, though verification exercises are ongoing.<sup>4</sup>

## CONTEXT & RATIONALE

On 15th April, 2023, fighting broke out in Khartoum, Sudan, spreading to other parts of the country in the following days and weeks, and resulting in mass displacement from Sudan to Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia, Libya, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. By the end of data collection on 2nd June, 92,190 people had reportedly displaced to South Sudan, the vast majority of entering through the Joda/Wunthow border point in Renk County, Upper Nile State, the northernmost border crossing in South Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Of those crossing, 93% were South Sudanese returnees, many of who fled war in then-southern Sudan prior the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, or war in South Sudan between 2013 and 2018.<sup>6</sup>

Following the influx of displaced people to Renk beginning on 16th April 2023, humanitarian agencies in South Sudan mobilized a response focused on receiving displaced people at the border, providing them with basic services in a transit centre in Renk Town, and facilitating their onward movement to other parts of the country. According to humanitarian coordinator key informants (KIs) working in Renk, and returnee focus group discussion (FGD) participants, most returnees wish to return to their areas of origin within South Sudan, and most refugees are being transported by humanitarian agencies to existing refugee camps in Maban County.

On 13th May, humanitarian agency-supported movements began to Malakal, and have reportedly continued since, despite intermittent pauses due to security and logistical challenges, according to a humanitarian coordinator KI with knowledge of onwards movements and a service provider KI in Malakal. In addition, the South Sudanese government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private entities have facilitated onwards movement, and an unknown number of individuals have moved themselves to other locations.

To contribute to the information already existing informing the Renk response, provide an overview of the situation in Renk and a snapshot of humanitarian coordination, returnee, and host community perspectives on population movement to Renk, the response, and priority needs, REACH, in conjunction with the World Food Programme (WFP), conducted a rapid needs assessment in Renk from 23rd May to 2nd June 2023.

## METHODOLOGY

Primary data collection took place between the 23rd of May and 2nd of June 2023 in Renk Town, informal displaced-persons sites, the Renk transit centre, and the Joda/Wunthow border crossing in Renk County, Upper Nile State.

Data was collected via 40 FGDs, 28 with returnees displaced from Sudan and 12 with host community participants. Due to returnees making up the vast majority of displaced people, and the specific and implemented response plan for refugees, only returnees, of the displaced population, were sampled for FGDs. FGDs focused on population movement (16), and food security and livelihoods (FSL), priority needs, and conflict sensitivity (24). All 16 FGDs on population movement were conducted with returnees displaced from Sudan. For FGDs on FSL, priority needs and conflict sensitivity, 12 were conducted with host community participants and 12 with returnees. Of these FGDs, 2 (one population movement and one FSL, priority needs and conflict sensitivity) were conducted with the same group – transit centre community leaders – given their specific and unique knowledge of the transit centre and displaced communities.

Unstructured key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with three humanitarian response coordinators in Renk County, and remotely with one humanitarian agency KI in Kosti, White Nile State, Sudan. These discussions served to ensure that REACH's assessment was coordinated with existing efforts on the ground, and oriented to fill the most useful information gaps, and to develop the greatest possible in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the response, displacement, and needs for displaced populations and the host community.

Qualitative assessment findings are not statistically generalisable and should be considered indicative of the situation at the time of data collection. In addition, REACH, ACTED, Plan International, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and African Development Aid (ADA), with logistical support from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), conducted a Joint Rapid Market Assessment (JRMA) on 26th and 29th May in Renk Town to gain an understanding of the impact of the Sudan conflict on markets, and consumers ability to access purchased goods. The JRMA consisted of four components: data collected using three quantitative tools for consumers, retailers, and wholesalers in Renk, and an FGD with four representatives from the Renk Trade Union.

## POPULATION MOVEMENT AND ONWARD MOVEMENT CHALLENGES

As of the end of data collection on 2nd June, 71,596 people had reportedly entered Renk Town, Renk County from Sudan following the outbreak of conflict there on 15th April 2023, with an average of 1,300 arriving per day during the prior two week period.<sup>7</sup> With an estimated population of 193,787 in Renk County, arrivals may represent as much as a 37% increase in the county's population.<sup>8</sup> Despite reported onwards movement of as many as 20,000 people, humanitarian coordinator KIs in Renk estimated that between 20,000 and 40,000 people remained in the town at the time of data collection – between the humanitarian agency-run transit centre created to manage returnee and refugee flows into the country, and several informal sites in town.

According to humanitarian coordinator KIs, the humanitarian response plan for Renk County – and for the Sudan crisis more broadly – comprised three main components: reception of returnees and refugees at the border; movement facilitation and provision of basic services at the transit centre in Renk; and onward movement to other locations in South Sudan. As of 24th May, one humanitarian coordinator KI working on facilitating onward movement reported having the logistical capacity to move just under 1,000 people per day from Renk to Malakal. Despite this, logistical challenges, challenges with the safety of riverine movement to and beyond Malakal, and challenges with Malakal as a transit location reportedly resulted in a pause in movements from Renk to Malakal between 25th May and 8th June. Even should consistent humanitarian-supported onwards movement to Malakal resume, combined with the unknown number of people likely to move themselves onwards each day, numbers in Renk Town are likely to increase notably, as a continued 1,200-1,500 people continue to arrive per day from Sudan.

While humanitarian coordinator KIs reported that maintaining an approximately equivalent inflow and outflow in Renk Town is the ideal scenario for the coming two-to-three-month period, it is reportedly contingent on multiple tenuous factors, several of which have seemingly already at least impeded humanitarian agency-supported onwards movement. If security in Malakal deteriorates, movement from Renk may be discontinued. If conflict resumes along the Tonga-Atar corridor, as has been projected to be likely, onward movement beyond Malakal may be prevented, resulting in bottlenecks in both Renk and Malakal. Finally, if fighting in Sudan expands

to White Nile or Blue Nile states, Renk would likely receive an exponentially larger number of arrivals, plausibly surpassing the contingency scenario point of the current response.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, even should onwards movement to Malakal remain possible, humanitarian coordinator KIs, and FGDs with community leaders at the transit centre suggest that most of the returnees remaining in Renk at the time of data collection wish to travel to Unity or Greater Bahr el Ghazal; places for which Malakal may not be an ideal transit location due to logistical, and potentially conflict-sensitive, concerns.

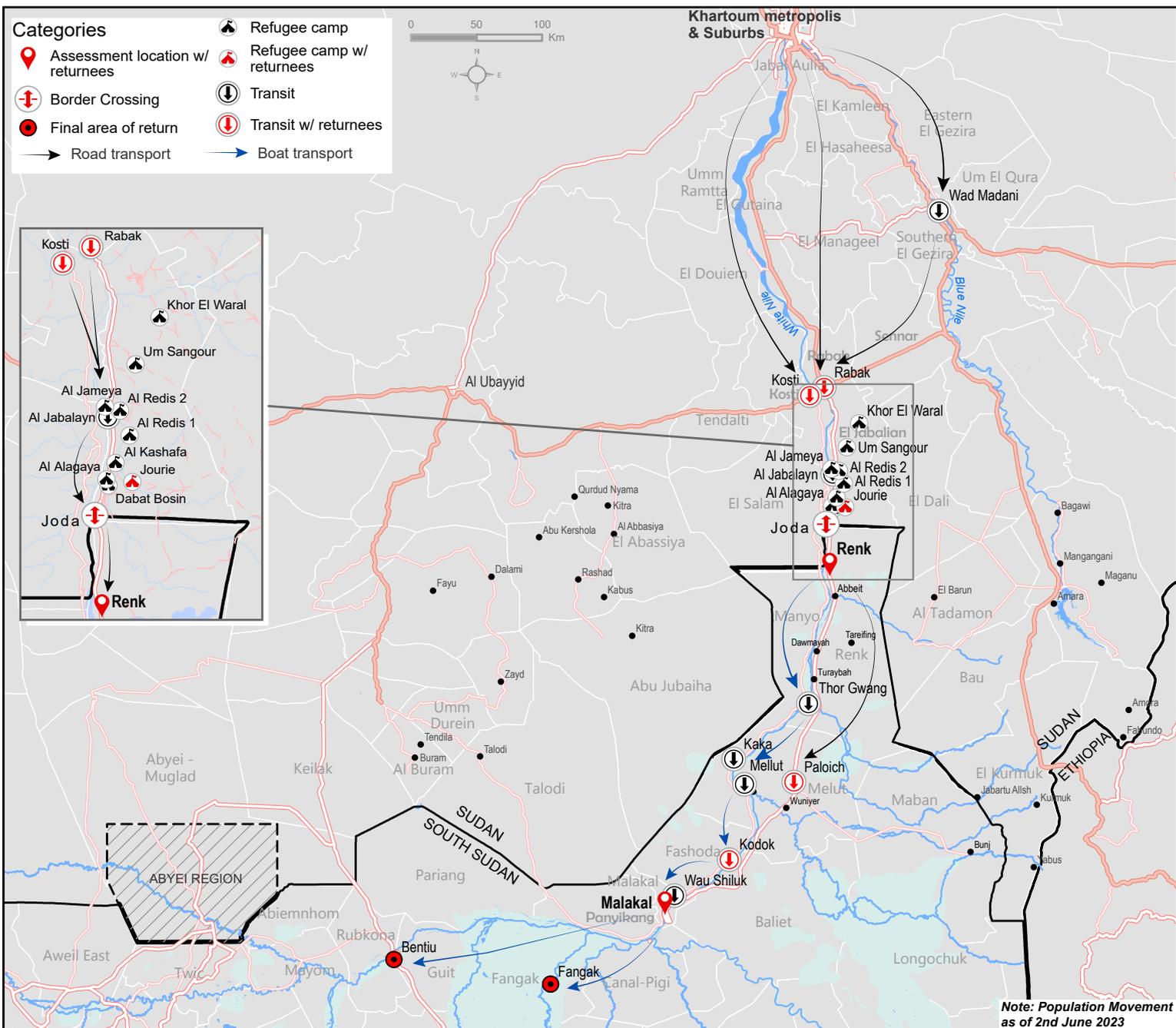
While the above scenario regarding an increase in conflict in Sudan would likely eventuate arrivals across many of the border points already in use by those fleeing the conflict, returnee participants in FGDs on population movement consistently reported that the Khartoum-Renk road is perceived by most in Sudan as the only viable option for displacement to South Sudan, given its relative safety compared to other routes. FGD participants reported that these other routes – including those through Panakuach, Unity State, the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA), Aweil, Northern Bahr el Ghazal State, and Raga, Western Bahr el Ghazal State – were blocked by armed groups.

The perceived feasibility of the Khartoum-Renk route, compared with other routes from Sudan to South Sudan, is also notable because the road is reportedly paved the entire way, meaning that the onset of the rainy season in late June is unlikely to create barriers for movement into South Sudan, though it may create barriers for movement onward from Renk.

Finally, humanitarian coordinator KIs and FGD participants reported that substantial numbers of people likely remain in Khartoum, Omdurman, Kosti, Medeni, and the refugee camps along the Sudan-South Sudan border, who either currently intend to travel to South Sudan when financial access or a decrease in conflict intensity allows for it, or are waiting in preparation to travel to South Sudan, should fighting reach their areas. Participants in multiple FGDs reported that the number of people remaining in Sudan with intentions of fleeing to South Sudan is greater than the number of people who have already come. One humanitarian coordinator KI reported that should fighting reach White Nile, the estimated 275,000 South Sudanese in camps in the state will likely flee south.<sup>10</sup>

Given this context, a humanitarian coordinator KI reported that contingency planning – which amongst

Map 1: Population movement from Khartoum to area of final return, via Renk and Malakal, as of June 2, 2023



implementing partners in Renk at the time of data collection reportedly anticipated a worst-case scenario of a 10,000-15,000 person increase in the town's population during the rainy season – may be conservative.

### VULNERABILITY OF DISPLACED POPULATIONS

Despite the reported relative safety of the Khartoum-Renk route described by FGD participants, compared with routes to Panakuach, the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA), Aweil and Raja counties, participants in most groups also described their journeys as high-risk and high-consequence. Participants in most groups reported that robbery was commonplace on the

roads between Khartoum and Renk, and participants in several groups reported incidences of sexual- and gender-based violence. In one group, participants reported that they had seen people killed, or had members of their own traveling group killed by armed actors during their journey.

Data collected by humanitarian agencies operating in Renk underscore displaced people's vulnerability – both on their displacement journeys and upon arrival in Renk. A humanitarian coordinator KI responsible for screening arrivals at Joda/Wunthow reported that between 20% and 30% of arrivals meet UNHCR protection vulnerability criteria. One humanitarian coordinator KI reported that displaced people who arrived shortly after fighting began in Khartoum seemingly had access to greater financial resources,

and that as the conflict has progressed, arrivals have become increasingly vulnerable. Participants also reported that people without access to financial resources are particularly vulnerable, and in large part have not been able to displace. Multiple participants reported that the cost of their journeys exceed 1 million Sudanese Pounds (SP) – equivalent to over 1,500 USD – suggesting that there are high financial barriers to displacement.<sup>11</sup>

FGD participants in one quarter of groups reported walking for at least part of their journeys – most concerningly through areas identified as high risk between Khartoum and the Khartoum suburbs, where many participants reported the situation can be so volatile that transportation providers are unwilling to pick people up.

Assessment findings indicate that difficult displacement journeys have translated to heightened vulnerability for returnees in the transit centre. Participants in most FGDs conducted with displaced people on FSL, priority needs, and conflict sensitivity, reported that their priority needs at the time of data collection were food and shelter, suggesting that returnees' priority is to meet their most basic survival needs. Needs identified by returnees in the transit centre differed greatly from what participants identified as their priority needs prior to displacement. In Khartoum, prior to displacement, the priority needs reported by returnee FGD participants in a few groups were good education for their children and a good house.

While returnees reported having access to basic humanitarian services, including food, communal shelter, and basic health services, corroborating reporting by humanitarian coordinator KIs, findings also suggest that provision of such services may not be fully meeting needs. Participants in most groups reported that provided food was, at best, not preferred, and at worst, causing illness. Participants in nearly every group also reported that despite challenges accessing food, few if any consumption coping mechanisms are available. While communal shelter is provided within the transit centre, and a one-time plastic sheet distribution has allowed many households to build individual shelters, congestion in the site – an estimated 1,200-1,500 additional people arrive per day, in conjunction with reportedly insignificant outflow numbers – means that shelter is a scarce resource for displaced people. With the onset of the rainy season, shelter-related issues are likely to continue to increase, and may drive increased public health risks.

## IMPACT ON THE HOST COMMUNITY

Host community participants in every FGD focused on FSL, priority needs, and conflict sensitivity reported that the primary impact of displaced peoples' arrival has been a significant increase in prices, and consequent increased difficulty accessing markets – the reported primary source of food in Renk Town.

Participants in every group reported fulfilling most of their food needs by purchasing goods at the market, though participants in several groups also reported augmenting their diets with collected wild foods, such as lallop or lallop leaf. To access income, participants largely reported engaging in small-cash generating activities, such as casual labour, firewood collection, and the sale of food items like mandazi or cooked groundnut, though a smaller number of participants also reported that some men work in construction.

Primarily, host community FGD participants reported that the main effect of arrivals has been a prohibitively steep increase in prices – which was commonly attributed to the influx of displaced people, but is likely due to a combination of factors, including a more congested consumer market, conflict-related disruptions to supply routes from Sudan, and the continued devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound. In turn, the host community in Renk, which reportedly relies almost entirely on market purchases to access food, has seemingly faced higher financial barriers to food access since the beginning of conflict in Sudan. Participants in several groups also reported that displaced people are also engaging in activities like firewood collection, saturating the market with sellers and making it difficult to generate income.

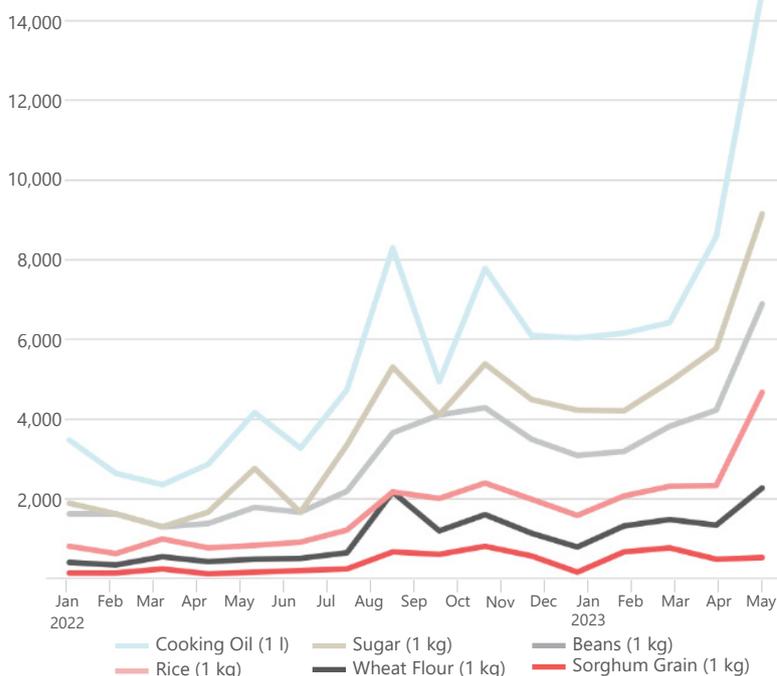
Host community participants in roughly half of FGDs on food security reported that most people do not have access to enough food, and that as a result people are relying on consumption coping strategies such as consumption of less preferred foods, eating smaller portions at mealtimes, or skipping meals. Participants in several groups reported more severe forms of rationing, including skipping meals or going days without eating, suggesting the presence of at least a small population which is more highly food insecure. While participants noted that the presence of arrivals has not impacted their ability to employ such coping strategies, it is likely that the reportedly heightened financial barriers to food access has resulted in less food for the host community, and the more commonplace employment of the consumption coping strategies described above.

Notwithstanding the impacts host community FGD participants attribute to the arrival of displaced people from Sudan, participants in every group reported that the relationship between the two communities is good; and that many in the host community are actively providing food, water, or shelter to displaced people, or would like to if they had access to more resources themselves. In most groups, participants reported never having had access to humanitarian assistance, (in the groups which did report receiving aid, none had been recent), and nonetheless all reported that they were pleased displaced people were receiving aid. Participants in most groups commonly noted that those in the transit centre were fleeing conflict, had very little in South Sudan, and deserved assistance.

## IMPACT ON MARKETS

Data collected during the JRMA exercise suggests that the overwhelming majority of consumer respondents reported that prices of commodities have increased since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan. This finding is supported by data from REACH's JMMI, which reported that the price of the MEB in Renk - an indicator which describes a monetary threshold for what is needed to cover essential needs for a household for a month - increased from 91,439 SSP to 142,628 SSP between the first week of April and the first week of May, an increase of 56%.<sup>12</sup> The effect of increasing prices is also likely compounded by the continuing depreciation of the SSP, which decreased in value from 860 SSP/1 USD at the beginning of April to 980 SSP/1 USD at the time of data collection, a nearly 15% depreciation.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 1: Price of staple food items in Renk Town (SSP), between Jan 2022 and May 2023; REACH, JMMI**



Simultaneously, the increase to Renk's population – making up as much as a 39% increase in Renk County – has seemingly increased demand, with 81% of retailer respondents surveyed during the JRMA exercise reporting that they have witnessed an increase in customers since the beginning of conflict in Sudan.<sup>14</sup> Retailer respondents also reported an increase in demand for credit purchase, further evidencing reported barriers to market access for consumers.

Compounding the development of exchange rate- and demand-related impacts on markets are supply issues, with wholesaler respondents reporting that suppliers are based primarily in Sudan, and that supplier shortages, checkpoints, and the consequent supply chain disruptions, are the main barriers to restocking. Retailers broadly reported that further increased demand would make it difficult for them to supply both food and non-food items, with 77% and 70% of retailer respondents reporting foreseeing such difficulties, respectively. Participants in the FGD conducted with Trade Union representatives in Renk corroborated these findings, reporting that the most important supply chain into Renk, comes from Rabak, in White Nile State, Sudan. Participants estimated that up to 50% of market goods came from Rabak prior to the outbreak of conflict, and another 30% from Bouth, in Blue Nile State, Sudan. Participants reported that prior to the conflict, only 20% of market goods in Renk Market were supplied through Juba. Quantitative data corroborates the impact the conflict has had on supply chains. Almost a third of wholesaler respondents reported that the number of suppliers they rely on had decreased since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan.

Participants reported that as of the time of data collection, traders were taking the same routes into Renk from supply markets in Rabak and Bouth, but facing increased insecurity-related challenges, and demanding increased prices for transportation as a result. While checkpoint related costs in both Sudan and South Sudan were reportedly present prior to the conflict, participants reported that on the Sudan side, there has been a significant increase in the number of checkpoints, and the money demanded for traders to proceed safely. Two thirds of wholesaler respondents reported that they would have trouble meeting increased retailer demand both for food and non-food items due to movement restrictions or road closures.

Participants reported that while staples from Sudan – such as flour, sugar, tea leaf, and oil – were affected at the time of data collection by supply

chain disruptions, they believed that staple sorghum could likely continue to supply the market through local production. Participants estimated that prior to the beginning of conflict in Sudan, during the post-harvest period, 80% of sorghum in the market was locally-sourced; during the lean season, 40%. Participants reported that similar local production was possible to some extent for other foods like onion and kudra.

Nonetheless, participants forecasted that continued conflict in Sudan would mean that markets would need to be supplied almost entirely by Juba; even without fighting expanding to White Nile and Blue Nile states, markets in those states are reportedly supplied by Khartoum, which was heavily affected by conflict at the time of data collection. Participants reported that this would likely lead to a continued increase in prices. While they estimated that Juba provided up to 20% of supply for the market prior to conflict in Sudan, checkpoints along the Nile, the longer supply time (two weeks from Juba as opposed to 12 hours from Rabak), and the necessity of transferring goods from barge to boat in Malakal before they can proceed to Renk, all would represent higher costs should Juba supply make up an increasing amount of the market share. Participants suggested that in this forecast scenario, in three months, people in Renk Town will not be able to afford prices. FGDs with host community participants suggests that this may have already been the case for many at the time of data collection.

## CONCLUSION

If conflict in Sudan continues, the next six-month period will likely see a continued influx of displaced people to South Sudan, and to Renk County, via the Joda/Wunthow border point. Barring an escalation of the conflict, or an expansion into White Nile or Blue Nile states, arrivals trends suggest that, conservatively, nearly a quarter of a million people may arrive to the county by the end of the year. Should conflict in Sudan escalate or expand, that number would, according to humanitarian coordinator KIs with knowledge of Sudan, likely be exponentially higher.

In this scenario, even the most optimistic projection for the number of people humanitarian agencies could support with onwards movement – according to a humanitarian coordinator KI, around 1,000 people per day – combined with what KIs estimated were another 1,000 people per day moving themselves or relying on other modalities for onwards movement, would not mitigate a large-scale

increase in the population of displaced people in Renk.

If the population of displaced people in Renk continues to increase, and challenges continue to limit options for onwards movement, humanitarian actors may have to shift their response in Renk – given that, at least until larger-scale onwards movement can begin, Renk Town and the transit centre will likely play host to a large displaced population with few options for movement elsewhere.

## ENDNOTES

1. Protection vulnerability criteria include: A. Older persons without family support; B. Single women or girls; C. Single parents with more than two children; D. Individuals with disabilities; E. Unaccompanied and separated children; F. Persons with serious medical or psychological conditions. Note: These criteria are not exhaustive and UN agencies maintain sub-criteria to assess vulnerability as necessary.
2. REACH. [JMMI Dashboard](#).
3. UNHCR. [“Refugee Camp Profile: Overview of Refugee Camps and Facilities in Sudan.”](#) November 2020; UNICEF. [“White Nile State Profile.”](#) 2022.
4. Interview with humanitarian KI in Kosti, White Nile State, Sudan.
5. IOM-UNHCR. [Sudan-South Sudan Population Flow Monitoring Dashboard](#). Accessed 2 June, 2023.
6. Ibid.
7. IOM. “Population Estimates: South Sudan.” 2022; Ibid.
8. IOM-UNHCR. [Sudan-South Sudan Population Flow Monitoring Dashboard](#). Accessed 2 June, 2023.
9. Craze, Joshua. [“Upper Nile Prepares to Return to War.”](#) March 2023.
10. NRC. [“Sudan’s White Nile Camps – Multi-sectoral needs assessment.”](#) 26 September 2022.
11. Exchange rate as of 8th June 2023. Conversion from xe.com.
12. REACH. [JMMI Dashboard](#).
13. Ibid.
14. IOM. “Population Estimates: South Sudan.” 2022; Ibid; IOM-UNHCR. [Sudan-South Sudan Population Flow Monitoring Dashboard](#). Accessed 2 June, 2023.

## ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).