

Situation Overview: Unity State, South Sudan

February 2017

REACH Informing more effective humanitarian action

Introduction

Displacement trends, population needs and humanitarian access have all been negatively affected by the insecurity resulting from the ongoing fighting in Unity State since July 2016. As humanitarians were able to upscale services in catchment areas outside formal displacement sites from late December, REACH observed marked improvements in population trends and access to most services in January. However, not all of these reported improvements have continued in February. On 20 February 2017, the Integrated Food Security Phase (IPC) Technical Working Group declared a state of localised famine in Leer and Mayendit Counties as a result of deteriorating food security situation in Central Unity.¹ Also, other sectors such as WASH have returned to negative trends.

To inform the response of humanitarians working outside of formal settlement sites, REACH is conducting an assessment of hard-to-reach areas in South Sudan, for which data on communities across the Greater Upper Nile region is collected on a monthly basis.

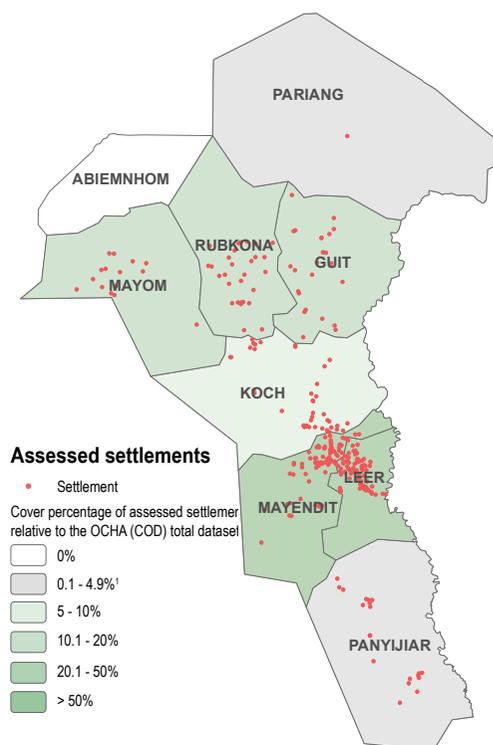
Between 6 and 24 February 2017, REACH interviewed 537 Key Informants (KIs) from 288 settlements in 7 of the 9 counties in Unity State. 314 KIs were interviewed in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians site (Bentiu PoC) and 223 were interviewed in Nyal. Findings

have been triangulated using focus group discussions (FGDs), secondary data, and previous REACH assessments of hard-to-reach areas of Unity State.

Two-thirds of the respondents interviewed had arrived in their displacement location in January or February, and therefore had up-to-date information about the village from which they had been displaced, in order to ensure an accurate understanding of current displacement and population dynamics. Other respondents had recent information about a certain village through contact with someone (usually a relative) that is currently living there.

This Situation Overview provides an update to key findings from the January Situation Overview for Unity State. The first section analyses displacement trends in Unity State in February, and the second section evaluates the population dynamics in the assessed communities, as well as access to food and basic services for both IDP and non-displaced communities.

It should be noted that not enough settlements in Panyijiar were assessed in February to be able to report substantively on that county. It has therefore been excluded from REACH analysis in this report.



Map 1: REACH assessment coverage of Unity State, February 2017

Population Movement and Displacement

Although no population estimates were published at the end of February, figures from mid-February suggest that the population of Bentiu PoC has been gradually decreasing since the large influx of new arrivals in November 2016. By mid-February, the

population was 118,851², down from 120,011 at the beginning of February.³

However, it is highly likely that recorded movement to formal displacement sites does not adequately reflect the extent of ongoing population movement in Unity State. Many people from the most conflict-affected parts of the state are reportedly unable or unwilling to use the road that traverses southern Unity State to Bentiu PoC. Numerous incidents of looting, physical attacks and abductions of young female travellers by armed groups were reportedly experienced firsthand by FGD participants who used the road in February. As a result, many people who have been displaced from their homes prefer to remain hidden in the bush, despite the pronounced lack of food and access to services in such areas, rather than risk travelling to a formal displacement site.

Furthermore, despite the ongoing upscaling of humanitarian services in catchment areas and the possible decrease in displacement suggested by recent PoC population estimates, an IRC assessment of the Nhialdiu area concluded that many communities in Rubkona (and, although not assessed by IRC, likely also Guit) continue to rely on general food distributions in Bentiu PoC. As a result, these communities remain vulnerable to gender-based violence, looting and physical attacks as people travel regularly from their

1 IRC, GBV Assessment in Nhialdiu, February 2017.

2 IOM, Bentiu Population PoC Count: 13-15 February 2017.

3 IOM, Bentiu Population PoC Count: 31 January-2 February 2017.

4 IRC, GBV Assessment in Nhialdiu, February 2017.



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METHODOLOGY

To provide an overview of the situation in largely inaccessible areas of Unity State, REACH uses primary data provided by key informants who have recently arrived, or receive regular information, from their pre-displacement location or “Area of Knowledge”.

Information for this report was collected from key informants in the Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site and Nyal in Unity State throughout February 2017.

The first phase of the assessment methodology comprised a participatory mapping exercise to map the relevant settlements in Unity State. In-depth interviews were then conducted with selected participants using a standardised survey tool comprising questions on displacement trends, population needs, and access to basic services.

After data collection was completed, all data was examined at the settlement level, and settlements were assigned the modal response. When no consensus could be found for a settlement, that settlement was not included in reporting. Descriptive statistics and geospatial analysis were then used to analyse the data.

It must be noted that this represents a **change in methodology as of December 2016**, as REACH previously analysed data at the community level. This means that **this report is not directly comparable with Situation Overviews from before December 2016**.

village to the PoC to bring back food.⁴

For more information about displacement trends in Unity State, please refer to the December 2016⁵ and January 2017⁶ Situation Overviews.

Situation in Assessed Communities

Demographic profile

Remaining population in assessed villages

Seventy-four per cent of assessed settlements reported that most of the local community continues to live in their normal residences, which is comparable to January (73%) and represents a positive trend compared to December (63%). However, 23% of assessed settlements reported that the majority of the population was living in the bush, which represents an increase compared to January (17%).

Only settlements in conflict-affected Leer (47%), Mayendit (35%) and Koch (16%) reported that the majority of the local community population was living in the bush. This is consistent with findings from FGDs conducted in Bentiu PoC, which suggest that fleeing to the bush is usually the first response of a settlement population when their village is directly affected by conflict, after which they often remain hidden in the bush for weeks or months before deciding to make their way to a formal displacement site.

Furthermore, around a third of settlements in conflict-affected Leer (30%), Koch (32%) and

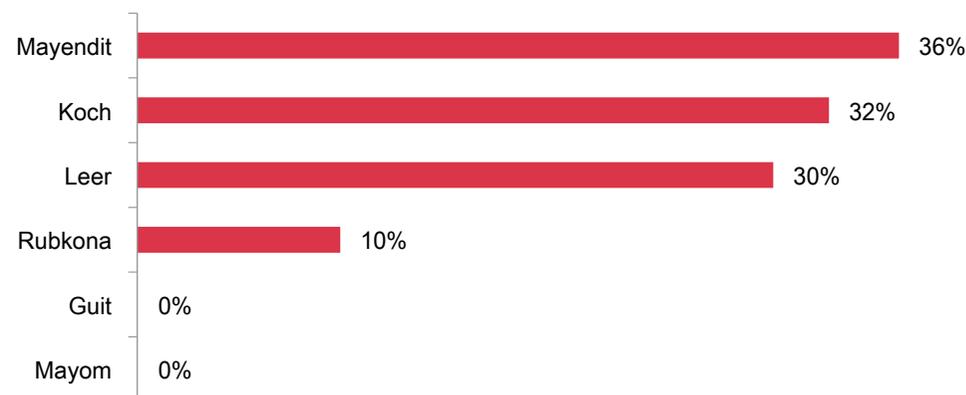


Figure 1: Proportion of settlements reporting that the majority of the remaining population is elderly, by county, February 2017

Mayendit (36%) reported that the majority of the remaining population in the settlement were elderly, which was not reported by any assessed settlement in stable Mayom, nor in Guit, which is also comparatively more stable than the counties in central Unity. This reflects another consequence of conflict that is commonly reported during FGDs, whereby those with the physical capacity to do so flee the area first, leaving behind the elderly, disabled and female-headed households with extremely young children.

This is also why the reported gender balance in conflict-affected areas tends to be much less proportionate than in stable areas. Ten per cent of assessed settlements in Leer, 16% in Koch and 25% in Mayendit reported that the entire remaining population in the settlement is female, while none of the assessed settlements in Mayom or Guit reported the same.

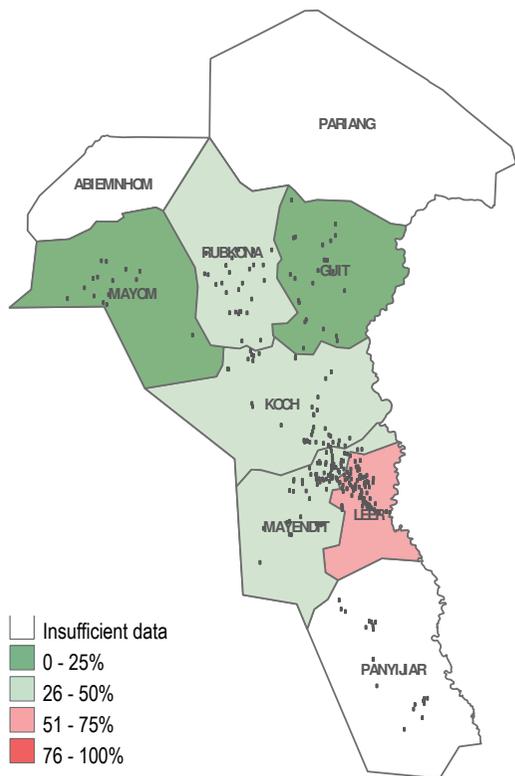
IDP population in assessed villages

Forty-three per cent of assessed settlements reported that they were hosting IDPs in February, representing an increase compared to January (36%). Of these, the vast majority (89%) reported that the IDP population had arrived since the renewed crisis in July 2016, and more than half (52%) reportedly arrived following the more recent upsurge in violence in November. This suggests that despite apparent improvements in population and displacement dynamics, high levels of displacement remain an ongoing trend in Unity State.

As with local community populations, only settlements in the conflict-affected counties of Leer (31% of assessed settlements reporting an IDP presence), Koch (25%) and Mayendit (23%) reported that most IDPs were living in the bush.

5 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, December 2016.

6 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.



Map 2: Proportion of settlements reporting an IDP presence, February 2017

Food security

Only 39% of assessed settlements reported that they had adequate access to food in February, which represents a substantial decrease compared to January (47%). This may be attributable to the beginning of the lean season in South Sudan, which generally begins in February and peaks in July. During the lean season, the previous year's harvest is completed and has already been largely consumed, and wild foods, fish and pasture

for livestock all become increasingly scarce as water tables dry up.

As illustrated in Map 3, reported access to food varies substantially by county, with most of northern Unity reporting adequate access and most of conflict-affected central Unity reporting inadequate access. It therefore follows that the most commonly reported reasons for inadequate access to food were conflict-related, with 40% of assessed settlements reporting that it was too unsafe to cultivate or harvest, and 22% reporting that their crops had been destroyed by fighting. According to FAO, the national output of the 2016 harvest (completed in January 2017) was below average and 10% lower than that of the 2015 harvest, largely due to the impact of the conflict and consequent displacement.⁷

In some parts of Mayom, food insecurity is becoming an increasingly pronounced issue despite the relative stability in the county. All of the assessed settlements reporting inadequate access to food in Mayom cited natural disaster as the primary reason. FGDs suggest that flooding has caused substantial crop damage in Mayom, and a recent ACTED assessment found that the added stress of successive crop failures, drought, delayed rains and heavy rains has exacerbated food insecurity and exhausted the coping capacity of some Mayom communities.⁸

As in previous months, foraging was the most commonly reported source of food (38% of assessed settlements, which is comparable

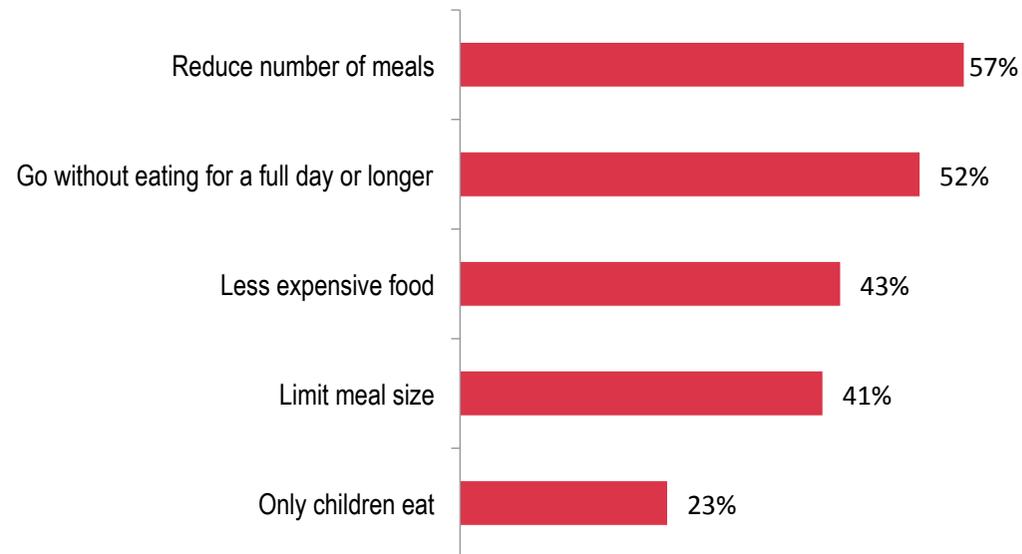


Figure 2: Top 5 reported food security coping mechanisms⁹, by proportion of settlements, February 2017

with December and January), followed distantly by cultivation and NGO assistance at 23% and 20% respectively. FGD participants reported a heavy reliance on water lilies (collected by women) and fish (procured by men) for survival, but these will become increasingly difficult to find as water sources dry up.

Numerous negative coping mechanisms were also widely reported, including reducing the number of meals eaten each day (reported by 57% of assessed settlements) and going entire days without eating (52%). As illustrated in Figure 2, the five most commonly reported coping mechanisms were directly related to food consumption (as opposed to strategies for increasing resource capacity, such as selling livestock or borrowing money), suggesting

that the capacity of many communities to cope effectively with food insecurity has been severely eroded.

On 20 February 2017, the Integrated Food Security Phase (IPC) Technical Working Group declared a state of famine in Leer and Mayendit Counties, and also identified Koch as likely to experience famine in the imminent future.¹⁰ Famine is declared when access to food is severely limited for at least 20% of the households in the area (which is supported by REACH data), the Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate exceeds 30%, and the daily death rate exceeds 2 per 10,000 people.

As a result of the IPC declaration, a substantial scale-up of the humanitarian response in central Unity State is expected to occur over the coming

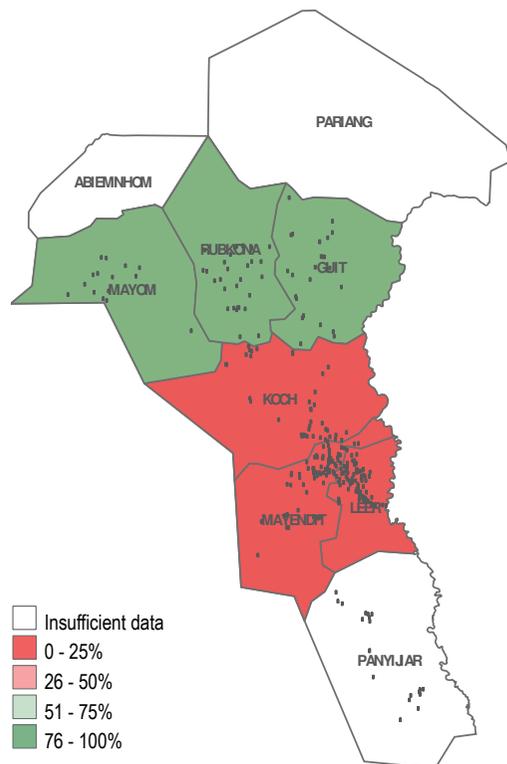
7 FAO, Country Brief: South Sudan, February 2017.

8 ACTED, Rapid Needs Assessment: Mayom County, March 2017.

9 Respondents could select more than one option.

10 IPC, IPC Global Alert - South Sudan - Localized famine and unprecedented levels of acute malnutrition in Greater Unity, February 2017.

11 Global Logistics Cluster, How the Logistics Cluster is preparing for the famine response in South Sudan, March 2017.



Map 3: Proportion of settlements reporting adequate access to food, February 2017

months.¹¹ However, FEWS NET warns that the capacity of humanitarians to effectively address this emergency will continue to be restricted by the high levels of insecurity in these conflict-affected counties, as humanitarian access to these areas is likely to remain unpredictable throughout 2017.¹²

Livelihoods

The vast majority (95% or more) of assessed settlements in Guit, Koch, Mayom and Rubkona Counties reported access to land. By contrast,

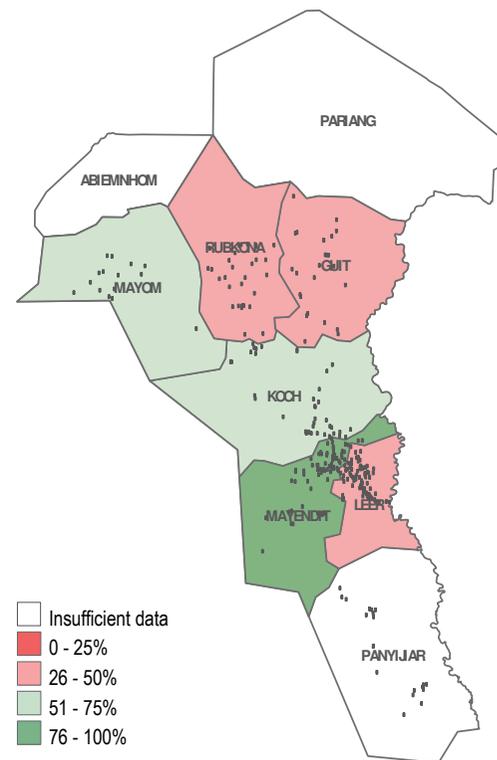
only 45% of settlements in Leer and 77% in Mayendit reported the same. This is supported by FGDs in Nyal, in which many participants from central Unity State have reported that they are unable to return to their land because it has or had been occupied by members of armed groups.

Other livelihoods trends observed in February are comparable with those reported in the November Situation Overview, including relatively low access to agricultural inputs and few casual job opportunities.¹³

Protection

In what is likely a clear indication of the current protection situation in Unity State, **conflict was reported to be the biggest cause of death by 64% of assessed settlements in February** (compared to 49% in January), of which an average of 14 conflict-related deaths was reported per settlement within the past month. The protection context in Unity State has changed in highly concerning ways since the month of July, with an increase in reports of major violence committed against civilians, particularly in counties such as Leer, Koch and Mayendit. According to FGDs conducted with new arrivals in Bentiu PoC, this trend has continued into February, with killings, abductions, physical and sexual violence, and looting of food stocks all reportedly triggering displacement to the PoC.

Protection trends are comparable to those reported in the November 2016¹⁴ and January 2017¹⁵ Situation Overviews, with the primary



Map 6: Proportion of settlements reporting access to safe water, February 2017

concerns being killing or injury for men, sexual violence for women and abduction for children. Forced recruitment continues to be a clear post-July Crisis trend with regards to protection concerns for men, as reported by 16% of assessed settlements in February, which is comparable with previous months.

Water and Sanitation

Fifty-eight per cent of assessed settlements reported access to safe drinking water (usually a borehole), representing a decrease compared

to January (64%). This may be attributable to the ongoing decline of water sources and lowering of water tables in boreholes as the dry season continues in South Sudan.

FGDs conducted with new arrivals suggest that the majority of the population of Unity State likely obtains their drinking water from sources of unsafe water such as rivers and swamps, even in cases where villages technically have access to safe water. For example, many FGD participants living in villages with at least one functioning borehole reported that most of the settlement population obtains their water from unsafe sources, either because the borehole is too far for most people to access on a daily basis or because the borehole does not provide enough safe water for everyone. Furthermore, an IRC assessment of Koch Town found that due to poor maintenance, even functioning boreholes may produce unsanitary water.¹⁶

Latrine use remained extremely low in Unity State in February, with only 5% of assessed settlements reporting that at least half of the population uses them. These findings are of particular relevance in light of the ongoing cholera outbreak in Unity State (see health section below).

For more information about the general WASH context in Unity State, please refer to the October Situation Overview.¹⁷

Education

Only 20% of assessed communities reported access to education services in February, which represents a decrease compared to both

12 FEWS NET, Food Security Outlook: A Famine (IPC Phase 5) is likely occurring in parts of Unity State, February 2017.

13 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, November 2016.

14 Ibid.

15 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.

16 IRC, Beyond Bentiu Hazards and Vulnerability Analysis: Koch, February 2017.

17 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, October 2016.

December (36%) and January (24%). However, this state average masks a high degree of county variation. Stable Mayom reported the highest level of access to education at 80%, while conflict-affected Leer reported the lowest level at only 2%. It must also be noted that in Rubkona, where humanitarian education programming is most extensive, many education services are not reflected by REACH data because they are concentrated in locations that are unlikely to be covered by survey respondents, such as Bentiu PoC and Bentiu Town.

Eighty-four per cent of assessed settlements in Leer County reporting no access to education cited the direct or indirect impact of conflict as the most important reason (insecurity, abandonment of schools by teachers, or school buildings destroyed by fighting). Most schools that do exist in conflict-affected areas are often held under trees in remote displacement sites, and lack adequate school supplies or qualified teachers. However, FGDs conducted in Bentiu PoC suggest that NGOs are beginning to provide education services in parts of Leer for the first time, which may be reflected in future reporting.

Reported attendance rates are comparable to those described in the December Situation Overview, with far fewer girls reportedly attending school than boys.¹⁸

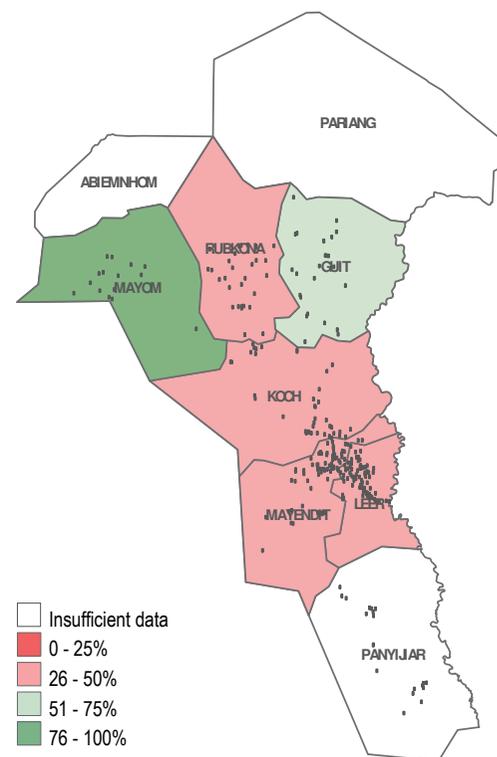
Health

Access to health services remained low in February but appears to have continually

improved since December. Forty-seven per cent of assessed settlements reported access to health services in February, which is slightly more than the 44% that reported the same in January. This represents a large improvement on reported access to health services in December (34%), which itself was an improvement on previous months.¹⁹ Of the assessed settlements reporting access to health services, 67% reported that the health facility could be accessed by walking for an hour or less. At the time of writing, only partial data on functioning health services in Unity State was available for verification.

It should be noted that access to health services in Rubkona is extremely likely to be underreported because services are concentrated in Bentiu PoC and other locations that are unlikely to be covered by REACH data, such as Bentiu and Rubkona Towns. Furthermore, as previously stated, not enough settlements were assessed to report substantively on Panyijiar in February. Accounting for these constraints, it appears likely that access to health services is higher in counties that are relatively stable (such as Mayom) and physically accessible for humanitarians (Rubkona and Guit), and lower in the conflict-affected counties of central Unity State.

Of those reporting no access, 74% of assessed settlements cited the direct or indirect impact of the ongoing conflict as the most important reason. Conflict-related factors include insecurity, facilities destroyed by violence, and the abandonment of facilities by medical staff.



Map 4: Proportion of settlements reporting access to health services, February 2017

Seventeen per cent of assessed settlements reported that no health facility had ever existed in their area.

After conflict (see protection section above), cholera was reportedly the most common cause of unnatural death in Unity State in February, as reported by 18% of assessed settlements, of which an average of 9 cholera-related deaths in the previous month were reported per settlement. However, it must be noted that these responses reflect KI perceptions only, as medical confirmation that cholera was the

actual cause of death is likely impossible in most cases.

This marks a substantial shift from January, when malaria was reportedly the most common cause of death and cholera was only the third most common cause. This may be attributable to the ongoing shift to dry season dynamics, whereby mosquito populations shrink (hence fewer reported malaria deaths) and sourcing clean water becomes increasingly challenging (hence more reported cholera deaths). However, further investigation would be required to confirm this.

In its February cholera update, WHO identified riverside and island populations in Leer and Panyijiar as cholera hotspots, and also highlighted the negative impact of restricted humanitarian access on cholera transmission in Unity State.²⁰

For more information about the ongoing outbreak of cholera in Unity State, please refer to the October 2016²¹ and January 2017²² Situation Overviews.

Shelter

Shelter conditions also appear to be continuing to improve for local communities compared to previous months, with many more settlements reporting traditional tukuls as the primary shelter type than in 2016. In most assessed counties, the reported proportion of tukuls (as opposed to more temporary structures) remained the same or increased in February. However, the state average was negatively affected by a large

18 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, December 2016.

19 It should be noted that REACH methodology changed in December 2016, which may at least partially account for any reported changes in access compared to previous months.

20 WHO, Situation Report #109 on Cholera in South Sudan, February 2017.

21 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, October 2016.

22 REACH, Situation Overview: Unity State, January 2017.

reported decrease in Leer (from 51% in January to 10% in February). This may be partially attributable to heavy fighting in and around Thornyor in February, in which shelters were reportedly destroyed, but further investigation would be required to confirm this.

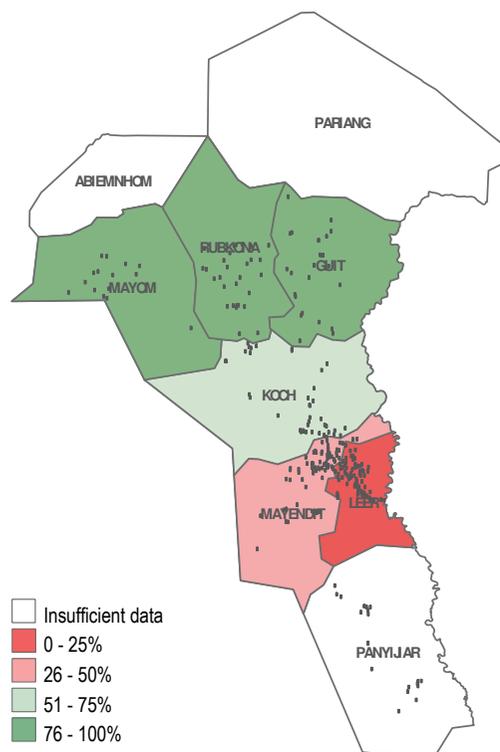
As a result, overall only 42% of assessed settlements reported tukuls as the primary shelter type, compared to 56% in January. Nevertheless, other shelter indicators suggest that conditions are indeed continuing to improve. For example, 75% of assessed settlements reported that none of the local community population was living in poor quality shelters, compared to only 43% in January.

Furthermore, the proportion of assessed settlements reporting that most local community members are not living in shelters has further decreased to 1% in February, from 4% in December and 2% in January.

By contrast, reported shelter conditions for IDPs in February suggest a return to more negative 2016 trends. Sixty-four per cent of assessed settlements reporting an IDP presence reported rakoobas as the primary shelter type, compared to only 40% in January, and 46% reported that at least 50% of IDPs were sharing shelters with the host community, compared to only 39% in January.

Conclusion

The situation in Unity State remains highly volatile, and overall access to services is still low. Humanitarian actors are rapidly upscaling



Map 5: Proportion of settlements reporting tukuls as the primary shelter type for the local community, February 2017

their services beyond formal displacement sites, which should lead to substantial improvements in access to services, particularly in counties such as Rubkona and Guit. However, after sweeping improvements in January, some displacement trends, population needs and access to services (particularly food and safe water) appear to have been negatively affected by the continued onset of the dry season in February.

Humanitarians are likely to continue to be

restricted by insecurity in some of the most vulnerable parts of Unity State. Addressing food security needs in conflict-affected Leer, Mayendit and Koch, where 100,000 people are now considered to be facing or likely facing famine conditions, will be particularly challenging. **Food security therefore remains the priority humanitarian need in Unity State**, particularly in light of the incumbent lean season.

Although access to health services appears to be continuing to improve, the majority of assessed settlements continue to report inadequate access. Similarly, it appears that the majority of the population of Unity State continues to rely on unsafe sources of water, and open defecation remains an almost universal practice. This is all of particular concern considering the ongoing cholera outbreak.

The conflict-affected populations in Unity State are among the most vulnerable and underserved, and a sustained, large-scale humanitarian effort will be required to address their needs. However, this can only be possible if reliable, unrestricted access is assured to humanitarian actors in both the immediate and longer term.

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