

# Food Security Assessment

## Pibor

August 2024 | South Sudan



### OVERVIEW

**Assessment findings suggest that food insecurity during the 2024 lean season – specifically, the period between May and early July – was atypically severe in parts of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA).** Findings support [IPC](#) and [FEWS NET](#) analyses, which projected widespread severe acute food insecurity, including pockets of catastrophic hunger (IPC Phase-5), between April and July. Community members attributed the situation to large-scale attacks in [2020](#) and [2022-23](#), which eroded pastoral livelihoods and destroyed critical infrastructure. Prolonged and repeated disruption to humanitarian food assistance in 2024, chronic movement restrictions caused by localized insecurity, and spiraling food prices were also identified as aggravating factors.

**Health and nutrition data reveal an extremely severe public health crisis in Pibor at the peak of the 2024 lean season.** A SMART survey conducted between May-June 2024 recorded a Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate of 25.4% and a Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) rate of 7.5%, both of which surpass the emergency thresholds set by the World Health Organization (WHO) of 15% and 2%, respectively. The GAM rate approaches but does not surpass the IPC threshold consistent with famine (30%), defined by Weight-for-height scores. The SMART survey also recorded a Crude Death Rate (CDR) of 1.0, which meets the WHO threshold for emergency-level mortality. Assessment findings suggest that poor health and nutrition outcomes were driven by extremely inadequate food consumption and critically poor sanitary conditions.

**Significant inter-communal violence has declined in western Pibor since mid-2023.** A series of [peace conferences](#) in 2023 and 2024 – led in recent months by a newly appointed Chief Administrator

– appear to have mitigated large-scale hostilities between communities from Pibor and neighbouring Jonglei State. However, clashes in [April](#) and [May](#) suggest the situation is fragile. Furthermore, chronic localized insecurity continues to disrupt humanitarian operations. Ambushes along the Bor-Pibor road in the first quarter of 2024 stalled prepositioning efforts, and multiple food distributions were delayed or missed as a result of armed robberies. Meanwhile, one nutrition site in Gumuruk County was closed for ten months between August 2023 and May 2024 because of security concerns.

**A recent attack in Greater Kapoeta is reportedly driving severe food insecurity in eastern Pibor.**

Armed youth from Pibor launched a coordinated [cattle raid](#) on neighbouring Kapoeta East County in April. Kapoeta authorities' decision to close the Boma-Kapoeta road after the attack has blocked a key supply route into eastern Pibor. Humanitarian key informants stressed that the situation in Boma and Maruwo is extremely concerning and set to worsen without a resolution. Eastern Pibor was deprioritized for food assistance in 2021, and currently does not receive general food distribution.

**Humanitarian conditions in Pibor are expected to deteriorate throughout the rainy season.**

A major flood event is [ongoing](#) in South Sudan. Humanitarian partners [estimate](#) that half of the population in Pibor – 105,540 people – could be affected. Flooding could displace thousands, obstruct humanitarian access, and increase the prevalence of disease and malnutrition. Compounding this, disruption to an emergency food distribution between September and December will drive severe food security outcomes in parts of western Pibor, where chronic localized insecurity and a lack of equipment have eroded the mitigative effects of farming and fishing.

## BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

Assessments regularly **identify** the Greater Pibor Administrative Area – and, specifically, the western counties of “lowland” Pibor, comprised of Pibor, Gumuruk, Lekuangle and Verteth – as one of the most severe humanitarian contexts in South Sudan. In 2020, the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) made an *IPC Phase 5 (Famine) with reasonable evidence classification* in western Pibor. Thereafter, the IPC reported pockets of catastrophic hunger during all of 2022, the first quarter of 2023 and, most recently, the first half of 2024. In October 2023, the IPC **projected** that 75% of the population in Pibor would face acute food insecurity between December 2023 and July 2024. This included 10,987 people (5% of the population) in IPC Phase-5 (Catastrophe).

**The situation in Pibor in the first half of 2024 may have been worse than projected by the IPC.** IPC projections assumed half of the population in Pibor would receive monthly food rations until July 2024. However, residual flood water and chronic localized insecurity have eroded the mitigative effects of humanitarian food distributions, which were regularly delayed between January and June. For example, less than one-third of targeted beneficiaries received food assistance in May, according to data shared by a humanitarian partner. Furthermore, focus group participants commonly attributed the severity of the 2024 lean season to prolonged delays between food distributions.

**This qualitative assessment, conducted between July 23rd and August 2nd, sought to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the situation in the GPAA.** Findings are intended to inform county-level classifications for Pibor at the October 2024 Integrated Phase Classification workshop, whilst ensuring that donors, implementing partners, and government officials have an accurate understanding of humanitarian conditions.

## UNDERLYING VULNERABILITY

**Large-scale conflict events in 2020 and 2022-23, erratic weather patterns and chronic localized insecurity have eroded household resilience and driven severe underlying vulnerability across much of the Greater Pibor Administrative Area.** Findings suggest that extensive cattle raids in 2020 and 2022-23 have severed many households’

access to traditional livelihood activities. Participants explained that nomadic pastoralism – once the dominant livelihood activity in western Pibor – has become difficult, **dangerous** and otherwise impossible. Furthermore, community members described large-deficit harvests caused by variable weather patterns, a shortage of seeds and tools, and widespread perceptions of insecurity that disincentivize planting. As a result, assessment findings suggest that households depend on humanitarian food assistance (HFA). In fact, it is likely that many households – especially those in remote areas of the western counties – were heavily reliant on HFA at the start of the 2024 lean season. This supports SMART survey results showing that HFA was the main food source for households in Pibor between May-June.

## SHOCKS & HAZARDS

The 2024 lean season was extremely severe, according to focus group participants. This was commonly attributed to significant cattle raids in 2020 and 2022-23, a large-deficit harvest in 2023, prolonged disruption to humanitarian food distributions in 2024, and spiraling food prices. These factors considered, **IPC projections** that at least 5% of the population (10,987 people) in Pibor would face catastrophic food insecurity between December 2023 and July 2024 are plausible.

**Households’ access to a traditional livelihood source and coping mechanism declined sharply following violent asset stripping in early-2023.**

The severity of the 2024 lean season was widely associated with extensive and violent cattle raids in 2020 and 2022-23, which deprived households of a foundational food source and coping mechanism. Participants explained that most households in Gumuruk and Lekuangle lost all of their cattle during the attacks in 2022-23, a finding that corroborates previous humanitarian assessments.<sup>1</sup> Few households in these locations have rebuilt their herds, according to community members, key informants, and field observations.

**Erratic weather patterns disrupted the 2023 harvest, reducing the availability of food at the beginning of 2024.** The severity of the 2024 lean season was also attributed to atypically dry conditions between June-July 2023, which **spoiled** many households’ maize and short-maturing sorghum. As a result, most households **exhausted** their food stores atypically early in February, and the

2024 lean season began earlier than usual.

**Ambushes and residual flood water stalled prepositioning efforts in early-2024, limiting the availability of a critical lean season food source.**

Humanitarian storage facilities in western Pibor were [looted](#) and [destroyed](#) during the violence in 2020 and 2022-23. Whereas before the attacks, partners prepositioned food in each of Gumuruk, Lekuangole, Pibor and Verteth, all food assistance was prepositioned in Pibor Town in 2024. However, the period for prepositioning was shorter in 2024 than in previous years, according to humanitarian key informants. While prepositioning usually begins in January, one key informant confirmed that [poor road conditions](#) and [ambushes](#) delayed the process until February. Attacks on convoys transiting the Bor-Pibor road were especially disruptive. Whenever an incident occurred, deliveries were reportedly suspended for two weeks at a time. Early rains in May further shortened the window for prepositioning, according to another key informant. As a result, one informant estimated that half of the stock was not prepositioned before the rainy season began.

**Poor road conditions and localized insecurity disrupted food distributions, greatly reducing households' access to food during the peak of the lean season.** Food was distributed via commercial trucks between January and March. Thereafter, road conditions deteriorated, commercial trucks returned to Bor, and partners relied on amphibious vehicles ("sherps") to deliver food. Sherps can navigate the difficult terrain between Pibor Town and the western counties. However, they have 10% the carrying capacity of commercial trucks. As a result, a single distribution in Verteth took two months to complete, according to a humanitarian key informant. Chronic localized insecurity – driven, in part, by violent clashes between age-sets – posed another major operational constraint. Deliveries in Manyabol and Vuvet were reportedly suspended following incidents in May, while armed bandits [intercepted and looted](#) a food distribution intended for school children in Lekuangole County in June. In fact, a humanitarian key informant confirmed that three of five distributions in Lekuangole were missed between January and May.

**Widespread sharing diluted food distributions, further reducing the availability of food during the lean season.** The last registration exercise occurred in 2019. Registration reportedly took place

over a short period of time, often in central locations and with little advance notice. Those households living in remote communities, or those without access to timely information, were not enrolled. Others reportedly lost their ration cards at various stages in the intervening years. As a result, food distributions were shared among a large number of households, diminishing per-person consumption and diluting the mitigative effects of HFA. Notably, a new round of biometric registration was ongoing in GPAA at the time of data collection, according to a humanitarian key informant. This suggests the caseload will increase and sharing will reduce.

**Spiraling market prices restricted financial access to food at the peak of the lean season.**

Households that migrated to Pibor Town in search of food were engaged in arduous, low-paid and otherwise unproductive activities that generated a small income, especially as compared with [spiraling market prices](#). The Joint Market Monitoring Initiative [recorded](#) an 87% increase in the MSSMEB Food Basket – an indicator that represents the minimum cost of food items required to support a family of six people for one month – in Pibor Town between March and July. Poor road conditions between Bor and Pibor, which forced some traders to use flights to restock, contributed to high prices. So too did standing flood water between Pibor Town and the western counties, which hindered efforts to move stock. For example, a trader in Lekuangole explained that riverine movement – which cost three times as much as road transport – was the only way to deliver commodities to Lekuangole County.

## CURRENT PERIOD (MAY - JULY 2024)

### FOOD CONSUMPTION

**Findings suggest most households in western Pibor experienced extremely inadequate food consumption at the peak of the 2024 lean season.**

In the months prior to data collection, household diets were said to have comprised mainly of grass, lallop and cabbage leaves. Findings therefore support SMART survey data showing extremely poor dietary diversity and quality among households in Pibor between May-June. More specifically, most households (62%) exhibited Food Consumption Scores indicative of IPC Phase-4 (Emergency), while 55% of households exhibited Dietary Diversity Scores indicative of IPC Phase-3 (Emergency) and

above. Assessment findings also suggest that some households were engaged in severe food-based coping strategies at the time of data collection. Multiple interviewees in Pibor Town, for instance, reported going days without eating because of a lack of money to buy food. This also supports SMART survey results, which reveal widespread engagement (78% of households) in food-based coping strategies indicative of IPC Phase-3 *or worse* between May-June.

## LIVELIHOOD CHANGE AND COPING

**Large-scale cattle raids have eroded households' traditional livelihood activities and coping capacity.** Whereas before the attacks, households consumed animal products – blood and milk – or liquidated their animals – by sale or slaughter – in order to access food or money to buy food during the lean season, few households could practise these behaviours at the time of data collection.

**Significant food shortages forced some households to employ coping strategies associated with extremely severe hunger.** In July, a humanitarian key informant based in Jonglei State confirmed that Murle women and youths were travelling to Akobo County to access food. This is an unusual and dangerous means of accessing food. The Murle and Lou Nuer – the predominant ethnic group in Akobo County – share years of violent enmity. While tensions between the two groups appear to have eased in recent months, renewed clashes in May suggest the situation is fragile. The same key informant confirmed that this type of movement last occurred in 2021 when a large percentage of households in Pibor experienced [famine-like](#) levels of hunger.

**Other households were forced to undertake dangerous journeys to access food.** Temporary migration to Pibor Town was widespread and ongoing at the time of data collection. Whereas in previous years, a smaller percentage of households used this strategy – mainly to visit family or escape an attack – findings suggest that an elevated proportion of households had migrated between the western counties and Pibor, and that hunger was the main push factor at the time of data collection. Participants described treacherous journeys involving ambushes, sexual violence and robberies.

## NUTRITION

**Nutrition data reveal a severe public health**

**crisis in Pibor at the peak of the 2024 lean season.** The SMART survey found Severe Acute Malnutrition and Global Acute Malnutrition rates that surpassed WHO emergency thresholds between May-June. Assessment findings show that SAM rates in 2024 exceeded those in the previous two years, further suggesting that the 2024 lean season was exceptionally severe. Data provided by a humanitarian NGO show that recorded cases of SAM among pregnant and lactating women (PLW) at two health facilities in Gumuruk and Lekuangle were higher in the first seven months of 2024 than in all of 2023 and 2022 (895 compared to 863 and 401, respectively). This corroborates one humanitarian key informant, who reported that rates of acute malnutrition among pregnant and lactating women (PLW) were “extremely high” before the rainy season began. It also aligns with SMART survey results showing that a significant proportion (52.1%) of PLW were “at risk” of moderate acute malnutrition between May-June.

## HEALTH

**An increased disease prevalence likely contributed to severe health outcomes in Pibor at the peak of the 2024 lean season.** Health facility data reveal a significant increase in recorded cases of watery diarrhoea in Pibor between June and July. Furthermore, recorded cases of malaria were considerably higher in each month between January and July than the 5-year historic average.<sup>2</sup> An increased disease burden was likely driven, at least in part, by widespread reliance on unprotected and unsafe water sources (62%), and on open defecation (94%), both recorded during the SMART survey between May-June. A sharp decline in health conditions throughout the 2024 lean season plausibly contributed to severe mortality outcomes. For example, the SMART survey recorded a retrospective Crude Death Rate (CDR) of 1.0, which equals the emergency-level threshold set by the World Health Organization. Approximately one-quarter of deaths were attributed to illness. Supporting this, focus group participants regularly echoed concerning yet unverified [reports](#) of hunger-related deaths<sup>3</sup> in Pibor during the 2024 lean season.

## PROJECTIONS & RISK FACTORS (AUGUST - DECEMBER 2024)

**Assessment findings and secondary literature suggest that humanitarian conditions will deteriorate during the remainder of 2024, due**



primarily to a large-deficit harvest, continued disruption to humanitarian food assistance, the prospect of renewed inter-communal violence, a high risk of severe flooding, increased movement barriers between remote communities and health services, simmering tension among communities in eastern Pibor and Greater Kapoeta, and chronic localized insecurity driven by clashes between age-sets.

**The usual mitigating factors in Pibor - agriculture and fishing - might not prevent a further deterioration in food security.** Participants in most interviews believed that the harvest would exhaust atypically early as a result of erratic rainfall, a shortage of seeds, and widespread perceptions of insecurity that disincentivized planting. In parallel, heavier rainfall and the swelling of local rivers and streams will increase the availability of fish, as is typical in the region at this time of year. Yet many households reportedly lack the equipment necessary to engage in this activity, which suggests that fishing will offer limited improvement to most households' consumption patterns in the coming months.

**Continued disruption to food distributions in late-2024 will drive severe food security outcomes in parts of western Pibor.** Assessment findings suggest that humanitarian food assistance (HFA) remains a critical food source in Pibor. Households' diminished access to traditional livelihood assets, combined with a large-deficit harvest, will likely drive continued reliance on HFA. In turn, further disruption to HFA could precipitate a marked deterioration in food security towards the end of 2024.

**Lowland Pibor has seen a relative lull in significant inter-communal violence through much of 2024, but the situation is volatile and renewed clashes would restrict households' access to food and basic services.** While previous efforts – most notably, the Pieri peace agreement [signed](#) in March 2021 – largely [failed](#) to mitigate hostilities between ethnic groups from Pibor and Jonglei State, a series of [peace conferences](#) convened in 2023 and 2024 appear to have reduced the frequency of inter-communal attacks. This corroborates one security database showing a marked decline in conflict-related fatalities in Pibor in 2024 compared to previous years. However, long-unresolved grievances from the violence in 2022-23 threaten to disturb the peace. Progress is fragile following renewed [clashes](#) in May that displaced

over 900 households in Lekuangle County. A resumption of large-scale hostilities would have disastrous consequences, not least for households' access to basic services. Amid rumours of impending attacks in February and March, for instance, health partners reportedly evacuated all facilities in Lekuangle and services did not resume for two weeks.

### **An extreme flood event in late-2024 will have disastrous consequences for food security and public health conditions in the GPAA.**

Severe flooding is expected in South Sudan in the second half of 2024. An estimated 105,540 people in Pibor could be affected. In 2019 and 2020, extreme flooding [displaced](#) thousands of people, [obstructed](#) the delivery of humanitarian food assistance, and [contributed to](#) an increase in disease prevalence and acute malnutrition. Violent conflict and asset stripping in late-2022, pervasive severe acute food insecurity, and continuous disruption to humanitarian operations indicate that many communities in Pibor are ill-prepared for [another year](#) of severe flooding. If large-scale flooding unfolds [as expected](#) in Pibor, flood waters would likely inundate farmland while obstructing households' access to alternate food sources, including wild foods and bush meat. Flood water could also exacerbate the spread of disease by displacing people into congested sites and further restricting households' physical access to health services.

**Public health conditions are expected to deteriorate throughout the rainy season.** Stagnant flood water, inadequate shelter and poor sanitary conditions will increase the prevalence of malaria and diarrhoea, according to health partners. Increasingly arduous journeys between remote communities and health facilities will worsen the situation. While heavier rainfall can facilitate riverine movement to Lekuangle County, recent [events](#) suggest this is a dangerous route. Furthermore, health and nutrition partners explained that locations in Gumuruk County will remain inaccessible for much of the year. A partner-led distribution and screening programme will pause between September and November, due to a gap in funding. In turn, persons in remote locations presenting symptoms of acute malnutrition will need to travel for several hours to access the main stabilization centre in Pibor Town.

### **A recent attack by Pibor youth in Eastern**

**Equatoria State threatens to spark retaliatory violence and is already driving severe food insecurity in the eastern counties of Pibor, according to humanitarian partners.** Simmering tension [coloured](#) over years by raiding and abductions culminated in a significant [cattle raid](#) perpetrated by armed youth in neighbouring Kapoeta East County in April 2024. An [unconfirmed](#) number of cattle were raided while scores of civilians were abducted and killed, according to independent news outlets. Authorities in Pibor promptly [launched](#) an investigation, and some abductees were [returned](#) by July. However, the situation remains unresolved. A humanitarian key informant reported that Toposa youth are mobilising for revenge. A second [attack](#) perpetrated by Pibor youth in July, this time in Kapoeta North County, will likely escalate tensions. So too will Kapoeta authorities' decision to close the Boma-Kapoeta road, an important [supply route](#) for communities in the eastern counties of Pibor.

The blockade could drive [increasingly severe food insecurity](#) in Boma and Maruwo, which were deprioritised in 2021 and currently do not receive general food distribution. A secondary trade route passing through the Ethiopian border town of Raat has also been closed intermittently by Ethiopian authorities, according to one key informant.

Meanwhile, drought conditions reportedly eroded the harvest in parts of eastern Pibor. Humanitarian key informants who visited the region in July stressed that the situation is extremely severe and likely to worsen should the closure of the Boma-Kapoeta road continue.

**Chronic localized insecurity in lowland Pibor, driven primarily by violent clashes between competing age-sets, could reduce the availability of food and restrict households' physical access to alternate food sources.** Age-sets are used to [configure](#) relationships and settle disputes. In recent years, however, certain age-sets have fragmented with increasingly [violent](#) consequences. A health partner with multiple years' experience in Pibor reported that clashes in April and May were the deadliest they had seen. Movement restrictions imposed by localized flooding could mitigate similar disputes in the second half of 2024. However, persistent and widespread perceptions of insecurity will likely restrict households' access to important food sources, including fish and wild animals. Furthermore, participants in multiple interviews feared that armed individuals would loot the harvest.

## METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

**Primary data was collected in Gumuruk, Lekuangle, Pibor (in-person) and Verteth (remote) counties of the GPAA between July 23rd and August 2nd 2024.** REACH conducted 24 focus group discussions and 12 key informant interviews. Focus group participants were sampled purposively, in collaboration with community leaders and the county-level Relief and Rehabilitation (RRC) office. Focus groups were conducted separately with men and women. Key informants included humanitarian service providers and local authorities.

Assessment findings build on a secondary data review conducted by REACH between July 8<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup>. This brief draws on analysis of data compiled by the Integrated Phase Classification (IPC), the Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission (CFSAM), the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI), the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) database, and the Food Security & Nutrition Monitoring Survey (FSNMS). Findings also draw on needs assessments and various other resources shared by humanitarian actors.

## Endnotes

- 1 Bilateral update from a humanitarian actor.
- 2 Bilateral update from a humanitarian actor.
- 3 Anecdotal reports of hunger-related deaths were not verified by REACH.

### ABOUT REACH

REACH is a leading humanitarian initiative that collects primary data and produces in-depth analysis to help aid actors make evidence-based decisions in support of crisis-affected people. With this in mind, our flagship research programmes aim to inform the prioritisation of aid according to levels of need - both crisis-level planning and targeted rapid response - as well as decisions around appropriate modalities of aid. Through our team of assessment, data, geospatial, and thematic specialists, we promote the design of people-centred research and set standards for collecting and analysing rigorous, high quality data in complex environments. Visit [www.impact-initiatives.org](http://www.impact-initiatives.org) and follow us @REACH\_info.