

Situation Overview: Greater Nyal West, South Sudan

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SUMMARY

Recently there has been a significant displacement of IDPs from Leer, Mayendit, and other counties to the islands in the swamps northwest of Nyal Town in Panyijar County. It is estimated that 2,500 to 3,500 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are now living there. Most are in need of humanitarian assistance, and are surviving with the help of the local host community.

From October 31st to November 6th, REACH carried out an assessment of 19 islands occupied by IDPs in the swamps northwest of Nyal Town. The mission was designed to fill critical information gaps on unvisited IDP sites in northwestern Panyijar county. 19 new sites were added to the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). The team found there to be thousands of displaced persons living on the islands in need of immediate humanitarian support.

CONTEXT

A renewed offensive by the Sudan's People's Liberation Army (SPLA) into southern Unity state in May 2015, displaced thousands of people living in Koch, Leer, Mayendit, and Panyijar counties.¹ Approximately 130,000 IDPs made their way north to UNMISS Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site, however many others, particularly those living in Leer and Mayendit counties, fled south to the swamps in the Greater Nyal area of

northern Panyijar, where they are now living on islands, along with IDPs from elsewhere in Panyijar.² Few humanitarian actors in the Nyal area are currently present, and more efforts and resources are needed in the islands to meet the needs of all IDPs.³

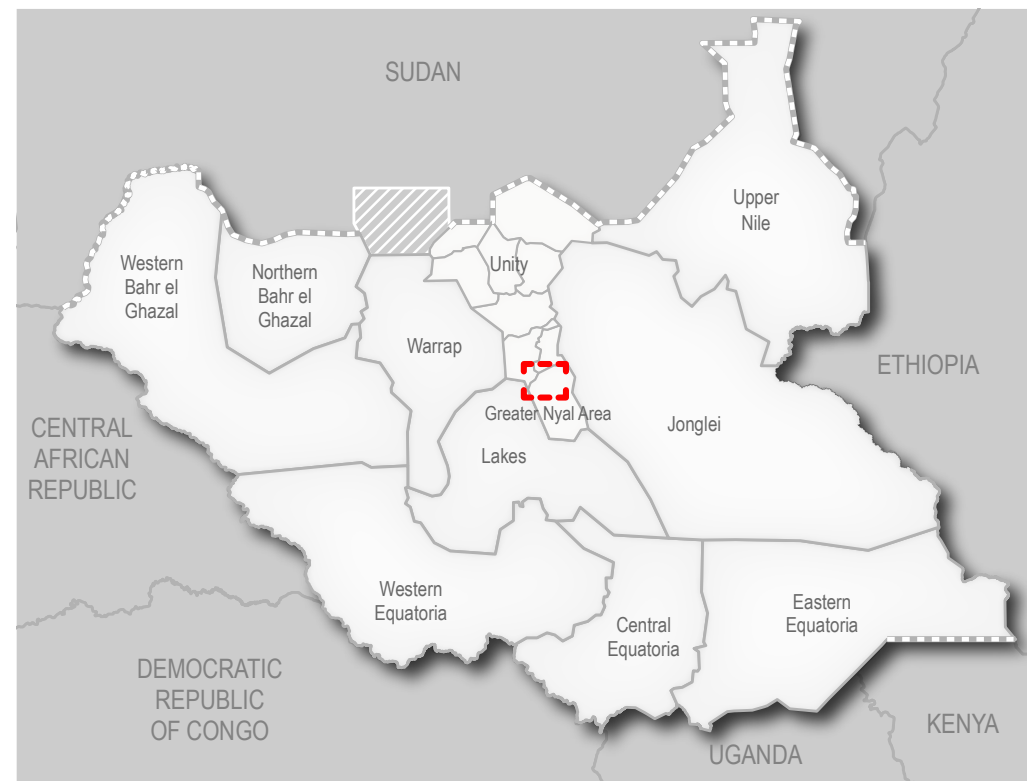
Based on the current assessment, there are now between 6,000 and 10,000 IDPs from other counties in Unity state living in the Greater Nyal area, of which **between 2,500 and 3,500 are living on islands in the swamps north of Nyal town.**⁴

The IDPs living there are currently supported by the islands' host communities, many of whom are IDPs themselves, and remain in need of humanitarian support.

DISPLACEMENT

From the 19 locations surveyed the majority come from **Mayendit county**, particularly the payams of Dablual, Rubquay, Miringnyal, Pabuong, and Bor payams. A sizable minority also hails from Pilling, Thonyor, Leer, Adok, Yang, and Bou payams in Leer county. These payams are all located near or around the major towns in eastern and northern Mayendit and central Leer, or along arterial roads in both counties, which are now all under the control of the South Sudan Government.⁵

All IDPs surveyed, expressed that they had been satisfied with their pre-displacement lives, reporting functional markets, schools,



Map 1: Location of assessed islands in Greater Nyal West.

and health centres within easy access. Many reported growing crops such as sorghum, maize, okra, and beans; and owned livestock, including cows, goats, and chickens. Goods arrived through Unity State's main arterial road, which connects Leer and Mayendit with the rest of Unity state. In the dry season, IDPs used to graze cattle near the border between Rumbek and the Lakes state. Relations with other communities were reportedly amicable.

¹ IOM displacement tracking matrix

² Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) for Sudan and South Sudan: The Conflict in Unity State, 1 July 2015.

³ Mission to Nyal, Panyijar County, Southern Unit, 31 August -2 September 2015: Mission Report OCHA (2015).

⁴ Overall estimate by REACH Team based on 32 FGDs and visits conducted in the Greater Nyal area.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 22 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted on the 19 islands over six days. On each island, focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with both IDPs and host community members. When possible, IDPs and host community members were separated for each discussion, as were men and women for gender specific questions.

LIMITATIONS

In many cases, the REACH team were the first NGO members to visit the island as such much of the population came to take part, making it difficult to separate IDPs into small, specialised groups. As a result many groups often exceeded 20 people, which can effect the quality of the discussion, and should be considered when reading the report.

In addition, due to the rapid nature of the assessment the number of FGDs that could be conducted on each island was limited in order to give the REACH team time to verify the information recieved from IDPs.

Because the team relied on information from Key Informants findings should only be taken as representative of the islands northeast of Nyal as a whole, and not treated as a representative assessment of each individual island.

Reasons for leaving

All IDPs interviewed fled their homes to escape armed groups from Mayom County. **Several reported cases of execution and abduction, physical harassment, and abuse of the civilian population.**⁶ After first being displaced, they began to starve, leading them to head south in search of safety and food.

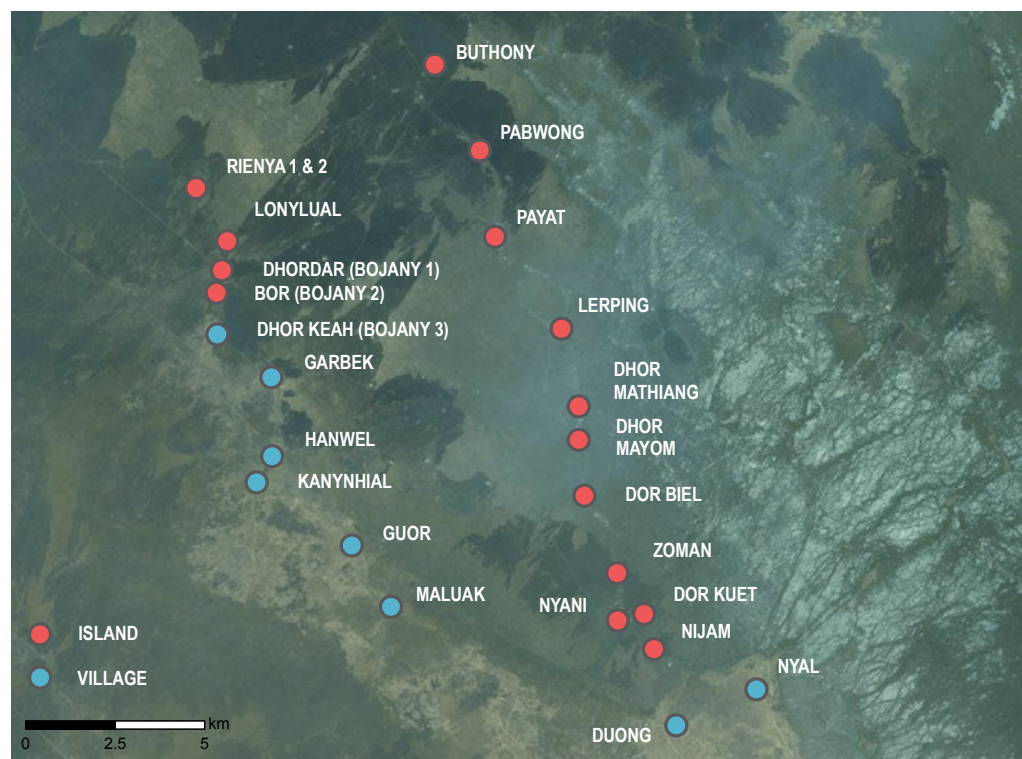
Reasons for settling in Greater Nyal

When looking at reasons for settling in Greater Nyal, IDPs from Mayendit and Leer will be looked at separately as they came for differing reasons.

Mayendit: The majority of IDPs from Mayendit came for two reasons: 1) Most of those living on the mainland or the larger, more populated islands closer to Nyal had friends or relatives who lived there, and wished to move in with them; 2) Those living on the outer islands tended not to have any relations, and had simply fled south until they found an island upon which there was enough room for them to live and acquire food through planting or fishing.

Table 1: Reported reasons for displacement

| Push Factors | Pull Factors |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Lack of Security | Secure area |
| Lack of Food | Presence of family |
| Destruction of Livelihoods | Land/Opportunities for Livelihoods |
| Loss of Property | |



Map 2: Assessed area of western Greater Nyal

Leer: Unlike the IDPs on Mer and other western Islands, most of the IDPs from Leer had a relative who had married into a family which lived in Greater Nyal.

Routes

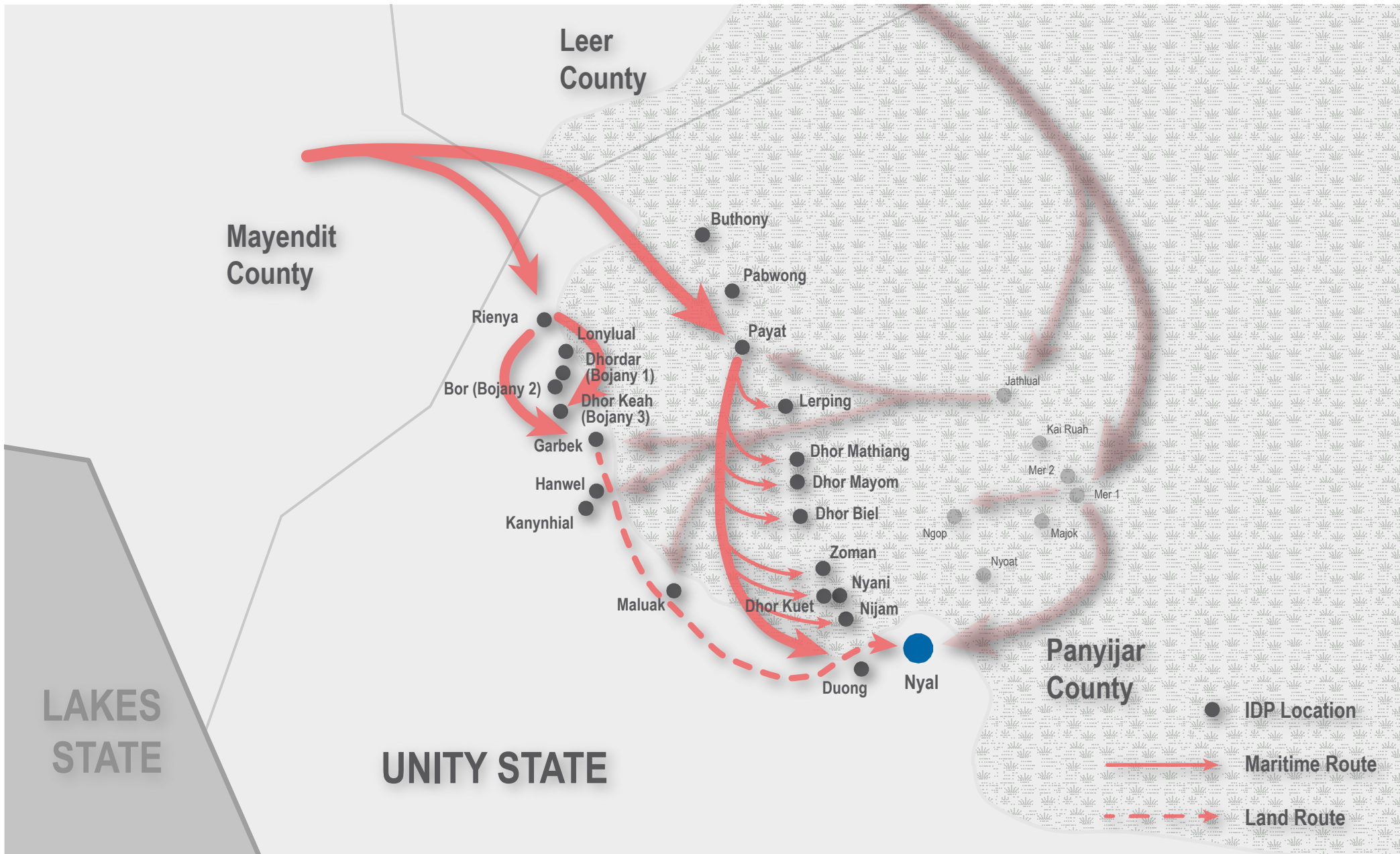
IDPs from Leer and Mayendit also took very different paths to get to Greater Nyal.

Mayendit: IDPs from Mayendit, who constituted the vast majority of those at the sites surveyed, have been arriving in a steady stream since the conflict erupted in May. Numbers increased in August and September,

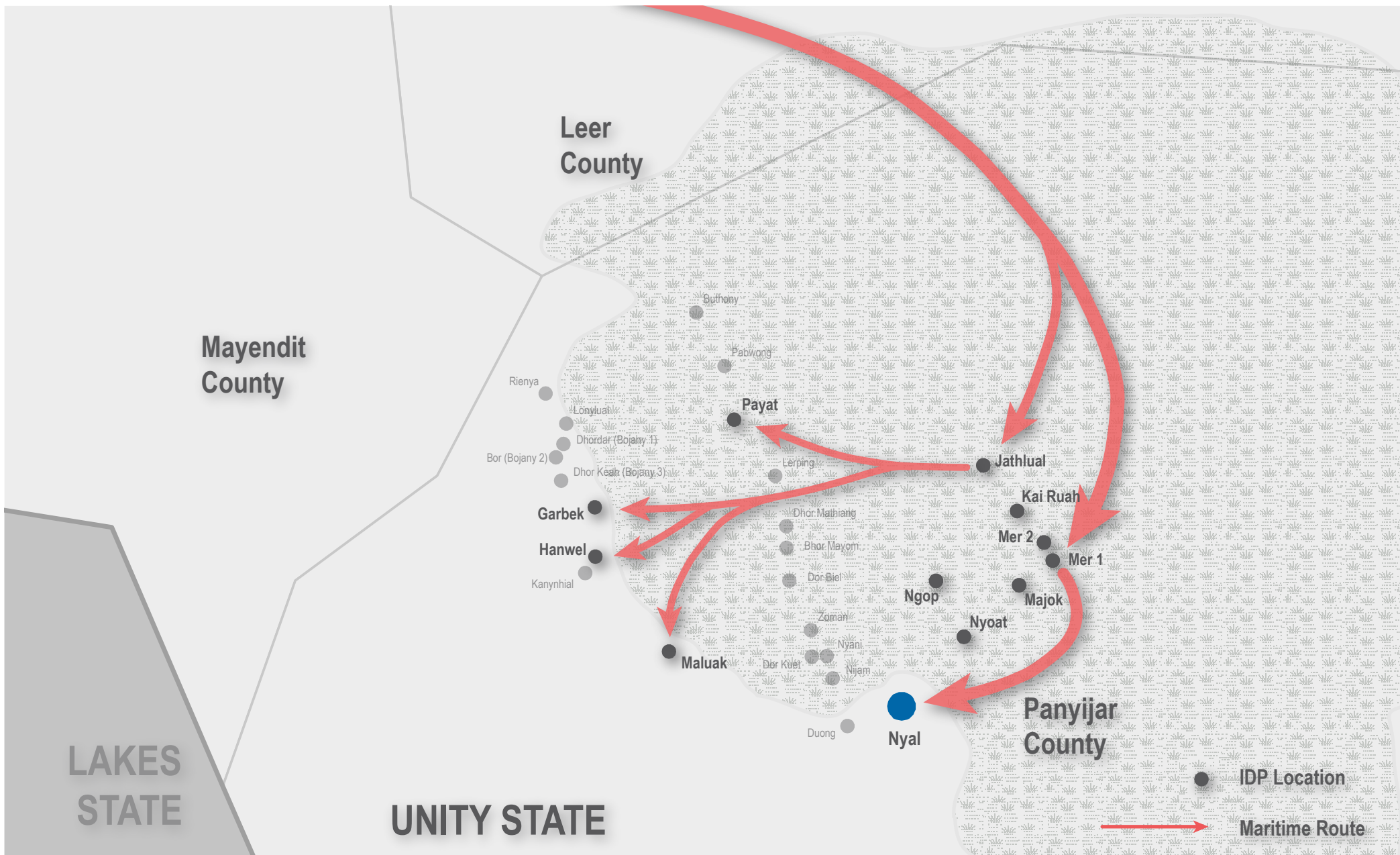
but have begun to stabilise as the advance of armed groups into Mayendit has waned. IDPs first fled to the islands of Kurenyang, Duol, and Koat, after which they fled south to Chier, a partly submerged area near the Mayendit/Panyijar border that is not dry land, but has dense enough grass to rest on. From there, they made their way south into Panyijar.

Those seeking the mainland directly from Mayendit came through Rienya, a collection of three small islands close to the Mayendit border. From there, they went to Bojany, and Garbek a large mainland village a few hours

⁶More comprehensive documentation of the current conflict of Unity can be found in, "Flash Human Rights Rport on the Escalation of Fighting in Great Upper Nile, UNMISS, 29 June 2015."



Map 3: Reported displacement routes of IDPs from Miyendit



Map 4: Reported displacement routes of IDPs from Leer⁷

⁷For more information on the Islands pictured above, see “REACH, Situation Overview of Greater Nyal (East).”

Swamp transportation

To come to Nyal, IDPs must navigate a labyrinth of islands, sand bars, and knee deep swamp water obscured by thick, three-meter high grass. Most rely on the canoe men from Panyijjar, who charge IDPs 300 SSP per man, 400 SSP per woman, and 150 SSP per child to take the two-day journey from Kok to Mer or Jathlual islands.

Most IDPs trade the few remaining assets they have in order to afford the journey. This requires them to take dangerous trips back to their homelands to recover hidden assets, leaving late at night and returning early in the morning to avoid SPLA patrols. Acquiring the necessary money to pay for a canoe can take a long time; some IDPs waited as long as three months on Kok until they could afford a ride for them and their families.

Those who could not afford to travel by boat, or came before the large influx of IDPs in August, were instead forced to travel without a boat. In this case a family would wrap all of its belongings in a plastic sheet, and tie it around their waists with rope. Children would sit on top, while adults (usually women) would trudge their way through the Sud all the way to Panyijjar (the waters are anywhere between half a meter and a metre and a half deep, depending on the location). While cheaper, this method is also much more dangerous, exposing IDPs to swamp dwelling poisonous snakes and crocodiles.

south by canoe. They then walked toward Nyal until they found a village where they could settle.

Those who had friends or relatives in Nyal town near islands, or did not have any connections in Panyijjar made their way to Payat, an island seven hours north of Nyal. From there, those with relations in Panyijjar made their way directly to their current location. Those without any familial connections headed south from Payat toward Nyal until they found an island with enough land or a suitable host community where they could support themselves.

IDPs from Mayendit did not spend much time on the transit islands in Mayendit County, instead pulling their belongings by plastic sheet (see box). Trips took anywhere between four and 20 days. More recent arrivals have paid to take canoes.

Leer: The IDPs from Leer arrived later in August, coming through the islands of Turia and Kok, located in Southern Leer. From there, most IDPs waited on the islands, hoping that the situation would soon stabilise and they would be able to return home. They then came via the western island of Jathlual, where many IDPs from Leer live, making their way directly to the eastern islands in Mayom payam where IDPs have settled.⁸

Nearly all IDPs from Leer said they took canoes. Many IDPs from Leer spent months on Kok or Turia trying to recover their remaining assets to trade for a ride to the islands in Nyal.⁹

IDPs do not intend to return to their homelands until there is a lasting peace, and all stated that they felt safe in the Nyal area and intend

to restart their lives there. All mentioned that everything that once existed in their homelands has now been destroyed, and that there is nothing to go back to.

HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

The situation faced by IDPs on each of the islands is largely uniform across sectors. The situation varies on each island depending of certain factors such as the presence of the host community, size of the IDP population and when the majority of them arrived.

Demographics

According to observations, **the vast majority of the IDP populations at each location were young children.** The remainder were women of varying ages, along with a few old men. Very few young men were seen, and are presumed to remain in their areas of origin.

Health

IDPs claimed that Malaria, Diarrhea, Typhoid, and Bilharzia were the most widespread illness afflicting the population. A health centre, run by Sign of Hope, provides treatment for most of these diseases in Nyal town, but many islands are at least two full days from the mainland, a journey that many IDPs can not afford. Those living in mainland villages also have access to a clinic run by IRC in Maluak, though most villages are a 4-6 hour walk across broken and flooded dike paths.

IDPs report that up to five children had been born in the last month and that between 3 to 15 people had died. Most of the deaths were of children under five years old. **The “outer**

islands” past Zoman, reported a sharp rise in death rates; Dhor Biel saw 15 deaths in the last month, most of which were children under 5. For most IDPs, herbal remedies are the only available treatment for disease such as a concoction made from Nim trees that grow on the islands.

Shelter

A majority of the IDPs at each location were living without any shelter. Rakoobas and Tukuls built by the host community displaced by fighting in May provide the only housing on the islands. These are shared by between three and five families at night (usually 10-30 people). In mainland villages and large islands closer to Nyal, Tukuls are the most common structures, while further away, nearly all structures are dried palm and plastic sheet rakoobas. **When it rains, as many as 30 people crowd inside of a single shelter to keep dry, an unsustainable option during the rainy season or four to five months.** The vast majority, however, sleep under mosquito nets set up in the open.⁹

Non-food items

With the exception of soap, which is non-existent in all locations except Nyal town itself, most NFIs, including mosquito nets, cooking sets, fishing kits, and plastic sheets are available on the islands via the host community or IDPs from Panyijjar. These however are chronically overstretched in order to share with the IDPs from Leer and Mayendit. **On the islands, the only construction material are dried palms, which have almost been exhausted.** UNIDO and Mercy Corps have

⁸ See, “REACH, Situation Overview of Greater Nyal (East)”

⁹ Many IDPs stated in FGDs that they brought their mosquito nets with them.

participated in distributions prior to the influx in June, using local canoes as a means of delivery, but IDPs reported receiving no distributions since then.

Water and Sanitation

All IDPs on the islands report getting all of their water for both drinking and cooking from the swamp. The water has a salty taste and strange odor, and many IDPs believe it to be the cause of rampant illness on the islands. **Because of these perceived health issues and a lack of adequate jerry cans, IDPs reported consuming less than 10 L per day.**

There are no latrines on any of the islands and IDPs relieve themselves in the bush. Unlike the western Islands like Mer and Nyoat, most IDPs simply throw their garbage in a pile on the island, or directly into the swamp. In some cases, like Payat, entire islands are littered with fish parts, which attract swarms of flies.

Several mainland communities have functional boreholes, but must share each bore-hole between thousands of people, leaving them overstretched. IDPs and host community report waiting as long as two hours for water at a bore-hole. There was no soap or latrines at any of the locations, with the exception of Kenyhnial, which has one latrine.

Food Security and Livelihoods

During the initial crisis, many IDPs hid their food near their homes in their pre-displacement locations, which they have since returned and brought to islands with them. Along with the fish they are able to catch and food shared by

the host community, they have no other means of survival. IDPs complain of a lack of nets and hooks to fish, and of dwindling food stuffs. Most of the islands are too small to allow for the IDPs to have room to plant, and even on the mainland where land is available, IDPs had missed the annual growing season.

Education

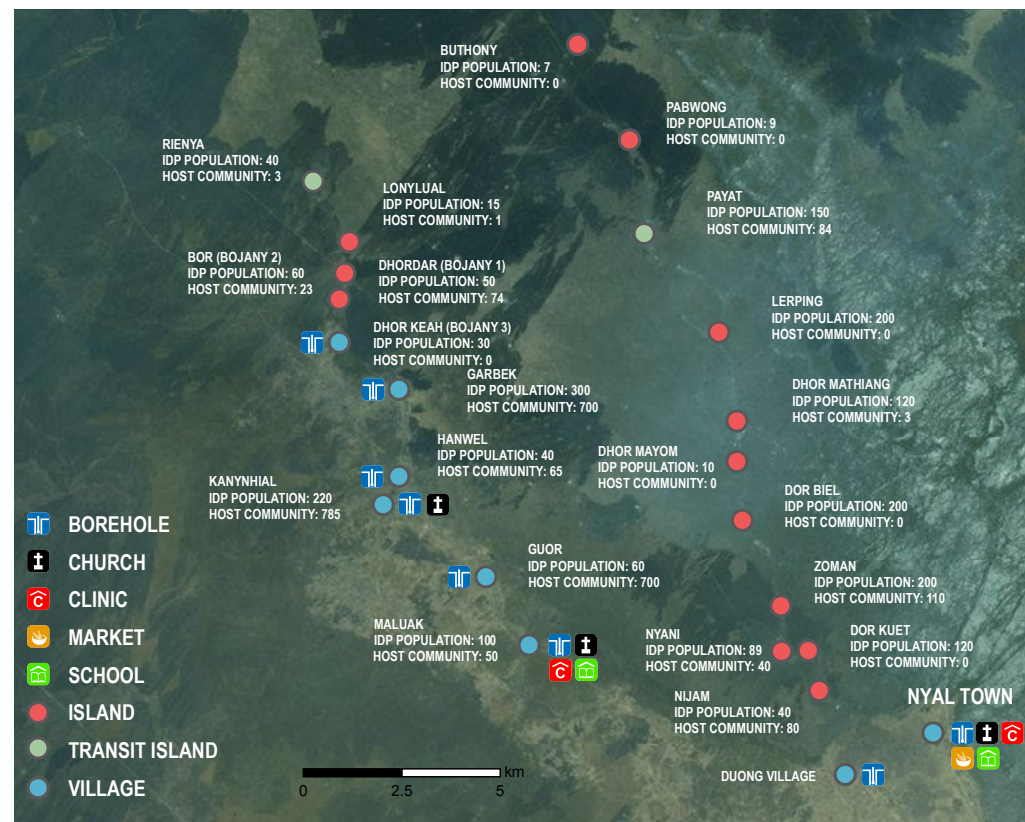
On the mainland, there are two schools available for children; one in Youp (at least five hours walk from most of the IDP sites surveyed) and another in Maluak (about two to four hours from most mainland sites). **To attend, children must walk for hours across broken dike paths, or take a canoe.** Only primary school education is available, and most children lack pens or paper, so adults decline to have them attend. On the outer islands, education is not an option.

Protection

All IDPs stated that they felt safe on the islands. However, they did express concerns at the lack of lighting (there is no artificial light source on any of the islands) and a fear of snakes/wild animals that may harm them at night.¹⁰ Crime on the islands is low, though alcoholism is a problem.

Privately, women stated that most of their SGBV issues have been related to armed groups, who are not here. IDPs are integrated into the host community, and any problems are handled through the local host community's governance structures that are already in place.

The SSRRA provides representatives to



Map 5: Services and estimated IDP population by location¹¹

manage affairs on the inner islands and mainland villages and to who all problems can be reported. With the exception of Payat, however, the outer islands lack any SSRRA presence. All problems are reported to a representative, who reports to the boma authorities, and then on to the payam authorities.¹² IDPs from Mayendit tended to be more connected with the host community, and seem to have integrated, while those from Leer are less integrated, and expressed

a greater need for tracing to locate missing family members.

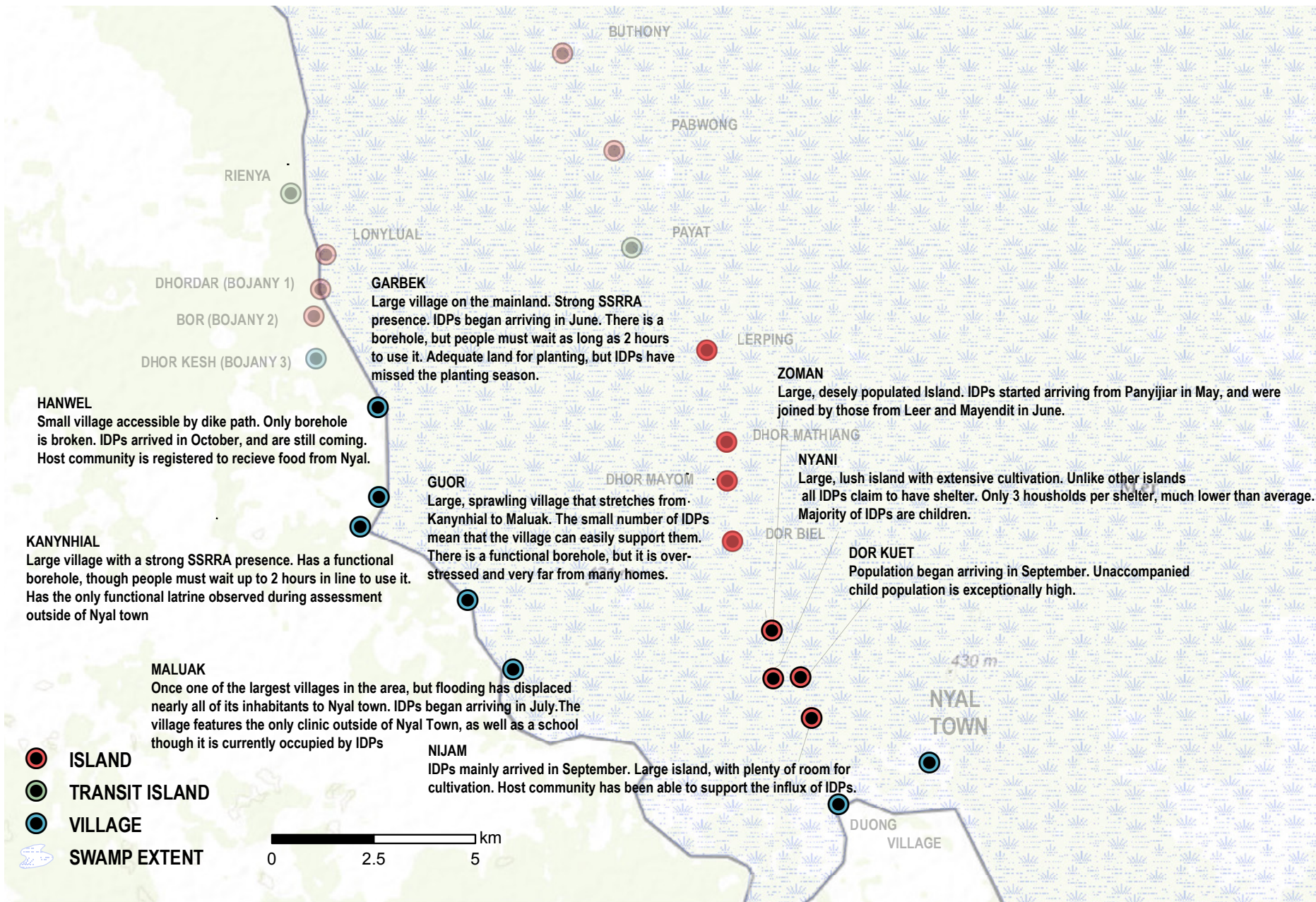
Communication

IDPs have no means of communication with their homelands in Leer other than through new arrivals and the rumors brought by the boat drivers who go back and forth. Many desire more information on the country security situation and increased humanitarian activity in the region.

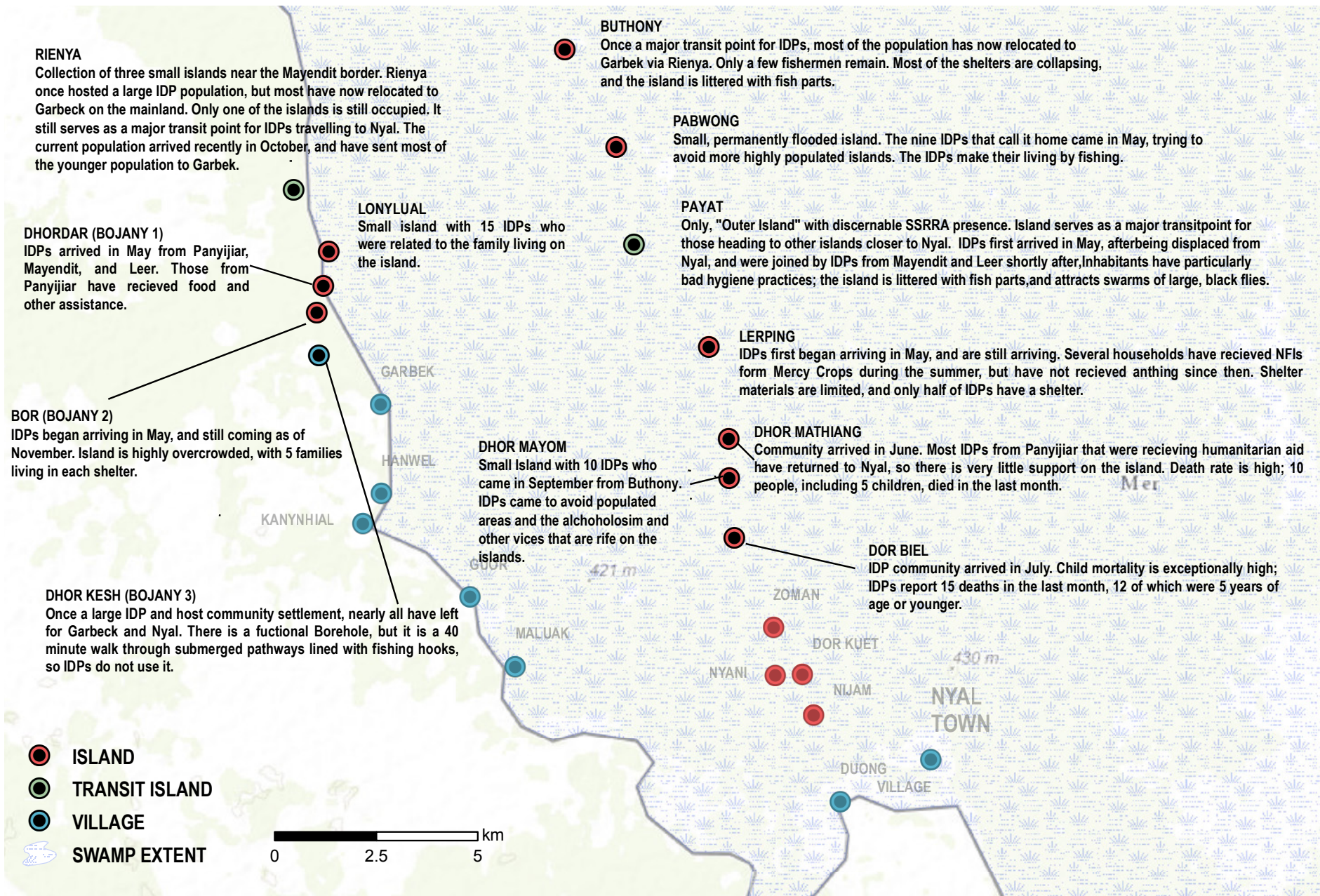
¹⁰ Both NGOs and IDPs report hippos and crocodiles living in the area. While the REACH team did not observe any during the assessment, they saw a many large monitor lizards and snakes.

¹¹ The numbers of IDPs in the map above are the most conservative estimates of the REACH team, based on observation and information available. Actual numbers may well be higher.

¹² The payam authorities are either Mayom or Nyal Payam, depending upon the island's location.



Map 6: Overview of assessed islands and villages: inner islands



Map 7: Overview of assessed islands and villages: outer islands

¹³The REACH team estimates that there are anywhere between 2000 and 2500 IDPs living on the 19 locations surveyed. This is based on both a combination of self reported numbers by IDPs in focus group discussions and physical observation where the REACH team explored each island, attempting to verify the reported numbers.

Humanitarian Assistance

Aid to IDPs in the Greater Nyal area, particularly those living on the islands, is limited. Sign of Hope runs the main clinic in Nyal Town, and primary service units in Duong, Nyondong and Pathiel; IRC maintains a smaller clinic in Maluak, six to eight hours east. In addition, UNIDO has a mobile clinic, located in the market area of Nyal Town. Health services are still limited, and restricted to those on the mainland or close by.

IRC is the lead WASH partner in Nyal, and is currently operating in four payams, rehabilitating boreholes and conducting hygiene promotion activities, together with UNIDO. However, IDPs report a lack of clean water and positive hygiene practices across the entire Greater Nyal area. Oxfam has plans to begin constructing wells on some of the islands.⁵

IRC is currently conducting protection monitoring in 4 payams and two bomas in the area, and UNIDO is doing some mobile protection monitoring on the mainland. **IDPs and host community on the Island have requested assistance in tracing and counseling.**

Mercy Crops has an emergency cash transfer program with 1,718 beneficiaries, which supports local traders on the mainland and on 16 islands. UNIDO and IRC are distributing seeds and tools to vulnerable host community members and IDPs on the mainland. In addition, IRC has a restocking scheme to replenish female goats and sheep to the host community.

NFI and shelter distributions have been carried out by Mercy Corps, both on the mainland and the islands.

In terms of education provision, UNIDO assists with four schools on the mainland, but support has so far been limited to the rehabilitation of school houses and the training of 30 teachers.

The vast majority of host community and IDPs, particularly those living on the islands, report not receiving any services. **Those who are have found themselves sharing overstretched resources with the influx of IDPs.** There is room for increased programme implementation and expansion across all sectors.

HOST COMMUNITY

Prior to the crisis, both the mainland villages and the large, inner islands (Nijam, Nyani) had a permanent host community living on them. The other islands remained deserted until May 2015, when violence displaced much of the population of Mayom and Nyal payams in Panyijar. Members of both communities fled to the islands for refuge, but most have since returned to the mainland. Several of the islands (Zoman, Payat) still have IDPs from Panyijar living on them, while others (Dhor Mathiang) had evidence of IDPs from Panyijar that had since left. Both displaced persons from Panyijar and the original host community identify as being part of the host community, so is difficult to separate those who were displaced or not.

According to IDPs on the islands, only the host community and IDPs from Panyijar are

registered to receive aid from distributions in Nyal. However, food aid received is shared with IDPs.

The host community in mainland villages is comparatively large. Unlike those living on the islands, households still have much of their cattle, and were able to plant crops during the wet season. The retention of their pre-crisis livelihoods has allowed them to absorb the shock of the IDP influx much more easily. While less vulnerable than island communities, they still face strain on their resources.

CONCLUSION

The assessment sought to understand the humanitarian situation on 19 islands within western Greater Nyal. These islands host a large population of recently displaced individuals, the vast majority of which are children and women.

The population consists of IDPs—the majority from the county of Majendit who have traveled south, fleeing conflict in their Areas of Origin—and host communities, many of which are friends or family of IDPs. While most IDPs appear to have assimilated comfortably into the host community, their presence is placing increasing strain on resources.

The current situation for IDPs living on these islands is difficult. Having fled quickly from their homes and sold most of what they owned to pay for the journey, many have little or no means of supporting themselves, and rely heavily on support from the host community.

While the assessment found humanitarian needs across all sectors of response, access

to clean water and food is particularly pressing. Shelter and basic non-food items such as mosquito nets are also severely lacking, leaving IDPs on the islands vulnerable to disease, and in most cases with limited access to health facilities.

The most vulnerable IDPs appear to be those staying on the “outer islands”, where the attention of NGOs and local authorities is limited; there is a less permanent host community to provide support; and the distance to Nyal town makes access more difficult and therefore costly.

With no intention to return until meaningful peace is established, IDPs in Greater Nyal West face protracted displacement, further underlining the need for external assistance in order to make their current situation more sustainable.

About REACH Initiative

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