

Situation Overview: Quarterly Displacement to Nyal, Southern Unity State

South Sudan, October - December 2016

REACH An initiative of
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Introduction

Since December 2013, fighting across Unity State has caused displacement, destroyed homes and livelihoods, and restricted humanitarian service access for over 534,689 people.¹ Much of early 2016 saw many displaced people returning in order to rebuild their homes and livelihoods. However, renewed fighting across Unity State following the outbreak of conflict in Juba in July 2016 has again forced people to flee, and a large number of new arrivals have been reported by humanitarian organisations in Nyal town and United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Bentiu Protection of Civilians (PoC) site since October.²

To inform the response of humanitarians working outside of formal settlement sites REACH conducted an assessment of displacement to Nyal town during the fourth quarter of 2016. Between 16 - 21 December, REACH conducted six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving 38 participants from the four counties that most IDPs arriving in Nyal come from: Koch, Leer, and Mayendit Counties in Unity State, and Ayod County in Jonglei State. Panyijiar County has not seen significant displacement, though secondary data sources were sourced to explain small-scale displacement that has occurred there. FGDs focused on recent displacement patterns, push/pull factors, and a participatory

mapping exercise to understand the routes that people took to come to Nyal.

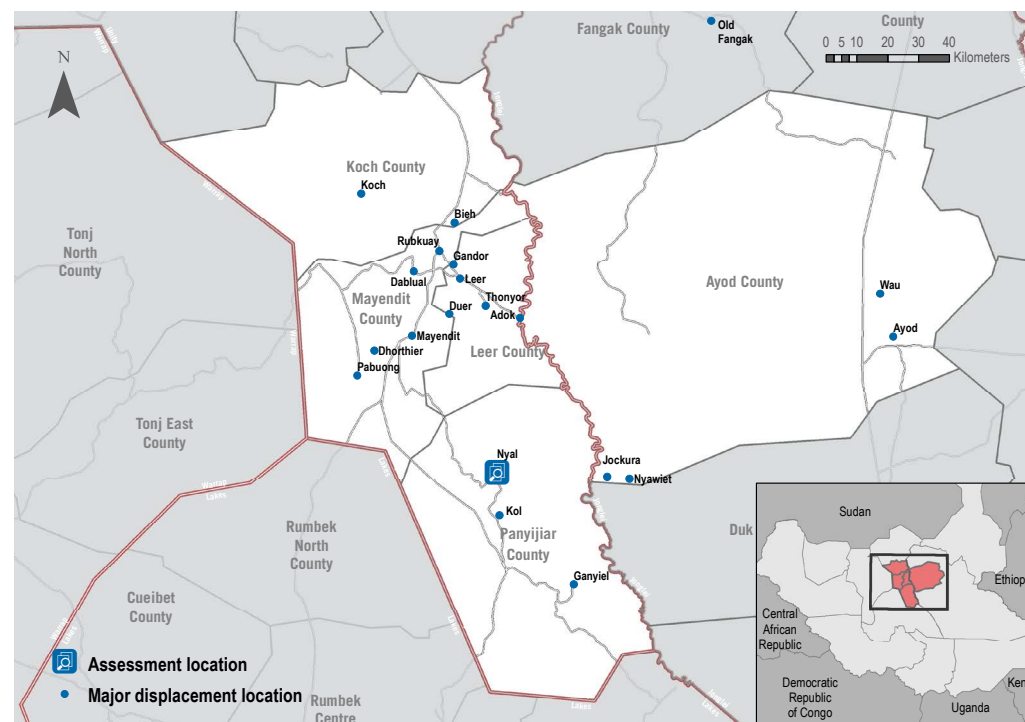
These findings were triangulated with the REACH monthly port monitoring assessment, which tracks movement into and out of Nyal and explores reasons for people arriving to and departing from Nyal. Between 1 - 31 December, 3,882 arrivals and 1,553 departures were logged.³

New arrivals were specifically targeted during the data collection phase to ensure a better understanding of up-to-date displacement dynamics. Nearly all participants had arrived since October and were able to provide up-to-date information about the villages from which they had been displaced.

Population Movement and Displacement

Most IDPs reported being displaced multiple times since the beginning of the conflict in December 2013, involving cyclical patterns of violence and displacement that led them to gradually withdraw to remote islands deep in the Sudd before coming to Nyal. FGD participants identified three stages of displacement: IDPs first fled to nearby safe areas (Stage 1), then after being discovered by armed groups, fled to very remote islands where armed groups could not find them (Stage 2). After experiencing a prolonged lack of access to food and other services, many

Map 1: Assessment location and major towns in in Unity and Jonglei States, December 2016



then left to Nyal in order to access life-saving services and bring aid back to their families still living on the islands (Stage 3).

Stage 1: Displacement to nearby safe areas

Previous studies have reported that the 2013 crisis caught most people by surprise, and many were not aware that the conflict was occurring until their villages were attacked by armed groups.⁴ Most FGD participants reported that upon the outbreak of violence,

1. Protection Cluster, Protection Trends: South Sudan, April – September 2016, November 2016.
2. REACH, Assessment of Hard to Reach Areas: Unity State Wet Season, November 2016.
3. REACH, Nyal Port Monitoring Factsheet, December 2016.
4. Cathy Huser, Displacement: An Auto-Protection Strategy in Unity State, March 2015.



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Table 1: New Arrivals in Nyal by County, December 2016⁵

| County | Number of New Arrivals | Percentage of Total New Arrivals |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ayod ⁶ | 4 | 1% |
| Canal ⁶ | 2 | >1% |
| Fangak ⁶ | 1 | >1% |
| Guit | 1 | >1% |
| Koch ⁷ | 39 | 11% |
| Leer | 223 | 61% |
| Mayendit ⁷ | 94 | 26% |
| Panyijiar | 1 | >1% |

they fled to nearby safe areas, usually forests or swamp islands, where they had traditionally taken shelter during cattle raids or other violent disputes. Most IDPs from counties in Unity State were able to return to their homes in late 2014 before being displaced to the same areas again in 2015, while a majority of IDPs from Ayod have been displaced since the beginning of the conflict in early 2014. Most people reported staying there several months, subsisting on wild foods and what they could recover from their homes whenever armed groups temporarily left the area. Increasingly aggressive patrols, which many participants believed directly targeted civilians, eventually penetrated these safe havens, forcing IDPs to

flee once more (stage 2).

Stage 2: Displacement to remote areas

After being forced from their first displacement location, most participants reported that they fled to very remote areas of their state that they knew to be safe. These places were often deep in forests or swamps, and in the case of IDPs from Ayod and Koch, often located far away in other counties. Many had never been to these places before, but had heard of them and said that they had a reputation for being safe. IDPs from Mayendit and Ayod highlighted that these areas were often highly populated and protected by armed groups that they trusted, while in Leer and Koch they were usually too remote for hostile armed groups to easily find. Many respondents reported being supported by the local community and stayed in these locations for up to a year.

In some cases these locations were not remote enough, and after several months to a year, the IDPs were again discovered by hostile armed groups, and forced to flee to even more remote areas. Many respondents, particularly those from Mayendit and Koch, reported being displaced multiple times in this fashion, often fleeing to a safe haven for several months,

Table 2: Timeline of displacement stages by county⁸

| County | Stage 1 | Stage 2 | Stage 3 |
|----------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Ayod | Early 2014 - Late 2014 | Late 2014 - Late 2016 | Late 2016 - Present |
| Koch | Mid 2015 - Late 2015 | Late 2015 - Late 2016 | Late 2016 - Present |
| Leer | Mid 2015 - Late 2015 | Late 2015 - Late 2016 | Late 2016 - Present |
| Mayendit | Mid 2015 - Mid 2016 | Mid 2016 - Late 2016 | Late 2016 - Present |

5. REACH, Nyal Port Monitoring, December 2016. Numbers should not be taken to be representative of IDPs arriving in Nyal.

6. Most new arrivals from Jonglei State arrive on foot from Ganyiel, and therefore not counted by port monitoring, which is only conducted in Nyal.

7. Most new arrivals from Koch and Mayendit are reported to have settled in villages west of Nyal, and are not counted by port monitoring.

8. Precision of dates is low as most participants were unsure of the exact months within which they travelled, and each stage tended to fall within a range of months.

Major displacement patterns by county



Displacement from Leer County:

Most participants from Leer were initially displaced during the fighting in May 2015. They first fled to nearby forests or islands where they felt safe (Stage 1). After a few months, they were again attacked in late 2015, and fled to remote islands in Southern Leer (Stage 2), before being forced to leave for other, more remote islands in Southern Leer in early 2016 due to a lack of resources. They stayed there until fall 2016, when the attacks by armed groups and the outbreak of cholera led them to leave for Nyal in October and November (Stage 3).



Displacement from Mayendit County:

Participants from Mayendit County reported cyclical displacement in 2014 and 2015, usually fleeing to nearby forests, where they hid until armed groups left the area (Stage 1). When the conflict broke out in July 2016 armed groups pursued them to their hiding places, and they were forced to flee further to islands in Southern Mayendit and the Leer County border (Stage 2). Many began to leave for Panyijiar due to a lack of food and prevalence of disease, reportedly heading to islands and villages northwest of Nyal town, where many people from Mayendit have relatives (Stage 3). Swamp waters in Mayendit are shallow, and most people were able to travel part or all of the way by plastic sheet, rather than canoe.



Displacement from Koch County:

All of the participants from Koch County were displaced by conflict during the 2015 wet season. They initially fled to nearby areas where they traditionally hid from cattle

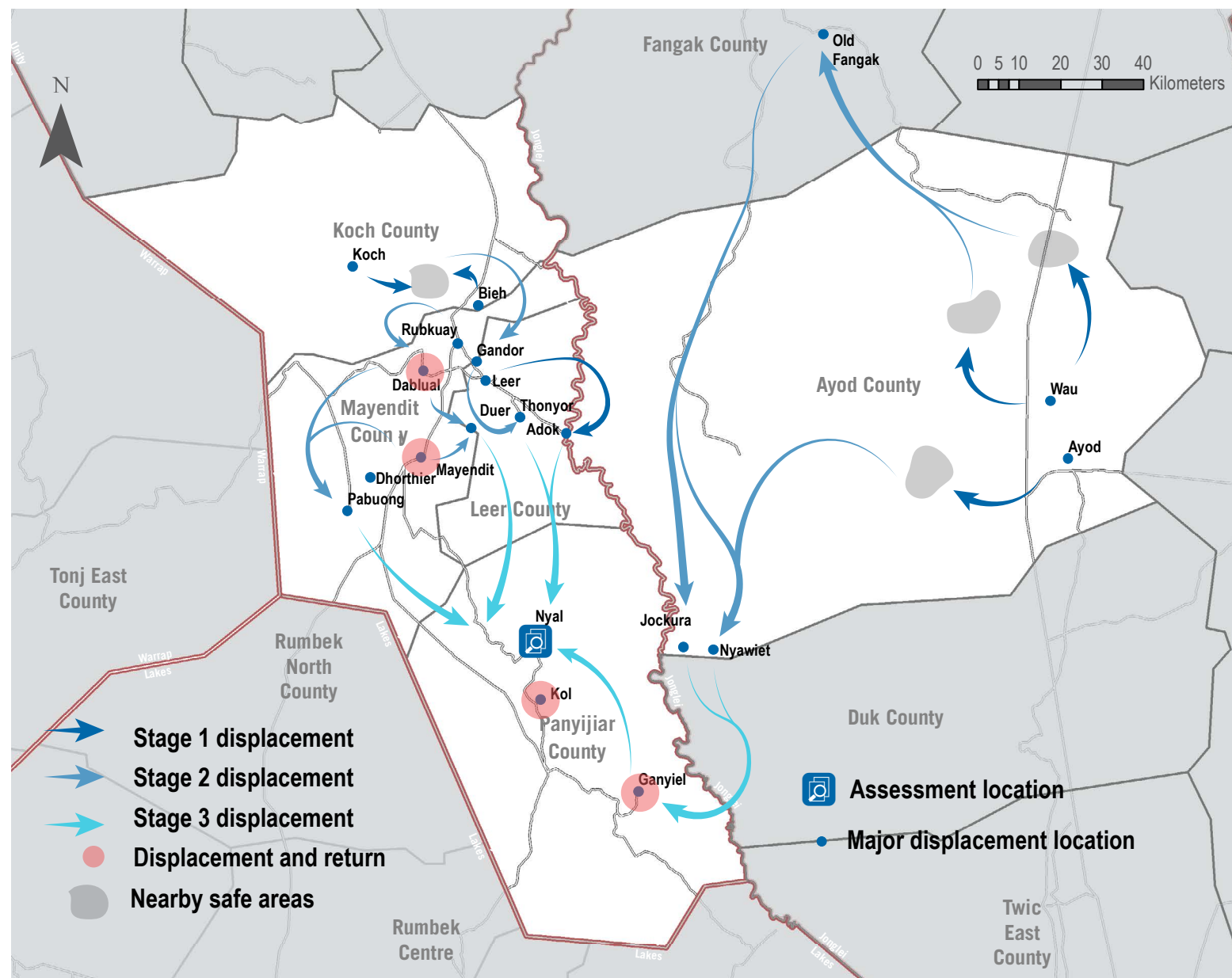
raiders (Stage 1). After being discovered by armed groups in fall 2015, they again fled to Leer and Mayendit Counties, where they took refuge with the local communities who were in hiding (Stage 2). They stayed with them until July 2016, when renewed fighting again forced them to flee their homes. Those who had fled to Leer and Koch then fled the same routes as IDPs from Mayendit and Leer. Like IDPs from Mayendit County, most are reported to have settled in the villages west of Nyal where many have relatives (Stage 3).



Displacement from Ayod County:

Participants reported first being displaced in 2014, during the initial conflict in South Sudan. After their villages were attacked, they initially fled to nearby forests and islands, where they hid and waited for the armed groups to leave (Stage 1). After several months, the armed groups were still there, so they fled north to Old Fangak and villages and towns in Fangak County, where there were other armed groups that they believed would protect them (Stage 2). When fighting came to Fangak in late 2014 and early 2015, they fled south into the swamps in western Ayod. Most reported spending nearly two years on the islands, often moving from one to the other on home-made rafts whenever resources became stretched. In late 2016, IDPs returning from Nyal informed them of the possibility of acquiring aid there, which convinced many living in islands near the Nile to seek canoe transport with traders to Ganyiel town, after which they were able to walk to Nyal on foot (Stage 3).

Map 2: Displacement of December 2016 new arrivals to Nyal from Ayod, Koch, Leer, and Mayendit Counties, December 2013 - December 2016



only to be attacked and forced to flee to another safe haven, where they stayed for several more months before being attacked and forced to flee again.

All participants reported that they eventually retreated to locations deep in the swamps, usually islands in Southern Leer, Mayendit, and Ayod Counties. Deep water prevented armed groups from entering without canoes, and the presence of swamp fish and water lilies met their food needs.

Stage 3: Displacement to Nyal town

With the exception of several Mayendit respondents who came directly to Nyal due to violence, most people reported eventually finding a place in southern Leer, Mayendit, or Ayod Counties where they were safe from armed groups. Though sporadic attacks continued to occur in some locations, most IDPs described these as rare events that did not impact their lives enough to make them want to flee.

Instead of insecurity, a lack of food and the outbreak of disease were much larger push factors for people staying on these islands. The outbreak of cholera on these islands in Leer in October 2016 in particular led many people to flee to Nyal. In Mayendit and Ayod Counties, people reported running out of food to feed their families, and lacking adequate healthcare to address disease. Both factors, along with Nyal's growing reputation as a safe place where IDPs could receive services, eventually pushed most people to begin

Photo 1: Canoes at Gap Port in Nyal Town.

The majority of IDPs arriving in Nyal travel by canoe. Canoe drivers often charge extremely high prices for rides, often leaving passengers in debt. Photo credit: REACH, December 2016.



searching for a way to come to Nyal.

Displacement Dynamics

Most IDPs initially fled due to conflict, though food and healthcare became more important over time, leading IDPs to settle in Nyal. Canoes remain the main form of transport, particularly in Stages 2 and 3, when most people fled the mainland, though many IDPs are unable to afford the prices that canoe operators charge.

Push and Pull Factors

Nearly all participants reported insecurity as the primary reason for leaving their homes. Armed groups reportedly attacked entire

villages without warning, forcing many people to flee for their lives. IDPs from Koch and Mayendit also noted that armed groups were using informants from the local community to track them, and often followed IDPs between locations, forcing them to flee multiple times.

Multiple displacements of stages 1 and 2 led to food and other services becoming a more important displacement factor over time and was reported to be more important than insecurity in Stage 3. A lack of shelter and healthcare were also reported to be important reasons for leaving their homes. Most IDPs from Mayendit and Ayod cited a lack of adequate access to food as the main reason for leaving, while in Leer, disease, particularly

Displacement in Panyijiar County

Unlike the rest of Southern Unity State, Panyijiar County has remained relatively peaceful since mid-2015. The only exceptions to this were armed cattle raids that occurred in central and southern Panyijiar following a protracted standoff between armed groups in Ganyiel Town in December 2016. Several hundred people were displaced from Ganyiel and other villages for a few weeks before order could be re-established and the IDPs were able to return to their homes.

cholera outbreaks, was reported as the primary reason for displacement.

Reasons for coming to Nyal largely mirrored push factors. Since early 2016, Nyal has become known as a safe location where humanitarian organizations are present and people can go to access food distributions, healthcare and other humanitarian services. Many respondents reported that they had learned this by word of mouth from IDPs returning from Nyal with food. Many also reported being able to see the World Food Programme (WFP) cargo planes dropping aid in the direction of Nyal. Though all of the IDPs interviewed arrived too late to be registered for any current distributions, many recent arrivals reported being prompted to come by rumours that a new registration would be occurring in the coming months and wanted to ensure that they would be registered.

Method of Transport

Most participants reported having to use a canoe at some point during their displacement. Those displaced from Koch, Mayendit and Ayod, where there is more dry land, were able to initially travel on foot. Closer to the Nile, many participants claimed to have travelled between islands in the Sudd using homemade rafts from reeds. In shallow water, IDPs reported travelling by “plastic sheet,” a method that involves tying their belongings up inside of plastic sheet so that it floats on water, placing their children on top and then dragging it through the swamp to their destination. Many IDPs from Mayendit, where the waters are shallower, reported travelling in this way. While cheaper, this method exposes IDPs to health

IDP Decision Making: Nyal town or UNMISS Bentiu PoC site

Most participants reported that their decision to come to Nyal instead of UNMISS Bentiu PoC was based on both where they were when the conflict started and whether or not they had children. People fled in whatever direction they thought they would be safe from armed groups; those closer to routes to Bentiu tended to flee north, while those who were not fled south. In addition, many noted the lack of hiding places north of Koch, and that they did not believe that they would be able to safely make it to Bentiu with children who could not run or travel through the bush quickly. The route to Nyal provided far more hiding places, and could be travelled slower with children.

risks from swamp water and to wild animals such as poisonous snakes.

However, as IDPs retreated deeper into the swamps, and the water became too deep to cross on foot, canoes were required to continue their journey. Most of these canoes are driven by operators who charge exorbitant fees for transport; as of December 2016, women were charged 600 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP), men 500 SSP and children 300 SSP.⁹ During the height of fighting in October, fees of 1,000 SSP per person were reportedly charged.¹⁰ Some participants noted that canoe drivers were beginning to allow them to ride

for free and pay canoe fees later when they had the money, or exchanged half of any food that IDPs acquired on the mainland. Only IDPs from Ayod reported getting free trips, usually from traders moving goods along the Nile. Traders would often accept small payments of dried fish to provide passage for vulnerable people and their families when asked. Income from other business activities and the absence of a formalized canoe transport “industry” on the Nile was the most likely reason for IDPs not being charged for transport. Oxfam provided free passage for vulnerable people in Leer County as part of its protection programme in

mid to late 2016, though this programme is no longer active.

Family Profile

Nearly all participants reported being separated from other family members at some point during their displacement. This was due to the sudden onset of conflict, which forced people to flee before they could locate all of their family members. Most were able to reunite through connecting with other IDPs to identify missing relatives displaced in other locations. Most respondents reported that after reunification, they travelled together with their families until they reached a safe location.

Families that were able to flee together often split themselves into groups after reaching a safe location. Participants noted that this was based on gender; men would travel alone to Nyal and women would stay with their children on the islands. This decision usually had to do with money – due to the expense of canoe trips, only certain members were able to afford a ride to Nyal. If they had family in Nyal, women and children would go to reunite with them. If they did not, men would go to Nyal and return back to the islands once they have acquired food and other resources.

Conclusion

Five months after the re-emergence of widespread conflict in South Sudan, the situation for IDPs and local community in Koch, Leer, Mayendit, and Ayod Counties remains dire. Fighting has spread to all but the most remote areas of the four counties,

Living in Nyal

Most people who have arrived in Nyal have not been able to acquire food directly, because they are not registered to receive any aid, though the local community and other IDPs who are registered have shared their food with them. Those who have relatives typically stay in town, while those who do not often relocate to islands in Northern Panyijiar, where an abundance of fish and water lilies allows them to better meet their food needs. In many cases, women and children live on the islands while men go to Nyal to look for food from distributions and other supplies to support them.

and the vast majority of IDPs have either fled to UNMISS Bentiu PoC site, the temporary site in UNMISS Leer, or to Nyal town and the surrounding islands in Northern Panyijiar.

Most newly arrived IDPs in Nyal were displaced in multiple stages, first fleeing to surrounding safe areas, then to very remote islands deep in swamps in Southern Leer, Mayendit, and Ayod, before finally coming to Nyal. Push and pull factors have changed over time; initially fleeing for security, most new arrivals are coming from secure locations in Leer, Mayendit and Ayod where disease and a lack of food are greater problems. Nyal and the surrounding islands offer support for most IDPs needs; the area is secure, and food and life-saving services such as healthcare are available.

Photo 2: A WFP cargo plane drops food aid over Nyal town.

Though many in the town regularly receive food and NFIs, most of the new arrivals are not registered, and therefore ineligible to receive aid. Photo credit: REACH, December 2016.



9. REACH, Situation Briefing: Displacement Leer County, Unity State, South Sudan, October 2016.

10. Due to the economic crisis, the value of the SSP versus the United States Dollar (USD) fluctuates on an almost daily basis. On December, the United Nations exchange rate was recorded at 89.571 SSP to 1 USD.

Many IDPs who would like to come to Nyal are limited by the price of canoe trips, which are too expensive for most people to afford. NGOs have helped provide transport for vulnerable people between Nyal and the islands, but due to lack of funding, are unable to continue to provide this service.

Conditions for IDPs and host community living in Southern Unity State and Ayod County continue to deteriorate. Armed groups are still pursuing IDPs fleeing into the swamps, and reports of killings, child recruitment, and sexual and gender based violence are common. As of 31 December, IDPs are still arriving in Nyal town and nearby islands in Panyijiar on a daily basis from Leer, Mayendit, and Ayod Counties.¹¹

The need for food and other humanitarian services remains a primary pull factor for most newly arrived IDPs in Nyal. With the evacuation of humanitarian actors from Ganyiel following insecurity in late December 2016, Nyal remains the only location in Southern Unity State secure enough for these actors to consistently deliver aid.¹² When conditions allow, humanitarian organizations are able to directly access populations in Leer, Mayendit and Koch Counties from Nyal. An upcoming registration by IOM and WFP is likely to draw even more people who would otherwise not come. As the height of the dry season approaches, and IDPs continue to filter in and out of Nyal seeking aid the humanitarian community should be prepared to provide additional services.

Returns to Leer and Mayendit counties

Despite the stated dangers related to insecurity and a lack of services in Leer and Mayendit Counties, many IDPs reported that they or other people that they knew routinely returned to their former homes. Many still had family members, usually vulnerable people like the elderly and children, still living in Leer and Mayendit Counties. These vulnerable people were unable to safely flee, and are still staying in remote parts of each county.

Many FGD participants also reported having strong bonds with the land that they and their ancestors grew up on; despite insecurity and the extreme lack of food, people in Leer and Mayendit Counties did not feel comfortable leaving their homes for long periods of time, even to nearby counties like Panyijiar.

More recently, new attempts to deliver aid to conflict-affected populations still staying in Leer and Mayendit Counties has drawn as many as 20,000 IDPs to return to their homes in order to receive aid that they could not acquire in Nyal.¹³ Food drops conducted across Leer County in December reportedly drew many back to islands and villages on the mainland that they had stayed in before coming to Nyal town while many IDPs from Mayendit County are now returning in anticipation of food drops in northern and central parts of the county in February. As the food security situation in Southern Unity State continues to deteriorate to near-famine conditions, IDPs reported being increasingly willing to move to wherever food was being distributed.

Photo 3: Women selling firewood in Nyal Town market.

Because of its relative peace and prosperity in a region wracked by war, Nyal remains a popular destination for many IDPs looking for a safe place to resettle. Photo credit: REACH, December 2016.



About REACH

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11. Most IDPs who fled south from Koch are now living in Leer and Mayendit Counties, and have not seen their homelands since 2015. Most IDPs fleeing directly from Koch instead head north to Bentiu PoC site (see inset, page 2).

12. NGO Forum, Weekly Security Update, 31 December 2016.

13. Estimates based on an unpublished REACH multi-sector needs assessment conducted in October 2017 and Port monitoring conducted in December 2016.