

Public health crisis on Sobat River-Corridor threatens to spiral beyond control

April 2025 | South Sudan

This brief summarises and supplements findings from a recent [qualitative needs assessment](#) conducted in displacement sites in Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk counties between March 24 and 30, 2025.

Key Messages

- Armed violence and airstrikes, which escalated in March 2025, continue to displace thousands of people on the Sobat River, particularly in Nasir and Ulang counties. These areas were already experiencing “serious” levels of acute malnutrition, widespread acute food insecurity, and a cholera outbreak.
- A severe public health crisis is unfolding in the displacement sites, marked by a sharp uptick in disease rates and acute food shortages. In parallel, the humanitarian response is beset by broken supply lines, stockouts and serious access constraints, which have forced some partners to scale back lifesaving assistance.
- In the coming months – which coincide with the traditional ‘lean season’ – severe constraints on humanitarian operations, coupled with significant violence and recurrent displacement, will continue to fuel extreme health outcomes, increasing the risk of preventable loss of life.

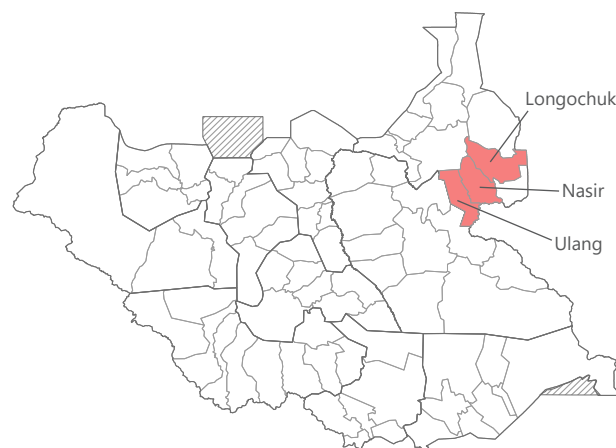
Context & Rationale

Since February 14, armed violence and airstrikes have triggered mass displacement on the Sobat River, particularly in Nasir and Ulang counties. Displacement is occurring in severely vulnerable communities experiencing widespread acute food insecurity, “serious” levels of acute malnutrition, and an ongoing cholera outbreak. Available evidence suggests a public health crisis is deepening, and humanitarian actors face considerable obstacles to mitigating it.

REACH partnered with Relief International, Polish Humanitarian Action, UNKEA and GOAL to conduct [a rapid qualitative needs assessment](#) in displacement sites in Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk counties. The team conducted 49 focus group discussions (FGDs) with recently displaced persons and 9 key informant interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian actors, from March 24 to 30. REACH also reviewed facility-level health and inventory data shared by humanitarian actors.

Pre-existing conditions were already extremely severe

In January 2025, an emergency was underway in Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk counties, Upper Nile State. According to the [latest IPC analysis](#) – conducted in October 2024 – more than half of the combined population in these counties were acutely food insecure (IPC Phase 3+). Almost **83,000 people were experiencing emergency-level food insecurity (IPC Phase-4)**, which is characterised by extreme food shortages and very high rates of acute malnutrition. Further, **a marked and unforeseen food shortage displaced 21,000 people in Nasir in January**, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).



Frequent escalations trigger widespread displacement

Starting on February 14, the situation in Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk counties deteriorated quickly. Since then, airstrikes and violent clashes have displaced between [60,000](#) and [80,000](#) people. Most have corralled in makeshift sites along the Sobat River, while an estimated [23,000](#) crossed into Gambella region, Ethiopia. It is possible this is a significant undercount. One exercise conducted in late-March recorded 67,000 arrivals in Burebiey, Gambella.

In April, a ground offensive in Ulang County triggered fresh waves of displacement. On April 14, armed individuals entered Ulang Town and [looted](#) humanitarian facilities. The town is now deserted, according to humanitarian partners, amid fears that fighting will continue. The newly displaced have fled into makeshift sites on the Sobat River, where a severe public health crisis is [unfolding](#). At the time of writing, returns appear unlikely without an immediate and sustained ceasefire.

Severe public health conditions continue to worsen

In the displacement sites, disease rates have increased significantly, according to data shared by an NGO. A concentration of people in precarious shelters with extremely poor sanitation has fuelled resurgent cholera outbreaks in Nasir and Ulang. Health facility data shared with REACH also reveal a spike in cases of diarrhoea, malaria and pneumonia. Disease transmission is likely to accelerate in the coming months, when heavier rainfall will drive even poorer sanitation and facilitate the spread of waterborne disease.

Severe hunger is also expected to worsen in the coming months, which coincide with the traditional 'lean season' when household consumption gaps are typically widest. Prior to the recent outbreak of fighting, for instance, the [latest IPC analysis](#) estimated that 67% of the combined population in Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk would experience severe acute food insecurity (IPC Phase-3+) between April and July, 2025.

Interviews [conducted](#) in late-March, however, suggested food sources that were expected to mitigate more severe conditions during this period – mainly fish, livestock and humanitarian food

distributions – were difficult to access or otherwise unavailable. Further, interviews also suggested that productive assets – mainly animals and agricultural inputs – which households could convert to food or income to buy food were also unavailable.

Humanitarian actors confront considerable restrictions

The response in affected areas is crippled by stockouts, broken supply lines and severe access constraints, according to multiple humanitarian practitioners. The violence in February forced multiple partners to scale back lifesaving services. On April 14, an NGO was forced to [close](#) the hospital in Ulang Town – the only functioning health facility in the area – after the premises was looted. Critical services, including pediatric care and treatments for cholera, have since ground to a halt.

The last remaining health partner in Ulang, whose mobile medical units (MMUs) serve multiple displacement sites, has [run out](#) of essential medicine, including Oral Rehydration Salts to treat a resurgent cholera outbreak. Resupplies are difficult in light of recent clashes, which might force the MMUs to relocate, according to a senior staff member. Recent drawdowns in funding pose another challenge; funding for the MMUs in Nasir and Ulang expires on April 30, after which they may be forced to cease operations, according to the same staff member. In Nasir, the MMU is the only facility serving displacement sites on the border with Ethiopia.

Armed clashes have impeded food distributions that were critical to mitigating the risk of more severe food insecurity in Nasir and Ulang. At the time of writing, Nasir, Ulang and Longochuk counties are classified as "no go" areas for UN agencies, including the World Food Programme. Further violence along the Sobat River will likely continue to obstruct distributions from Malakal County, the regional hub, in the coming months. Moreover, the threat of armed clashes and bombardment will stymie efforts to reach and register beneficiaries.