

What has happened in Akobo County in 2026?

September 2026 | South Sudan

This brief outlines key events that shaped humanitarian needs in Jonglei State in 2026, with a particular focus on Akobo County. It also summarises conditions in Akobo East in August 2026.

Key messages

- Armed violence displaced over 100,000 people [into](#), [within](#) and [outside](#) Akobo County between January-March 2026. By April, over 12,000 people in Akobo faced starvation and one-in-three children were acutely malnourished, according to the [IPC Projection Update for April-July 2026](#). Under a plausible worst-case scenario involving continuous violence, an influx of returnees, seasonal flooding, and a collapse of life-saving services, the IPC warned there was [“credible risk” of Famine in Akobo until July](#).
- Available information suggest this worst-case scenario was averted. A pause in large-scale violence has largely held in Akobo – particularly Akobo East – since [opposition forces retook Akobo town on April 13](#). While this did facilitate [mass returns](#) of [exceedingly vulnerable](#) returnees, it also enabled a significant humanitarian surge from May. The county hospital reopened, nutrition services resumed, and food assistance reached at least 8,000 households each month between June-August, according to programme data shared with REACH.
- By August, interviewees said the response had helped ‘stabilize’ conditions in Akobo East. However, many described this as a fragile reprieve rather than a sustained recovery. Despite an overall decline in acute malnutrition cases in Akobo East between June-August, severe acute malnutrition remained persistently high, accounting for an average of 38% of admissions in this period.
- Interviewees described a convergence of factors that were restricting households’ access to food in August. Below-average rainfall was draining the Pibor river – according to field observations and [satellite alimetry](#) – with interviewees reporting the availability of fish in August was a fraction of previous years. At the same time, a [ban on cash transfers](#) to Akobo was “paralysing” local markets. These factors were driving reliance on humanitarian food distributions.
- The situation in Akobo East looked set to deteriorate once food distributions concluded in August. Interviewees said a prolonged dry spell between May-July would devastate the harvest – due in October. This is corroborated by [CHIRPS 3 rainfall data](#), which show the 2026 April-July period was the second driest since 1991. By August, people in Akobo were already calling this year *ruonrethea* – the Nuer word for ‘rot’, used to describe a drought that results in failed harvests. The last *ruonrethea* was reported in 2009.
- If food distributions are discontinued until 2027, the harvest performs as poorly as expected, and the availability of alternate food sources is continually restricted, households’ access to food will constrict substantially beginning in September. Findings are therefore in line with FEWS NET’s conclusion in August that [the risk of Famine in Akobo will persist until at least January 2027](#).

Background & Methodology

This piece briefly traces the events that pushed [almost 50,000 people in Akobo to the brink of famine](#). It details what has happened since, and projects what is likely to happen in the coming months. The brief combines a desk review with a small number of qualitative interviews conducted between August 10-21 in Akobo town, where REACH spoke with humanitarian staff, community leaders, fishermen, and traders. It also references admissions data shared by health and nutrition partners operating in Akobo East in August 2026.

Due to access restrictions in Akobo West in August, **findings should be considered indicative of the situation in Akobo East only.**





Armed violence caused mass displacement and destruction in Jonglei State

On January 25, 2026, the South Sudan military announced a major [operation](#) in Jonglei State. Between January-March, armed violence forced [over 275,000 civilians – mostly children](#) – from their homes. Satellite imagery revealed “[a path of burning and looting](#)” affecting major towns, including [Lankien](#) in Nyirol, [Pathai](#) in Uror, and [Walgak](#) in Akobo West.

Meanwhile, health and nutrition facilities in Ayod, Duk, Nyirol and Uror counties were “[destroyed or looted](#)”. And humanitarian operations were crippled by [no-fly zones, evacuation orders and roadblocks](#) in conflict-affected areas.

By February 26, an estimated [136,000 people](#) – approximately half the affected population in Jonglei – were displaced into Akobo County, where assessments soon documented catastrophic food insecurity, ‘extremely critical’ acute malnutrition levels, and alarming morbidity rates among arrivals.¹

An evacuation order emptied Akobo town and contributed to the risk of famine

On March 6, 2026, the military issued an [evacuation order](#) for Akobo town. Civilians and humanitarians were given 72 hours to relocate to SSPDF-controlled areas or “areas they deem safer.” The order also demanded the closure of the UNMISS base in Akobo, as well as the “immediate withdrawal” of its peacekeepers.²

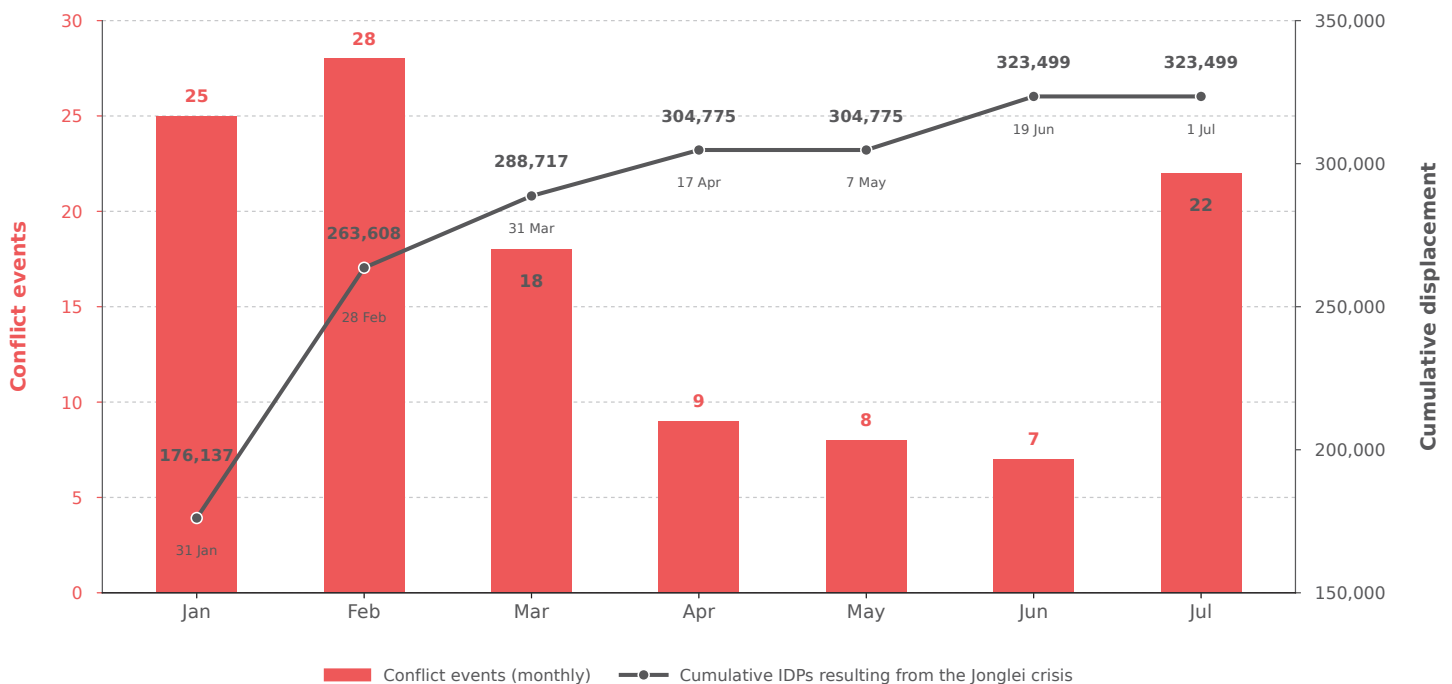
Beginning on March 8, an estimated [200,000 people](#), mostly women and children, fled Akobo town and its environs.

That morning, REACH observed hundreds of civilians travelling northwards alongside the Pibor River. [Over 100,000 people](#) walked to a crossing point connecting Akobo on one side with an Ethiopian border town, Tiergol, on the other. A further [114,000 people](#) fled to eight other locations in Akobo County, including Dengjok, Dibula, Nyandit, Nyikhan and Wechguak (see Figure 3, Page 3).

Figure 1: Conflict events and cumulative displacement resulting from the Jonglei crisis between January-July 2026.

Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data [ACLED] (Conflict events) and IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix (Cumulative displacement)

Note: “Conflict events” refer to Battles, Explosions/Remote violence and Violence against civilians in Akobo, Ayod, Duk, Nyirol and Uror counties.



¹ Rapid public health assessment among persons displaced to Akobo town as a result of the Jonglei crisis. February 26-March 8, 2026. Copy on file with REACH.

² SSPDF Orders for closure and withdrawal of UNMISS force from Temporary Operating Base in Akobo. South Sudan People's Defence Forces, Press Release. March 6, 2026. Copy on file with REACH.

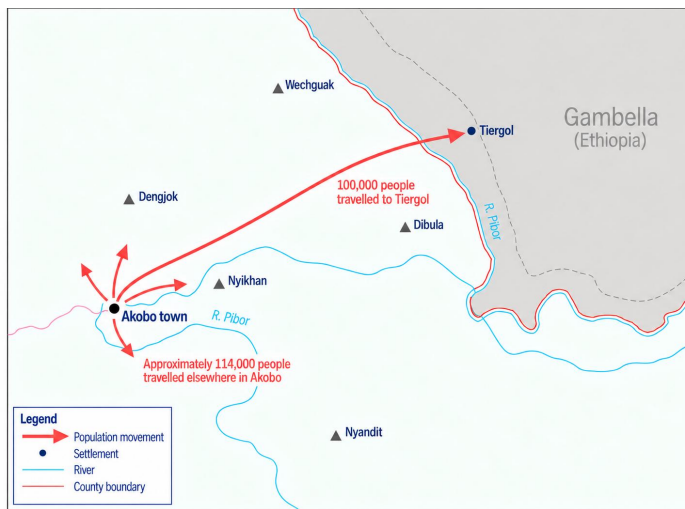


Figure 3: Displacement patterns in Akobo beginning in March 2026.

Source: OCHA South Sudan [Humanitarian Snapshot](#) (March 2026); OCHA South Sudan [Flash Update #14](#) (March 14-26, 2026)

Early assessments revealed alarming conditions in displacement sites

At the end of March, a [fact-finding mission](#) described “a severe, multi-sectoral crisis affecting an estimated 142,000 people” residing in Akobo East and West. The assessment team also observed “significant” movements between Akobo town and Tiergol, with almost 1,000 people crossing daily.

However, interviews conducted in Akobo town in August suggested these were transient movements, and they did not reflect a growing sense of safety in Akobo. Despite extreme suffering in displacement sites, interviewees said civilians feared returning to Akobo town whilst it was under military control.

The IPC issued a risk of Famine statement for Akobo County

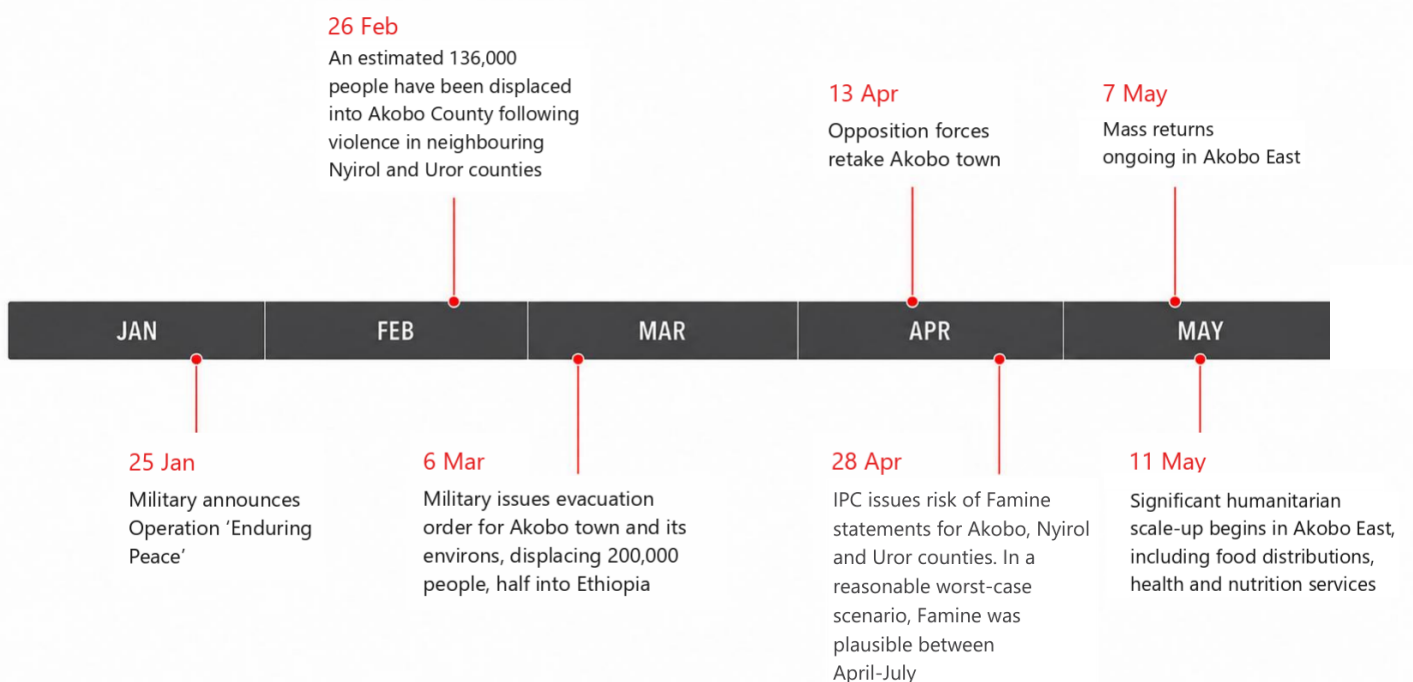
In April, the IPC classified Akobo County in area-level Phase 4 (Emergency). Between April-July 2026, 80% of households in Akobo were projected to experience [life-threatening food insecurity](#) (IPC Phase 3 or worse). This included over 12,000 people (5% of the population) in ‘Catastrophe’, which is characterised by “[an extreme lack of food](#)”, death and destitution.

The April IPC analysis stopped short of classifying greater numbers in Akobo in Catastrophe for two main reasons. First, it was assumed the most vulnerable households fled to Tiergol, which was outside the analysis scope. Second, food distributions targeting 35% of the remaining population with 50% rations were expected to mitigate catastrophic consumption gaps.

Despite this, the IPC also classified Akobo County in [Acute Malnutrition Phase 5 \(Extremely Critical\)](#), meaning at least 30% of children under-5 were malnourished. And in a worst-case scenario involving continuous violence, flooding, mass returns of “asset-depleted” populations, and a collapse of food and nutrition services, [the IPC warned Famine would occur by July](#).

Whilst the displaced population in Tiergol were not included in the analysis, reports of food shortages, extremely poor sanitation, and a complete absence of commercial and humanitarian services over an extended period point to an elevated risk of excess mortality in Tiergol between March and May.

Figure 4: Significant events affecting Akobo County between January-May 2026.





A counter-offensive facilitated mass returns and a large-scale humanitarian surge

In the early hours of April 13, 2026, [opposition forces retook Akobo town](#). Three weeks later, over 30,000 civilians had returned to Akobo, according to [one headcount](#). However, partners in early-May reported Tiergol was “[nearly abandoned](#)”, suggesting most of the estimated 100,000 refugees had returned.

While Akobo town did not meet the same fate as other towns in Nyirol ([Lankien](#)) and Uror ([Pathai](#)) – which were razed during the violence – interviewees recalled civilians returning to homes without beds, doors or fences; the corrugated iron sheets having been stripped and taken.

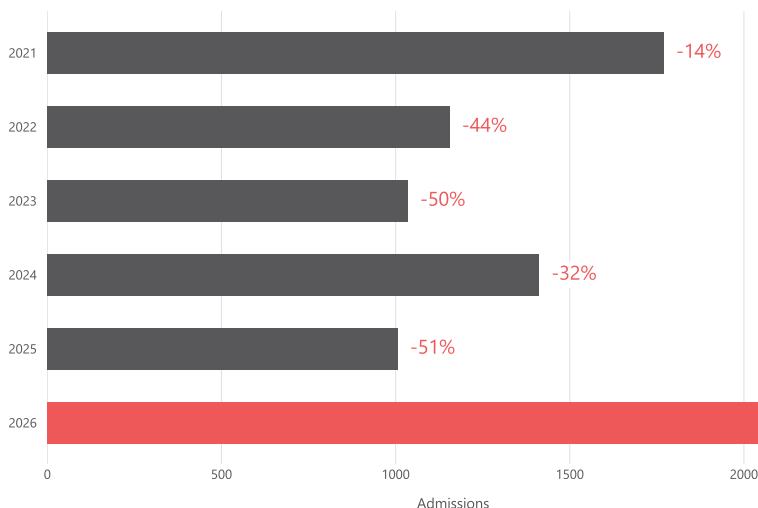
Humanitarians observed extreme vulnerability during the scale-up

Beginning in May, partners launched a significant humanitarian surge. By May 15, one month after the opposition recaptured the town, at least [30 humanitarian organizations were present in Akobo](#).

Humanitarians encountered the impact of widespread looting and vandalism, which had caused “[significant loss of nutrition supplies and damage to infrastructure](#)”. Reports described the county hospital [stripped of basic essentials](#), including beds. Further, partners at the time reported all 15 medical sites in Akobo County were “[destroyed](#)”.

Figure 4: Admissions to Outpatient Therapeutic Programmes (OTP) in Akobo in the May-June period between 2021-2026

Source: [South Sudan Nutrition Cluster](#) (2021-2025); a nutrition partner operating in Akobo East (2026)



Despite a surge of specialized staff and medical supplies, then, the hospital was “[critically overstretched](#)” in May. Its caseload – over 260,000 people – was [more than five times its intended capacity](#). The number of people visiting the facility accelerated through May, with [consultations more than doubling in the final week of the month](#).

By June 14, the number of daily consultations at the hospital was [equivalent to the weekly number](#) before the evacuation order in March. Meanwhile, two mobile medical units in Bilkey and Dengjok payams received over 100 patients per day between June 8-12, according to data shared with REACH.

The malnutrition rate among returnees was another indicator of extreme vulnerability. Between May-June 2026, admissions for severe acute malnutrition in Akobo were markedly higher than in previous years. Admissions in this period in 2026 more than doubled those in 2025 (see Figure 4).

A partner operating four nutrition sites in Akobo East admitted 2,520 children under-5 with acute malnutrition in May. Almost half of these (41%) were severely malnourished. This was the highest prevalence one nutritionist had seen in over a decade in South Sudan. At the end of May, the number of children admitted at the hospital's Inpatient Therapeutic Feeding Centre (ITFC) – a specialized unit for treating Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) with medical complications – [neared three-times the unit's capacity](#).

The collapse of basic water and sanitation infrastructure contributed to elevated malnutrition levels in Akobo. Partners in June reported the water infrastructure in Akobo, totalling 17 towers and 35 boreholes, was “[destroyed or looted](#)” during the violence. An NGO worker said in August that some were destroyed intentionally. Others, including the major supplies at the hospital and the school, were disabled when their main power source – solar panels – were dismantled and stolen. By June 19, [just eight handpumps in Akobo were functional](#), enough to serve less than 5% of the population.

Partners had rehabilitated 21 of 35 boreholes in Akobo by August 13. However, demand surged because the major supplies were still non-functional. In result, some boreholes frequently broke down from overuse. In some areas, an interviewee said entire bomas depended on one borehole, with queues lasting as long as three hours.



Lifesaving food, health and nutrition services scaled through August

By August, interviewees said humanitarian interventions had helped 'stabilize' the situation in Akobo East. Nutrition facility-level data reveal a decline in admissions for moderate (TSFP) and severe (OTP) acute malnutrition at twelve sites between June-August (see Figure 5). Data also show a reduction in the number of children admitted at the Akobo hospital with complicated severe acute malnutrition (ITFC).

Beginning in May, partners launched outpatient therapeutic and targeted supplementary feeding programmes at four sites in Akobo East. This expanded to twelve sites by June 1, according to a humanitarian practitioner. Approximately half of these were integrated health-nutrition facilities. Services included two stabilisation centres: one at the hospital in Akobo town and one in Dengjok payam, north of Akobo town.

As well as health and nutrition services, the World Food Programme (WFP) launched emergency food distributions beginning in May. WFP targeted a minimum 75,000 people in three separate distribution windows between May-August.

The violence in Jonglei between January-March prevented WFP from pre-positioning supplies, including in Akobo. Meaning the agency relied on airdrops in the first distribution window between May-June.

Figure 5: Admissions to Outpatient Therapeutic Programmes (OTP), Targeted Supplementary Feeding Programmes (TSFP), and the Inpatient Therapeutic Feeding Centre (ITFC) in Akobo between May-August 22, 2026.

Source: Two nutrition partners operating in Akobo. OTP and TSFP admissions were recorded at twelve nutrition sites in Akobo East; ITFC admissions were recorded at the Akobo county hospital, also in Akobo East.

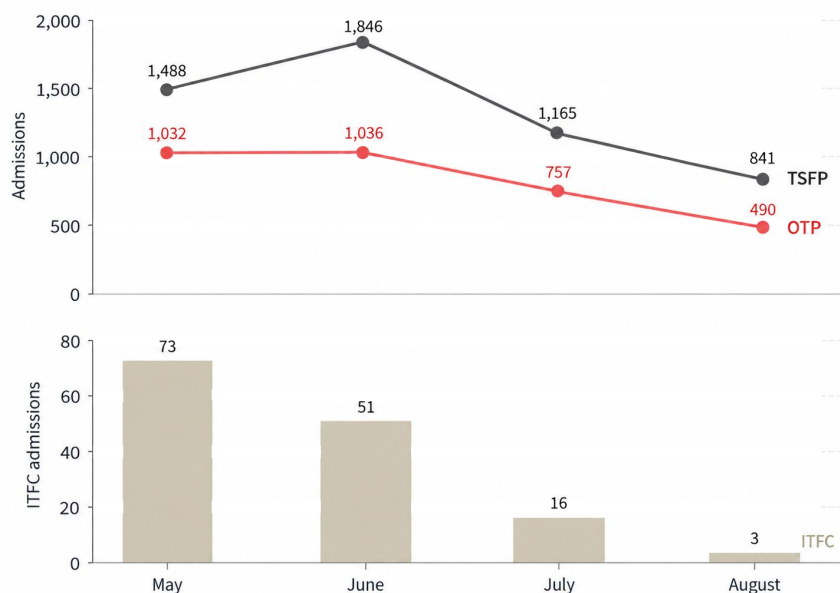
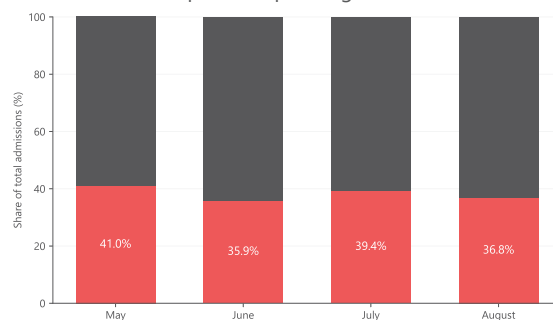


Figure 6: Severe cases as a percentage of all admitted children in Akobo between May-August 2026.

Source: Nutrition partner operating in Akobo



WFP adapted its approach in June, procuring sorghum in Ethiopia and pivoting to a hybrid method combining in-kind (food) and cash distributions. However, this raised further obstacles. Transporting food from Ethiopia is enormously expensive (see Page 8). And authorities in Juba have suspended cash distributions in Akobo, meaning WFP was – and remains – unable to distribute cash. Another challenge was a continued influx of returnees between July-August from more distant locations in Ethiopia. As a result, WFP increased the caseload by 10,000 people in August.

The situation remained extremely fragile

A humanitarian surge and improvements notwithstanding, challenges remained. Whilst the malnutrition caseload decreased between June-August (Figure 5), facility-level data suggest it did not become less severe. In all months, a persistently large share of children admitted with acute malnutrition were severe cases (an average of 38%) (Figure 6).

And even despite the overall reduction in malnutrition cases between June-August, humanitarian partners described considerable pressure on available services. Typically, the main nutrition partner operates children's nutrition services two days per week, usually treating fewer than 50 children per day. However, a staffer explained considerable demand – exceeding 100 children per day – required them to double services to four days per week.

Notably, these admissions included *only self-referrals* – children brought to nutrition sites without being *formally referred* by a health worker or mobiliser. Staff therefore explained the current figures were likely an undercount. Community-level screening was set to begin in September. The same staff said admissions would begin increasing thereafter.



Conditions looked set to deteriorate from September

Interviewees repeatedly described the response as the main factor sustaining recent improvements and enabling people to return to Akobo. As one NGO worker explained, “the humanitarian response is the only reason people came back. Without it, most people would have stayed in Tiergol or gone onwards to camps in Gambella [Ethiopia].”

Community leaders and humanitarians were worried, then, about the suspected pause in food distributions in September. Interviewees said distributed sorghum comprised the bulk of households’ food intake. And that few alternatives remained once distributions finished.

Interviewees identified three main reasons for this. First, an exceptionally severe dry spell threatened to devastate the harvest – due to begin in October. Second, and relatedly, dry weather was draining rivers, reducing the availability of fish to a fraction of previous years. And third, a ban on commercial goods and cash transfers was straining markets. Taken together, interviewees expected these pressures to drive another deterioration in food security and malnutrition after August.

The following sections examine each factor in more detail.

The 2026 harvest will be extremely poor

A exceptionally severe dry spell – driven by the 2026-27 El Niño event – was depressing yields in Akobo East. Participants widely believed this would devastate the harvest.

On returning from displacement sites in Akobo and Tiergol in May, farmers began planting maize and sorghum. Maize would be ready by July and sorghum by October. However, interviewees in August explained a prolonged dry spell interspersed with inadequate rainfall had prevented both crops from germinating.

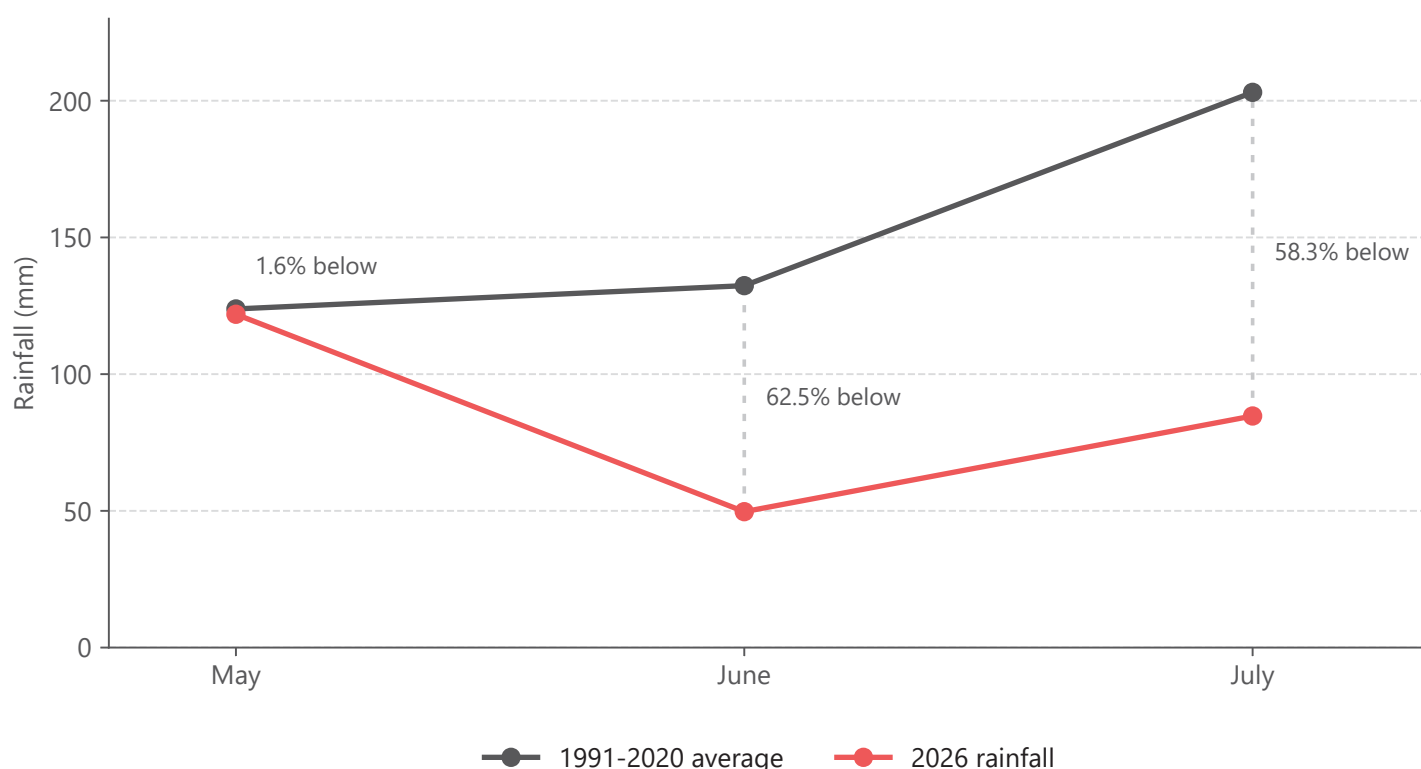
This is corroborated by CHIRPS 3 data, which reveal the May-July period in 2026 was the second driest since 1991. Only 2009 recorded a lower May-July total between 1991-2026.

Farmers were reported to have planted seeds multiple times whenever rainfall increased. However, these seeds repeatedly failed, leading many to give up planting this year. Whilst heavier rainfall could materialise between August-October, this is insufficient for long-maturing sorghum, which requires between 5-6 months to germinate properly.

In Akobo, *ruonrethea* ('rot') describes a drought that results in a failed harvest. An NGO worker recalled the last *ruonrethea* in 2009-10. Community leaders were yet to officially name the drought in 2026, but, he explained, the resemblance was already clear.

Figure 7: Total rainfall in Akobo town between May-July 2026, compared with the 1991-2020 average.

Source: Climate Hazards Group InfraRed Precipitation with Station data (CHIRPS) - University of California, Santa Barbara





The availability of fish was a fraction of previous years

Failing rains were also visible in Akobo's waterways, particularly the Pibor River. Interviewees in August described water levels substantially below extents in previous years, a finding partly corroborated by satellite altimetry.

The [Database for Hydrological Time Series of Inland Waters \(DAHITI\)](#) operates a monitoring point approximately 33km downstream from Akobo town. Figure 8 (below) shows water levels in August were between 0.5-0.6 metres lower than the comparable date in 2024, and around 0.3-0.4 metres lower than in 2025. The differences emerged mainly from late-July onwards, following broadly comparable levels earlier in the rainy season.

Interviewees said this had greatly reduced the availability of fish. The main fishing site in Akobo is a 7km stretch between Barmath and Kony, south of Akobo town. In a typical year, this generates a regular supply of fresh fish consumed daily in Akobo town.

By August, however, interviewees said catches there were a fraction of previous years. Whereas a fisherman in August 2025 would have caught as many as 40 fish there a day, interviewees said a fisherman was "lucky" to catch three at the 2026 levels.

This forced fishermen to travel to a series of fishing grounds – Kuornyin and Rummyeri – around Wanding, a payam 30km north of Akobo in Nasir County, Upper Nile State.

Reaching these areas, however, depended on access to canoes, which had fallen substantially since the crisis in March. Interviewees estimated around three-quarters of fishermen could access a canoe before the crisis, compared with only one-quarter in August.

Even for those able to travel, the journey constrained what fisherman could bring to Akobo. Fisherman said reaching Kuornyin and Rummyeri took between two and three days. The return journey could take as long as one week because fish were dragged behind the canoe inside a tarpaulin. Without motorised boats, fishermen said it was effectively impossible to deliver fresh fish from these more distant fishing grounds to Akobo town.

REACH could not verify reports that most households were unable to access fish in Akobo in August 2026. However, these accounts are consistent with a low baseline. During the same period in 2025, when Figure 8 indicates river levels were higher, only 18% of households in Akobo could access fish, according to Round 31 of the Food Security & Nutrition Monitoring System (July-September 2025). Given lower water levels, a substantial reduction in fish in nearby areas, and limited access to canoes, available information suggests households' access to fish was even lower than this in August 2026.

A ban on commercial goods and cash transfers was straining markets

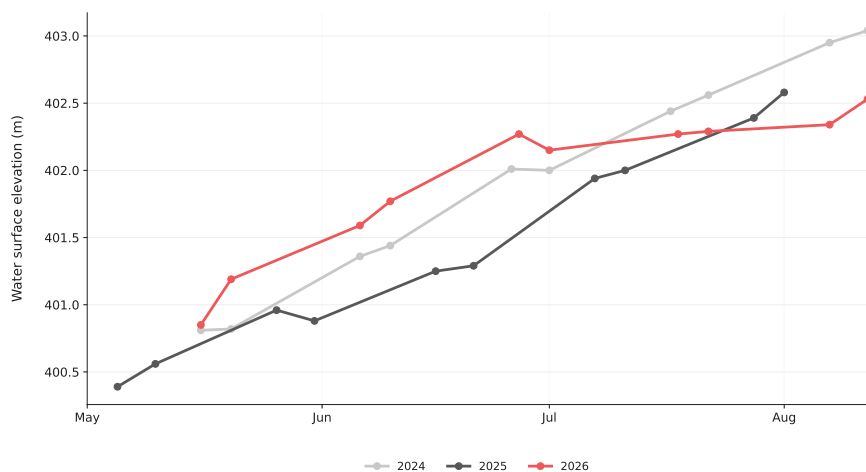
Authorities in Juba have [banned commercial and humanitarian cash transfers](#) to Akobo County since May 2026. By August, traders and humanitarians said the resulting shortage of cash was "paralysing" the market, constraining traders' ability to restock, and reducing the availability of food beyond humanitarian food distributions.

Markets in Akobo depend heavily on supplies from Ethiopia. Local traders typically partner with Ethiopian middle-men to procure sorghum from markets in central Ethiopia.

This is a costly process, with the largest expense being payments levied at checkpoints. In August, the secretariat of the Akobo traders' union identified 18 checkpoints between Gambella and Akobo, including 13 he described as "main" checkpoints. At a main checkpoint, traders reported paying as much as 500 Ethiopian Birr (~USD3) per 100kg of sorghum.

Figure 8: Observed water surface level at a DAHTI monitoring point 33km north of Akobo town between May-August of 2024, 2025 and 2026.

Source: [Database for Hydrological Time Series of Inland Water \(DAHITI\)](#).



Note: Observations were not taken on the same date each year. Comparisons use the closest available measurements between May 1 and August 12. The latest recording before this date in 2025 was August 1, hence the line finishes earlier.



These costs had risen since the beginning of the crisis in March. According to the Chairman of the traders' union in Akobo, transporting 100kg of sorghum from Ethiopia to Akobo cost around 9,400 Ethiopian Birr a (~USD58) in August, compared with 8,400 Birr (~USD50) in March. His counterpart in Tiergol estimated the cost was as high as 9,700 Birr.

At the same time, considerably fewer traders had the cash required to absorb these costs. The Chairmain of the traders' union in Akobo estimated only one-quarter of traders in town could afford to procure food in Ethiopia in August. Traders attributed this partly to losses incurred during the March-May crisis, but also to the subsequent ban on cash transfers, which prevented them from restocking and building capital.

Many traders exhausted much of their available cash in Tiergol between March-May, using it to support themselves, their relatives and neighbours. Others depleted their remaining stocks after returning to Akobo. One trader described providing sorghum on credit to households registered for humanitarian cash distributions, on the understanding they would repay him once distributions occurred. By August, however, humanitarians and community leaders confirmed that these distributions had not occurred.

The cash-transfer ban also restricted traders' access to savings held outside Akobo. Traders said many were unable to withdraw money from bank accounts in Juba. Whilst transferring funds to accounts in Ethiopia was possible, the exchange rate was reportedly so unfavourable that some traders chose not to withdraw money at all. Combined with the limited volume of cash already circulating in Akobo, an NGO worker said this had effectively "paralysed" the market.

Another challenge in August was the lack of Ethiopian traders, who previously were prominent suppliers of cooking oil, beans and other foods in Akobo market. Many had still not returned at the time of the assessment. Interviewees identified three reasons for this.

First, interviewees said around three-quarters of the Ethiopian traders operating in Akobo in March had lost their entire stock during the violence. Few had restarted their businesses by August, according to the Chairman of the traders' union in Tiergol. Second, among traders who retained stock in Tiergol, restricted cashflow in Akobo had weakened households' purchasing power and reduced demand below levels they considered commercially viable.

And third, Ethiopian traders were reluctant to return to Akobo because of the volatile security situation. The traders' Chairman in Tiergol said rumours of another escalation deterred them from transporting goods back to Akobo. Some had expected heavier seasonal rainfall to reduce the likelihood of further fighting. As described earlier, however, these rains did not materialise, leaving traders with little confidence the security situation had improved.

Taken together, higher transport costs, traders' depleted capital, restricted cashflow and continued insecurity had substantially weakened Akobo's markets by August. With fewer traders able or willing to restock, the availability of commercially-supplied food had contracted. This left households increasingly dependent on humanitarian food distributions at precisely the point when those distributions were expected to scale down.

ABOUT REACH

REACH develops information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).



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