

South Sudan cross-border displacement: Rapid food security assessment in areas of return - Rubkona County.

September 2023 | Rubkona County | Unity State | South Sudan

KEY MESSAGES

- The conflict in Sudan appears to have had significant consequences for food security in Rubkona County, for both returnees and households residing in the assessment area prior to April 2023. Assessment findings suggest that the population influx has put substantial additional pressure on already scarce community and household food resources, while the price of staple food items and basic commodities have increased dramatically because of disrupted supply lines and the continued devaluation of the South Sudanese Pound (SSP).
- Most of Rubkona remains inundated with water as a result of catastrophic flooding in 2021, drastically reducing the viability of traditional livelihoods, including crop cultivation and cattle rearing, for most of the population, and restricting mobility across the southern two-thirds of the county.
- More than 200,000 displaced people residing in Rubkona, who for many years have been receiving twelve months of humanitarian food assistance (HFA), will after August 2023 not receive rations, ostensibly until 2024. Given the continued impacts of flooding, perceptions of insecurity, and consequent dearth of traditional livelihoods, it is likely that the cessation of HFA will contribute to a marked deterioration in food security over the short term among all population groups in the area.
- Returnees, who face greater near-term barriers to accessing livelihoods and are not registered to receive general food distribution, are heavily relying on family and community support networks to access food and other basic needs. As such, FGD participants often identified persons without relatives or support networks in Rubkona as especially “vulnerable”, with special emphasis on households transiting through Rubkona en route to their final area of destination, as they are less likely to have access to support networks enabling them to fulfill their basic needs over the immediate term.
- Assessment findings and secondary data make clear the immense deterioration in public health conditions since the outbreak of fighting in April. WHO IDSR data¹ reflect a rise in cases of acute watery diarrhea (AWD), upper respiratory infections (URI), malaria, and measles. Healthcare providers in Rubkona reported that health facilities had been overwhelmed by the scale of needs, leading to stock-outs of medicines and supplies, and the early discharge of patients. Increased mortality among young children was frequently mentioned in both FGDs and KIIs.

CONTEXT & RATIONALE

Since the outbreak of fighting in Sudan on April 15 2023, humanitarian agencies have recorded 262,298 individuals crossing the Sudan-South Sudan border at 22 points of entry (PoEs) in Abeyei Administrative Area, Upper Nile, Unity, Northern Bar El Ghazal and Western Bar el Ghazal states². The large majority (91.4%) of those recorded crossing are South Sudanese nationals who had been residing in Khartoum State as refugees. Of these, 46,062 have been recorded entering Rubkona County through two PoEs.

As of September, Rubkona is among the most common destinations for returnees, owing in part to the persistence of floodwaters across much of Unity State, making Bentiu - the administrative capital of Unity State, as well as of Rubkona County - the de-facto areas of return for returnees with relatives residing in displacement sites there.

This assessment sought to provide a better understanding of how the fighting in Sudan and resultant displacement to South Sudan have impacted food security in areas that have since April received a substantial number of returnees.

Underlying vulnerability of populations in Rubkona County

Pre-April 2023 Population: Prior to the onset of fighting in April 2023, approximately 200,000 internally displaced people were residing in Rubkona County, including persons displaced during the 2013-2018 crisis, and by flooding between 2019 and 2022. The Bentiu IDP camp (formerly known as the “Protection of Civilians site” or PoC) had a population of roughly 100,000 people as of March 2023, while roughly 70,000 additional flood-affected IDPs resided across 5 displacement sites in Bentiu Town, and 28,000 IDPs resided in Rotriak.

As of September 2023, Rubkona remains one of the most flooded counties in South Sudan. The vast majority of 5 of its 8 payams are inundated with water leftover from catastrophic flooding in 2021³. Only areas in the county’s far north, around the town of Rotriak, lie on relatively high-ground and remain largely unaffected. Such levels of flooding have greatly reduced the ability of people to practice agriculture and livestock rearing in most of the county, according to FGD participants and key informants, and drive congestion within displacement sites. The lack of access to traditional livelihoods and scarcity of income generating activities has driven the population to depend on HFA and markets for food sources. Before the onset of the Sudan crisis, the main source of food in Rubkona markets was the import of goods from Sudan, as this route was the most cost efficient for traders. Prices had experienced different fluctuation levels over the past years, with greater peaks in August 2022 due to flooding affecting the markets, and January 2023 due to

the devaluation of the SSP.

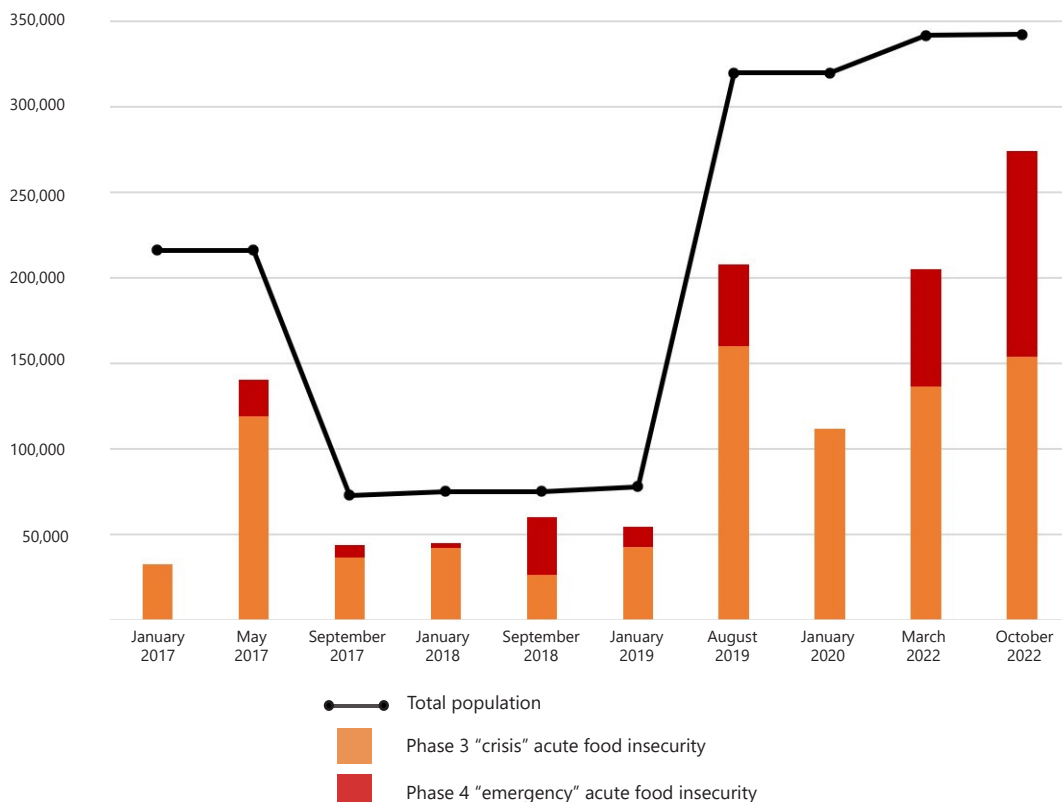
The combination of widespread displacement and extreme flooding has driven a protracted situation with acute food insecurity affecting most households in the area. Since 2019, the population of Rubkona County has increased fivefold, as has the number of people experiencing acute food insecurity, as seen below in Figure 1.

Displacement and Population Movement: Since April 15, Rubkona County has received more than 40,000 returnees from Sudan since April. Returnees have mostly settled in 4 areas: Rotriak, the Rubkona IDP camp (formerly the Protection of Civilians site, or Poc), Rubkona Town, and Bentiu Town, and have mostly integrated into the host community, according to KIs. Several small sites have been established for persons awaiting transportation to another county of destination, while some returnee households have been allocated land in Rotriak. Returnee FGD participants reported travelling to Rubkona via one of two routes: an overland route through the Panakwach PoE, and a riverine route via Joda, Renk, and Malakal, landing in Nyaroup port, Guit County before onward humanitarian-facilitated overland transport to Bentiu.

Returnee Vulnerability: Assessment findings corroborate a growing base of evidence indicating that recent arrivals from Sudan experienced severe humanitarian conditions in transit and after arriving in destination areas, faced substantial barriers to integrating and meeting their basic needs in their final destination, and have considerably eroded coping capacity due to displacement-related asset loss. Most specifically:

Figure 1: Total population of Rubkona County vs number of acutely food insecure people between January 2017 and October 2022

Source: IPC. “South Sudan - IPC Analysis 2017-2023.” Dataset.



- Needs assessments in conducted transit locations in Renk and Malakal Towns between June and August show severe needs among returnee populations reflected in critical rates of acute malnutrition among children under 5 years old and pregnant or nursing women⁴. Such outcomes appear to be driven by poor hygiene and sanitation conditions, congestion, limited shelter and consequent exposure to weather, disease, and poor food consumption.

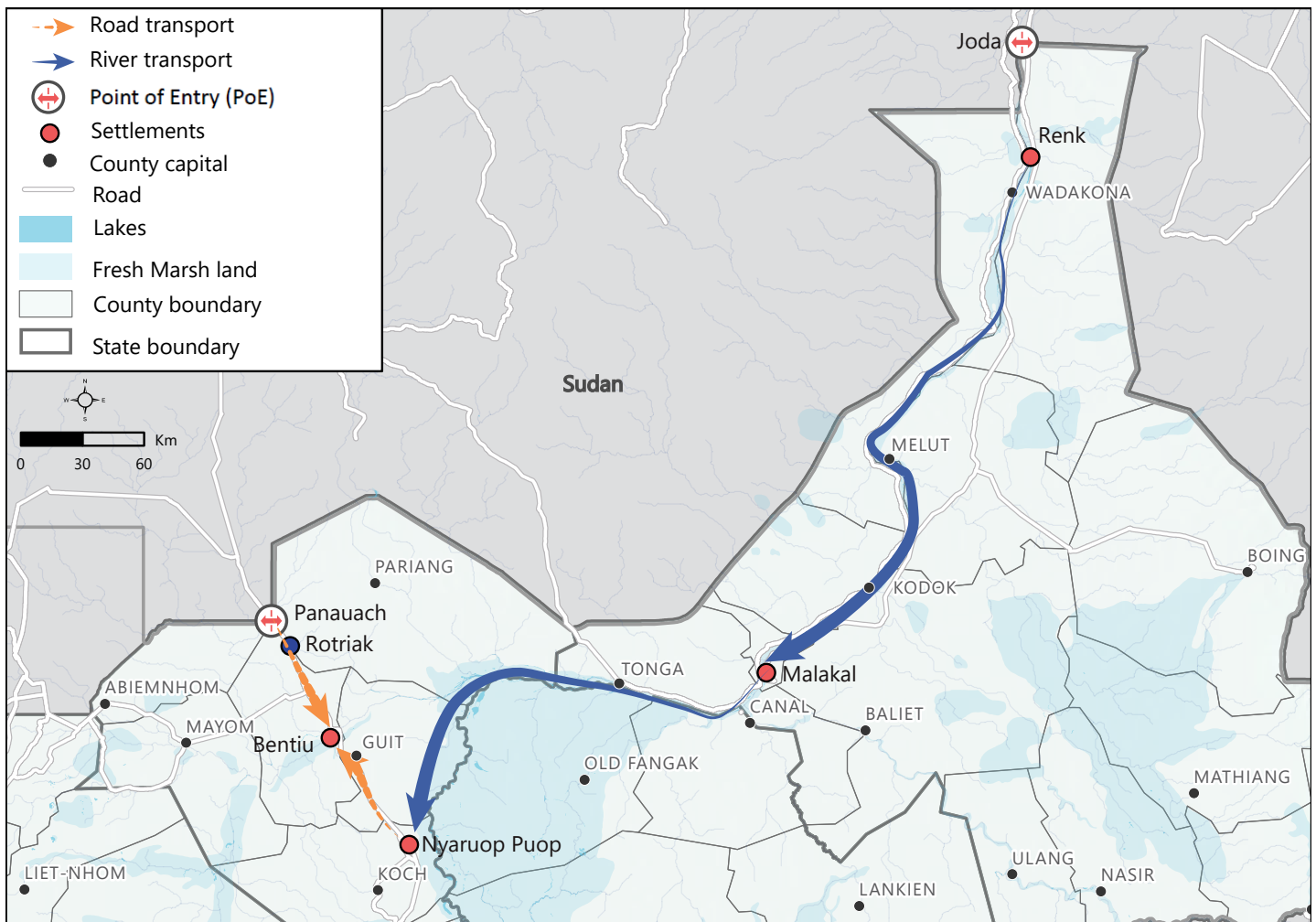
Returnees interviewed in Malakal and Bentiu reported extremely poor conditions during riverine transit from Renk to Malakal and Malakal to Unity State, including multi-day journeys aboard overcrowded boats with no access to drinking water, limited access to food, no access to latrines, and no protection from the sun. A total of fifteen non-trauma deaths of young children during riverine transit between Malakal and Nyarouport, Koch County, were reported independently during three separate returnee FGDs in Rubkona, and were corroborated by two humanitarian agencies and one community leader in Bentiu. Healthcare providers in Bentiu reported observing high rates of acute malnutrition, high acuity illness, and exhaustion among people arriving through Panakuach and Nyarouport PoEs.

- Findings of assessments conducted in Renk and Malakal in June found that many returnees had experienced near total asset loss in the course of their displacement. Assets

were left in their area of departure due to the sudden-onset nature of the conflict, sold to finance journeys or food, and robbed or confiscated by members of armed groups in transit. An assessment in August⁵ found increasing liquidation of assets, mainly clothing, among women at the Bulukat transit center in Malakal. As such, new arrivals reported being highly dependent on social networks or other forms of external support to access food and meet their basic needs in their final destination, and may have lower coping capacity relative to host community populations.

- Returnees in all FGDs reported that the Sudan crisis, and their consequent displacement, had resulted in the complete destruction of their former livelihoods. Returnee participants in all groups described facing substantial barriers to accessing cash-earning opportunities or other self-sustaining livelihood activities in Rubkona, and are not registered to receive general food distribution, compounding their dependency on relatives and support networks to meet their basic needs. Assessments conducted in Malakal and Renk in June found that most returnees held blue-collar jobs in Khartoum, most often as construction workers or cleaners, and expressed anxiety about accessing similar work opportunities in South Sudan, where rearing livestock, cultivating crops, or fishing are likely to be more commonly practiced⁶.

Map 1: Population movement of returnees to Rubkona County



Impact on food access and availability

Increased sharing reduces per-person household food consumption: In most FGDs with host community members, there was consensus that the crisis in Sudan had negatively impacted food consumption by increasing the dependency of new arrivals on relatives and social networks in areas of return, thereby decreasing the amount of food available per household member. This was most commonly described as an increase in household size (due to the arrival or returnees) without a commensurate increase in HFA rations, which many FGD participants reported was their households' primary food source. This trend was corroborated by returnee FGD participants, who widely reported being dependent on relatives or other members of the host community to access food and meet other basic needs.

Continued impact on markets: Ongoing fighting continues to disrupt supply chains between Sudan and South Sudan by driving up the price of staple food items and leading to decreased availability of commodities at markets, according to two KIIs with traders. Moreover, data from the [Joint-Market-Monitoring Initiative](#) reflects a steep increase in the cost of staple foods between April and August. The food minimum expenditure basket (MEB) – the cost of what is needed to cover basic food consumption for a six person household for one month - rose 129% between March and August. Traders attributed price increases to the need for resorting to source goods from Juba, which incurs greater costs associated with procurement and transportation.

Bilateral updates received from a humanitarian partner in Rubkona on September 4 indicated that security personnel had ordered some traders to lower the price of food commodities, and that several traders had been arrested. In response to arrests, some traders decided to hide their stocks of sorghum, further reducing availability.

FGD participants commonly reported being unable to purchase food at markets because of high prices. Host

community members often reported that only people with NGO or government jobs, or those whose family members occupied such jobs, were able to source food from markets.

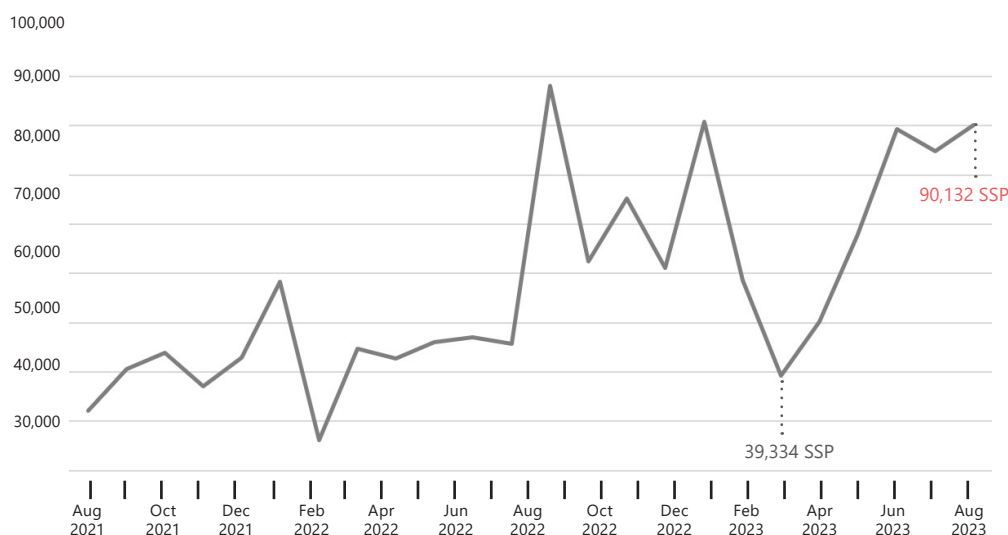
Impact on cash-earning opportunities: FGD participants from the host community reported that a small number of core cash-earning activities remained available despite the impacts of flooding and other shocks, including fishing or the reselling of fish, the collection of firewood or long grass for shelter construction, and the production of charcoal. Less commonly reported were casual labor opportunities such as working in tea shops. FGD participants reported that access to such livelihoods were restricted for older or physically disabled people, and became more difficult to practice in the rainy season (traditionally from May to November). Returnees, alternatively, reported that the fighting in Sudan and resultant displacement had caused the complete elimination of their former livelihoods, which involved casual labor as construction workers, cleaners, or making alcohol, and are currently reporting very limited access to any kind of income sources in the areas of return.

However, because the scarcity of income sources was a present issue before April 2023, HC participants did not ascribe as much importance to the Sudan crisis negatively affecting income-earning opportunities, and considered these are relatively unimportant when it comes to access food. This statement is all the more important when considering the high dependence on HFA that the population in the Rubkona area has had for years now. Nevertheless, in most HC groups, participants noted that the returnee population influx had put additional pressure on household financial resources, meaning less cash could be reinvested into business or used as capital to engage in cash-earning ventures.

Humanitarian food assistance: Most returnees reported having received a one-off one-to-two week ration of food assistance upon their arrival to Bentiu. Most host community members reported that at least some members of their household were registered to receive general food distribution.

Figure 2: Cost of Food Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) at Bentiu Market between August 2021 and August 2023

Source: Joint-Market Monitoring Initiative Dashboard



Impact on public health

Assessment findings and secondary sources reflect the Sudan crisis' immense impact on public health both in transit areas and in areas of return. An outbreak of measles, which was declared by the South Sudan Ministry of Health in Rubkona in December 2022⁷, has worsened significantly since April, reflected in a spike in the number of measles deaths between June and July. WHO IDSR data¹ also shows increasing cases of ACR, AWD, and malaria in Rubkona since April.

The general decline in public health conditions was frequently regarded by FGD participants as a primary consequence of the Sudan crisis, both in terms of its impact on well-being as well as its impact on livelihoods. For instance, FGD participants reported that the sickness of young children had prevented mothers from engaging in need-fulfilling activities, such as the collection of wild foods, or forms of casual labor like the collection of firewood, because mothers needed to stay in close proximity to their children to care for them.

Projections (September to December)

Results of this assessment supported by secondary literature on seasonality, livelihoods, and humanitarian assistance suggest that mitigating and aggravating factors affecting the food security situation in Rubkona County between October and December 2023 could include the following:

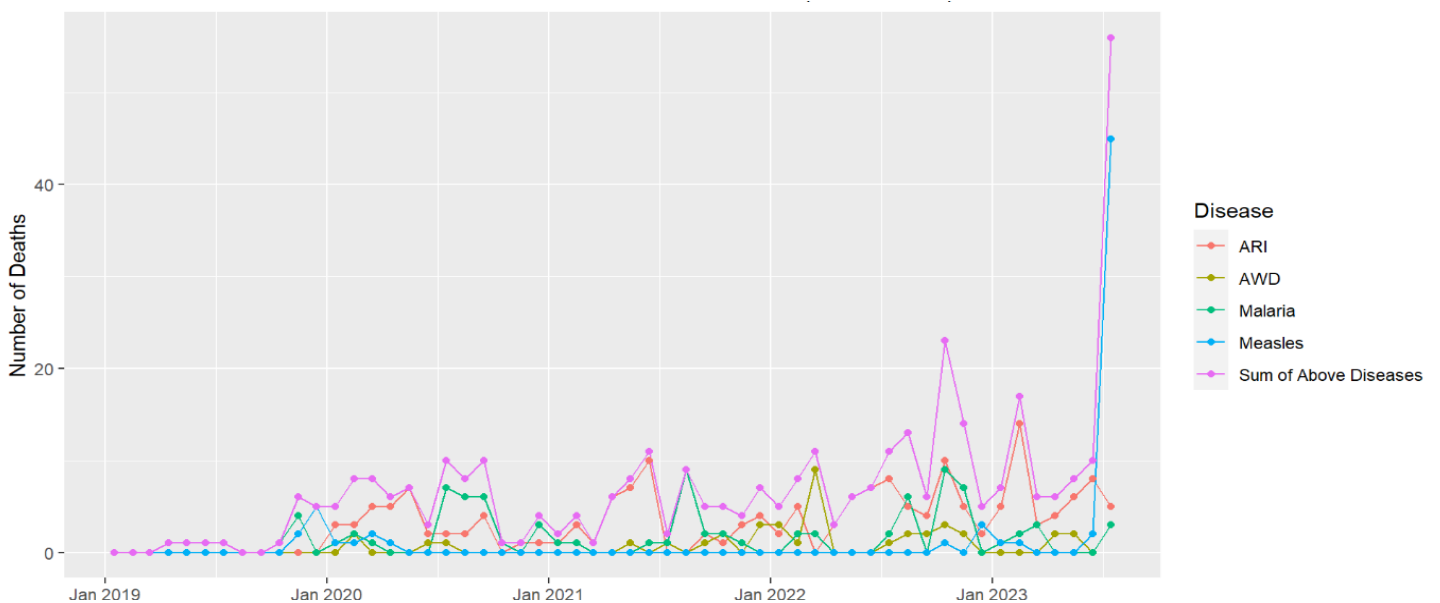
Population flows to Rubkona likely to decrease: The flow of returnees to Rubkona is likely to decrease considerably between September and the end of the year due to the cessation of humanitarian-facilitated riverine movement

from Malakal, and the slowing of population flows through the Panakwach PoE. Population flows through the Panakwach PoE have slowed considerably since the second week of August to fewer than 50 people on average per day, which assessment findings suggest could be linked to widespread perceptions of insecurity along the Kosti-Bentiu road, driven by reports of physical violence, including sexual-gender-based violence, and robbery⁸. Humanitarian facilitated transport between Malakal and Unity has been discontinued as of the first week of September due to funding shortages.

Household food security to be substantially impacted by HFA cuts: The ending of general food distribution for displaced populations in Rubkona in August will likely have substantial impacts on household food security between September and the end of the year. Assessment findings suggest that HFA is a key food source for many households in Rubkona, and as such, that household food consumption is likely to decrease following General Food Distribution (GFD) cessation, at least in the short term. The decline in household food consumption could drive increased migration away from Bentiu and Rubkona towns to fishing islands or to highlands in the north of the county, near Rotriak.

Land allocation in Rotriak could exacerbate tensions with groups in Ruweng: Tensions between communities from Rubkona and communities from the Ruweng Administrative Area (RAA) have grown since 2021, when catastrophic flooding forced herders from Rubkona to bring their cattle to graze atypically far north into a triangle of high-ground encompassing Rotriak and Panakuach. This area is historically contested between the two communities, and some conflict analysts have suggested that the settlement of returnees on government-allocated land in Rotriak could inflame tensions.

Figure 3: Recorded deaths due to ARI, AWD, Malaria, or Measles, between January 2018 and July 2023 (WHO IDSR data¹)



METHODOLOGY OVERVIEW

Primary data was collected via two qualitative components: **12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with a total of 48 individuals**, 24 who had returned from Sudan since April 15, and 24 persons residing in the assessment area prior to April 15, including internally displaced persons; **and 10 Key Informant Interviews (KII) or FGDs with humanitarian service providers or humanitarian response coordinators, members of local government, community leaders, and traders**. For each of these two components a separate semi-structured tool was used, with key informant tools including or omitting certain questions based on the key informant's profile. FGDs explored the impacts of the Sudan crisis on food security, livelihoods, and other basic needs, while KIIs sought to outline the extent of humanitarian service provision and identify broad trends in humanitarian conditions and population movement since April 15.

Data collection took place between the 14th and 21st of August in the Bentiu internally displaced persons (IDP) site - known as the Protection of Civilians (PoC) site - Rubkona

Town, Bentiu Town, and Rotriak Town. Correspondence with humanitarian service providers based in Rubkona and Juba continued to supplement assessment findings until the 8th of September.

This brief also draws on secondary sources including data from the Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI), FEWS NET Livelihood Zone Profiles, county profiles developed by REACH and the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility (CSRF), the IOM-UNHCR population movement dashboard, ad-hoc updates from humanitarian coordination bodies on the Sudan crisis, and needs assessments conducted by humanitarian agencies between May and July 2023 in Bentiu and Rotriak.

This analysis focuses largely on the areas of Bentiu Town, Rubkona Town, and Rotriak, where the majority of the county's population resides according to government officials. It does not discuss conditions in the five largely flooded southern payams, which remain mostly inaccessible except by boat, but are likely to have relatively small populations residing in payam headquarters and on islands. Conditions in these

ENDNOTES

PAGE 1

¹ WHO Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR).

² UN-IOM and UNHCR. "[Population Movement from Sudan to South Sudan.](#)" Dashboard.

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³ UNOSAT

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⁴ Exhaustive nutrition screenings were conducted by humanitarian agencies in transit sites in Upper Nile and Unity States between June and August 2023. Proxy GAM by MUAC among children under 5 ranged between 16.6% to as high as 44.2% (Paloich, Melut county). Results are on file with REACH.

⁵ REACH. "South Sudan cross-border displacement: Rapid food security assessment in areas of return - Malakal County." September 2023

⁶ REACH. "[Emergency Situation Overview: Sudan-South Sudan Cross Border Displacement. Malakal County.](#)" June 2023.

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⁷ Government of South Sudan. "[Measles Outbreak and Response Weekly Situation Update.](#)" 28 March 2023.

⁸ Nonviolent Peace force. "From Conflict to Conflict." June 2023. On file with REACH; REACH. "[Emergency Situation Overview: Sudan-South Sudan Cross Border Displacement. Malakal County.](#)" June 2023.

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of 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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