

Situation Overview: Cross-border displacement into Uganda via Nimule, Eastern Equatoria

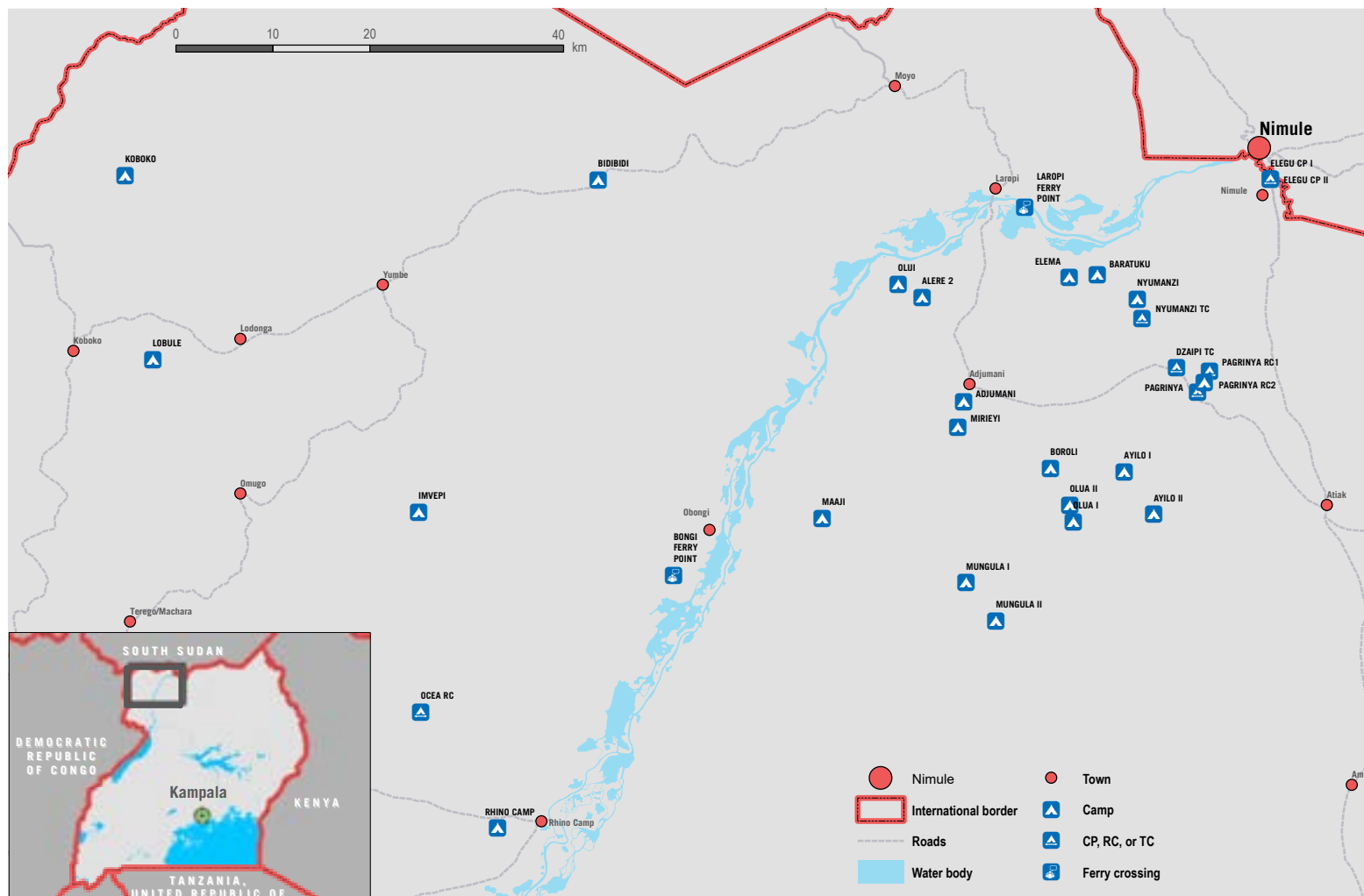
REACH Informing
more effective
humanitarian action

South Sudan, February 2017

Introduction

Ongoing insecurity across Greater Equatoria has resulted in high numbers of South Sudanese fleeing across the border to refugee camps in Uganda. From 1 January to 15 February, a total of 106,244 South Sudanese crossed into Uganda and registered as refugees, joining the 489,234 who had previously fled across the border throughout the duration of 2016¹. The vast majority of these have settled in the multiple refugee settlements in Northern Uganda, as illustrated by Map 1. However, an increasing number of refugees are now returning to South Sudan, reporting that the living conditions in the Uganda settlements are untenable. In order to better understand these cross-border dynamics, and the implications they may have on humanitarian planning in both South Sudan and Uganda, REACH conducted a rapid assessment in Nimule Town, a key border crossing between South Sudan and Uganda, in February 2017.

This Situation Overview presents findings of a rapid assessment of displacement patterns into and out of Nimule Town, Pageri County, in Eastern Equatoria State. The assessment predominantly focused on cross-border displacement to Uganda from Eastern Equatoria, and the movement of returnees to South Sudan.



Map 1: Nimule border crossing and location of Ugandan refugee settlements

1. UNHCR. South Sudan Situation: Information Sharing Portal. Available online at <http://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/documents.php?page=1&view=grid&Country%5B%5D=229#page-2>



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
and Cooperation SDC

Between 9-15 February REACH conducted 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) and 64 key informant interviews (KIIs) with internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and members of the host community, as well as additional four KIIs with relevant government officials and community and religious leaders to better understand the displacement patterns in and out of Nimule, and the impact that they are having on the local community. Due to sensitivities around collecting data at the border checkpoint, REACH was unable to speak to many IDPs who were crossing into Uganda. In order to mitigate against this, two FGDs and 36 KIIs were conducted with local community members, border staff and local government employees to gain insight into the push and pull factors, and intentions of people travelling to and from Uganda.

Nimule Context

Thus far, Nimule has not been directly affected by the ongoing conflict in the region, although some respondents alluded to a rise in insecurity within the town over the last six months, referencing several incidents of civilians disappearing at night and never returning.

However, much of the surrounding county has been severely impacted by insecurity and respondents reported that very few civilians now remain. This, combined with multiple incidents of vehicles being attacked on the Juba-Nimule road over the last six months²,

has resulted in Nimule Town becoming one of the only places in the region that respondents reported to be perceived as relatively safe.

Due to its close proximity to the Elegu Collection Point³ in Uganda, Nimule is a key entry point for refugees seeking to leave South Sudan. The town provides direct access between Uganda and Juba via a busy tarmac road, making it a key transit hub for both people and goods crossing the border. The greater Nimule area has experienced a simultaneous influx of IDPs from surrounding towns and an exodus of both local community members and IDPs into Uganda since the July 2016 crisis.

Most IDPs use the town as a transit route for entering Uganda, however, a small number chose to remain. A REACH rapid assessment of displacement into Nimule, conducted in November 2016⁴, found that the primary reported reasons for remaining in Nimule, rather than travelling to Uganda, for both local community members and IDPs, were financial constraints, health restrictions, former negative experiences in Ugandan refugee camps and reports of unfavourable conditions within current Ugandan refugee camps.

In addition to the substantial volume of people crossing the border, Nimule is a primary transit route for importing goods from Uganda and Kenya. Given the ongoing closure of the border with Sudan, the lack of significant cross-border trade with Ethiopia, and ongoing instability along the border with Kenya, the road from Nimule to Juba has become a vital transit route for the supply of food and

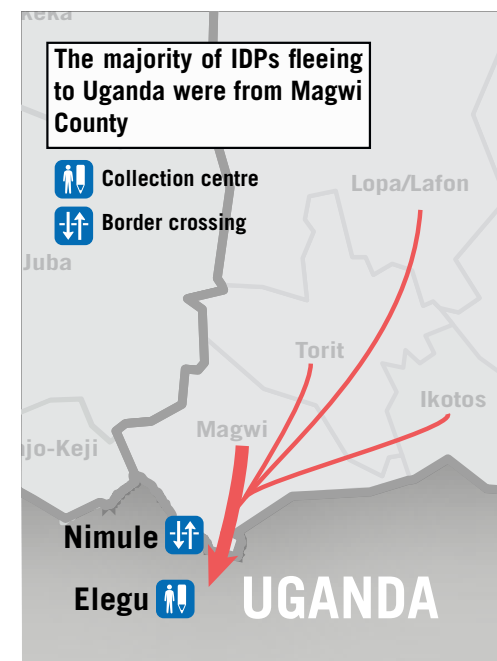
petroleum into South Sudan. As a result the town is a strategic location in the Greater Equatoria region.

Displacement into Nimule and Uganda

There is currently ongoing displacement from across Eastern Equatoria, with the highest numbers of IDPs coming from Magwi and Torit Counties (as reported by assessment respondents). In addition, at the time of this assessment, the border crossings at Kaya, south of Yei, and at Moyo, south of Kajo-Keji, are currently closed, meaning that there is the potential for more IDPs to begin travelling to Nimule from Yei, Kajo-Keji and other locations in Central Equatoria, in addition to crossing the border informally through the bush.

Most IDPs were reported to travel in small groups so as to avoid being targeted for attack, moving on foot through the bush or in small private vehicles if they could afford to rent them. A number of IDPs were also observed arriving into Nimule in the back of goods trucks. Some respondents reported incidents of rape and lethal attack along the road.

Once in Nimule, the majority of IDPs cross the border on foot and wait to be registered at the collection centre in Elegu. One respondent who worked near the border checkpoint estimated that between 100 and 200 people were crossing into Uganda from Nimule every day at the time of the assessment.



Map 2: Displacement into Uganda

Push factors

Insecurity was the primary driving force behind displacement into Nimule. Nineteen of 25 KIIs from Eastern Equatoria, principally Magwi County, reported that they had fled their homes because of fighting. FGD respondents described the presence of armed actors in many parts of the state, and reported that armed actors arrived in their villages and gave them one to three days to leave their homes, and warned that anyone who stayed beyond this deadline would be considered an enemy combatant and killed.

2. NGO Forum, Security update. 11 February 2017.

3. A collection point is a centre where newly arrived refugees are registered, before being dispatched to refugee settlements.

4. REACH, Nimule Situation Overview. November 2016.

Pull factors

Security was cited by respondents as the principal reason for IDPs fleeing to Uganda. Despite an awareness of the poor conditions in the Ugandan refugee settlements, respondents indicated that the settlements would at least provide safety for them and their families.

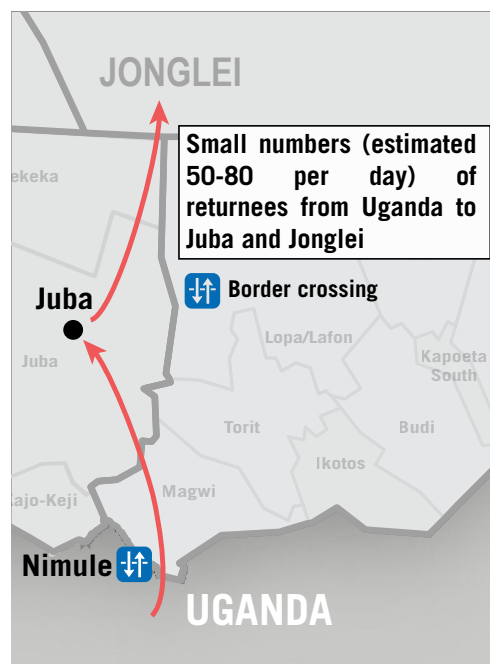
Intentions

KIs reported that most people from the Equatorias who had moved into Uganda over the last six months generally intended to remain in the refugee camps until peace returns to South Sudan. The continued insecurity across much of Eastern Equatoria is deterring the majority of recently displaced refugees from returning.

Most IDPs from across Eastern Equatoria have reportedly lost their homes and crops due to fighting, and the rapid nature with which IDPs fled their homes meant that few were able to carry their tools and other agricultural assets with them. This has larger implications for food insecurity in the Ugandan refugee settlements; although refugees are given plots of land, without agricultural tools their ability to cultivate remains limited.

Returnees to South Sudan

Returnees from Uganda fell into two broad categories; those who were intending to stay in South Sudan for a short period of time in



Map 3. Returnees to South Sudan

order to “find money”, who generally travelled to Nimule or Juba, and those who reported wanting to travel back to their areas of origin permanently, who generally travel to various locations in Jonglei State. Respondents reported that the majority of returnees to South Sudan pass straight through Nimule to other parts of South Sudan, either in private vehicles, or on government sponsored ‘Bongo Buses’, which leave Nimule for Juba in a military-escorted convoy each morning. Respondents estimated that between 20 and 50 returnees leave for Juba on the Bongo Buses every day, the majority of whom are returning to their pre-crisis locations in Jonglei. The buses are

subsidised by the government and charge approximately 300 South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) per ticket⁴.

In contrast, a minority of returnees travel to Juba in private cars, which are estimated to cost between 1,000 and 1,500 SSP per person⁵. In general these returnees were reported to travel to Juba on a temporary basis in order to find work.

Similarly, a small number of returnees have chosen to remain in Nimule and generally reported coming back from Uganda in search of work. Returnee respondents in Nimule stated that they had left their children with relatives in the refugee camps whilst they carried out informal income-generating activities, such as running a market kiosk. Additionally, FGD respondents indicated that some South Sudanese travel to Uganda to be registered for a ration card and then remain in Nimule to work, travelling back to the settlements for food distributions.

Similarly, some refugees living in Uganda cross back into Nimule to temporarily access additional food distributions. Respondents referenced a recent food distribution done by a church organisation which attracted South Sudanese from across the border, and eventually resulted in the looting of food supplies⁶. This has implications for humanitarian service provision in Nimule as it is possible that a similar pattern will reoccur.

Push factors

Most respondents who were returning to South Sudan cited food insecurity in the settlements as a reason why they were travelling back across the border. Although small plots of land have been allocated in some settlements, opportunities for cultivation remain limited, making many refugees almost wholly reliant on general food distributions, which are unreliable and often come late. One respondent travelling back to Bor indicated that the amount of rations given to each family had halved since January 2016. The reported reduction in rations may be a result of World Food Program attempts to encourage refugees to cultivate, and/or increased pressure on supply lines following the massive influx of new arrivals since July 2016.

Additionally, although there are small markets in the camps, the decreasing value of the SSP has resulted in very few households being able to afford food.

Alongside food insecurity, returnees also reported being unable to access the materials to build semi-permanent shelters, predominantly tukuls or rakoobas. Whilst the local community sells these materials in the market, very few households are able to afford them, and multiple respondents described incidents of women being attacked when they left the camp to collect grass and wood construction material themselves.

4. Approximately \$2.70 USD using the February national average market exchange rate of 1 USD to 111 SSP. As reported by a KI who worked at the Nimule bus park.

5. Approximately \$9.00-13.51 USD. Ibid.

6. As reported by several KIs in local government

A number of respondents stated that they were returning to South Sudan to access education services, particularly secondary schools. The lack of secondary education services in the camps, and the high cost of school fees in the local community, have pushed families with older children back across the border. A head teacher interviewed in Nimule indicated that he was no longer accepting new enrolments as a number of returnees had registered at his secondary school since January 2017. Additionally, although primary school facilities are available in the camps these were reported to be severely overcrowded and expensive, again causing some families to return to South Sudan to access primary schools.

Finally, several respondents indicated that inter-ethnic tensions in the camp were a factor in their decision to leave Uganda. Community membership is not currently taken into account when placing refugees in each camp, which is reportedly causing friction between different communities, particularly given the increasingly ethnic nature of the conflict in South Sudan. Given the ongoing influx of refugees to Uganda from the Equatorias, we may expect to see a continual movement of returnees from other communities to areas in Jonglei, such as Bor and Twic East.

"If you die in your country is more better than dying in a foreign country"

(Male IDP intending to travel back to Bor)

Pull factors

Access to food was cited as a key reason why people are returning to South Sudan from Uganda. This was closely linked to the increasing weakness of the SSP which meant that, as aforementioned, many refugees were unable to afford basic food in Uganda. Respondents indicated that they believed their money would have greater purchasing power in South Sudan, and that they would benefit from the additional support of relatives who had remained. Returnees intending to stay in Juba reported travelling back in order to find temporary work or receive financial support from relatives, before returning to their families in Uganda.

For those intending to return to Jonglei, the relative stability in Bor and Twic East Counties over the past few months may account for the increase in numbers now travelling back to those areas.

Intentions

Whilst by no means a concrete rule, the majority of returnees travelling on Bongo Buses generally reported intending to travel back to their pre-crisis locations in Jonglei to settle there permanently, whilst the smaller numbers of returnees travelling to Nimule or Juba in order to find work reportedly generally intended to return to Uganda after one or two months.

Given that the majority of refugees fled

without agricultural assets, it is likely that any returnees will be heavily dependent on food aid even if they are able to access land for cultivation again. Additional support through the provision of agricultural inputs is therefore likely to be necessary.

Conclusion

Ongoing conflict across large parts of Eastern Equatoria has resulted in a high number of South Sudanese moving across the border to Uganda over the last six months, with the most recent influx largely originating from Magwi County. Additionally, there is a growing trend of returnees travelling back to South Sudan in search of food and education services.

Alongside those who are intending to move back to South Sudan permanently, smaller numbers of returnees cross into Nimule in the short term, both to work and to access aid services. Aid concentrated in Nimule is likely to attract higher numbers of South Sudanese from across the border, who come in search of food and other donations.

Whilst this assessment has attempted to capture the motivations for this cross-border movement, and the future intentions of IDPs, refugees and returnees, establishing permanent port monitoring data collection would strengthen this information significantly. Further understanding of why people are returning to South Sudan, and identifying the areas that they intend to resettle to, would

better inform the humanitarian response in both countries.

Additional research should be conducted into the inferred lack of social cohesion between different community groups in the refugee camps in Uganda, and whether fear of fighting may be causing some refugees to leave the camps and return to South Sudan.

About REACH

REACH 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. All REACH activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms.

For more information, you can write to our in-country office: southsudan@reach-initiative.org or to our global office: geneva@reach-initiative.org.

Visit www.reach-initiative.org and follow us @REACH_info.