



# Yei County Displacement Brief

Yei County, Central Equatoria State, South Sudan, March 2018

## Introduction

Fighting in Yei County has displaced thousands of people since July 2016. Although Yei town was reported to be peaceful in recent months, and returns from Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are reported to have increased since January, sporadic fighting along major roads continues to cause displacement. In response to reports of returns and recent displacement, REACH deployed with the World Food Programme (WFP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on a rapid assessment of displacement dynamics in Yei town and Lasu Refugee Camp between 19 - 22 March. Quantitative records of the size, origin, and current location of 1377 IDP and returnee households (HHs) that arrived during the period covered by this assessment (between January 2017 and March 2018) were obtained and transcribed from the Yei County Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), for which summary statistics were generated and analysed.<sup>1</sup> Six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with 55 IDP and host community participants (29 men and 26 women), six Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with government officials and humanitarian actors, and direct observation of four locations in Yei County were also conducted. FGDs and KIIs took place in Lasu Refugee Camp, near the border with DRC, in Yei town, and in New Site and Gezira villages in Yei town (see Table 1). Findings are indicative only.

## Key Findings

- **The vast majority of IDP HHs in Yei County are reportedly residing in remote areas of Yei County outside of Yei town.** Many reportedly expose themselves to serious protection risks in order to obtain food and other services.
- Most reported "returns" to Yei town did not previously live in the town; rather, these are secondarily displaced **former refugees in Uganda who were originally from rural parts of Yei County** but do not feel safe to return to their home villages in rural parts of Yei County.
- **A majority of IDP HHs in Yei town are living in the unoccupied shelters of HHs who previously sought refuge in Uganda.** Housing, land and property (HLP) disputes are likely to emerge as people continue to return from Uganda and find IDP HHs occupying their homes.
- **Internally displaced HHs are reportedly splitting themselves between refugee settlements in Uganda and unoccupied homes in Yei Town** in order to increase their overall access to services.

## Displacement in Yei County, October 2017 - March 2018

Conflict began in Yei town in June 2016 and spread to rural areas along major transit routes between late 2016 and early 2017. The conflict displaced much of the population into Uganda, DRC and remote areas of Yei County.<sup>2</sup> Sporadic incidents of violence along major roads continued throughout most of 2017 and early 2018.

Table 1: Location and data collection methods

Assessment location		Data collection method		Date
Site	Payam	FGD	KII	
Lasu Refugee Camp	Lasu	3	1	20/03/2018
Yei County RRC	Yei Town	1	1	21/03/2018
New Site village	Yei Town	2	1	21/03/2018
Gezira village	Yei Town	0	1	21/03/2018
UNHCR	Yei Town	0	2	22/03/2018

REACH identified two main patterns of displacement in Yei County between October 2017 and March 2018: displacement and returns to Yei town, and displacement from villages into remote areas of Yei County. Both patterns of displacement are explored in detail below.

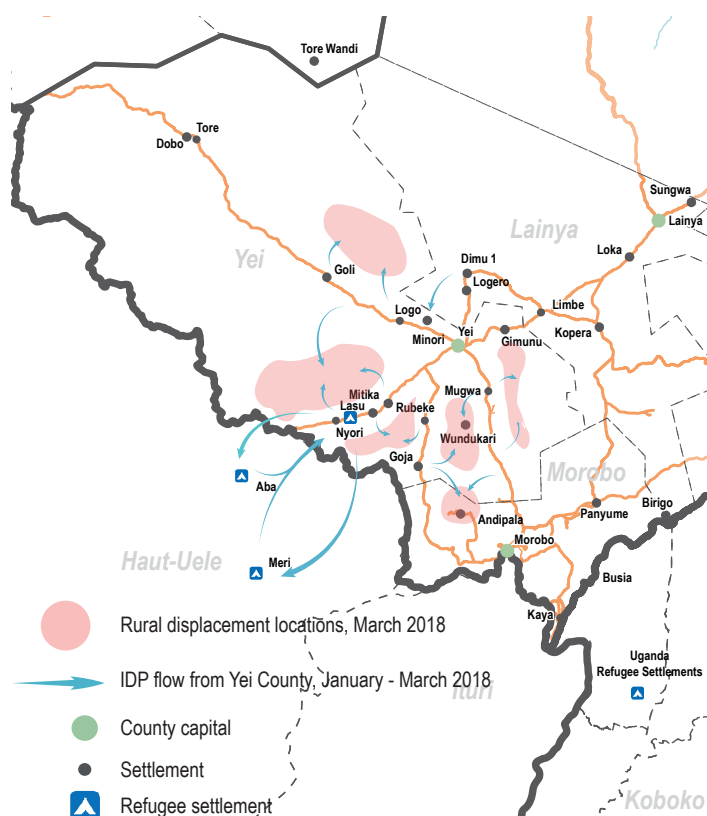
### Displacement from villages in Yei County, October 2017 - March 2018

Between October 2017 and March 2018, fighting has continued to displace people from villages along all of the major roads in Yei county, including Logo, Rubeke, Mugwa, Gimunu, Goja, Nyori, Lasu, and Mitika (see Map 1). A majority of HHs fled to remote locations where they were less likely to be found by armed groups, while a minority made their way to Yei town or refugee settlements in Uganda.

### Displacement in Lasu Payam, December 2017

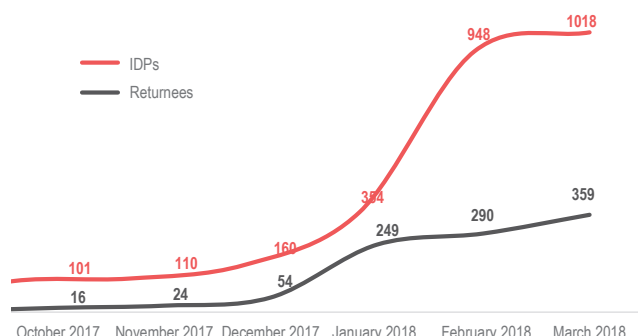
Of particular note is Lasu Payam, where an estimated 2,247 refugee HHs (8,144 individuals) from DRC are registered by UNHCR in Lasu Refugee Camp. Most of the population of Lasu Payam was displaced

Map 1: Displacement from villages to remote areas in Yei County, October 2017 - March 2018



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**Figure 1: Number of IDP and returnee HHs registered in Yei Town, October 2017 - March 2018<sup>3</sup>**

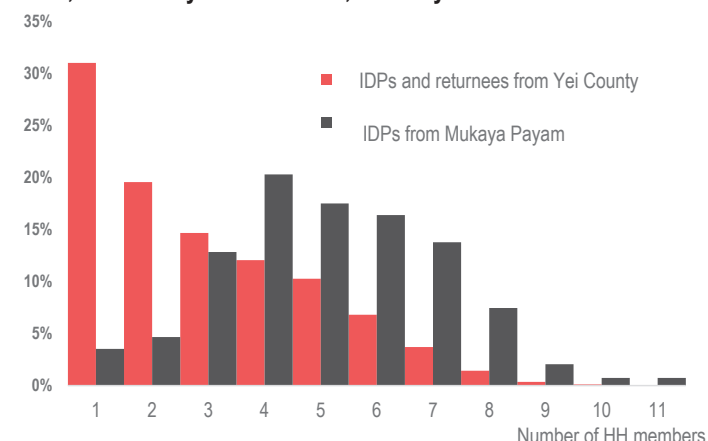


by conflict in December 2017.<sup>4</sup> While a minority of IDPs fled to Yei town, the vast majority fled into remote areas far from roads; REACH estimated that there were likely 3,935 HHs (19,673 individuals) from the host community displaced throughout Lasu Payam.<sup>5</sup> FGD participants further revealed that **all of the refugee HHs from DRC who had been living in Lasu Refugee Camp were also scattered in remote areas** of Lasu Payam with the host community.

Most of the IDPs in Lasu Payam were reportedly unable to access food or other services; FGD participants described living in small, makeshift shelters which did not protect them from the rains, and farming small plots of land deep in the bush with the few tools that they had fled with. Many reported being unable to move freely, and needing to be ready to abandon their shelters and farms if armed groups patrolling in the area found them. Most households were reportedly eating only one meal a day, and severely limiting portion sizes. The impact of the lack of food on children was most serious; according to FGD respondents in Lasu Refugee Camp, between 10% - 20% of children in Lasu Payam were exhibiting symptoms of malnutrition.

According to FGD participants, many people from Lasu Payam fled to refugee camps in DRC, but quickly returned. Returnees reported that conditions in refugee camps were often worse than in South Sudan; the presence of armed groups made most of the areas outside of the camps too dangerous to safely collect firewood and wild foods. Protection concerns were reportedly rife, including incidents of sexual and gender based violence, child labour, and killings by armed

**Figure 2: Frequency distribution of HH size of new arrivals in Yei Town, Yei County RRC records, January 2017 - March 2018<sup>6</sup>**



groups in the area. Access to food was also a challenge; returnees reported being given money to purchase food by local authorities, but accessible markets were not sufficiently supplied to meet demand.

## Displacement and returns to Yei town, January - March 2018

### Displacement of IDPs from Mukaya Payam, February 2018

Conflict between armed groups in two bomas (Logero and Dimu 1) of Mukaya Payam in western Lainya County on 12 February displaced much of the population to Yei town.<sup>7</sup> The RRC recorded a total of 962 HHs (6,977 individuals) occupying most of the shelters in New Site and Gezira villages in Yei town.<sup>8</sup> A minority of the population of Mukaya Payam also reportedly fled to Minori, a remote village northwest of Yei town.

Unlike the returns and IDPs from Yei County, the IDPs from Mukaya come from a different community and do not have relatives in Yei town to support them; nearly all of the Mukaya IDPs are occupying the shelters of households who are still displaced in Uganda. They have no means of cultivation, as most of the land near the town is being used by the host community and it is still too dangerous to access farms far from Yei Town, making them dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival. FGD respondents from Mukaya were reportedly given food by Caritas and local authorities in February, but were now running out, and may soon be forced to return to Mukaya to forage for food. A recent arrival noted that armed groups were still in the area, and had looted all of the crops that were abandoned when they fled.

### IDPs and returns from Uganda to Yei town, January - March 2018

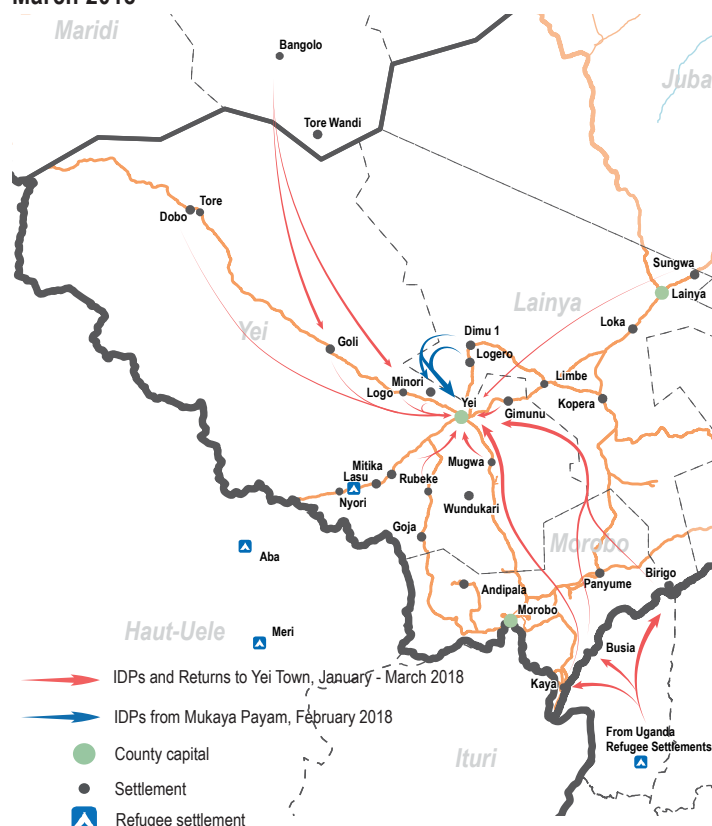
Increasing numbers of HHs have returned to Yei County from refugee settlements in Uganda, and DRC to Yei town since January 2018. Most reportedly came due to deteriorating conditions in the settlements in Uganda and DRC; FGD participants who had recently arrived from Uganda noted hostile host communities, a reduction both in the size of the plots of land and in their food ration size, and overcrowded schools as the main reasons for leaving.<sup>9</sup> The improved security situation in Yei town following the relocation of armed groups to rural areas was cited as the main pull factor for coming to Yei town.<sup>10</sup>

RRC records of returnees and IDPs between October 2017 and March 2018 further showed over half of all recorded HHs contained only 1 or 2 individuals; most members of the HHs were still living in settlements in Uganda. FGD participants explained that **HHs split themselves as part of a coping strategy**; members of the HH, usually school-age children and their guardians, returned to Yei in order to access services that they could not get in Uganda, primarily education, while the rest of the HH stayed in the refugee camps in order to continue to access food and other services.

**Most of the households who returned to Yei town from refugee settlement in Uganda were likely secondarily displaced IDPs rather than returnees from Yei town.** A recent study by UNHCR found that 82% of all newly arrived HHs were from distant villages in Yei county, rather than Yei town itself, and had returned because of their increased vulnerability to challenges in the refugee settlements; most of Yei town's original pre-crisis population was believed to still

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**Map 2: Displacement and returns to Yei town, October 2017 - March 2018**



be living in refugee settlements in Uganda.<sup>11</sup> Many were residing with friends or relatives in Yei town, but others had occupied the empty homes of HHs still living in neighbouring countries. REACH noted the disproportionate number of school-aged children and their guardians among the new arrivals; according to FGD participants, schools in the refugee settlements were overcrowded, and many parents wished to send their children to study in Yei town now that the security situation has improved.

## Conclusion

Improvements in the security situation in Yei town have allowed many refugees to return to South Sudan. However, most are still unable to return to their homes in rural parts of Yei County due to insecurity, and are now IDPs in Yei town, where they are occupying other displaced people's shelters. Disputes over shelter ownership are likely to become an issue as the original owners return from refugee

settlements in Uganda. This is likely to be particularly problematic for the population from Mukaya Payam, who are estimated to account for over 2/3 of the total IDP caseload in Yei town, and reportedly lack support from the host community. Most HHs are now split between refugee settlements in Uganda and Yei town in order to better access services in both locations; KIs noted that many of the services that the IDPs had left Uganda to access in Yei town (such as education) were quickly becoming strained due to the influx of people.

However, **the vast majority of IDP HHs are displaced in remote areas of Yei County; most are unable to venture far from their shelters due to insecurity, and are unable to produce enough food to meet minimum HH needs.** Though security in Yei town has improved, protection remains a key concern for most HHs displaced outside of Yei town; accessing services often involves coming across armed actors. FGD participants in Lasu noted that soon after the FGD ended, they would have to flee back into the bush to hide from armed groups that would likely enter the area as soon as humanitarians left, limiting access to the health centre and other services at the site until humanitarians returned.

## Endnotes

1. The full Yei County RRC records were incomplete (1,377 HHs containing 6,566 individuals were identified from the records; official figures show 1,497 HHs containing 8,095 individuals), and likely contain transcription errors.
2. Amnesty International, South Sudan - "If Men Are Caught, They Are Killed, If Women Are Caught, They Are Raped" - Atrocities In Equatoria Region Turn Country's Breadbasket Into a Killing Field, July 2017.
3. Yei County RRC, Returnee and IDP HH records, March 2018.
4. Reuters, "South Sudan rebels accuse army of attack as peace talks restart," 18 December 2017.
5. REACH estimate methodology: South Sudan National Bureau of Statistics (SSNBS) Official payam population projection of 22,477 Individuals (SSNBS, Population projections for South Sudan by Payam: From 2015 - 2020, April 2015). Refugees registered in DRC between 31 November and 31 January (2,804 individuals) was subtracted to give 19,673 individuals. This was divided by 5 to give the estimated number of HHs (3,935). The official UNHCR population figure for Lasu Refugee Camp (2,247 HHs and 8,144 Individuals) were added (UNHCR, DRC Regional Refugee Response: South Sudan, January 2018).
6. Yei County RRC, Returnee and IDP HH records, March 2018.
7. Child Protection Cluster, Protection Assessment: IDP Situation of Displaced Population from Mukaya, February 2018.
8. REACH's transcription of RRC records found only 539 HHs containing 2,731 individuals from Mukaya. An additional 16 HHs did not document HH size, and were not counted; REACH estimates approximately 555 HH containing 3,000 individuals from Mukaya in Yei town.
9. REACH, Uganda Refugee Response Monitoring, Settlement Factsheet: Kinyadongo, January 2018.
10. Previous REACH assessments in the Equatoria region have found that urban populations are often perceived as wealthier, and are therefore more likely to possess vehicles and other transferable assets that allow them to better endure hardships like displacement. See: REACH, Situation Overview: Displacement and Intentions in Eastern Equatoria State, October 2016.
11. UNHCR, Refugee Returns to Yei, February 2018 (Forthcoming). For more information on urban displacement models, see: Global Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster, Urban Displacement and Out of Camps (UDOC) Review, December 2013.
12. Yei County RRC official estimates, March 2018.
13. UNHCR. Ibid.

### Inset: Government convoys from Kaya to Yei town

The state government began facilitating transport via convoys for IDP HHs from the border crossing to Uganda at Kaya on 7 January; many refugees have since relocated to Kaya to wait for government convoys. At the time of the assessment, a reported 16 trips had been made, transporting 573 HHs containing 1101 individuals.<sup>12</sup> However, KIs noted that most HHs are still arriving on foot via the informal border crossings at Busia and Birigo on the Ugandan border. RRC has established nine outreach centres in Yei town to register, verify, and provide services to new returns with UNHCR support.<sup>13</sup> According to the RRC, the average size of the HHs who have returned with the government convoys was 1.9 individuals per HH.