

# Emergency Food Security Update: Rubkona County

November 2023 | Rubkona County | Unity State | South Sudan

This brief is an addendum to the Rapid Qualitative Food Security Assessment conducted by REACH in Rubkona between 14th and 21st August 2023. The purpose of that assessment was to better understand the impact of the Sudan crisis on food security in areas of South Sudan that have received substantial numbers of returnees. This update builds upon findings from the [initial brief](#) with additional analysis presented at the September 2023 Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Workshop.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Recent IPC analysis corroborates [earlier assessment findings](#) that suggest an **already severe humanitarian situation in Rubkona County has worsened in 2023** - due in large part to the impacts of the conflict in Sudan, including atypical price increases, large returnee population inflows, increased congestion and disease outbreaks, and overburdened service providers, - and warns that such conditions may persist or worsen through much of 2024.
- The IPC Acute Malnutrition (AMN) analysis estimates a Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate of 28.1% in Rubkona County, which **approaches but does not cross** the "extremely critical" threshold (30%) consistent with famine. Results of the IPC AMN analysis project that the prevalence of acute malnutrition **will surpass the extremely critical threshold between April and July 2024**, placing the county in AMN Phase 5, the most severe phase classification. An [ongoing measles outbreak](#) has likely been one key driver of such severe nutrition outcomes.
- The IPC estimates that **80% of Rubkona's population will face acute food insecurity** between September and November 2023, including **15,400 people (5% of the population) in catastrophic food insecurity** ("famine-like" conditions). The proportion of the population facing acute food insecurity is projected to remain consistent between December 2023 and July 2024, at 80%, though the proportion of the population in "emergency" or worse acute food insecurity (Phase 4 or 5) is projected to decrease between December and March, and again between April and July, because of the resumption of humanitarian food assistance (HFA) and anticipated stabilization of food prices.
- Because of their unique vulnerability status, internally displaced persons in Rubkona have for years received ongoing year-round HFA, surpassing the standard "lean-season response" window that typically concludes with the harvest in August, and resumes the following year. [Due to funding restrictions](#), 2023 was the first year since the Bentiu PoC's inception that internally displaced persons [received 7 months of assistance](#), setting up an atypical five-month gap between August and December. Given the inability of much of the population to engage in traditional livelihoods, deteriorating economic conditions, and limited ability to migrate due to persistent climate and security associated movement barriers, **it is likely that any prolonged gap in general food distribution has had and will continue to have very severe impacts on food security and wellbeing.**
- According to the IPC, a Risk-of-Famine (RoF) analysis conducted during the IPC workshop initially determined that there was a ["reasonable probability"](#) of Rubkona County experiencing a famine between December 2023 and July 2024. **The conclusion was reversed**, however, following a revision of the HFA distribution plan that aims to resume general food distribution in Rubkona beginning in November 2023 and continuing until December 2024. **If HFA does not resume in November, however, or is significantly disrupted, the RoF conclusion will no longer be valid.**

## DRIVERS OF ACUTE NEEDS AND UNDERLYING VULNERABILITY

Rubkona County hosts more than 177,000 internally displaced persons across at least thirteen sites in Rubkona Town, Bentiu Town, and Rotriak.<sup>1</sup> Over the past decade, Rubkona's population has increased sharply due to successive waves of displacement in response to conflict or climate shocks, or due to poor living conditions in surrounding areas.

Between April and August 2023, Rubkona received an additional 46,062 returnees from Sudan.<sup>2</sup> The rapid and largescale population influx has precipitated the spread of disease in highly congested displacement sites and overwhelmed the capacity of healthcare providers, who have reported stock-outs of basic medical supplies and the early discharge of high acuity patients due to limited in-patient space.<sup>3</sup> Population inflows have also exacerbated needs by placing additional pressure on already scarce community and household resources, including food, especially because arriving populations have significantly compromised coping capacity and own very few assets.<sup>4</sup>

IPC analysis corroborates earlier assessment findings that, among communities in Rubkona, rates of participation in traditional subsistence livelihoods, chiefly agriculture and livestock rearing, are negligible. The August REACH assessment suggests this is primarily because floodwater left over from 2021, which continues to cover most of the county, restricts population movement and access to land, and because perceptions of insecurity - which are likely heightened in the run-up to planned 2024 elections -

continue to discourage displaced persons from returning to their areas of origin. As such, populations in Rubkona are highly dependent on markets, humanitarian food assistance, and the collection of wild foods, including fish, to meet their basic food needs.

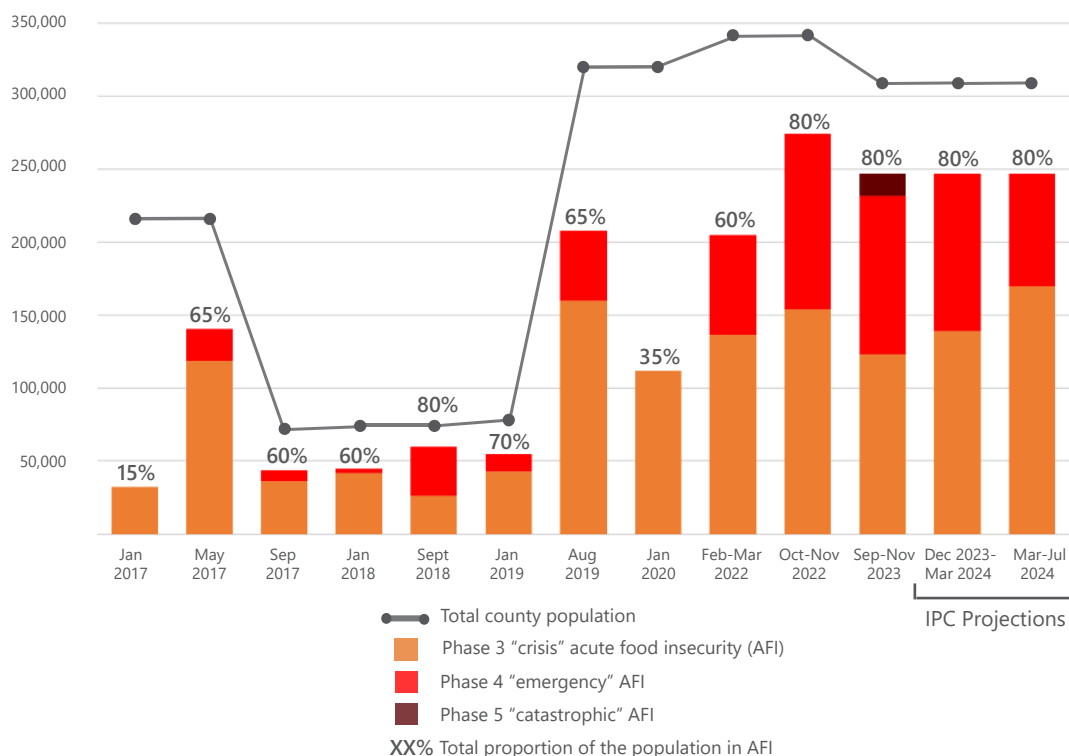
Moreover, the conflict in Sudan has aggravated already poor economic conditions, exacerbating financial barriers to markets. The price of the food minimum expenditure basket (MEB) increased by 129% in Bentiu Town and 65% in Rubkona Town between March and August 2023.<sup>5</sup> In addition, economic capacity among residents of Rubkona is extremely poor: Recent IPC analysis found that 87% of households did not have the economic capacity to meet their essential needs.<sup>6</sup>

The seasonal conclusion of HFA provision in August is also likely to have had serious consequences on food security, particularly for highly vulnerable populations with limited access to cash-earning opportunities. In October, a humanitarian coordination agency raised concerns about heightened PSEA risks due to increased begging by local staff, such as cleaners, in the Bentiu Humanitarian Hub because of lack of money to purchase food.<sup>7</sup>

The combination of high prices, humanitarian assistance reductions, largescale population inflows, and disease outbreaks is likely to have severe impacts on already acute humanitarian needs, while persistent movement barriers reduce the capacity of households to migrate away from severe conditions.

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.](#)



## RISKS AND ASSUMPTIONS (DECEMBER 2023 TO JULY 2024)

**Humanitarian Food Assistance:** According to the IPC, an analysis that initially found a risk of famine between December 2023 and July 2024 was overturned based on adjustments to HFA plans: instead of no food assistance reaching Rubkona between August 2023 and January 2024, assistance would resume in November and rations would increase from 50% to 70%.<sup>8</sup> As such, **the delivery of HFA before the end of November is a critical assumption to monitor** when assessing the risk that catastrophic outcomes will persist or worsen. Given the relative lack of seasonality associated with low participation in subsistence livelihoods, the "lean season" in Rubkona effectively began when HFA concluded in August, and will likely persist until assistance resumes. Any delay in HFA provision will likely precipitate the increased use of emergency coping strategies, such as liquidation of assets, begging, and borrowing, and could trigger protection concerns, including migration away from displacement sites, possibly resulting in family separation.

**Prices and Markets:** Though food prices appear to have begun to stabilize following their peak in June, and will likely continue to fall because of seasonal increases in food supply, high prices are likely to remain a key limiting factor for food security in the coming months. It is unlikely that fighting in Sudan will sufficiently ease to allow market functionality and food prices to return to pre-conflict levels, and any increased seasonal supply of cereals will likely be marginal and short-lived given the very large food production deficits across Unity State.<sup>9</sup> Atypical dependence on markets will remain high over at least the medium-term. As such, food prices will remain a key risk factor to monitor through all three IPC-analysis periods (until July 2024).

**Sanitation and Disease:** Extremely poor sanitation and hygiene conditions are likely to remain a critical risk to health and wellbeing between October 2023 and July 2024. WHO Integrated Disease Surveillance and Response (IDSR) data reflects a gradual decrease in the number of deaths attributable to measles following a peak in July, as well as in total disease-related deaths recorded at health facilities. That said, the risk of disease outbreaks will remain high due to congested living conditions, very poor sanitation conditions, continued arrivals from Sudan and associated challenges with vaccination at points of entry. Disease, in turn, is likely to negatively impact household productivity and coping capacity.

**Population Movement:** The rate of returnee inflows from Sudan appears to have slowed since July, reducing the burden on local resources, markets, and humanitarian service providers. Increased population flows could resume, however, due to any number of factors, the most plausible being a surge in fighting. If humanitarian assistance is not scaled-up proportionately to the number of new arrivals, which the IPC acknowledges is an exceptionally vulnerable population group a substantial proportion of which is dependent on external support to meet their basic needs,<sup>10</sup> conditions are unlikely to markedly improve.

### ENDNOTES

1. South Sudan CCCM Cluster. "IDP Site Masterlist." September 2023.
2. REACH. "South Sudan Cross-Border Displacement: Rapid Food Security Assessment in Areas of Return - Rubkona County." September 2023.
3. Ibid.
4. IPC. "Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition, November 2023 to July 2024." November 2023.
5. Joint Market Monitoring Initiative. "JMMI Dashboard." Accessed October 30, 2023.
6. IPC. "Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition, November 2023 to July 2024." November 2023. Page 40.
7. Humanitarian Coordinator. Update by email. On file with REACH. October 5, 2023.
8. IPC. "Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition, November 2023 to July 2024." November 2023. Page 40.
9. FAO and WFP. "2022 FAO/WFP Crop and Food Security Assessment Mission to the Republic of South Sudan." June 2023. Page 43.
10. IPC. "Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) for Acute Food Insecurity and Acute Malnutrition, November 2023 to July 2024." November 2023. Page 24.

Figure 2: Price of Food MEB, in South Sudanese Pounds (SSP), in Bentiu Town and Rubkona Town, between January 2022 and August 2023  
Source: [Joint Market Monitoring Initiative \(JMMI\) Dashboard](#).

