

# Looming escalation of violence will deepen chronic humanitarian crisis in Jonglei State

January 2026 | South Sudan

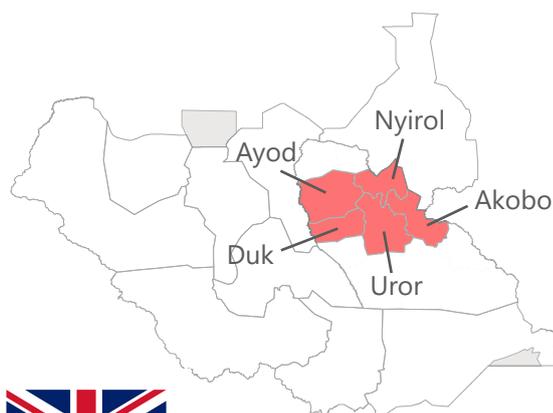
## KEY MESSAGES

- **Extreme violence looks set to engulf Jonglei State in the first quarter of 2026**, according to statements issued by [humanitarian partners](#), [human rights monitors](#), [government spokespeople](#) and [military personnel](#). The violence is expected to centre on Akobo, Nyirol and Uror counties, where a January 25 directive<sup>1</sup> ordered civilians and humanitarians to evacuate "immediately". The military is planning a major [offensive](#) in these areas to counter a wave of [advances](#) made by opposition forces since the end of 2025.
- **The violence displaced more than [230,000 people](#) in Akobo, Duk, Nyirol and Uror counties in January – over a quarter of their combined population.** Reports from neighbouring Canal/Pigi, Mingkaman, Twic East and Ulang counties described harsh conditions in displacement locations, including a lack of shelter, poor sanitation, concerning malnutrition rates and limited availability of food and basic services.
- **The violence is unfolding in communities already in the throes of a serious humanitarian crisis.** The latest [IPC analysis \(October 2025\)](#) projected over 400,000 people in Jonglei would face Emergency-level food insecurity (IPC 4) in the first quarter of 2026. Meanwhile, acute malnutrition rates were [projected](#) to surpass the WHO emergency threshold (15%) in 8 of Jonglei's 11 counties. Conditions appeared most concerning in Duk County, where a severe [cholera outbreak](#) was among several factors driving 'Extremely Critical' [malnutrition levels](#).
- **The violence has crippled the humanitarian response in affected areas.** [Airstrikes](#), [flight suspensions](#) and [fears of violence](#) forced humanitarian organisations to evacuate staff from Akobo, Duk, Nyirol and Uror in January. Thereafter, [impassable roads](#), [access restrictions](#) and [looting](#) disrupted lifesaving health services for over [360,000 people](#) in Akobo, Nyirol and Uror alone. Multiple partners reported they were unable to [resupply facilities](#) or [refer critically-ill patients](#) owing to [restrictions](#) on air and river movement.
- **The violence is all but certain to drive extreme health outcomes in affected areas, possibly resulting in death from disease and starvation.** In a context of intense violence, considerable access restrictions, widespread displacement and severe underlying vulnerability, the likelihood of deepening food insecurity, alarming malnutrition rates, and excess mortality will accelerate in the coming months, which will almost certainly coincide with an atypically early onset of the [traditional 'lean season'](#) when food insecurity and malnutrition reach their seasonal peak.

## Airstrikes and armed violence opened a new frontline in Jonglei in late 2025

Large-scale violence impacted parts of South Sudan between February and May 2025. Affected areas included Nasir and Ulang counties in eastern Upper Nile State, as well as Canal/Pigi and Fangak in northwestern Jonglei. Starting in November, however, the violence shifted to a new area encompassing larger parts of Jonglei State, mainly Ayod, Duk, Nyirol and Uror counties.

Beginning in November, available data indicate a steady uptick in violence in Nyirol and Uror counties, in particular. Airstrikes on major population centres – Lankien (Nyirol) and Pieri (Uror) – on November 11 triggered a wave of armed violence that escalated in frequency and intensity through December and January (see Figure 1, Page 4).



## The violence has displaced tens of thousands of civilians

Airstrikes and armed violence displaced [230,000 people](#) from and within Akobo, Duk, Nyirol and Uror in January, according to humanitarian partners. This represented over a quarter of the total population in these counties. Approximately [50,000](#) of these people were displaced between January 19-26 alone.

[Most](#) displacements occurred in Uror County, where an estimated 105,000 people – over half of the county's population – were forced from their homes. Northwards, in Nyirol County, an estimated 57,000 people – over a third of the population – were displaced.

Arrivals were reported in Akobo, Canal/Pigi and Twic East in Jonglei, as well as Mingkaman in Lakes and Ulang in Upper Nile. Field reports described harsh conditions in displacement locations, including poor sanitation and limited access to food and basic services. In multiple cases, displaced persons arrived in communities experiencing widespread severe acute food insecurity and 'Critical' malnutrition rates. These communities' resources and absorptive capacity will be strained.

## The violence has crippled the humanitarian response

The U.S. imposed funding [suspensions](#) in Ayod on January 8, citing "interference by officials". Throughout January, airstrikes, flight suspensions and fears of further violence forced organisations providing lifesaving services to evacuate in [Akobo](#), [Nyirol](#), and [Uror](#). On January 25, the military ordered remaining humanitarian organisations in these counties to leave.

UN [sources](#) reported four health facilities – two in each of Nyirol and Uror – were looted or vandalized in January, depriving approximately 115,000 people of basic medical treatment.

This added to an estimated 24 nutrition sites – which served 8,000 children – that were looted or forced to close. The closure of nutrition sites in a region where close to a half-million children were expected to suffer from acute malnutrition between 2025 and 2026 (see below) is immensely concerning.

Though limited health services continued in January, a partner based in Akobo, Nyirol and Uror was [unable](#) to resupply and process referrals at its sites in Lankien – the only facility in the region providing [lifesaving health services](#) – Pieri, and Akobo town. These facilities served a caseload of more than [360,000 people](#).

Other partners reported they were [unable](#) to refer critically-ill and wounded patients, nor to resupply facilities, as a result of restrictions on air and river movement.

## Available information signals a continued escalation in the first quarter of 2026

Senior humanitarian organs, including the [Humanitarian Coordinator's office](#) and the [United Nations Mission in South Sudan](#), issued statements in January warning of a continued escalation in Jonglei in 2026.

On January 25, the military published a directive announcing "imminent" operations in parts of Jonglei. The directive instructed civilians in Akobo, Nyirol and Uror counties to evacuate "immediately", whilst giving NGOs in these counties two days to leave.

Though efforts to de-escalate are ongoing, available information foreshadows extreme violence in Jonglei State in the first quarter of 2026. Tens of thousands of civilians, already reeling from chronic humanitarian crises (see below), stand to suffer the most.

## The violence will deepen a chronic humanitarian crisis

Across Jonglei, chronic, large-scale violence and extreme flooding have combined over more than a decade to drive endemic acute food insecurity and alarming malnutrition rates. The population in Jonglei is not prepared for an escalation of violence, including the widespread and likely protracted displacement this will entail.

## Jonglei has been the most violent state since the end of the civil war

Since the end of the civil war (2013-2018), a fifth of all violent incidents in South Sudan (21%) have occurred in Jonglei.<sup>2</sup> This is the highest percentage of any state. Violence was stubbornly frequent between 2018 and 2025, and its root causes, including [protracted economic and humanitarian crises](#), went largely unaddressed.

Chronic violence impacted heavily on households' access to food and basic services. The average percentage of households in Jonglei reporting "insecurity" as a shock increased for four consecutive years between 2022 (29%) and 2025 (32%), and remained considerably higher than the percentage in other states.<sup>3</sup>

### **Jonglei was also the most flood-affected state in 2025**

As of November 30, over 630,000 people had been affected by flooding in Jonglei, according to [UN OCHA](#). This was an increase of 200,000 people from 2024, and it equalled over a quarter (28%) of the population.

The worst-affected counties in 2025 included those exposed to the current violence, including Ayod (57,000 people affected by flooding), Duk (23,000) and Nyirol (17,000). [Residual flood water](#) in some locations might have restricted civilians' movement to escape the violence. For instance, field reports suggested the road between Akobo East and West was flooded in January, possibly obstructing people fleeing neighbouring Uror.

As well as submerging villages and driving disease outbreaks, flooding also rendered much of Jonglei [inaccessible](#) during the second half of the year. In the middle of the rainy season (August) in 2025, for instance, flood mapping revealed [considerable inundation](#) in Duk County. Furthermore, an [analysis](#) shared by the Logistics Cluster revealed every major road in Jonglei was impassable at the end of October.

During the dry season (December-March), when roads reopen, humanitarian partners in Jonglei typically pre-position supplies, including food and medicine, ahead of the coming rainy season (April-November). Currently, however, this is not possible owing to access restrictions and continuous violence. As a result, repositioning will likely be suspended, raising the probability of shortages and stockouts after April once the 2026 rainy season begins.

### **Food insecurity was already widespread before the latest escalation of violence**

An IPC [analysis](#) conducted in October 2025 estimated over 400,000 people in Jonglei – approximately one-fifth of the population – would experience Emergency levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 4) between December 2025 and March 2026.

This was the highest state-level prevalence of IPC Phase 4 in the country. More than one-third of people in Emergency in Jonglei (170,000) were expected to reside in Akobo, Ayod, Duk, Nyirol and Uror, the counties most exposed to the latest escalation of violence.

In IPC Phase 4, households [either](#) experience significant hunger that is reflected in "very high" acute malnutrition levels and excess mortality, or they mitigate significant hunger only by employing "emergency livelihood strategies" (such as slaughtering their last cow or goat, or relocating in search of food). However, available information suggests most households in Jonglei cannot mobilise these strategies, and that hunger will deepen. At the peak of the lean season in 2025, for instance, more than two-thirds of households in Jonglei did not own livestock.<sup>4</sup> Further, reports of food shortages in displacement locations indicated relocation was not mitigating consumption gaps among the displaced. Displacement likely isolated affected households from familiar fishing, foraging and hunting grounds, critical food sources beginning at this time of year.

Crucially, the IPC projections were made in October 2025 and they did not anticipate the level and intensity of violence observed in Jonglei since November. As such, it is probable the severity of acute food insecurity during this period – and beyond – will be greater than projected.

### **Alarming acute malnutrition levels threaten extreme health outcomes**

The IPC analysis conducted in October 2025 also [estimated](#) over 450,000 children in Jonglei would suffer from acute malnutrition between July 2025 and June 2026. This amounted to one-fifth of all malnourished children in South Sudan, the highest prevalence of acute malnutrition of any state.

In the first quarter of 2026, the IPC analysis classified 7 counties of Jonglei's 11 counties in IPC Acute Malnutrition Phase 4. This included Akobo, Ayod and Uror, where malnutrition was expected to surpass the WHO emergency threshold (15%).

Admissions data collected at the end of 2025 confirmed alarming malnutrition rates in Jonglei. In December 2025, the number of new [admissions](#) for acute malnutrition (23,712) in Jonglei was considerably higher than in any other state, and was also 49% greater than the figure in December 2024.

Whereas admissions [decreased](#) at the beginning of 2024 and 2025, the largely unforeseen escalation of violence in early-2026 will likely drive elevated malnutrition levels. However, a near-collapse in monitoring systems risks obscuring trends and obstructing early warning efforts in the worst-affected counties.

Conditions are most concerning in Duk County, where the IPC projected acute malnutrition would surpass the 'Extremely Critical' threshold (IPC Acute Malnutrition Phase 5) between October 2025 and March 2026. Authorities in January [reported](#) overcrowding and poor sanitation in areas of displacement were driving an increasingly [severe](#) cholera outbreak in Duk, which an overstretched health system was struggling to contain.

## Conclusion

An escalation of intense violence beginning in November is ongoing – and set to worsen – in Jonglei State. The worst-affected areas, namely Akobo, Ayod, Duk, Nyirol and Urur counties, demonstrate severe underlying vulnerability, including endemic food insecurity and alarming malnutrition rates.

The escalation will likely trigger an atypically early onset of the traditional 'lean season' (April-August), when food insecurity and malnutrition reach their seasonal peak.

In a context of mass violence against civilians and significant humanitarian access restrictions, the combination of widespread displacement, residual flood water, deepening food insecurity and alarming malnutrition rates in the approaching lean season will likely drive extreme health outcomes, including excess mortality, over the coming months.

## Footnotes

1 Office of the SSPDF Spokesperson, Press release on precautions and safety of civilians in SPLA-IO controlled areas. January 25, 2026. Copy on file with REACH.

2 Analysis of ACLED data between September 12, 2018, and January 28, 2026. Incidents analysed are: Battles, Explosions/remote violence, and Violence against civilians (Events); and Armed clashes, Attacks, Shelling/artillery/missile attacks, and Air/drone strikes (Sub-events).

3 Analysis of Food Security & Nutrition Monitoring Survey (FSNMS) data between 2022-2025. Datasets on file with REACH.

4 Analysis of FSNMS data. July 2025.

AYOD	<b>2 DECEMBER</b> Airstrikes in Mogok Payam kill a report eight children and five women.	<b>4 JANUARY</b> Armed clashes were reported between government and opposition forces. Opposition reportedly assumed full control of the area.	<b>20 JANUARY</b> Fears of attack by opposition forces prompted residents to loot the market in Ayod Town.	<b>25 JANUARY</b> Government and opposition forces clashed Biey boma, Wau Payam, as government troops advanced into Ayod from Duk County. Later that day, armed clashes occurred on the outskirts of Ayod Town.
URUR	<b>3 DECEMBER</b> Airstrikes in Pieri Town, located within Pieri Payam, and in Motot Payam, resulted in an unknown number of casualties.	<b>2 JANUARY</b> Opposition forces seized a military barracks in Yuai town, Urur Payam. Later that day, an airstrike was reported in Yuai town, Urur Payam.	<b>9, 13, 18 JANUARY</b> Airstrikes were reported in Yuai town, Urur Payam, Pathai Payam and Tiam Payam, resulting in an unknown number of casualties.	<b>26 JANUARY</b> Airstrikes were reported in Yuai Town, as were armed clashes between government and opposition forces in Tiam village. Two civilian women were killed, and houses were burned down. Fighting moved toward Kolthiak, in the direction of Pajut, Duk County.
NYIROL	<b>22, 23 DECEMBER</b> Armed clashes between government and opposition forces were reported in Waat Payam. Government forces returned to their base in Waat, where an attack occurred the next day.	<b>24, 26 DECEMBER</b> Airstrikes in Borduot, Pariyam, Wunbil and Waat payams resulted in an unknown number of casualties.	<b>29 DECEMBER</b> Government forces were ambushed by opposition forces in Riang village, Nyambor Payam. On the same day, airstrikes targeted Lankien market, Thol Payam, resulting in 26 fatalities and unjuring another 16 people.	<b>27 JANUARY</b> Armed clashes were reported in Pultruk village, Pading Payam. SPLA-IO forces also reportedly captured the SSPDF base in Pading.
DUK		<b>4 JANUARY</b> Armed clashes between government and opposition forces were reported in Pajut Town, Panyang Payam, resulting in an unknown number of casualties.		

**Figure 1:** Major conflict events in Jonglei between 2 December, 2025 and 27 January, 2026, according to a conflict monitoring organisation.