

# Escalating humanitarian needs in Renk amid reduced mobility, operational challenges and environmental risks

July 2025 | Renk County | Upper Nile State | South Sudan



## Key Messages

- The suspension of Onward Transport Assistance (OTA) has led to **a growing population of increasingly vulnerable returnees in Renk County** – a trend expected to continue throughout the second half of 2025.
- Findings indicate **severe humanitarian conditions among returnees across various locations in Renk County** – especially in relation to food security, nutrition, health, and WASH – amid overstretched host communities and declining humanitarian response capacity. The cholera death rate doubled between June (0.4%) and July (0.9%).
- **Deteriorating conditions in the Transit Centre have already led to unrest**, and returnees are reportedly increasingly relying on negative coping mechanisms – raising concerns about potential future tensions.
- There is **a strong need for durable solutions and integration support**, as many returnees are likely to remain in Renk long-term now that options for onward movement are limited.
- In addition to shifting population dynamics, **the onset of the rainy season presents notable risks**, including flooding, disease outbreaks, and further constraints on access and livelihoods.

## Context

Since the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in April 2023, over 1 million individuals have crossed the border from Sudan into South Sudan.<sup>1</sup> Of these new arrivals, over 800,000 crossed the border at Wunthow/Joda in Renk. The majority are “returnees”; South Sudanese nationals who have returned to South Sudan, after having initially fled the country because of conflict.<sup>2</sup> These arriving populations are highly vulnerable. For many, their return to South Sudan follows a prolonged period as refugees in areas of Sudan that are facing severe food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, due to the high costs of transportation, the many checkpoints and insecurity along the route, many returnees arrive in South Sudan deprived of most – if not all – of their financial and material assets.<sup>4</sup> Those without relatives in South Sudan are even more vulnerable, with very limited access to social support structures.

## Rationale & Methodology

On June 1, 2025, **Onward Transport Assistance (OTA) from Renk to other areas in South Sudan was suspended**, while transportation from Wunthow/Joda to Renk continued at a very limited capacity. As such, an increasingly large number of vulnerable returnees are likely to reside in Renk County, either in or around the already over-crowded Transit Centre (TC) or alongside a host community with very limited absorption capacity.

In the first half of 2025, **returnees in Renk County were already facing severe levels of food insecurity and malnutrition**. In this fragile context, the suspension of OTA – alongside a broader reduction in humanitarian services – further strained both public services and host community capacities to share resources. These developments raised serious concerns about a potential public health crisis.

Given this risk, the information gaps associated with a rapidly evolving context, and the overall scarcity of qualitative data on returnees in South Sudan, **REACH conducted a qualitative assessment in Renk County in June-July 2025**. Primary data was collected from the 18th of June to the 1st of July 2025, and consisted of two qualitative components: 21 key informant interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian organisations and local authorities, and 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) with returnees and members of the host community (methodology continued on page 8).

## Notable increase in population of vulnerable returnees in Renk County

In the first half of 2025, Renk County continued to receive a steady flow of new arrivals through the Wunthow/Joda border crossing. While the average number of daily arrivals has declined since the significant influx in December 2024<sup>5</sup> – triggered by escalating conflict in Sudan’s southern states – humanitarian key informants emphasized that the situation remains highly unpredictable, with the potential for renewed surges in displacement. For example, several humanitarian key informants reported that, in June, hundreds of new arrivals crossed into South Sudan through facilitated movements.

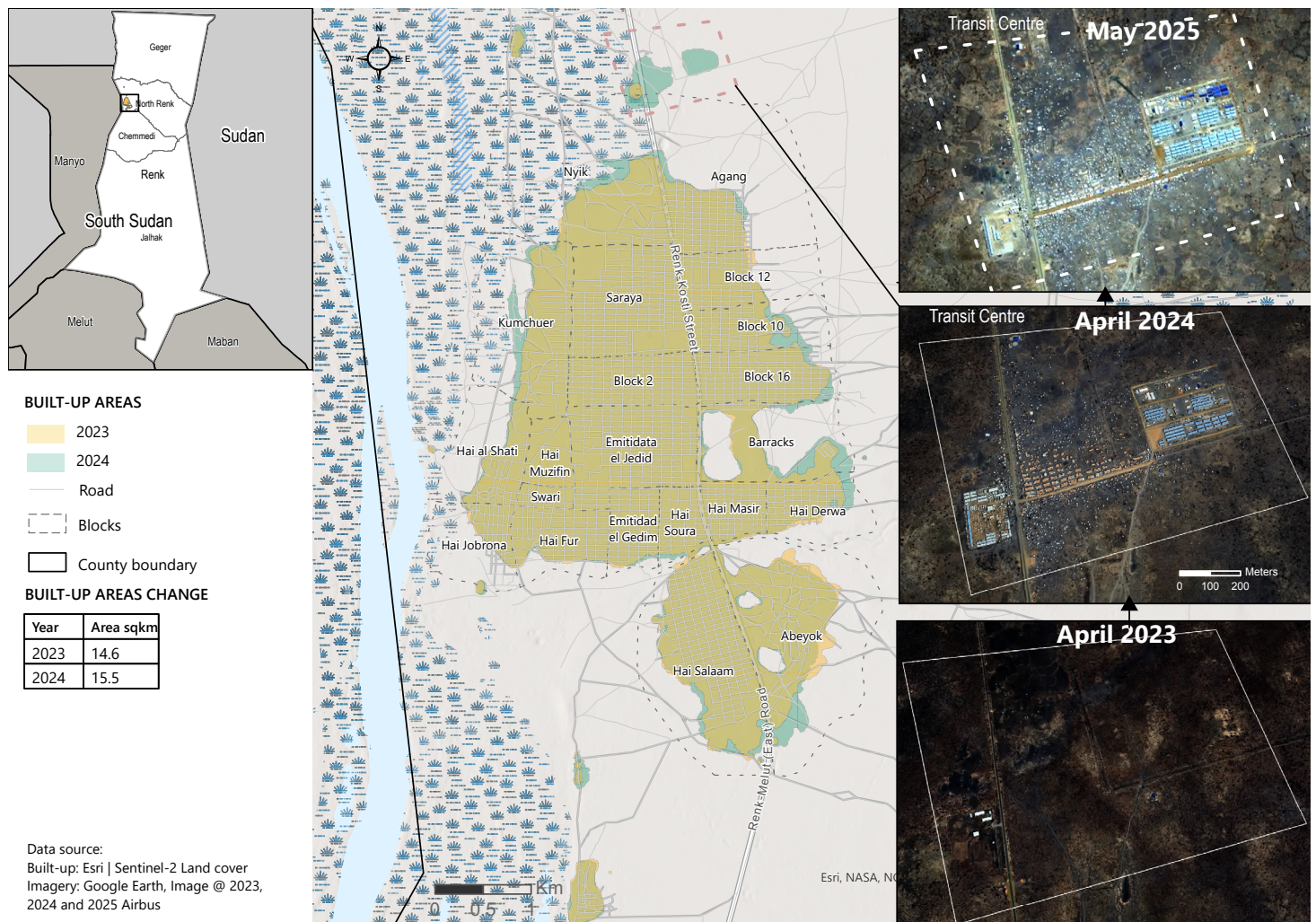
**Notably, some key informants reported that an increased number of people are returning to Sudan.** However, this group reportedly consisted almost entirely of Sudanese nationals, primarily returning from displacement sites in Maban, and

a small number of South Sudanese who were likely returning temporarily to access humanitarian assistance in refugee camps in Sudan.

**The suspension of OTA on June 1, 2025, has likely severely restricted returnees’ onward movement from Renk to other locations in South Sudan.** Transportation from Wunthow/Joda to Renk continued at a very limited capacity. Previous assessments have shown that OTA is a critical enabler – and in some cases, prerequisite – to returnees’ movement, particularly in absence of government-facilitated transport.<sup>6</sup> In nearly every focus group discussion with returnees, participants reported high costs of transportation in South Sudan, ranging from 500,000 to one million South Sudanese Pounds (SSP) per person (roughly 109-218 USD as per the official exchange rate), depending on the final destination. Many expressed a desire to relocate but lacked the means to do so.

*“Some went to join their relatives, but we are stuck here because we are with children and there is no means of transport that can facilitate us” – returnees*

**Map 1:** Built-up areas in Renk town from April 2023 to May 2025



**By the end of June 2025, the suspension of OTA had already resulted in an increased population of returnees across Renk County.** In the month following the suspension of OTA, the population in Renk TC rose considerably – from 9,000 in May to over 12,000 by mid-July.<sup>7</sup> This increase occurred despite the TC already operating beyond its intended capacity. The centre had been experiencing overcrowding since its opening, but conditions worsened significantly in December 2024 following a large influx of people from Sudan.<sup>8</sup> Although new shelters were constructed at that time, increasing the capacity to 4,000 people, the TC has remained under pressure ever since. The recent suspension of OTA has further strained conditions, with the centre now accommodating more than 300% of its intended capacity. Meanwhile, outside of the TC, satellite data shows an increase of built-up area on the outskirts of Renk town from April 2023 (map 1), coinciding with the onset of the Sudan conflict. Host community members also reported a noticeable population increase since April 2023, with a marked rise following the OTA suspension in June 2025.

**Looking ahead, the returnee population in Renk County is likely to continue to increase, and findings suggest that these returnees may be increasingly vulnerable.** The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) anticipates 125,000 new arrivals in the county during the second half of 2025.<sup>9</sup> Previous research indicates that more recent arrivals from Sudan tend to be more vulnerable, as they often lacked the financial means to leave earlier.<sup>10</sup> As of early July 2025, IOM estimates that 43,000 people are in urgent need of transport assistance.<sup>11</sup>

*“There will be many returnees stuck here. These will be the most vulnerable and poorest ones, those who cannot leave.” – humanitarian key informant*

## Severe humanitarian conditions among returnees across various locations in Renk County

**In nearly all focus group discussions, participants reported lacking access to food or the financial means to purchase it.** They cited significant barriers

to traditional livelihoods, including limited access to land for cultivation and perceived nepotism in casual labour hiring. Additionally, access to food has been severely constrained by rapidly rising market prices. The cost of the Multi-Sectoral Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (MSSMEB)<sup>i</sup> has increased dramatically since the onset of the conflict in Sudan, which disrupted major supply routes into Renk. Between April 2023 and July 2025, the cost of the MSSMEB in Renk town increased almost tenfold (from 78,697 SSP to 748,697 SSP).<sup>12</sup> While this increase affects both host communities and returnees, several key informants emphasised that returnees’ limited financial capacity makes them particularly vulnerable. In addition, a safety audit by humanitarian partners in October 2024 found that returnees with chronic illnesses or disabilities, older persons, and separated children face heightened barriers to financial support, increasing their vulnerability.<sup>13</sup>

*“The prices of food items have doubled or even tripled. So while there is agriculture in Renk, the produced food is for the market - and for returnees it’s hardest to access that food.” – humanitarian key informant*

**These constraints in accessing food, or the financial means to purchase it, are reflected in recent outcome data on food security and nutrition.** The latest Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis projected that 5 percent of all returnees in South Sudan would experience IPC Phase-5 (“Catastrophe”) levels of food insecurity between April and July 2025.<sup>14</sup> A mass mid-upper arm circumference (MUAC) screening conducted by a partner in Renk in March 2025 found a proxy Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate of 14.9 percent for children aged 6-59 months in the TC – indicating an alarming situation corresponding to ‘serious’ or ‘critical’ levels of acute malnutrition as per IPC protocols. More recent screenings by humanitarian partners show an alarming deterioration in proxy GAM rates from May to June 2025, particularly in the TC.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a May 2025 screening by another organisation in Gosfami, an informal settlement in Renk County, found concerning levels of malnutrition among children under 5 and pregnant and lactating women.<sup>ii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Representing the minimum group of items required to support a six-person South Sudanese household for one month, used as a proxy for the financial burdens facing households in different locations.

<sup>ii</sup> Between June and July, the Food and Agriculture Organisation and the World Food Programme will conduct the Food Security and Nutrition Monitoring Survey. This will provide an update on acute malnutrition and acute food insecurity in Renk County.



**Another major unmet need among returnees in Renk is access to safe and adequate shelter.** Almost all humanitarian key informants reported that a large proportion of returnees are living in makeshift shelters, often inadequate for protection. Some cited cases of lactating mothers seeking shelter in latrines during rainfall. The lack of adequate shelter was a recurring theme in focus group discussions with returnees in all assessed locations. Combined with increasing congestion in the TC, a lack of shelter greatly heightens the risk of infectious disease outbreaks and deteriorating health outcomes.

*"We have no shelters here in the camp. I was told: "if you want to have a shelter, come with your family". It is devastating, as most of us came without families. Where will we stay? Especially now that we are approaching the rainy season. Because of this, I regret coming here. If I knew this, I would have just stayed in Sudan to die there" – returnees*

**Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) conditions are severe, with access to safe and clean water remaining a key gap for host communities and returnees.** Indeed, FGD participants across Renk County commonly reported WASH-related concerns such as unsafe or unhygienic latrines, lack of access to clean drinking water, and unsafe water storage containers. Recent assessments show that access to sanitation facilities, such as latrines, is severely limited.<sup>16</sup> The 2024 Inter-Sectoral Needs Assessment (ISNA), for example, found that 64 percent of households in Renk practiced open defecation. Additionally, close to two thirds of households did not have access to soap.<sup>17</sup> Humanitarian key informants reported that although an urban water system has been constructed in Renk town, it relies on the public electricity supply, which is highly unreliable – sometimes interrupted for weeks at a time. Findings from the 2024 ISNA show that almost half of households in Renk used unsafe sources as their main sources of drinking water, such as rivers, streams, swamps or unprotected wells.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a Village Assessment Survey conducted by IOM in 2025 found that, in most bomas in Renk County, households' primary water point is the river.<sup>19</sup>

**Key informants also highlighted particularly acute water needs in the eastern corridor, where hafirs<sup>iii</sup> (water**

basins) that typically sustain communities through the dry season are often depleted before the rains begin. The arrival of large numbers of refugees and returnees in 2024 has further strained the limited water supply, increasing reliance on water trucking by humanitarian organisations.

**Recent data also points to deteriorating health outcomes.** In the two weeks prior to data collection, reported cholera cases surged and continued to rise at the time of writing. Humanitarian key informants expressed concern over five fatalities recorded between 18-25 June - exceeding the total number of deaths in Renk County since the outbreak was first declared in September 2024. The Case Fatality Rate (CFR) doubled between June (0.4%) and July (0.9%).<sup>20</sup> Additionally, humanitarian key informants reported a rise in Hepatitis E cases in the eastern corridor – meeting outbreak criteria under World Health Organisation (WHO) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) protocols.

**These outbreaks are occurring against the backdrop of a limited healthcare system.** According to the 2025 Village Assessment Survey, Renk County has 18 health facilities, of which 5 were non-operational at the time of assessment.<sup>21</sup> Recent evaluations (conducted between October 2024 to January 2025) indicate widespread shortages of medical supplies, with frequent stockouts of essential medicines contributing to dissatisfaction with available health services.<sup>22</sup> Although healthcare is freely accessible within the TC, stockouts are common there as well – leading to prolonged recovery times and heightened vulnerability.<sup>23</sup> These issues were echoed in focus group discussions with both returnees and host community members, who cited repeated instances of medicines running out within days of delivery.

*"Whenever a drug is brought for 7 days, it finishes in 2 days. The problem is that the population is too high. And there is only one hospital." – host community members*

**In several focus group discussions, participants reported a lack of access to education in Renk County.** During a presentation of the preliminary findings of this assessment to humanitarian actors operating in Renk, several participants echoed these concerns. They emphasized

<sup>iii</sup> Hafirs, or haffirs, are shallow, excavated basins that collect and store rainwater for various uses. Source: Msanya, H. (2024). Harvesting Water with Hafirs. ECHO community.

the important cross-sectoral role of education – not only as a fundamental right, but also as a protective factor that can help mitigate risks such as child labour, early marriage, and other negative coping mechanisms.

## Notable gaps in returnees' ability to meet basic needs, amid overstretched host communities and declining humanitarian response capacity

**While humanitarian conditions for returnees are deteriorating, the absorption capacity of the host community remains overstretched and humanitarian organisations are facing increased challenges in responding to needs,** in a context where public service delivery remains weak and government capacity to provide basic services is limited. Host community households had limited capacity from the outset, and findings suggest their resources are now severely strained. In all focus group discussions with host community members, participants expressed concern around the major impact of the influx of displaced persons on their living standards. Most concerns related to the substantial population increase in Renk town, which has overwhelmed essential services – including water, healthcare, housing and sanitation. Participants also linked the population growth to rising market and housing prices.

*"[The influx of returnees in Renk] had a major impact on the host community, whose capacity has been stretched. Thousands of people are coming in and are using the same resources. This has led to an increased cost of living, increased criminality, increased prostitution - reinforcing vulnerability of the displaced, but also for the local communities" - humanitarian key informant*

**Additionally, the funding crisis of early 2025 forced humanitarian organisations to scale down essential services in Renk County.**<sup>24</sup> Several NGO-managed nutrition sites in Renk County were reduced to one staff member per facility. At the Renk Civil Hospital, the Stabilisation Centre reduced its staff by 75%, and the NGO that was previously providing the main hospital services fully withdrew by the

end of March 2025. At the Wunthow/Joda border crossing, the Cholera Treatment Unit operated by an NGO was closed, and another NGO ceased operations at the Primary Health Care Unit. Health services in the TC were also significantly reduced, with at least two NGOs discontinuing clinical and reproductive health services by the end of April 2025. Considering the majority of health facilities in Renk County are primarily supported by humanitarian organisations, the potential impact of scaled-down humanitarian services is likely to be severe.<sup>25</sup> Protection partners reported having ceased all sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) prevention activities and are now focusing solely on SGBV response activities. Notably, Renk County is not expected to receive Humanitarian Food Assistance as of July 2025.

**Looking ahead, findings suggest that partners will continue to face significant barriers to project implementation,** including funding challenges, price increases and supply chain disruptions.

**Nearly all key informants cited funding shortages as a major obstacle to service delivery.** Two informants noted that short-term funding cycles hamper continuity, with partners often receiving funding for only a few months, resulting in frequent service gaps. Additionally, delays in funding disbursements were reported. For example, one key informant explained that funding for rehabilitating hafirs in the eastern corridor was released only at the end of June – coinciding with the onset of the rainy season, when access to these locations becomes limited. Although procurement had begun at the time of data collection, the informant stressed that flooding may begin before activities are completed.

**The sharp increase in local market prices has further hindered humanitarian operations.** Partners reported that prices have doubled or tripled, causing project implementation costs to exceed available budgets. One humanitarian key informant noted that it remains uncertain whether their services will continue through the planned period.

*"Last year, we constructed communal shelters at the Transit Centre. Each unit cost about 22 thousand USD. Now, we are trying to construct a classroom of almost the same size, and the cost has gone to more than 40 thousand USD." - humanitarian key informant*

**Logistical challenges were also frequently reported.** Supply routes from Sudan have been disrupted since the conflict began in April 2023. While some goods still arrive, they are smuggled through informal routes and are significantly more expensive. Renk's second major supply route – the river – has also become largely inaccessible due to ongoing tensions in Jonglei and Upper Nile states. Goods sent via boat from Juba to Bor and onward to Renk have been stuck in Bor for months. While discussions around United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)-protected transport of goods to Renk were ongoing at the time of data collection, no decisive timeline was set. Although air transport remains available, it is prohibitively expensive for many organisations, especially given the current funding landscape.

**Notably, one humanitarian key informant reported that stocks for malnutrition prevention activities were already depleted by the end of June 2025,** with supplies for malnutrition treatment nearly exhausted. In the eastern corridor, nutrition stocks had reportedly not arrived by the end of June 2025 – a concerning development, as flooding is expected to cut off access to the area imminently. Similarly, WASH partners also reported critical shortages of essential supplies. Most notably, stocks of aluminium sulphate – used to treat water for human consumption – were nearly depleted at the time of data collection. While a small emergency stock is available in Malakal, it would only serve as a short-term solution.

## **Deteriorating conditions in the Transit Centre have already led to unrest, and returnees are increasingly relying on negative coping mechanisms**

**Focus group discussions revealed widespread feelings of desperation and hopelessness among returnee populations in Renk.** Participants frequently expressed that returnees are becoming increasingly anxious about their situation.

**Indeed, a growing reliance on negative coping mechanisms was reported.** Both FGD participants and key informants noted a significant rise in criminal activity in recent months, including robberies, break-ins and looting. While some stated that

crime had mainly increased within the TC, host community members also reported a perceived rise in criminality in their own neighbourhoods. One key informant highlighted an increase in looting of humanitarian compounds and materials as well, including theft of fuel, generators, and computers from aid agencies, as well as cut power lines.

**These observations align with findings from the 2024 safety audit conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR),** which identified a combination of factors – including a lack of livelihood opportunities, high unemployment, and food shortages – as contributing to increased theft and other forms of violence both within the TC as well as the surrounding areas.<sup>26</sup> The one-time nature of the cash-for-food assistance provided to returnees upon arrival was cited as a risk factor by several key informants, as well as in the 2024 safety audit.<sup>27</sup> According to some key informants, the cash assistance often runs out before the end of the two-week period, potentially increasing reliance on negative coping strategies. The continued suspension of OTA, which has resulted in returnees staying in Renk for extended periods – well beyond the 14-day coverage of the initial assistance – further compounds these risks.

**In addition to rising crime, key informants observed an increase in other negative coping mechanisms as well.** Several key informants reported an increase in children begging on the streets. Further, although no concrete data is available on SGBV, multiple key informants expressed serious concerns about the heightened risk of SGBV-related incidents in the coming months. These concerns are particularly pressing in light of the recent downscale in SGBV programming, as partners reported having ceased all prevention activities and are now focusing solely on response activities – raising concerns about the potential long-term impact on SGBV risks in affected communities.

**Within the TC, tensions over limited resources have reportedly escalated.** In several focus group discussions, participants voiced frustrations with humanitarian organisations; stating that while services were expected, little to nothing was available. These frustrations were echoed by humanitarian key informants, who confirmed that tensions have been rising. On 23 June 2025, a protest was organised by returnee and refugee representatives in

the TC. Demonstrators expressed grievances over the lack of transport assistance, as well as the absence of shelter and food support. Although the protest was eventually resolved, several key informants stressed the importance of addressing these concerns in the long term, warning that such underlying frustrations could lead to further unrest and potential violence.

## Returnees are increasingly likely to settle in Renk long-term, highlighting the need for long-term solutions and integration support

**In addition to the returnee population currently 'stuck' in Renk due to lack of onward transport, key informants highlighted the presence of a significant number of "long-stayers".** Although Renk was intended as a transit location, many returnees have opted to remain rather than move onwards. According to key informants, returnees chose to stay in Renk for various reasons. Some were born in Sudan or spent most of their lives there and have limited social ties to their areas of origin in South Sudan – sometimes not even speaking the local language. Others were separated from relatives during displacement and have remained in Renk in the hope of reunification. A third group originates from areas in South Sudan that are currently flooded, while others come from regions considered too insecure to return to, such as parts of Jonglei and Upper Nile states, where recent armed clashes and aerial bombardments have been reported.<sup>28</sup> Findings from the most recent Rapid Intention Survey<sup>29</sup> indicate that 3 in 5 surveyed returnees originated from five counties (Fangak, Luakpiny/Nasir, Malakal, Akobo and Ulang) that are classified as Level 4 severity in the Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan, primarily due to flooding and conflict.<sup>30</sup>

**Taking all of this together, the suspension of OTA, ongoing insecurity in parts of South Sudan, and the continued conflict in Sudan – which shows no signs of abating – suggest that the returnee population in Renk is likely to continue growing throughout the second half of 2025.** Returnees are expected to remain in Renk for longer periods. As such, humanitarian key informants stressed that longer-term solutions focused on integration into the host community are

crucial. One critical aspect of integration is access to land, which was frequently cited in focus group discussions as a prerequisite for long-term settlement – echoing findings from previous assessments.<sup>31</sup>

*"Some of us have no intentions to move. We want to stay, cultivate and integrate into the community. The land here is very fertile. If we are given seeds and tools, we will have a good harvest next year and not be called returnees again" – returnees*

**While local authorities, in collaboration with humanitarian partners, have undertaken efforts to allocate a piece of land for returnees, challenges persist.** Several key informants noted strong resistance from host communities, who are reportedly reluctant to allocate what they perceive as their communal land to returnees from different areas of origin and ethnic backgrounds. Even if land were allocated, many of the barriers to sustainable livelihoods for returnees would likely remain – including limited purchasing power and increased food prices, and perceived nepotism in hiring practices. Humanitarian key informants acknowledged that continued support from humanitarian organisations will be essential for the foreseeable future.

*"It disintegrated into discussion on land; with the host community saying: "These people are not from here, why do we give them land?", and "If we give them land, they will never leave"" – humanitarian key informant*

## In addition to population movement, rainfall and flooding pose major risks in the coming three months

**Although the rainy season in Renk typically begins in June, no significant rainfall had been recorded by the end of June 2025.**<sup>32</sup> This delayed onset is reportedly creating critical gaps in food access. FGD participants stressed that no food will be available until the first harvest. Cultivation cannot begin until the rains arrive – meaning that, in the meantime, no casual jobs will be available on farms.

*"These next 4 months, you will suffer. You will cultivate, but it will not come out at the same time: you need to wait. You wait while you are suffering." – returnees*



**Conversely, once the rains do begin, the widespread lack of adequate shelter among returnees will significantly increase the risk of infectious disease outbreaks and worsening health outcomes.** Given the recent surge in cholera cases and fatalities, as well as the rise in Hepatitis E cases, partners expressed serious concern. Several key informants warned that, should an official outbreak of Hepatitis E or another disease be declared, they would lack the capacity to respond.

**In addition, based on May-June assessments by the Renk Flood Task Force, an estimated 270,000 individuals**

**– including 108,000 returnees – in Renk County are likely to be affected by flooding in 2025.** Populations in the eastern corridor are particularly vulnerable, as flooding will render roads impassable – limiting both humanitarian access to the area and the ability of affected populations to reach Renk town for services.

**Flooding is also expected to undermine coping capacities.** Common strategies such as collecting firewood or engaging in casual labour in local markets will become increasingly inaccessible as roads flood and people are confined to their homes.

## Methodology Overview

**Primary data was collected between June 18 and July 1, 2025** in Renk town, informal displaced-persons sites, the Renk transit centre, the Wunthow/Joda border crossing and Bobnis, an informal settlement in the eastern corridor.

Primary data collection consisted of two qualitative components. **Sixteen FGDs were conducted:** four with members of the host community and twelve with recent South Sudanese arrivals from Sudan, “returnees”. Of these twelve, two ‘scoping’ FGDs (sFGDs) were conducted with community leaders in the TC. These sFGDs, conducted on the first day of data collection, served to provide a stronger understanding of the context of the assessment area. All

FGDs covered a variety of themes, including access to food, barriers to meeting essential needs, population movement, and perspectives on humanitarian services.

**Twenty-one KIIs were conducted** with humanitarian organisations and local authorities. KIIs served to provide an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of the response, displacement, and needs for displaced populations and the host community in Renk.

A Data Saturation and Analysis Grid was used to identify and analyse patterns within the data, by deductively coding transcripts into discussion points - which served as the starting point of the narrative analysis. **For more details on the methodological approach, please see the [Terms of Reference](#).**

## Endnotes

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