



Influx of returnees and refugees from Sudan into South Sudan

SOUTH SUDAN

Protection Analysis Update

Joint Protection Cluster – UNHCR update on protection risks for South Sudanese returnees and refugees and asylum-seekers from Sudan

FEBRUARY 2024 | External version

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

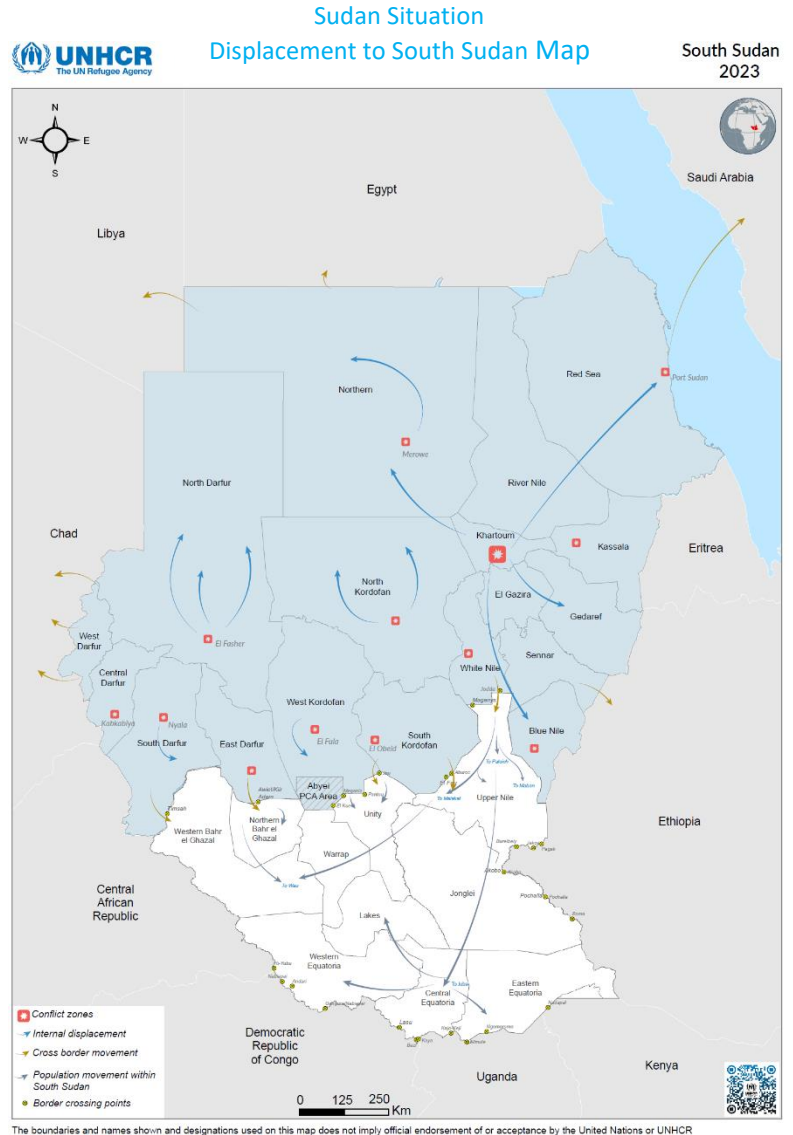
The Protection Cluster in South Sudan and UNHCR jointly present this Protection Analysis Update (PAU) spanning April 2023 to February 2024. This update aims to comprehensively document the protection environment at crucial stages of the displacement journey, including risks, vulnerabilities, and preventive measures. Focusing on points of entry, transit, and onward movement to integration locations, the report sheds light on the impact of the ongoing conflict in Sudan on various populations on the move.

Since April 15, 2023, South Sudan has been grappling with a deepening humanitarian crisis stemming from the protracted conflict in Sudan between the Government of Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The conflict has triggered widespread displacement, with over 588,000 people crossing into South Sudan since 15 April 2023, with further 420,000 returnees and 80,000 refugees expected to arrive in 2024. Of the arrivals, 120,000 are refugees and asylum-seekers from Sudan. The journey into South Sudan is fraught with peril, exposing refugees and returnees to various protection risks, including violence, assault by armed groups, theft, extortion, and heightened instances of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), particularly affecting women and girls.

The crisis has unfolded against the backdrop of South Sudan's existing challenges, including a prolonged internal displacement emergency with over 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), chronic food insecurity, and climate-induced disasters. Explosive hazards covering over 16 million square meters of land further impede movement and limit access to essential humanitarian aid, affecting both displaced populations and host communities. Humanitarian access challenges persist due to poor road conditions, particularly in northern Jonglei and parts of Unity and Upper Nile states. The influx of refugees and returnees exacerbates existing tensions, threatening to reignite ethnic-based fighting in Renk, Malakal, and other parts of the country.

The humanitarian response faces critical challenges in transit areas and onward movement. Congested transit centres lack essential services, exposing returnees and refugees to prolonged risks, and onward movement faces obstacles due to limited funds, poor road conditions, and reluctance of refugees to move to Maban camps designated by the Government as a refugee hosting area, and lack of efficient transportation. Inadequate funding is a pervasive issue, with only 50% of the 2023 Humanitarian Response Plan receiving funding and 36% of the Sudan Situation Refugee Response Plan funded, leading to a 30% shortfall in protection needs. The widening gap between available funds and the escalating humanitarian needs poses a critical challenge for both humanitarian actors and the protection landscape in South Sudan.

The unfolding crisis demands urgent attention and robust funding to address immediate protection concerns, enhance humanitarian access, and prevent further escalation of the humanitarian crisis. A comprehensive and strategic response is essential to mitigate the risks faced by vulnerable populations, especially women, girls, children, and individuals with complex



needs. The international community's commitment to closing the funding gaps is crucial for sustaining vital protection services and ensuring the well-being of those affected by the South Sudan humanitarian crisis in 2024.

The protection risks requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

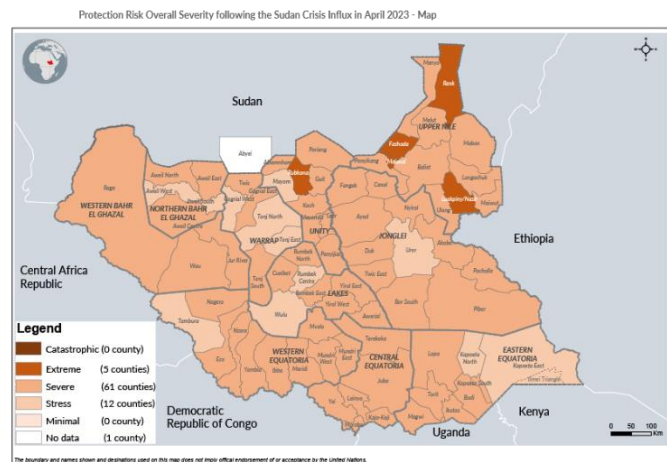
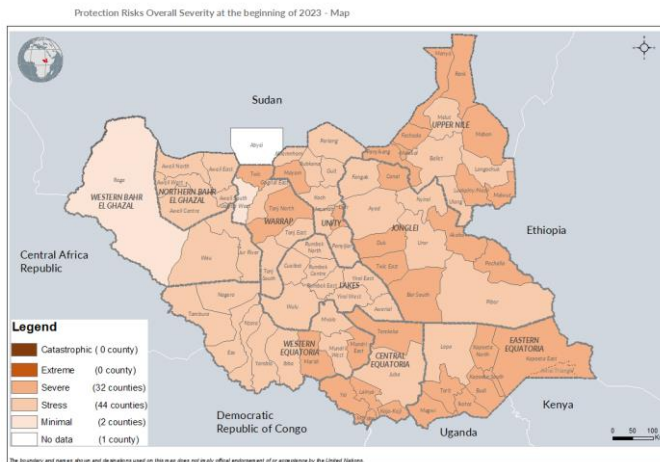
1. **Child and forced family separation:**
2. **Gender-based violence**
3. **Theft, extortion, forced eviction or destruction of personal property:**
4. **Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies, and justice:**

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- **Enhance Child Protection and Family Reunification:** There is a need to advocate for the establishment and strengthening of family reunification services, especially for unaccompanied minors and the elderly, with emphasis on the need for legal support in obtaining documentation and increased resources for families hosting vulnerable individuals, while highlighting the importance of robust child protection services and psychosocial support in conflict-affected areas.
- **Improve Access to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Services:** There is a critical need for improved access to quality GBV services and the provision of emergency livelihood opportunities to mitigate GBV risks in addition to the creation and strengthening of safe spaces for women and girls, and enhanced data collection and awareness efforts to combat ongoing GBV challenges.

UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISKS SEVERITY | JANUARY - DECEMBER 2023

STRESS		SEVERE			EXTREME		
Kapoeta East, Kapoeta North, Urur, Rumbek Centre, Wulu, Aweil South, Aweil West, Mayom, Gogrial West, Tonj East, Tonj North, Tambura		Juba, Kajo-keji, Lainya, Morobo, Terekeka, Yei, Budi, Ikotos, Kapoeta South, Lafon, Magwi, Torit, Akobo, Ayod, Bor South, Canal/Pigi, Duk, Fangak, Nyirol, Pibor, Pochalla, Twic East, Awerial, Cuebiet, Rumbek East, Rumbek North, Yirol East, Yirol West, Aweil Centre, Aweil East, Aweil North, Abiemnhom, Guit Koch, Leer, Mayendit, Panyijiar, Pariang, Baliat, Longochuk, Maban, Maiwut, Manyo, Melut, Panyikang, Ulang, Gogrial East, Tonj South, Twic, Jur River, Raja, Wau, Ezo, Ibba, Maridi, Mundri East, Mundri West, Mvolo, Nagero, Nzara, Yambio			Rubkona, Fashoda, Uakpiny/Nasir, Malakal, Renk		
INCREASE	43 counties	STABLE	33 counties	REDUCTION	2		



At the beginning of 2023, protection risk severities demonstrated that the country was mainly under a stressed situation, chiefly due to endemic low-level conflicts, poverty, flood-related displacement, and largely unaddressed consequences of past conflicts, with pockets of severe risk situation in Upper Nile, Jonglei, and other parts of the country that were subject to ongoing conflicts of a broader scale. The protection risk assessment conducted after the April 2023 influx demonstrates a heavy even extreme increase, in five counties of severities of risks connected with the arrival and transit challenges of people arriving from Sudan as well as an increased number of returnees seeking to (re)integrate across, for the most part, northern areas of the country. It is also important to note that protection risks severities might have been influenced by the reduction and re-prioritization of humanitarian support, including food and WASH and protection services in the country.

CONTEXT

As of April 15, 2023, Sudan has been engulfed in conflict between the Government of Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). This has led to widespread displacement, marking the beginning of a protracted conflict that continues to date. Before the ongoing conflict, Sudan hosted around 1.1 million refugees and asylum-seekers, including 800,000 officially registered South Sudanese. Additionally, many South Sudanese resided in Sudan without clear legal status.

Since the beginning of the conflict, there has been a substantial increase in the number of people fleeing Sudan, witnessed at various border points between Sudan and South Sudan. Authorities have identified 12 key entry points along the border, and as of 18 February 2024, nearly 464,000 people were recorded returning into South Sudan since 15 April 2023, with an anticipated 420,000 more in 2024. Simultaneously, 120,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Sudan arrived, with an additional 80,000 expected in 2024. The unfolding situation across Sudan, particularly in Wadi Madani, is causing further demographic fluxes towards the east (Gedaref) and the south (border between South Sudan's Upper Nile state and Sudan). Secondary displacement within and out of Sudan is becoming a recurrent feature of the unfolding conflict as many of those in Wadi Madani were already displaced from Khartoum and are now exposed to new forced displacement. Additionally, the continued hostilities in Kordofan and Darfur, combined with increasing food insecurity levels and limited or no access to assistance, drive people to cross the border into South Sudan.

The displacement journey into South Sudan is a perilous one, with many refugees and returnees facing a broad spectrum of protection risks. Many have experienced violence, assault and abuses by armed groups, theft, and extortion, and women and girls have suffered or witnessed various forms of sexual and gender-based violence.

Once in South Sudan, returnees and refugees arrive in mixed groups and urgently require life-saving assistance, including food, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene), shelter, nutrition, health and psychosocial support at border areas and transit and reception facilities. Currently, these facilities are congested and risk becoming remote and hard-to-reach crises, necessitating urgent onward transportation assistance for the well-being of new arrivals.

The Sudan crisis has been unfolding against the backdrop of South Sudan's prolonged conflict, insecurity, and climate-induced disasters, profoundly affecting vulnerable populations. The influx of refugees and returnees exacerbates an existing internal displacement crisis in South Sudan, which is already home to over 2.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), making it one of the largest internal displacement emergencies in the world. A [Protection Risk Assessment in 2023](#) highlights alarming rates of gender-based violence (GBV) and significant risks to children. Explosive hazards covering over 16 million square meters of land pose a considerable threat, endangering movement and limiting access to essential humanitarian aid. The highest levels of contamination are mainly located within the Greater Equatoria region on highly productive agricultural land and along main supply routes, as well as in Upper Nile and Jonglei states. Explosive hazards inhibit civilians from collecting water or firewood, cultivating land, attending schools, and receiving health care, among other essential services. They further prevent humanitarian organizations from accessing vulnerable communities or providing life-saving assistance in conflict-affected areas. Displaced populations, returnees, and refugees are exposed to heightened risks from explosive hazards as they may lack local knowledge of contaminated areas and may traverse and settle in marginal and hard-to-reach lands that have previously not been assessed. Limited governance compounds legal, justice, and remittance insecurities, impacting many issues including security of tenure for shelter and livelihoods.

Efforts toward (re)integration, especially in central and northern parts of South Sudan, face challenges due to instability, unfavorable conditions and risk exacerbating and igniting intercommunal tensions. People in IDP-like conditions, including those in camps and settlements, require basic support, and there are cases of secondary movements, with individuals returning to border areas due to dire conditions seemingly better than in designated return areas, further contributing to congestion.

Fighting in Sudan has made the humanitarian situation in South Sudan even worse. The cut-off of trade supply routes from Sudan to South Sudan has increased the prices of basic commodities as much as 60%. South Sudan largely relies on the neighboring countries for food imports. Still, commodities such as grain and other goods have stopped coming in due to road closures from northern Sudan to South Sudan, partly contributing to inflation. Additionally, new localized ethnic-based

tensions have already sprung up in Renk and Malakal in Upper Nile state and threaten to reignite ethnic-based fighting. As returnees reach new areas in their former home villages or cities like Malakal and Juba, the strain on already stretched basic services will grow. The added strains will do little to help stalled peace implementation move forward ([Refugees International 27/07/2023](#), [LSE 28/06/2023](#)).

Humanitarian access has been hindered for response teams, particularly in areas with persistently poor road conditions, such as northern Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states. Renk becomes inaccessible by road during the rainy season, while the route from Malakal is only navigable for small cars, preventing the delivery of significant aid. Although humanitarian partners have considered river transport as an alternative, recent improvements in road conditions have enabled vehicle movement from Bentiu, Rotriak, and Panakuach. ([OCHA 09/11/2023](#)).

The humanitarian response has prioritized areas facing emergency influx and areas of return in the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. Core support activities are highlighted to contain the situation and prevent the potential escalation of the humanitarian crisis. Protection actors, particularly in the South Sudan Protection Cluster, emphasize the need for emergency core protection services, vulnerability assessments, referrals, dignified shelter with security of tenure, peace-building, community mechanisms support, access to livelihoods, and localized linkages with government and development actors in (re)integration areas.

South Sudan faces chronic underfunding in its humanitarian and emergency responses. In 2023, only 50% of the Humanitarian Response Plan and 36% of the Sudan Situation Refugee Response Plan were funded, with a 30% shortfall in Protection needs ([OCHA, UNHCR](#)). As we move into 2024, the widening gaps between available funds and escalating humanitarian needs pose a critical challenge for both humanitarian actors and the protection landscape in South Sudan. The existing strain on lifesaving and remedial protection services is expected to intensify without sufficient funding. This deterioration will disproportionately affect women, girls, children, and vulnerable adults with complex needs, exposing them to increased risks. Additionally, newly arriving returnee communities will encounter similar challenges that initially prompted their displacement. Addressing the funding gaps and strategically responding to the emerging needs resulting from the refugee and returnee influx will be pivotal in shaping the protective landscape of 2024. Fundraising efforts must be robust to ensure the sustainability of vital protection services and mitigate the heightened risks faced by vulnerable populations.

COMPLEX SITUATION INCLUDING POINTS OF ENTRY, IN TRANSIT & ONWARD MOVEMENT AND REINTEGRATION

In South Sudan, the population is subject to different movement and displacement flows that are each characterized by factors exacerbating common protection risks or impacting their vulnerabilities and capacities to common threats. In the ongoing refugee and returnee movement emergency from Sudan to South Sudan, protection risks evolve through distinct stages: points of entry, transit, and onward movement and (re)integration (refugees to be settled in designated camps, settlements, and/or urban areas). Unlike returnees, refugees and asylum seekers, once arriving at transit centres, are moved to designated refugee camps where the Government of South Sudan, supported by UNHCR, initiates registration and status determination processes. Of the 2.06 million internally displaced people (IDPs) in South Sudan, 1.3 million are living in underserved sites, with 1.4 million estimated by the Protection Cluster to be people in need of protection. Furthermore, the affected population of 1.26 million returnees, of which there are an estimated 420,000 from Sudan and Ethiopia, 390,000 from the pre-Sudan crisis period, in addition to the 440,000 estimated to arrive during 2024, need emergency protection services at points of entry and adjacent reception and transit centres. There are an estimated 370,000 refugees in the country, 72,000 of whom arrived after the Sudan conflict began in 2023 with 80,000 estimated to arrive during 2024. A total of 450,000 individuals are estimated to be in need of emergency life-saving and protection services in 2024 in points of entry and adjacent reception and transit centres, and refugee camps across the country.

1. Points of Entry

As of the end of February 2024, South Sudan has recorded almost 588,000 arrivals at its points of entry, with the majority (79%) being South Sudanese returnees. However, reports indicate an increase in Sudanese refugees entering South Sudan compared to the conflict's onset in April. Notably, 97% of all refugees and asylum-seekers in South Sudan originate from Sudan (UNHCR population update, 3 March 2024). Furthermore, by the end of 2023, an estimated 70,000 South Sudanese from Ethiopia have returned to South Sudan due to insecurity in Ethiopia.

The 12 points of entry in South Sudan witness the majority of new arrivals (84%), with Wunthow/Joda, near Renk, in Upper Nile State being the primary crossing point ([UNHCR assessment 20/12/2023](#)). South Sudan upholds an open-door policy for refugees and returning South Sudanese citizens, positively impacting access to territory and asylum rights. However, challenges arise as the South Sudanese borders, especially with Sudan, remain largely porous.

Returnees and refugees fleeing conflict in Sudan have been subject to, and have witnessed, violence and conflict on their displacement journey. As Sudan's conflict erodes basic law and order, displaced returnees and refugees may experience criminality during their journey to South Sudan; many have been robbed of their most basic property and possessions, and some have been victims of physical abuse, gender-based violence, and/or suffered other forms of rights violations. Family separation during the journey has led to cases of unaccompanied or separated children, vulnerable people, including unaccompanied women or girls, the elderly, or people with disabilities finding themselves without family or community support in transit settlements. These experiences and conditions upon arrival create a variety of health, GBV, psychosocial and other mitigation needs among returnees that need to be addressed immediately and referred for longer-term intervention in areas of (re)integration or refuge.

2. In Transit

Most returnees and refugees have crossed into South Sudan through the Wunthow/Joda border crossing, north of Upper Nile State. Some 24,000 in Renk as of 3 January 2024 and 4,000 in Malakal are currently congested in transit areas due to the lack of possibilities for onward movement. Transit sites are intended as intermediary short-term stops for basic profiling of refugees and returnees ahead of onward movement and to receive life-saving emergency humanitarian assistance. As the number of refugees and returnees grows, so does the duration of transit periods. With the intersecting needs of individuals and families arriving, limited financial resources, and often having nowhere else to go, arrivals are increasingly stuck in transit locations. Transit sites are becoming overcrowded, lacking basic services and minimal standards for living conditions for long-term stays. The continuous influx exacerbates the already deteriorating living conditions, posing a growing threat to the health and safety of returnees. This situation also contributes to an increase in protection incidents, particularly in the areas of gender-based violence (GBV), child protection, and support for the elderly, disabled individuals and unaccompanied or separated children (UASC).

3. Onward Movement and Reintegration

Efforts to facilitate onward movement from transit centres to places of origin for returnees and designated refugee camps and settlements for refugees have encountered several challenges. These include insufficient funds, limited availability of efficient vehicles or vessels, poor road conditions, and the willingness of returnees and refugees to relocate. The persistently slow pace of onward movement has perpetuated congestion at the transit centres, heightening risks for those housed there. Various factors contribute to refugees choosing to remain in Renk, such as its proximity to the border and reluctance to relocate to Maban. Similarly, for returnees, some originally hail from Renk, while others cannot return to their areas of origin due to safety concerns. Some of the arriving South Sudanese returnees are original to the border areas and have dispersed in counties of Upper Nile State, Unity, Northern Bahr el Ghazal, and Jongoli states, seeking shelter and support, while some choose to remain in those areas and seek short-to-mid term integration solutions as they are unable or unwilling to travel to other areas. No research is currently available on the distinction between the two groups; however, recently acquired consensus among humanitarian actors and some government structures in Upper Nile State agrees on a number of some 90,000-100,000 South Sudanese returnees in the state and in need of (re)integration support including food security, security of tenure on land, basic shelter, livelihood support, and linkages to protection specific and targeted services.

Furthermore, at the national level, the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) cluster anticipates that around 20 per cent of these returnees will settle in existing IDP sites throughout the country.

4. Protection Environment for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

Before the conflict in Sudan in April 2023, South Sudan was hosting an estimated 300,000 refugees and asylum-seekers in an already challenging environment where South Sudan continued to grapple with sub-national violence, chronic food insecurity,

and the devastating impact of major flooding. At the end of December 2023, and after the conflict in Sudan, 78,150 refugees and asylum-seekers had arrived in the country, adding a further challenge to the capacity of the protection service delivery.

Like returnees, refugees and asylum-seekers encounter many of the same challenges at the points of entry, transit centres, and during onward movement to their designated camp or settlement locations. Refugees and asylum-seekers have been mainly arriving in the northern states, namely Upper Nile, Ruweng Administrative Area (RAA), Northern Bahr El Ghazal, Western Bahr El Ghazal, and to Abyei, with some managing to find their way to Juba or southern states. In the northern states, refugees were arriving at locations with no refugee camps/settlements nor established services and/or to existing camps already at their full capacity. This overstretched the financial resources available to build new settlements, expand the current camps, and provide shelter, WASH, and specialized services to meet the needs of the new arrivals. This contributed to limited access to services such as NFIs, multi-purpose case assistance, and child protection and GBV services for survivors, which resulted in reports of psychological distress among refugees. Examples of incidents caused by limited services have been reported by IOM and UNHCR in December 2023 portraying major challenges humanitarian agencies are facing in the country ([IOM and UNHCR are deeply concerned over the risks faced in relocating refugees and returnees away from border areas](#)).

Before the conflict in Sudan, about 90 per cent¹ of refugee households lacked the economic resources to meet their minimum food needs without external assistance. Refugees rely mainly on humanitarian food assistance, which has already been reduced by 50 percent since 2021 due to limited financial resources. Refugees have engaged in temporary and informal small-scale income-generating activities, such as selling firewood and/or rainfed agriculture. The disruption in the supply of goods, including food and non-food items, from Sudan—South Sudan's primary import source—has resulted in a significant upturn in market prices. Over the initial two weeks of the crisis, the cost of the essential food basket surged from 18 to 56 per cent.² This left many of the new arrivals and existing refugees unable to fill the gap of reduced food assistance, let alone to achieve self-reliance. The increased presence of refugees in refugee camps where the host community lives in their peripheries and receives different types of assistance in the past is anticipated to increase competition over already scarce natural resources and constrained socioeconomic opportunities.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Child and forced family separation

As of 31-December, more than half of the new arrivals are under 18, while 12,647 or 3%-are over sixty. Many of them have arrived without caregivers. Reports show that many of those reaching the entry points along the South Sudan border have been separated from their families; as of July 2023, over 380 unaccompanied and separated children have been identified at the border and transit centres ([UNHCR](#) assesment 20/12/2023, [UNHCR](#) 01/08/2023). The circumstances in which they have been separated vary according to the individuals, often children and the elderly. For example, anecdotal evidence shows that roadblocks have led to women and men being separated, leaving many (often women) experiencing sexual assault and theft of their belongings. According to an assessment conducted in Rotriak Settlement, some South Sudanese men and teenage boys have been either conscripted in Sudan, killed, or are in hiding within Sudan, leaving their families to go onward in their journey without them. According to the same assessment, some children reported that their parents were at work when the fighting started, and they got caught up in other parts of the city ([UNHCR](#) 01/08/2023, [UNFPA](#) 25/07/2023, [OCHA](#) 06/06/2023, [UN News](#) 07/12/2022). While this data shows the circumstances in which some families have been separated in a specific settlement, similar accounts of family separation have likely been experienced by people who have fled the violence in Sudan in other settlements.

It is not only children that are separated from their families, but also many elderly people have been recorded arriving with no caregivers ([OCHA](#) 09/11/2023, [UNFPA](#) 05/07/2023). Those who have been separated from or have lost family members or other caregivers are left even more vulnerable. They may experience severe mental health and psychosocial consequences from the experience of conflict and flight, with further risk of neglect, violence, and exploitation in situations of displacement.

¹ Joint Post Distribution Monitoring – January 2023

² WFP South Sudan, Country Brief, April 2023

The presence of parents and caregivers is one of the key factors against the long-term negative effects of stress; being separated from family can, in fact, contribute to PTSD. Deprived of family and community support systems and care, children are even more at risk of forced labour, recruitment, trafficking or GBV ([Info Migrants](#) 27/07/2023, [UNHCR](#) 15/06/2023).

RISK 2 Gender-based violence.

At the points of entry, gender-based violence (GBV) risks occur as individuals leave Sudan. The outbreak of conflict and widespread violence in Sudan has driven many, particularly women, to flee. Many women have cited the risk of GBV as a reason for their flight from Sudan – as being concerned for their safety and that of their children. Some have reported fighters sexually assaulting women and girls, while others have shared reports of sexual harassment and sexual exploitation. Testimonies from new arrivals cite different perpetrators, including organized armed groups, militias, gangs, and criminal groups. Most documented cases in Sudan referred to “armed groups” as perpetrators ([UNHCR](#) 19/12/2023). Women and girls have also faced sexual and gender-based violence during their journeys to safety, at checkpoints, and while awaiting visas at the border. Incidents being reported include cases of harassment at checkpoints, abduction, rape, sexual assault, and sexual exploitation. Events of systematic rape of women and minors as young as eight years old by parties to the conflict operating between Karasana and the border have been reported. An older woman described her route to South Sudan being “as dangerous as the war itself.” Anecdotal data also show that some women are separated from their travel companions at roadblocks along the way to border crossings and are then sexually assaulted ([UNHCR](#) 19/12/2023, [ICRC](#) 28/09/2023, [UNFPA](#) 25/07/2023, [REACH](#) 21/06/2023, [UNHCR](#) 15/06/2023). The risk of adolescent girls being exposed to sexual violence is especially high when they lose family members and immediate caretakers ([GPC & IASC](#) 20/01/2015).

While there is no published data on the number of women and girls who have faced such violence, data shows that women and girls make up nearly half of the new arrivals. Therefore it is likely to be a widespread issue, especially given the testimonies from new arrivals highlighting the issue ([UNHCR](#) 01/08/2023).

During transit, individuals face heightened risks of GBV. Overcrowded transit centres, lack of essential services, and vulnerability factors such as loss of assets contribute to increased risks of sexual violence. Women resort to selling belongings, collecting firewood, and engaging in income-generating activities, exposing them to exploitation and abuse ([UNFPA](#) 25/07/2023). Child and forced marriages are on the rise, and the longer individuals stay at transit centres, the higher their vulnerability to sexual harassment and forced marriage ([UNHCR](#) 15/06/2023). This increase in sexual and gender-based violence is likely to lead to rising unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections, on top of the physical and mental trauma hundreds of thousands are already suffering ([UNHCR](#) 12/12/2023). Women and girls with disabilities, and particularly those with psychosocial, hearing, and intellectual disabilities are more at risk of sexual violence and other forms of GBV due to negative attitudes by individuals and societies. The longer these women and girls stay at the transit centres, the higher their vulnerability will be to GBV, especially as a shortage of shelters persists and specialized services remain limited in transit and reception facilities ([UNHCR](#) 15/06/2023). The situation is particularly dire in Renk Transit Centre due to overcrowding.

GBV risks persist during onward movement and return journeys. The risk remains high when women and girls are on the move, seeking safer locations ([UNFPA](#) 05/07/2023). Even after resettlement, the risk of GBV remains elevated, given South Sudan’s high prevalence of GBV. Factors contributing to this risk include conflict, economic shocks, displacement, poverty, limited access to sexual and reproductive health rights, and compromised privacy in shared homes with host communities ([RT](#) 27/11/2023). Gender bias, unemployment, and weak justice systems perpetuate GBV, with customary courts often favouring men ([SSMJ](#) 04/11/2023). The psychological, mental, and physical health of survivors and communities are impacted, leading to transgenerational grievances and perpetuating cycles of violence ([UN SC](#) 31/01/2022).

Additionally, there is a compromised sense of privacy when returnees share homes with host communities, leading to overcrowding at the household level, often resulting in tensions and violence that expose them to GBV. There is also some evidence of the correlation between the presence of weapons and sexual violence, meaning the prevalence of arms in South Sudan is likely to drive up GBV incidents ([ICRC](#) 28/09/2023, [IPI Global Observatory](#) 09/12/2022). However, a specific case in Rotriak underscores the vulnerability of returnees due to the deteriorating conditions in which they are settling. Women, especially women-headed families, are settling in makeshift shelters under trees, exposing them to attacks, robbery, and

sexual and gender-based violence. Women have also expressed insecurity due to the lack of lighting during the night ([OCHA 06/06/2023](#)).

The lack of GBV response services at entry points, along with a deficient case management system in health clinics, further compound the challenges faced by survivors ([OCHA 19/09/2023](#)). As returnees experience similar challenges in South Sudan, comprehensive support services are needed to address the long-term impact of GBV on individuals and communities ([LAW 19/06/2023](#)).

RISK 3 Theft, extortion, forced eviction or destruction of personal property.

Many new arrivals continue to report violence and exploitation, such as extortion and looting, including during their journey to South Sudan. There have also been reports that upon arrival, many have been requested to pay unauthorized charges to be able to cross the border. The lack of money to make these payments to cross borders was cited as one of the barriers to movement ([UNHCR 01/08/2023](#), [IOM 18/07/2023](#), [REACH 27/06/2023](#)). Across points of entry in different states, such as Unity and Northern Bahr El Ghazal, there have been reports of looting of personal belongings, such as money, phones, clothes, and cooking utensils along the way, often at gunpoint ([Sudan Tribune 09/11/2023](#), [UNHCR 01/08/2023](#), [LSE 28/06/2023](#)). Additionally, in Bentiu, many new arrivals have reported targeted thefts and robberies of essential items, allegedly by the host community, but also by other new arrivals ([UNHCR 01/08/2023](#)). Some returnees who arrived complained that they spent two months on their way from Sudan to South Sudan; some of the reasons provided were that their vehicle fuel was siphoned by armed personnel (UNHCR 25-30/12/2023 Bentiu Field Office Weekly Update). Robbery was reportedly commonplace even along the reportedly relatively safer Khartoum-Renk route as described by those fleeing, compared with routes to Panakuach, the Abyei Administrative Area (AAA), and Aweil and Raja counties ([REACH 21/06/2023](#)).

The combination of losing their source of income, and the ongoing theft of personal belongings, especially money – possibly life savings - is likely to leave refugees, asylum-seekers and returnees economically vulnerable, and increase their protection needs, as economic vulnerability and marginalization may be part of the root causes of protection risks. It is also important to note that for those who have their money stolen along their journey, this could prevent them from ever reaching the point of entry or make the journey even more hazardous ([DW 10/07/2023](#), [REACH 27/06/2023](#), [UNHCR 2016](#)).

RISK 4 Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice.

Even before the Sudan conflict and the subsequent refugee and returnee movement, the lack of civil documentation has been a fundamental obstacle for returnees to South Sudan. After the 2018 peace agreement, many IDPs and refugees who fled to other countries returned home to find that other occupants had claimed their houses or that they were severely destroyed or damaged. Already, around 90% of men, women, and children in South Sudan do not possess a National ID, leaving a significant number at risk of statelessness. The process of obtaining nationality documents, especially in remote areas, proves to be an arduous and expensive journey, involving a range of demanding prerequisites, from birth certificates and age assessments to photographs, blood tests, and a fee of approximately USD 20. The financial burden, coupled with the need for credible witnesses, intensifies the challenges faced by individuals seeking to establish their nationality ([UNHCR](#) last accessed 20/12/2023, [IOM 20/11/2023](#)).

Moreover, competing authorities and blurred land rights, exacerbated by years of conflict, present real obstacles, including widespread destruction of housing, land, and property (HLP), land grabbing by military personnel, secondary occupation of land by IDPs, forced evictions, and financial barriers to HLP documentation are adding to the complexity of HLP issues particularly in managing the resettlement of returnees and IDPs in urban and rural areas. The patriarchal system defining women's land rights in land ownership and allocation adds another layer of complexity to the HLP landscape ([Protection Cluster 11/11/2022](#)).

A significant demographic of returnees comprises South Sudanese nationals (83%) returning to their homeland, with many expressing a wish to return to their areas of origin. As these refugees return, tensions emerge with those who remained and the host communities, particularly in regions like Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State and a primary destination for South

Sudanese returnees fleeing the Sudan conflict. There are reports of some returnees' homes having been reportedly burned or occupied. The aforementioned barriers to accessing documentation, in addition to disputes over lands (faced by returnees since 2018) are likely to be similar for the newly arrived returnees from Sudan, as barriers to access civil documentation persist. Without adequate civil documentation, returnees struggle to secure jobs in the formal economy, access public services, prove home ownership and resolve HLP disputes. Lack of documentation of land ownership and conflicts over natural resources, including cattle and water, remain significant risk factors for HLP disputes. There are already reports of tensions between returnees and those who stayed and oversaw the illegal logging activities ([IOM](#) 21/11/2023, UNHCR last accessed 15/12/2023, [UNHCR](#) 12/12/2023, [IOM](#) 20/11/2023, [UNHCR](#) 01/08/2023).

Despite the hesitancy of some to return to their places of origin due to insecurity, many will likely move to areas of origin if they are able to. Therefore, failure to address these issues effectively may only compound problems when displaced populations begin their return, presenting a daunting scenario for the sustainable resettlement and reintegration of communities in South Sudan, especially given that many lack up-to-date knowledge on the challenging conditions in the areas of return, and that many of the root causes of the civil war in South Sudan have not been adequately addressed, and widespread destruction is still visible ([UNHCR](#) 01/08/2023, [Refugees International](#) 27/07/2023, [LSE](#) 28/06/2023, [Protection Cluster](#) 11/11/2022).

RESPONSE

PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION

In South Sudan, significant progress has been made in enhancing humanitarian access and safety, especially in northern Jonglei, Unity, and Upper Nile states. Collaborative efforts with UNHCR and cluster members have improved aid delivery and reduced risks from explosive hazards. Life-saving assistance at border areas and transit facilities, including food, WASH, shelter, and health services, has addressed the immediate needs of refugees and returnees. The government's open-door policy has also been vital in ensuring access and asylum rights for those fleeing conflict.

Additionally, significant strides have been made in bolstering protection efforts, facilitated by collaborations like the [DRC/USAID PAF-DEEP project](#) and strategic partnerships with ECHO, USAID/Office for Humanitarian Assistance(OHA). These initiatives focus on strengthening joint protection analysis, emergency assistance for new arrivals, and capacity building among protection actors. A key achievement has been the introduction of the Protection Monitoring System (PMS), which systematically gathers and analyzes information to identify trends and patterns in rights violations and protection risks. This system is crucial in informing effective programming and advocacy, playing a central role in decision-making, and prioritization across all sectors. The upcoming integration of a Protection Risk Analysis element into the PMS in 2024 is expected to transform it into a comprehensive assessment tool. These efforts collectively enhance the overall protection landscape, improving response strategies, advocacy, and service delivery for vulnerable populations, including those impacted by gender-based violence, child protection, and sexual exploitation and abuse.

Additionally, with support from the Protection Cluster and the Refugee Protection Working Group, a robust protection coordination mechanism was rolled out in Renk, a place that sees most new arriving refugees, asylum-seekers and returnees transiting. The coordination mechanism is led by UNHCR and it coordinates life-saving emergency assistance and supports coordination of information sharing and planning activities with state-level and national stakeholders to drive prioritization, information sharing, and responding to needs.

ACCESS-RELATED CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS

Humanitarian access continues to be impeded by inadequate road conditions, notably in northern Jonglei and sections of Unity and Upper Nile states. Furthermore, the widespread presence of explosive hazards, particularly in Greater Equatoria, Upper Nile, and Jonglei states exacerbates the challenge of delivering essential aid to vulnerable populations. During the rainy season, Renk becomes unreachable by road, while the route from Malakal is only suitable for small vehicles, hindering the distribution of substantial humanitarian assistance.

CRITICAL GAPS IN FUNDING AND POPULATION REACHED

Despite these efforts, South Sudan's humanitarian response faces critical funding shortfalls. In 2023, only half of the Humanitarian Response Plan's budget and 36% of the Sudan Situation Refugee Response Plan were funded, resulting in a huge gap in protection needs. This lack of funds severely impacts services for women, children, and vulnerable adults, exacerbating risks for over 2.1 million internally displaced people and the growing number of refugees and returnees. Without increased funding, sustaining essential protection services and addressing the escalating humanitarian needs will be challenging.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the period covered by this analysis, urgent action is required to stop the sudden recorded increase in abuse and exploitation. The Protection cluster and partners consider the below-listed actions necessary to avoid further harmful consequences. To ensure mobile or static provision of critical protection assistance and services, including specialized response services, tailored to the specific needs, considering age, gender, and disability, at border crossing points and in reception and transit centres, protection actors plan for the following core and life-saving protection activities to new arrivals:

RISK 1 Child and forced family separation

PROTECTION SECTOR and PARTNERS

- Establish and/or strengthen family reunification services throughout the displacement journey from points of entry to final integration destinations, with an emphasis on the identification of unaccompanied minors and elderly persons.
- Provide legal support for obtaining necessary documentation for separated individuals, including birth certificates and identity documents.
- Humanitarian assistance to prioritize families hosting and supporting unaccompanied minors and elderly persons, with a potential to increase protection support packages for affected children, the elderly, and host families.
- Strengthen child protection services in conflict-affected areas. Provide psychosocial support, counselling, and rehabilitation for children who have been recruited or are at risk. Create safe spaces for children to share their experiences and receive assistance.
- Provide targeted support for families with children with disabilities to reduce their vulnerability.

RISK 2 Gender-based violence

PROTECTION SECTOR and PARTNERS

- Improve access to quality GBV services, emergency livelihood opportunities, and GBV-focused cash interventions to prevent women's and girls' exposure to risk throughout the key stages of displacement.
- In tandem with the above, provide risk awareness and referral pathways to women and girls in hard-to-reach areas.
- Establish/strengthen of women and girls' safe spaces to enhance reporting and response to GBV incidents.
- Strengthen evidence-based advocacy and data collection on ongoing GBV risks, violations, and preventative measures throughout the key stages of displacement.

RISK 3 Theft, extortion, forced eviction or destruction of personal property

PROTECTION SECTOR and PARTNERS

- Launch public awareness campaigns to educate refugees, asylum-seekers, and returnees about potential risks and scams during their journey. Provide information on authorised fees and charges, and raise awareness about their rights.
- Work closely with the Government of South Sudan at border points to mitigate all and any unnecessary costs associated with seeking refuge and asylum in South Sudan by returnees and refugees alike.
- Communities affected by the large influx of returnees and refugees at border and transit points and facing similar needs to new arrivals should be included on a vulnerability and needs basis in humanitarian assistance. This will help reduce inter-communal tensions, outbreaks of violence, and the prevalence of theft targeting new arrivals.
- Implement programs to support the livelihoods of displacement-affected communities. This can include vocational training, job placement, and small business support to mitigate economic vulnerability.
- Advocate for increased security measures at entry points, especially in areas prone to forced recruitment.

RISK 4 Impediments and/or restrictions to access to legal identity, remedies and justice

PROTECTION SECTOR and PARTNERS

- Simplify and streamline the obtaining of nationality documents, birth certificates, and other essential identification papers. Reducing bureaucratic hurdles and minimising the required prerequisites can make the documentation process more accessible to returnees, especially in remote areas.
- Establish mobile documentation units that can travel to remote areas to provide essential services. These units can assist individuals in obtaining necessary documentation, such as birth certificates and nationality documents, without requiring them to travel long distances.
- Launch awareness campaigns to educate returnees on the importance of legal identity and the steps involved in obtaining documentation. Provide information on available resources, services, and support to encourage individuals to pursue the necessary paperwork.
- Provide capacity-building support for local authorities involved in documentation processes and land rights management. Enhance their ability to handle complex issues and ensure they are well-equipped to address the unique challenges returnees face.
- Establish effective monitoring and reporting mechanisms to track issues related to legal identity, remedies, and justice. This includes tracking the progress of documentation efforts, identifying areas with persistent challenges, and taking corrective actions accordingly.



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