



Nonviolent **Peaceforce**

June 2023

FROM CONFLICT TO CONFLICT

Protection needs and responses in South Sudan amid
the Sudan crisis

Background

The humanitarian needs and protection risks faced by civilian populations in South Sudan have long been of concern. The escalation of violence in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023 is exacerbating these conditions and exposing returnees to widespread physical and sexual violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, torture, and killing. Since the onset of the civil war in South Sudan in 2013, many South Sudanese nationals sought safety as refugees in Khartoum, Darfur, and other areas of Sudan. Faced with escalating violence in Sudan, these nationals are now returning in significant numbers to South Sudan, with 120,585 returnees registering as internally displaced persons (IDPs) since the onset of the crisis (as at 25 June 2023; this is an underreported figure, as many returnees remain unregistered. For updated figures see the [UNHCR dashboard](#)). Thousands more arrive daily. Many returnees are female-headed households with children. The mass displacement of South Sudanese returnees (alongside Sudanese nationals) into South Sudan is exposing civilians to severe violence, as well as placing enormous strain on existing community and government support including essential goods and services.

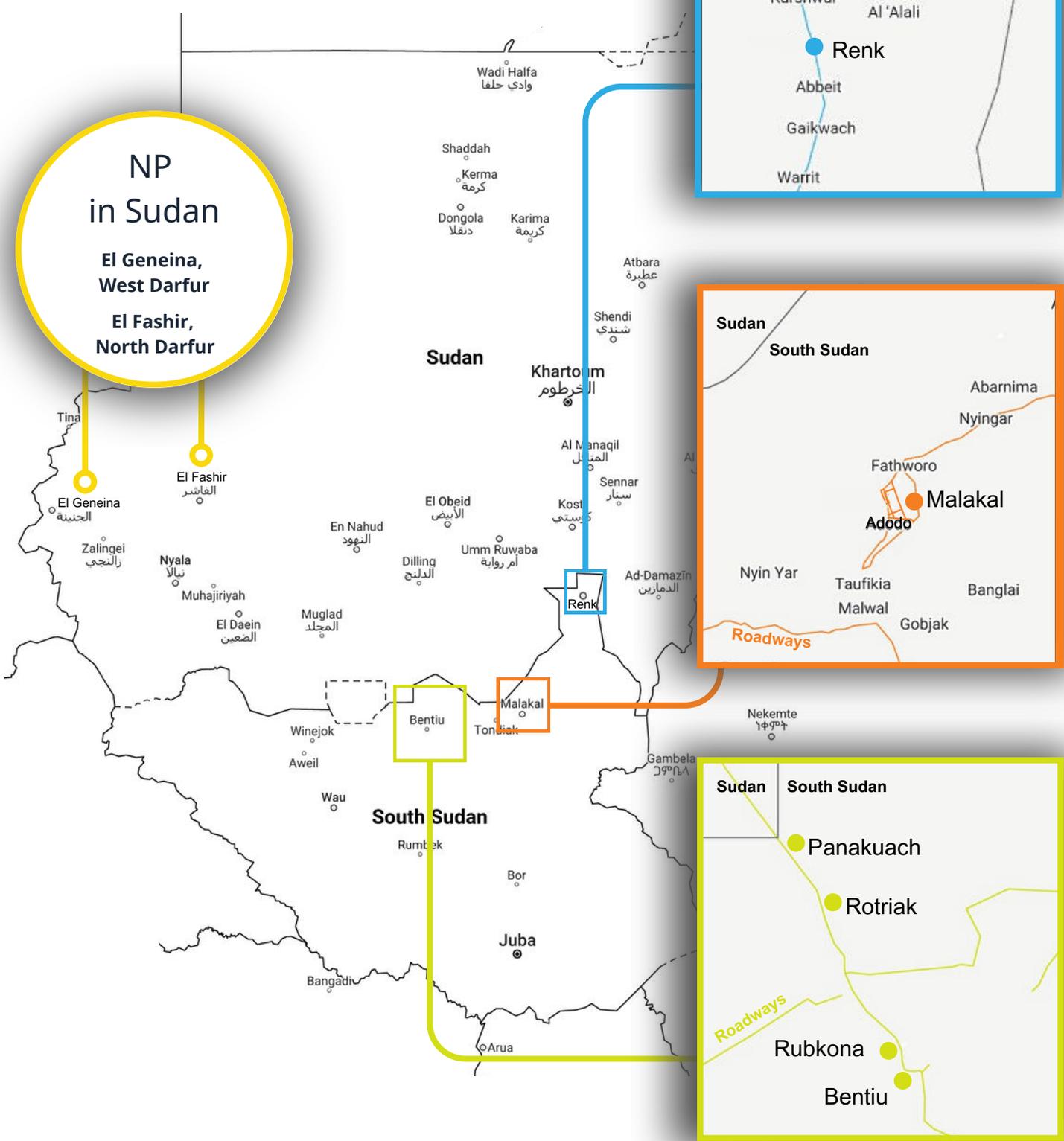
This has been intensified by current economic strain in the global humanitarian context, with donors and humanitarian organisations alike unable or unwilling to scale up a much-needed humanitarian response, both inside Sudan and in bordering countries hosting civilians in need. Amidst this slow response, returnees and host communities are struggling to meet basic needs and face increased risks of sexual and gender-based violence, child protection and family separation, and intercommunal mistrust and violence.

This report focuses on the protection needs and risks faced by returnees and host communities in South Sudan. The needs of the 7,457 Sudanese refugees (and almost 4000 others non-Sudanese or South Sudanese nationality) who have so far arrived in South Sudan remain critical, and captured in [analysis](#) elsewhere, and in forthcoming analysis from Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP)). Though many of the needs of and risks faced by these populations are similar, it is critical to also consider the specific challenges and vulnerabilities experienced by South Sudanese nationals (both returnees and the communities who host them).

This report highlights ongoing protection needs and risks facing returnees and host communities in South Sudan in the wake of the Sudan crisis, as well as highlights the need for urgent and conflict-sensitive responses to these needs. These responses must include a rapid scale-up of response for both returnee and host communities; include dedicated resources for a holistic protection response that goes beyond case management; invest in community-led mechanisms; and for open and accessible information on this response to be made available to civilians.

Geographic Scope

- Unity State, including Bentiu (settlement for returnees and existing IDP camp), Rotriak (settlement for returnees) and Panakuach (key border crossing point)
- Malakal (settlement for returnees) and Renk (key border crossing point)
- Juba (settlement for returnees)



Methodology

Nonviolent Peaceforce has teams in both Sudan (West and North Darfur) and across South Sudan (including in key areas of return including Unity State, Greater Upper Nile, Warrap, and Juba POC site). NP's ongoing protection work in communities is informed by ongoing context analysis that also informs this report. In addition to this ongoing analysis, Nonviolent Peaceforce South Sudan (NPSS) conducted a rapid assessment focused on conflict sensitivity and needs for returnees and host communities more heavily impacted by the Sudan crisis. Over 3 separate sites in late June 2023, NPSS teams engaged over 100 actors in Key Informant Interviews and within focus groups (14 representatives of local civil and military authorities, 35 host community members, 45 returnees, and 15 Sudanese refugees). Discussions focused on the needs and risks faced by both host communities and returnees, and necessary humanitarian and state responses.



Violence escalated in Sudan on 15th April 2023



NPSS and NPSD can provide more detailed briefings on request and will supplement this initial assessment with updates



Since that time, 120,585 returnees and 11,253 refugees have crossed the border from Sudan to South Sudan [as of 25 June](#)



NP engaged over 100 actors in Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and focus groups, including returnees, host communities, authorities, and humanitarian responders



NPSS and NPSD are conducting rolling analysis and protection activities



NPSS will provide additional analysis of Sudanese asylum seekers in South Sudan



Protection needs, risks, and responses

The protection needs of returnees and host communities in South Sudan are urgent and escalating as violence in Sudan continues. Though scale and scope of these needs are often variable depending on location, there are key themes that demonstrate trends across the country.

1. Conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV)

One of the deeply concerning findings of this assessment was the scale of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) experienced by South Sudanese returnees en route from Khartoum, Darfur, and other areas of Sudan. Many female returnees interviewed reported being subject to abuses including mass rape. Women reported that once combatants in Sudan determined buses or cars included South Sudanese women, they would request all passengers exit the vehicle and separate men and boys from women and girls. One woman reported that “Once they separated us, they took all the women and girls to the bush. They divided us based on the number of soldiers.” Though Sudanese nationals also face major risks of sexual and gender-based violence, first-hand testimony from both refugees and returnees suggests that being a South Sudanese national exposes women and girls to additional risk. One interviewee recounted a case of CRSV against men and boys.

Though some survivors interviewed had been able to access post-incident support services once reaching South Sudan, very few were able to access this in the required 72-hour window post-exposure. The journey from Sudan was reported to take up to 20 days by returnees. Many women who had sought support and services knew of others who had not accessed support, they suggested due to social stigma associated with SGBV and lack of education related to health risks. There is a major need for increased accessibility of information about seeking post-incident support (including in analogue forms such as loudspeaker announcements in

communities), and mobile clinics to provide treatment at points of arrival and settlement as quickly as possible. In addition, there is an urgent need for psychological first aid and longer-term psychosocial support for returnees who have experienced sexual violence. Tailored support must be provided for children, and additional efforts made to reach out to men and boys who are even more likely to face challenges accessing post-incident support.

It should be noted that once arriving in South Sudan, risks of CRSV and SGBV continue. In 2022, a UN Commission on Human Rights report described systemic gross human rights violations and abuses against women and girls, to which both host communities and returnees continue to be exposed. These violations have been widespread in South Sudan for decades, and services have never been sufficient to meet needs of survivors.

Exposure to this kind of violence is extremely traumatic and will likely have long-lasting impacts on survivors. Even prior to the escalation of conflict in Sudan, levels of services were not enough to meet the needs of the existing population. There is an urgent need for an expansion in dedicated support for those who have experienced CRSV and SGBV both en route and within South Sudan itself. In the immediate term, this needs to focus on the rapid deployment of teams dedicated to the medical and psychological treatment of survivors in both entry and settlement locations.

2. Physical violence and theft

Returnees and refugees alike face major risks of physical violence and theft en route from Sudan. Multiple interviewees reported members of their party being beaten, tortured, shot, or killed. Some who had moved in convoys with other vehicles reported that some buses carrying groups of returnees and refugees were detained by armed men in Sudan and remain unaccounted for. This echoes testimonies from Sudan and routes to other neighbouring countries such as Chad, where there have been widespread reports of indiscriminate killing and torture of civilians seeking to flee from violence in locations such as El Geneina in West Darfur.

Those interviewed also reported being required to pay bribes at every checkpoint and having some or all belongings confiscated. Most returnees report having the majority or all of their money and belongings taken enroute, and so arrive to South Sudan without the capacity to pay for essentials including food and water. For example, two people reported observing arrivals to the Panakuach border wearing only underwear and without any belongings.

Exposure to this kind of violence can be extremely traumatic, and current gaps in psychological health service provision across the country are a major concern. It also comes in addition to the previous traumas that many have experienced in waves of displacement: "All these challenges remind me of 2013. I don't know why I am not lucky at all. I faced the problem here in South Sudan and then I faced the same problem in Sudan. And now I have escaped back." There is an urgent need for an expansion in dedicated support for those who have arrived in South Sudan having experienced displacement and violence. In particular, there is an urgent need for the deployment of rapid-response mobile medical clinics and protection teams.

3. Protection and access to essential goods and services

Protection needs and potential responses in South Sudan are interlinked and shaped by severe constraints on access to essential goods and services including food, water and sanitation, shelter, and medical care. Prior to the escalation in Sudan, these services in South Sudan were already under severe strain. With the arrival of those returning from Sudan, these services are overwhelmed. This has been exacerbated by gaps in registration processes for those returning to South Sudan. Particularly for those who crossed in the first weeks of the conflict before reception processes were clearly set up, they remain unregistered and therefore have limited to no access to humanitarian distributions for those displaced from Sudan. For others, registration was processed by individuals who did not speak local languages, and mistakes meant that they were unable to prove their identity and status, and therefore unable to access humanitarian services. For all, there was a widespread lack of information and knowledge about what services and support were available.

In terms of access to food, rations provided by WFP had already reduced drastically prior to April. From July WFP have announced that Juba POC site will no longer receive general food distribution, and currently only serves registered IDPs. This is supplemented by limited government distributions. In Bentiu, food rations have reduced from 50kg of sorghum (plus lentils, oil, and salt) per 3 people to now 50kg per 7 people (with limited or no additional items); this does not account for unregistered family members, who are now also sharing these rations. Shared one Women's Protection Team leader in Bentiu POC site, "The food is already finished because of people returning from Khartoum. We are sharing everything that we have." In Rotriak, Unity State, the team observed returnees with rope tied around their waist, an attempt to forestall hunger.

Prices for goods in South Sudan, already subject to inflation, have also spiked as a result of the conflict in Sudan, with imports ceasing from Khartoum and instead routed through Juba by air and increasing transport costs to regional areas. Many women reported lack of income, combined with higher prices, is preventing them from being able to pay for school fees. This is also exacerbated by a lack of income opportunities in areas like Unity State, where ongoing flooding has constrained income-generating capacities such as collecting firewood and charcoal preparation.

Water distributions in many areas have also not increased to accommodate the needs of increased populations. Many areas are experiencing water scarcity that will worsen if not addressed by the coming of the dry season (January—April). The scarcity of water resources is a major point of conflict between returnees and host communities. For example, in Rotriak, it is common for women to verbally and physically fight over the two local water points. The amount provided by the government has not increased with the higher population, so there is a strong sense of scarcity that fuels conflict. Each family is allocated only one jerry can per day, which is not enough for drinking, let alone cooking, washing, and other activities. Women shared that they had resorted to collecting water from the river to supplement what they were able to receive at the water point. The water from the river is widely known to be contaminated by

chemicals from the nearby oil field mixing with floodwaters; the day prior to the assessment, the Commissioner reported that another baby had been born with [severe birth defects](#) and died as a result of its malformations.

Lack of shelter is also an ongoing issue for many returnees. Some have been able to be accommodated by families who remained in South Sudan. For others, particularly those returning to POC sites, shelters are already substandard and over capacity. In Bentiu, the assessment team observed returnees sleeping in the open, a major protection concern. For many who have returned sick, exposure to rain and other elements will exacerbate widespread health concerns. Open defecation is common, with full, unlit, and unlockable latrines exacerbating risks of water-borne disease outbreaks, as well as exposing people to higher risks of violence in bush areas. Lack of shelter, particularly in the evening, also increases risks of SGBV, physical violence, and looting.

Lack of accessible medical care is also impacting communities, particularly women and children (further discussed below). In addition to that discussed elsewhere, many returnee women were and are giving birth whilst fleeing from the conflict are most are lacking reproductive health kits and medical assistance. Health risks to both themselves and their babies have been exacerbated by the current context.

4. Child protection

Children account for a large number of returnees and refugees arriving in South Sudan from Sudan. Many arrive to the border visibly undernourished, and services and resources to meet these needs are strained as noted above. There are reports of children who have been separated from their families. In Bentiu, some of the children who have returned are ending up in the market and are likely to remain there as street children, due to lack of basic services. Though some child protection services are available at points of arrival and settlement, other locations do not have any dedicated providers. In Bentiu and Juba POC sites, for example, cuts to funding since 2022 resulted in the withdrawal of all dedicated child protection service providers. This places children at higher risk of child labour, exploitation, and engagement with armed groups. Unaccompanied children are at high risk and need protective accompaniment and long-term support until family tracing and reunification can be conducted.



Many host community children do not currently have access to education, with families struggling to pay school fees. In Bentiu, for example, a mother shared her inability to raise funds for fees due to ongoing flooding: “School here in the POC is not for free. Before we could go and sell firewood; now we’re not able to collect firewood anymore, so we can’t pay and the kids stay at home.” This lack of access will extend to returnee children facing the same conditions. There are limited or no child friendly spaces in most locations canvassed.

Undernourished children are more susceptible to deadly diseases like measles, acute watery diarrhoea, and other communicable diseases common in camps and other areas with limited or no WASH infrastructure. In Bentiu POC site, for example, community members are identifying returnees as the source of an ongoing measles outbreak: “Everyone from Renk has measles, there are lots of children dying. They were all on the same boat.” To date, at least six children have died from this preventable disease moving from Renk to Bentiu. Bentiu State Hospital and other NGO clinics are already over bed capacity. POC community members raise concerns about the lack of space available in the site to enable those who are infectious to be isolated from other community members. These risks and a perception that they are introduced by returnees have the capacity to inflame community fear and conflict, further explored below.

The current scale of needs and protection risk, particularly for those children without family networks, requires an immediate resumption and scale up of child protection services in these sites.

5. Conflict sensitivity and intercommunal violence

The arrival of displaced persons from Sudan into South Sudan carries major conflict sensitivity considerations that all humanitarian responders must pay attention to and integrate into programming. The scarcity of food, water, and shelter resources as described above is already proving a major issue, with violent altercations between host and returnee communities over limited water and food occurring daily. This is often exacerbating existing tensions between communities. For example, Rotriak in Unity State—now a key settlement site for returnees arriving through Panakuach, was already a site of tenuous social and political relations, subject to a dispute between local authorities over land and between people from different counties, including Rubkona, Mayom, Guit, Panygiar, and Koch Counties, as well as from Pariang Administrative Area.

It is clear from discussions with both authorities and host communities that there is a perception of bias in favour of returnees and their needs, over and above host communities. A Rotriak community leader explained “Nothing was provided to us. People were coming from different counties in Unity State to escape the flooding.” Now, there is a perception that “the situation is all about the returnees, no one is talking about the previous community.”

The aid response itself is contributing to these dynamics. Though Clusters have attempted to assess need based on general vulnerability (rather than isolating the response to only returnee populations), there is a perception that the host community is being overlooked. Aid organisations have been open about their reluctance to set up more comprehensive support and services (common is the term “light humanitarian response”) in some locations such as Rotriak because of a perceived risk this will embed the returnee populations in single locations; however, this has meant that communities desperate for urgent assistance are not receiving the support they need.

The scarcity of resources and rising prices of basic goods and supplies are contributing to a spike in opportunistic looting and crime, both in POC sites and elsewhere. Host communities in the POC sites are openly blaming youth who have returned from Khartoum and joined gang groups for this violence. Teams have also reported that groups in the camps are primarily targeting new arrivals, particularly women and girls. In South Sudan, a country that has long struggled with intercommunal violence over access to land and resources, this poses a risk of escalation into major violence.

Within returnee groups, there is also friction over matters related to registration and access to aid. For example, for those who arrived at the Pankuach border in Unity State early in the conflict, there were not yet registration processes set up, and they proceeded to Rotriak without being registered. Though registration has subsequently been conducted in Rotriak, many people reported missing this opportunity as they were seeking medical attention or unaware of the registration: “We weren’t registered at the border because we were the first that came in. But then the children got sick, and so we had to take them to hospital in Bentiu, and so we missed the verification and the distribution. We’re just told to seek help from the Government, because the NGOs only help those with verification codes.” Those who arrived later, after registration processes were established in Pankuach, are immediately registered at the border before proceeding to Rotriak. This registration is often visible to others, as they are allocated coloured wristbands. The gaps in registration for those who arrived early, and the expanded aid opportunities to which they have access as a result, have the potential to cause conflict within returnee populations.



Urgent actions and recommendations

The needs of civilians returning from Sudan and in host communities are urgent and escalating and require a comprehensive, tailored humanitarian response. There are several actions and recommendations that must be implemented by authorities and international actors, including humanitarian organisations and donors, to address emergent needs. This begins with addressing conditions in Sudan itself, as NP has highlighted in other [protection assessments](#). In terms of the strategy in South Sudan, the following recommendations must be core to the response:



1. Act now: Rapidly scale-up conflict-sensitive humanitarian assistance for returnee and host communities

Major risks to civilians are present now and cannot wait for a slow response. The reluctance of donors and humanitarian organisations to name and respond to urgent needs belies the emergency that many returnees and host communities are facing. Across the board—protection, food, water, shelter, medical services—needs are escalating for both returnees and host communities. It is critical that donors and organisations alike mobilise the necessary resources to meet these needs. This planning must centre leadership and coordination with actors currently on the ground and focus on how to strengthen existing efforts with direct funding and advocacy. Responses also need to be adaptable and mobile; meeting needs as they change in scale and location, including at border points. Protection responses need to go beyond monitoring, and include protection strategies such as protective accompaniment for groups facing heightened protection risks (for example, unaccompanied children, women, people with disabilities). Information on how to access this response must be made available to civilians, including in analogue forms to ensure those who are not literate are able to understand their rights and how to meet their needs.

2. Invest in community-led protection mechanisms

Many communities have existing community protection teams and community governance infrastructures that are uniquely well-placed to engage, guide and support returnees as they arrive in South Sudan. For example, NP works with over 83 community-based protection teams across the country that are trained in protection, conflict mediation, SGBV response, and advocacy. By investing in these local protection and peace infrastructures, there is an opportunity to respond with immediacy in a way that is context-specific, and that bridges gaps between host communities and returnees. Advocacy and coordination channels should be developed/strengthened for bottom-up coordination so that communal voices can reach relevant actors - especially humanitarians - to make basic goods and services available.

3. Prioritise conflict sensitivity and protection mainstreaming in all humanitarian responses and strategies

All humanitarian providers need to proactively integrate conflict sensitivity analysis into their programme strategies across all sectors, including food assistance, shelter and NFIs, water provision and access to health facilities. As noted in this analysis, well-intended assistance has the potential to create conflict between host communities and returnees, as well as between different clan and regional groups in South Sudan. The presence of dedicated protection partners—and integration of protection mainstreaming—across all interventions is essential to ensuring that those experiencing heightened risks (whether returnees or host community members) receive much-needed assistance. This also includes longer-term settlement options for returnees whose original homeland may be flooded or occupied by others. Housing, Land and Property disputes are widespread in South Sudan; it is essential to ensure that the needs of returnees—and how these interact with existing conflict dynamics—are accounted for in long-term planning.



Photos

- Cover: Returnees from Sudan headed toward Bentiu. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- P. 4: Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- P. 5: Woman walks on dike next to floodwaters. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- P. 8: Tukuls submerged in contaminated floodwaters. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- P. 10: Travelling by boat. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- P. 12: Water distribution in Rotriak. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP
- Back cover: Shelter in Rotriak. Unity State, South Sudan, June 21, 2023. ©NP



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PROTECTION NEEDS OF RETURNEES AND HOST COMMUNITIES IN SOUTH
SUDAN FOLLOWING THE SUDAN CRISIS