



Nonviolent **Peaceforce**

August 2023

SEEKING HARMONY IN HARDSHIP:

A Conflict Sensitivity Report on
Renk, South Sudan

Executive Summary

The sudden outbreak of conflict in Sudan and the sheer amount of displacement has been an immense challenge. Given the scale of the needs and the number of partners involved, the overall humanitarian response in Renk has overcome many difficulties and has been making positive progress. This report highlights four areas to prioritise in Renk as the response transitions from emergency to a more longer-term intervention: onward movement, intercommunal tensions and violence, protection and SGBV, as well as access to essential goods and services. Considering the wider situation, Renk is currently stable but the imminent stop in onward movement is likely to lead to a severe deterioration unless a solution is found quickly. To support a conflict-sensitive humanitarian response going forward, this report makes three critical recommendations: continuing and enhancing onward movement, fostering harmony through host community engagement and supporting intercommunal relations for social cohesion.

Objectives

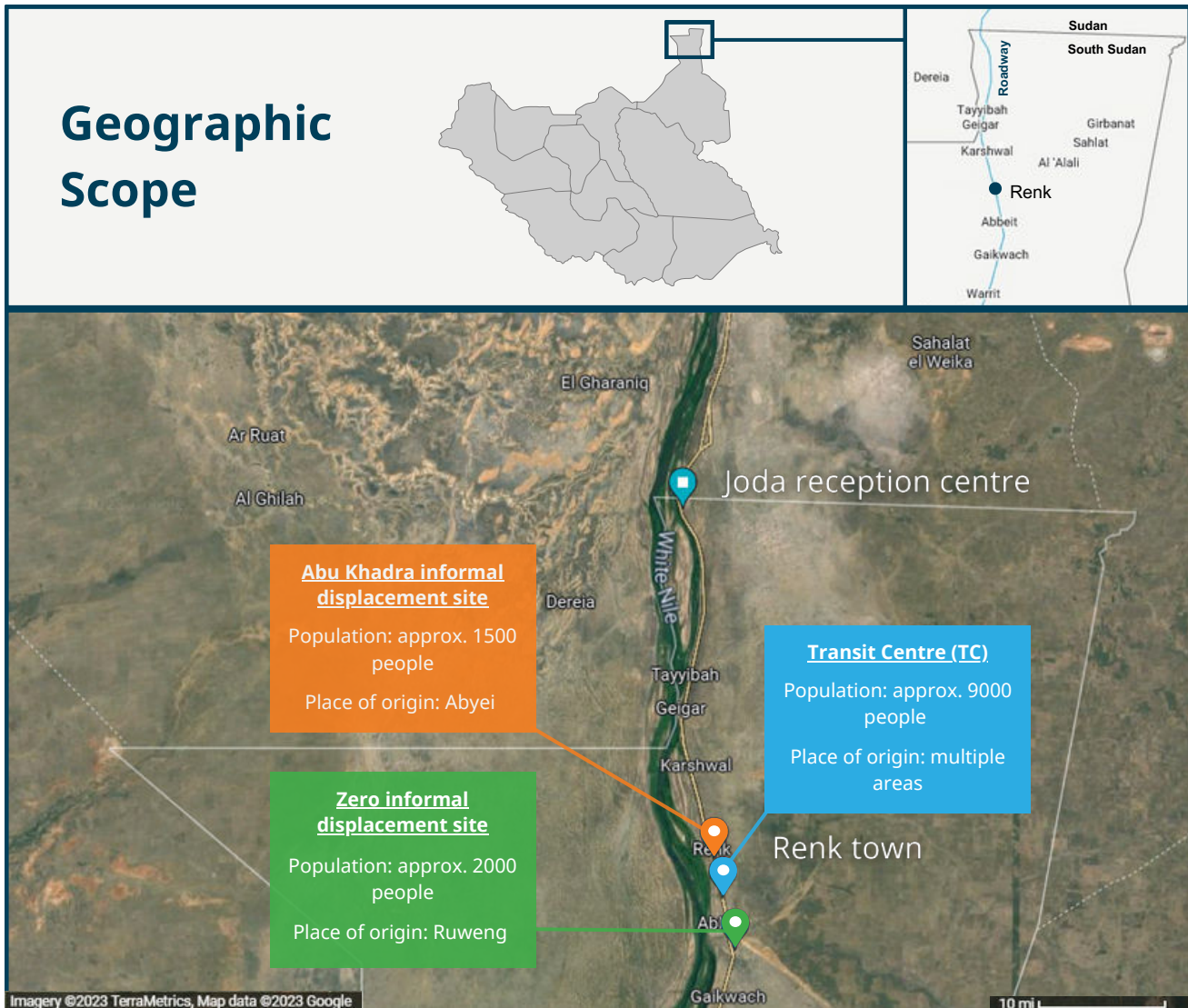
Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), in partnership with Solidarités International (SI), deployed a mobile emergency response team to Renk County, Upper Nile state between 26 July to 11 August to gather primary data for a conflict sensitivity assessment. The mission objectives were threefold: to understand the context of Renk, to identify the needs, risks and opportunities arising from the interaction between humanitarian interventions and the context, and to identify ways forward to mitigate the negative impacts of interventions and maximise their positive impacts.

Methodology

NP conducted a rapid assessment focused on conflict sensitivity and needs for returnees and host communities impacted by the Sudan crisis. In addition to a desk-based review, the NP mobile emergency response team travelled to Renk between 26 July and 11 August to engage with 142 individuals during eleven focus groups discussions (FGDs) and four community protection meetings with host and displaced communities along with nine key informant interviews (KIIs) with humanitarians, UN personnel, civil society, and government authorities. Discussions focused on the needs and risks faced by both host communities and returnees, and humanitarian responses. In addition to KIIs and FGDs, many protection concerns identified were corroborated through direct observation and discussions during seven proactive patrols and one dialogue workshop with host and displaced community members.



Geographic Scope



The mission engaged with communities, returnees, refugees, partners and government actors in the TC, Abu Khadra, and Zero sites. The informal displacement sites arose following an incident which occurred in May around the waterpoint within the TC, which escalated into intercommunal conflict between communities from Aweil and Warrap against those from Unity. The incident left one dead and 26 people injured. Many from Aweil and Warrap, particularly the youth, left the TC and established three informal displacement sites as a result – Abu Khadr, Zero and Riverside.

Riverside had been closed with all those residing there transported onwards by the time the field mission took place. Humanitarian services were not delivered to the informal displacement sites until July, and remained limited in comparison to those at the TC.

Context

Since 15 April, the outbreak of conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan has forced over [234,509 refugees and returnees into South Sudan with 79%, 185,454 people, arriving in Upper Nile using the Joda-Wunthow border point as of 22 August 2023](#). Approximately 1000-1500 people are arriving every day with the vast majority travelling from Khartoum and its surrounding areas such as Omdurman and Bahri. [South Sudanese returnees comprise 74%, followed by refugees from Sudan with 4%, and Eritreans with 0.5%](#). Half of all arrivals express a desire to stay in Upper Nile, mainly in areas outside of Renk, whilst [20% wish to travel to Central Equatoria and 10% to Unity state](#). Uganda is the main destination for those seeking to travel abroad.

Renk county is located at the northern tip of Upper Nile state and encompasses the Joda-Wunthow crossing. The [dominant ethnic group in Renk county](#) is Dinka (Abialang). However, there are multiple ethnic groups living together peacefully within the host community, including Nuer and Shilluk. The proximity to the border with Sudan means movement across the border for trade and personal reasons is routine and the communities in Renk are used to coexistence with those coming from Sudan. Upper Nile was the state in South Sudan where the most civilians were affected by violence (see [here](#) and [here](#)) during 2022. However, most of which has been concentrated in a few payams outside of Renk county. [Renk county has increased its stability and economic development](#) since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018.

To respond to the displacement from Sudan, a reception centre with humanitarian and government officials present at the Joda-Wunthow border crossing has been set up. Here, individuals are being registered, screened for vulnerabilities and supported with priority services including medical assistance and vaccinations. Households are then assisted with humanitarian-provided transportation from the reception centre to Renk, with smaller vehicles used to transport households who have people with special needs (PSN) rather than trucks. The target for onward movement from Joda to Renk is within two days but during the time of the team's visit onward movement to Renk was being successfully delivered for all individuals within a day. In Renk, there is a transit centre (TC) that has been set up for refugees and returnees in Upper Nile University as well as two informal displacement sites: Abu Khadr and Zero. Riverside was a third informal displacement site that had been closed by the time the field mission took place. Humanitarian services were not delivered to the informal displacement sites until July, and remained limited in comparison to those at the TC.



Needs and Conflict Sensitivity Analysis

There is strong coordination between the 46 organizations present in Renk, which helps to reduce duplication. Community-based structures are being utilised for protection, camp coordination and camp management in the TC, and one is in the process of being set up for the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). Diversifying those that are involved where possible such as including representatives from host communities or minorities such as refugees or people with special needs would be beneficial. Recognising the need to expand the size of the TC to respond to the number and needs of those arriving from Sudan, humanitarian actors and the government have been conducting consultations with various stakeholders to identify a suitable location, monitor conditions, and manage expectations to mitigate conflicts arising in the future around the coming extension. Embracing this consultative approach with host and displaced populations across all humanitarian activities would further the sensitivity of the humanitarian response in Renk. In this section, four main points will be identified as continuing challenges: onward movement, intercommunal tensions and violence, SGBV and protection, and access to essential services.

Onward movement

Onward movement from Renk is approximately 1000 people a day whilst the rate of arrivals at the Joda-Wunthow border has slowed to approximately 900 per day in recent weeks. This inflow-outflow balance has greatly helped ease congestion, strain on services and tensions amongst the displaced population in Renk. However, the number of arrivals from Sudan [is expected to increase](#) with the rains since this route is the only fully paved road and is considered the safest route from Sudan to South Sudan. If the outflow rate is unable to keep up with the influx of arrivals, either because of a return to higher arrival figures or an impediment to onward movement, the consequent congestion and delay in movement is highly likely to exacerbate tensions for displaced populations as well as other issues identified in this report. Already in May, an incident around the waterpoint within the TC escalated into intercommunal conflict between communities from Aweil and Warrap against those from Unity. The incident left one dead, 26 people injured and many from Aweil and Warrap, particularly the youth, leaving the TC and creating the three subsequent informal displacement sites – Abu Khadr, Zero and Riverside. On 25 July, there was an incident reported at the Joda border crossing after onward transportation was suddenly stopped from Joda to Renk, leading to displaced youth becoming frustrated and humanitarian staff and services having to withdraw from the site temporarily. Furthermore, at Abu Khadra informal displacement site, several incidents of harassment and physical violence have been reported during July and August between members from the displaced community members as well between the host community and humanitarian workers. These incidents demonstrate the level of tension already existing amongst communities affected by the Sudan displacement crisis. With multiple displacement sites and populations in Renk county, implementing a coordinated and conflict sensitive humanitarian response is even more challenging. Maintaining a balanced flow of onward movement is essential to preventing violent conflicts and avoiding further informal displacement sites emerging in Renk.

One challenge for onward movement already caused by the rainy season is modes of transportation. The road between Renk and Malakal is no longer accessible, making the quicker and less physically demanding journey of approximately 15 hours, unavailable for those with vulnerabilities or who can afford it. By boat, the standard journey takes two days although some have reported it lasting up to four days. During this time, between 300-500 people remain with their belongings on a boat without any soft or hard shelter cover from the rain or sun. Stops are made along the journey as there are no WASH services on the boat and there is no safe drinking water provided for the journey so travelers must rely on water from the River Nile for drinking. These conditions can aggravate pre-existing health conditions and expose people to develop other illnesses. Before boarding, according to one of the distributors, adults receive six portions of high-energy biscuits for the journey. For those travelling in households with children, particularly for child or single-headed households, this leaves them with an added strain as they must divide amongst themselves. At least one person has drowned along the way, as people make the journey without life jackets. There is no formal medical screening prior to boarding the boat and no medical support along the way, which can result in medical incidents, such as the case of one woman who gave birth on the boat. However, discussions and advocacy efforts amongst humanitarians and the government are ongoing for life jackets and having medical technicians on board. Women who are close to delivering are being advised to stay in Renk to deliver their baby before taking the boat journey to mitigate the possibility of further medical incidents along the journey. For emergency cases and the most vulnerable, flights are being provided as an alternative mode of transport, but this is a challenge due to the cost and limited number of seats available.

Another context dynamic that presents a challenge for onward movement is the context dynamics in transit destinations. Malakal is the main transit point for onward journeys but is a hotspot for intercommunal and armed group violence. Despite the Agwelek Forces agreeing to integrate forces into the national army, ethnic tensions in the area are likely to remain high with [potential for smaller disputes to escalate quickly](#). On 8 June, previous violent incidents and retaliatory attacks led to clashes in the UN Protection of Civilians site in Malakal, leading to at least 20 killed with more injured and approximately 6000 displaced to at least five informal sites [in Malakal town](#). Rumours and concerns over further mobilisations and attacks are likely to compound the anxiety, stress, and fears of those fleeing from conflict in Sudan. Similarly, for the Dinka Abyei staying in the informal displacement site in Abu Khadra, the challenge they face is that the onward transportation that has been proposed for them involves travelling by road from Warrap to Abyei. However, [intracommunal fighting between Dinka sub-clans in 2022 has left this community unwilling to take this route](#), for fear of attacks along the way, despite expressing a wish to return to Abyei. Recognising this fear amongst the community, partners in Renk are actively exploring alternative transport options that can address these security concerns.



Intercommunal tensions and violence

Since the most recent conflict in Sudan broke out, the host community of Renk has been affected by an exponential increase in economic prices due to a combination of disrupted supply chains caused by the war in Sudan, the rising SSP inflation rate as well as the displacement from Sudan. Prices have risen drastically with the average price of a meal rising from 1500SSP to 2500SSP and one 500ml bottle of drinking water costing 1000SSP. The [minimum expenditure basket \(MEB\) amount needed per household](#) for a month in Renk is 133,261SSP as of the first week of July, which is a 46% increase prior to the onset of the recent crisis. This increase has reduced compared to June when the MEB reached a peak of 145,466SSP and constituted a 59% increase since April. This suggests that the economic situation in Renk may be beginning to stabilise. Nonetheless, this economic situation is adding strain to a community that has been hosting a displaced population for four months now and receiving limited support for this. Additionally, some of the displaced have been cutting firewood which increases competition in the firewood selling market and creates tensions as gum arabic trees are being cut down, which are a valuable export product for the host community that is lost once the tree is cut down. Without dedicated attention and resources being shared with the host community, tensions between the host community and the displaced populations receiving services, or the host community and the humanitarian actors delivering services, could put all at risk of violence.

The host community has been employing coping strategies to access services and support including crossing over the border and returning into South Sudan in order to register and gain access to cash distribution services. There are also a high number of children presenting themselves at the TC as unaccompanied or separated children, who admit during the verification process that they have been sent by their parents from the host community to see what services are being offered for children. Even more concerning are reports of displaced populations being threatened by the host community before, during and after distributions, and incidents of harassment and physical assault towards humanitarian partners. These tensions appear to be increasing particularly around the informal displacement sites, where the displaced are already receiving less humanitarian attention and support than at the TC. Limited consultation with the host community in localised areas where humanitarian activities and services are being planned or implemented is exacerbating this. Examples include distributions being paused or cancelled due to host community interruptions as well as the construction of a SWAT site being delayed because consultation and approval from the government authorities had been completed but local community leaders had not been included prior to construction beginning.

To encourage conflict sensitivity and prevent tensions from growing, consultations with host communities should be more widely utilized, so that these communities can have input and are aware of what will be taking place in their surroundings. These consultations should also be met with a willingness from humanitarian partners to find ways the host community can also benefit from services and/or the increased economic opportunities presented by the large presence of humanitarian actors in the area. This would help to strengthen relationships between humanitarians and host communities and prevent tensions from escalating.

Unskilled jobs in the TC, such as crowd control, are being rotated on a weekly basis and are providing critical income support to those who are staying in the TC for longer than anticipated periods. However, there are complaints being raised by the host community that they are being excluded from jobs opportunities. Given that one partner was forced to withdraw in 2020 due to their compound being stormed over a dispute over the lack of employment of people from Renk, it should be noted that the matter is particularly sensitive in this location. Partners have coordinated and escalated the matter to the Ministry of Labour and keeping this united humanitarian response and working within the INGO forum guidelines going forward can help mitigate the risk of this becoming an operational hazard for humanitarian agencies. Another measure to consider could be to have unskilled positions evenly employ members of the displaced and host communities. With targeted attention, this could provide an opportunity for building relationships, enhancing understanding of challenges faced, and encouraging the host community to have greater ownership of the humanitarian response. Implementing joint social cohesion activities with the host and displaced populations, including capacity enhancement activities, is another important step that would enable members from both communities to implement or lead their own initiatives for social cohesion, advocate directly with each other about their challenges, and help minimise dependency issues in the long run.



Community protection meetings at Abu Khadra informal displacement site, South Sudan, 2023 © NP

Protection and SGBV

[A concerning number of people arriving in Renk have been traumatised by physical and sexual violence on their journey from Sudan.](#) This is likely to have long-lasting impacts on survivors and their families. Even prior to the escalation of conflict in Sudan, levels of services were not enough to meet the needs of the existing population. At the TC there are several providers and services for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) including fixed desks which facilitate referral pathways, but in the informal displacement sites the support for SGBV is limited. Having been violated by strangers along their journey to South Sudan and needing greater distance from others to feel secure during their period of transit means that there are many SGBV survivors staying in these informal displacement sites. There is limited proper shelter, particularly in Zero, where many have built wooden frames and used their own clothes or other materials to try to create some privacy for their household. This lack of shelter also increases the risk of SGBV, physical violence, and looting within the camps, particularly in the evening. Women are traditionally the ones collecting firewood and some report feeling exposed and insecure whilst travelling thirty minutes to one hour to collect firewood. Women have reported that once it is dark, they do not feel safe to move around to use the latrines or go to the water points (which they have identified as hotspot areas for violence), even within the TC or informal displacement sites without a source of light.

Domestic violence due to alcohol abuse and disputes over finances, including the main cash distribution for new arrivals to Renk, is also prevalent but not being formally reported according to discussions with those displaced. During a patrol, the team intervened as a child was beaten as a form of discipline to prevent the child moving in congested areas around the TC and risking exposure to illness and other harms. A recent study found that some girls “are brought to Renk town where they sleep in lodges with men in exchange for money, phones, or other gifts.”² This suggests that the trauma, stress and challenges of remaining in transit in Renk is leading to violence as a negative coping strategy. There is also higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) occurring compared to other sites because of the large and transient nature of the population in Renk as well as the high rotation in humanitarian workers.

To address the potential risk of SEA, a rapid assessment has been completed and a process for setting up a community-based complaints mechanism for preventing SEA has begun. Expanding protection services with regularly scheduled presence and activities in the informal displacement sites could help balance the need to provide essential support and assistance without fixing people in locations where they do not wish to remain. Distributing more dignity kits, torches and ensuring that each household has plastic sheeting for shelter would also help improve the dignity and safety of those displaced, especially those staying in the informal displacement sites or in the areas outside the TC, where there is not the same level of security and infrastructure protecting the site.

There are also reports of some security actors behaving inappropriately around the TC whilst implementing their duties. For example, whilst queuing to receive their cash distribution, some people have reported being beaten by those implementing crowd control. Others have reported that women have been threatened, promised gifts and encouraged to meet up in Renk town by police guarding the gate of the TC. Working with authorities to support capacity enhancement on codes of conduct and nonviolent methods of conflict mitigation and management could help address this.

Access to essential goods and services

Many people have chosen to remain outside the TC, either in informal displacement sites or in the empty land, due to concerns for their security or health as these people consider the 115m x 200m space in the TC too small and the rains have resulted in pools of stagnant water that partners are having to regularly disinfect and drain. The [risk of a measles outbreak is a serious concern](#) and vaccinations are ongoing at the Joda-Wunthow border. Humanitarian services are responding with a mobile unit roving around town looking for measles cases and an isolation unit set up in Renk hospital. However, overcrowding in displacement sites and the overwhelming demand for medical care means that there is still potential for measles as well as other illnesses spreading in Renk. Establishing the TC extension and continuing a balanced inflow-outflow rate of onward movement to reduce congestion and help cope with the expected increase in people arriving during rainy season is critical for mitigating an outbreak in Renk.

For those staying outside of the TC and not accommodated by the host community, limited shelter continues to pose health risks, especially for those arriving sick or with pre-existing health conditions, as the rainy season has started in Renk. Open defecation around the perimeter of the TC, particularly where people have set up makeshift shelters also increases the risk of water-borne diseases breaking out. There are fears of attacks from snakes and other animals for those staying in bushy areas such as at Abu Khadra informal displacement site and outside the TC where there is no fencing for security. Plans are underway to extend the TC to alleviate the congestion and improve the transit conditions once established. In the meantime, recognising the priorities of those staying outside of the TC and making services similarly available to them as much as possible, such as with mobile teams moving across the areas outside the TC and in the informal displacement sites, would help mitigate the severity of suffering.

In addition to the problem of crowd control highlighted in the previous section, verifying new arrivals from Sudan is proving difficult for the distribution of cash. There were reports that some young children from households were not being included when registration for the main cash distribution is being done, though these could not be verified by the team. Currently, 12,600 SSP is distributed per person for every individual newly displaced from Sudan. The amount is intended as a one-time distribution to last a week but some are having to wait in Renk three weeks for the next onward transportation to their intended destination, which is a further challenge given rising costs in the area. There are also long queues to receive the cash being distributed. People are queuing from the early hours in the morning and waiting through the

day despite there being no shelter set up for those queuing, which can lead to protection issues, especially for vulnerable people such as the elderly, pregnant women, and lactating mothers. Providing shelter cover for the queueing area and increasing the number of people staffing the cash distribution desk would help increase safety and dignity for those accessing the cash distribution service. Implementing a biometric system would help address challenges with verification.

There is a need for more WASH assistance in several locations across Renk. At the riverside boat departure location there is a complete absence of WASH services. This poses a concern as this is not only preventing people, especially menstruating women and girls, from accessing private latrines prior to the boat journey to Malakal but it leads to open defecation being the only option at locations close to the main water source for several host communities. At the Joda-Wunthow reception centre all the latrines are located opposite to the Joda reception centre on the other side of the main road. As this road is built on a raised mound, the sloping ground on either side of it means that it becomes muddy and pooled with water when raining. This is a concern, particularly for people with special needs and children, to have to cross this muddy ground and a main road to reach sanitary facilities. The danger is increased at night as there are no lights at the reception centre. Within the TC, some men are bathing in open areas because they consider the shower and latrine facilities in an unacceptable state. This is making women and children feel embarrassed and uncomfortable in the TC, and some experience this as harassment.

Documentation poses a challenge for those who have fled from Sudan without valid paperwork and for those who crossed during the early weeks of the Sudan conflict. Some people have reported arriving in April, when reception and verification processes were not yet systematically established. Since then they have tried to access services but have been told to go back to Joda for registration. Without proper registration, they have limited access to humanitarian distributions and services for those displaced from Sudan. [For returnees, partners have been able to set up an agreement with the government to facilitate access to national certificates and for pre-existing refugees, the government has given prima facie status for cases to be completed in South Sudan.](#) However, for refugees who have fled Sudan without valid documentation and left their home countries for sensitive reasons, there are great challenges. Replacing legal documentation generally takes three months for both returnees and refugees, which poses another challenge as the humanitarian support in Renk is designed for a shorter transit stay.



Community protection meetings at Abu Khadra informal displacement site, South Sudan, 2023 © NP

Recommendations

The needs and challenges being faced in Renk are immense and priorities have to be made. Implementing a wider conflict-sensitive response requires more shared knowledge and understanding of the conditions faced by returnees and refugees during onward movement and at other points of transit and final destinations. Within Renk, the following recommendations are key to the humanitarian response:

1

**Continuing and
Enhancing Onward
Movement**

2

**Fostering
Harmony through
Host Community
Engagement**

3

**Supporting
Intercommunal
Relations for Social
Cohesion**

1 Continuing and Enhancing Onward Movement

Onward movement is critical to managing tensions and reducing violence in Renk but as of 2nd September, humanitarian-assisted onward movement is being stopped due to a budget deficit. Further funding for this vital form of assistance is essential for the humanitarian response in Renk. Just a one-week stop in onward movement alone is expected to lead to an increase in almost 7000 people, close to the population already being housed at the overcrowded TC. The risk of more informal displacement sites emerging is high including at the Joda-Wunthow border. Given the limited capacity of the Joda reception centre and TC, this is likely to lead to a breakdown in services and the possibility of disease outbreaks and tensions erupting. As the emergency phase transitions out, onward movement needs to not only be maintained but emphasis on the integration of transport methods and routes that purposefully accommodate protection needs and consider the implications of context dynamics of other locations for those travelling is also needed. This should consider providing accompaniment during movements by actors for provision of specialised services including protection and medical care, as well as specialised transport options and routes for those with special needs from Renk to their final destination. If funding cannot be secured for onward movement, a surge in resources for humanitarian service delivery across all sectors in Renk is urgently needed to cope with the expected daily population increases and subsequent effects for both displaced populations and the host community.

2 Fostering Harmony through Host Community Engagement

The host community will be the only constant as those who are displaced transit through to their final destinations or find areas to settle. Therefore, meaningful engagement with the host community is essential to ensure that Renk remains a safe and secure place. This includes consulting with host communities at local levels and looking for opportunities for benefits and services to support both displaced and host communities. It also includes tracking and analysing tensions, incidents, and the interaction with interventions to adjust these accordingly and mitigate conflicts. At a higher level, it requires donors recognising the importance of including host communities as service users in interventions.

3 Supporting Intercommunal Relations for Social Cohesion

With no end in sight for the conflict in Sudan, social cohesion needs to be a greater priority. Initiatives such as intercommunal dialogues and other activities involving host community, displaced returnee and displaced refugee populations are encouraged. This would help improve intercommunal relations even as people continue transiting through Renk. These activities should also include other at-risk or marginalised groups such as youth and PSN. Community-based structures need support and capacity enhancement to improve their linkage with local authorities, strengthen their ability to advocate for their own needs, and broaden their representation to better advocate for minorities and marginalised groups such as refugees. Working with these structures through regular engagement to co-identify hotspot issues and areas, and co-develop risk mitigation strategies also increases accountability to affected populations and sustainability.



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