



Nonviolent Peaceforce

November 2023

Returnee truck supplies 28 Oct 2023 @NP

# **CRISIS UPON CRISIS: Conflict & Climate Induced Challenges in Rotriak, South Sudan**



## Executive Summary

In Rotriak, South Sudan, the extreme consequences of the global climate crisis and Sudan conflict are coalescing for all to see. The displacement crisis from Sudan is just one of many challenges afflicting the area and for the communities inhabiting Rotriak, life is a daily struggle to survive. This report identifies four critical dynamics in Rotriak: its sensitive location, insecurity, key protection concerns and community relationships. Based on these dynamics, three recommendations are encouraged to enhance conflict sensitivity in the humanitarian response: confront location challenges with transparent impartiality, support community-led responses to protection needs and target engagement with youth.

## Objectives

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), in partnership with Solidarités International (SI), deployed a mobile emergency response team to Rubkona county between 20 October and 6 November to build on initial assessments ([NP June 2023](#), [IRNA May 2023](#)) of the impact of the Sudan crisis on conditions in Rotriak and conduct an assessment focusing on conflict sensitivity and the challenges faced by communities affected by the Sudan crisis in Rotriak. The mission objective entailed identifying ways to mitigate negative and maximise positive impacts of interventions for affected populations by understanding the context in the wake of the influx of the displacement from Sudan to identify needs, risks and opportunities arising from the interaction between humanitarian interventions and the context.

## Methodology

Primary data has been gathered by engaging with 124 people through eight focus group discussions with affected host community and returnee populations and nine key informant interviews with humanitarian actors and government authorities. This is supported by direct observations and informal discussions during patrols as well as secondary sources.

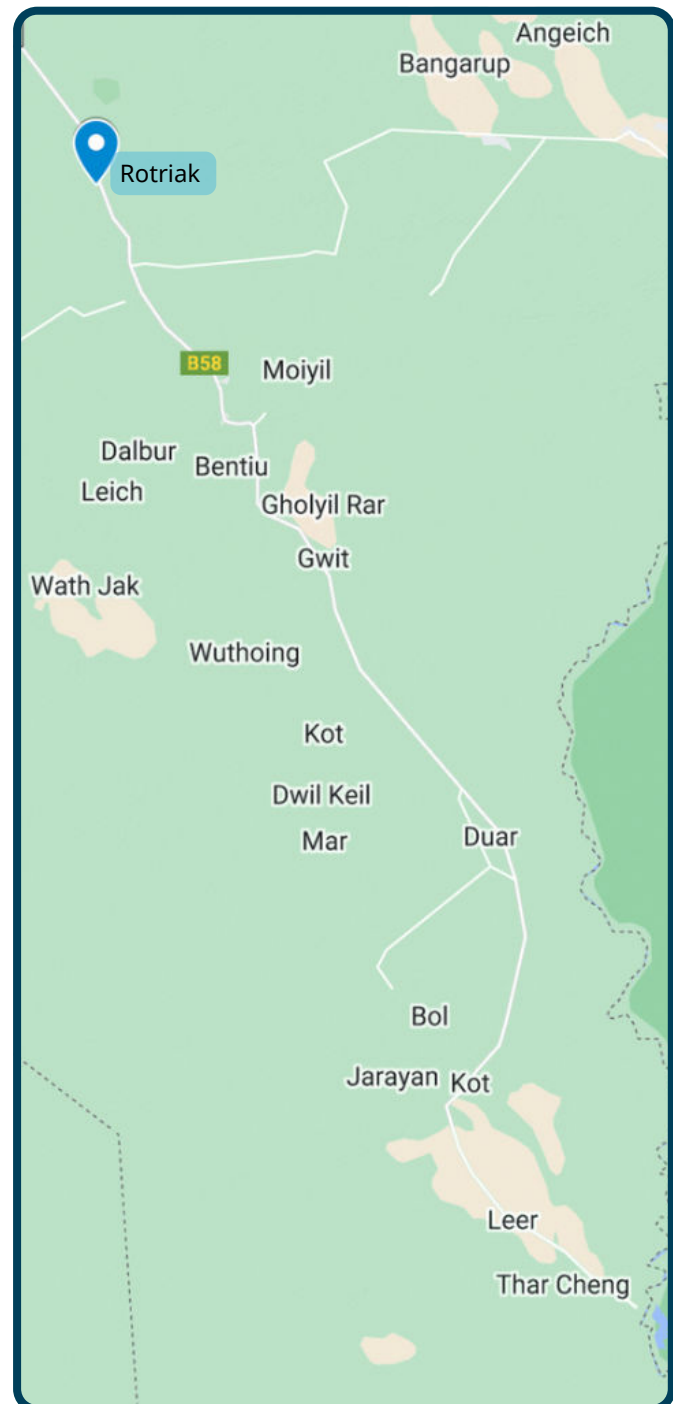


## Context

Rotriak is located in the northern part of Rubkona county, Unity state, which is the only monoethnic Nuer state in South Sudan, following the separation of the Dinka-dominated Ruweng Administrative Area in 2020. Since 2021, Unity state has been affected by massive, unrelenting floods and as a result, people have lost their homes, lost their livelihoods and spent years internally displaced to areas of higher ground. Rotriak has become a key settlement site, particularly for returnees travelling through [Panakuach – the second main entry point into South Sudan from Sudan](#).

However, the location of “old” Rotriak was itself affected by oil spills in 2021 and 2022 also. After the government and oil companies surveyed and approved the safety of an alternative site adjacent, people relocated from there to today’s “new” Rotriak site. Consequently, returnees from Sudan arrive to find a diverse mixture amongst the host community: there are the few who originally lived in the “new” Rotriak site, those who relocated from “old” Rotriak due to oil spills, internally displaced persons (IDPs) displaced by flooding in Rubkona and IDPs from Mayom, who fled due to insecurity in 2022 that resulted in the killing of the Mayom County Commissioner and the subsequent execution of the perpetrators. In addition, there are cattle camps nearby and there have been some incidents of cattle rustling.

[In May 2023, the estimated population of Rotriak was 60,000 individuals](#) and since then the population is considered to have grown considerably. Amongst those fleeing into Unity state, an estimated 80%-90% are women and children as conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are key drivers for fleeing and more men remain behind to protect property.



## Location Sensitivity

According to movement trends, many people are arriving in Rubkona county after having travelled via other locations in South Sudan like Renk and Juba, in search of conditions that can allow them to set up their lives again. Yet, climate change has had a direct impact on the [critical Sudd wetland](#) that expands across central South Sudan and [floods have now submerged five out of eight payams in Rubkona county](#) continuously since 2021. Rotriak is one of the few areas of higher ground not engulfed by flooding but this means new arrivals are finding a location already facing severe strain on its resources with so many populations fleeing here due to flooding, insecurity and conflict. [Since earlier assessments](#), new waterpoints have been added and existing ones have been improved to better accommodate the increased population in Rotriak. This has stopped the intense [conflicts over water between returnee and host communities previously occurring](#). However, many still rely on flood or surface water for their primary drinking source, whilst shelter, protection and health services are insufficient to meet the overwhelming need. Communities are [relying on water lilies for sustenance](#) and despite Rubkona county experiencing [IPC 4 \(emergency\) food insecurity with over 15,000 people already experiencing famine-like IPC 5 conditions](#), funding shortages have meant that [food distribution had to be stopped](#) from August 2023. In the words of one returnee, “We fled the conflict and found the land here flooded. Are we cursed?”. To prevent the situation deteriorating further [food distribution is planned to restart in November 2023](#). Clearly communicating criteria for distribution before registration, ensuring that communities are involved and there is an accepted balance between host and returnee communities to mitigate perceptions of preferential treatment could enable distributions to alleviate rather than [exacerbate existing tensions](#).

However, balancing a life-saving support without encouraging movement to Rotriak that could increase vulnerability is a challenge. The “new” Rotriak site remains close to Unity oil field, where [multiple oil spills](#) have contaminated the water and areas around it. Host and returnee community members have reported unusually high miscarriage rates, babies being born with deformities, and even girls are complaining of unusual menstrual pain which they themselves attribute to contaminated flood water that they drink whilst searching for firewood and water lilies. This raises concern for the humanitarian response in Rotriak, [particularly due to pre-existing allegations on the issue](#). Testing water samples from different locations in and surrounding Rotriak with the support of WASH and health partners, could help identify if there are any areas suffering from dangerous levels of contamination that need treatment and demarcation to protect communities from further exposure.

Searching for alternative locations for a key humanitarian response in Unity could also be an option but needs to be done with extreme caution, not just because of the limited areas empty and unaffected by flooding, but also [due to political and ethnic dynamics](#). The northern part of Rubkona county, where Rotriak and the Panakuach entry point lie, are located in an ambiguous area that has been [contested between the Dinka-dominated Ruweng Administrative Area and monoethnic Nuer Unity state since administrative boundaries in South Sudan were revised in 2015, 2018 and 2020](#).





Although the current political climate does not create expectation of imminent violence between the two areas, monitoring these dynamics and [general population movements](#) is critical as resulting tensions can affect or be affected by humanitarian interventions. Well-intentioned humanitarian responses still have the potential to be utilised by others to seek their own interests, especially in the run up to a 2024 election so being clear with where, what and why responses are being implemented in locations is critical for maintaining impartiality.

Some people are already relocating independently to Ngol, a riverside area three hours walk away from Rotriak, where fish can be found. However, others are settling in Norkur – a less congested location 2.5km away from the Sudan border. The overwhelming needs can motivate fast-moving humanitarian response but with the conflict in Sudan moving southwards, there is a risk of conflict spillover that needs close monitoring. Helping communities in this area establish early warning mechanisms and responses such as community-based early warning and early response (EWER) committees, designated evacuation locations and procedures could help communities implement their own self-protection.

Furthermore, there is a [history of tensions and clashes with Misseriya communities](#) in these border areas when the Misseriya migrate in dry season in search of water and pasture for their cattle. To prevent intercommunal conflict, proactive activities such as dialogues that mutually agree a plan for peaceful coexistence, coupled with a sensitisation campaign and the strengthening or establishing of functioning dispute resolution mechanisms would help mitigate violence and ensure the safety and security of populations and any humanitarian response in this area.

## Insecurity

[As found elsewhere](#), theft and burglaries are a widespread problem in areas where returnees are located. For male host community and returnee members, this is a negative coping mechanism driven by a lack of resources that does not raise much concern as there is no intent to kill as in Sudan, “the criminality is a means for survival only”. However, for women and girls, burglaries are a major concern and they perceive themselves to be more targeted. Especially if staying in a female-only household, “if criminals know that it is only females in a shelter, they are not afraid to enter” and cases of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) including the gang rape of a woman who had recently given birth have occurred.

Organised gangs also routinely operate by moving from block to block engaging in criminal activity in Rotriak and though they existed prior to the Sudan conflict outbreak, the number and size of gangs have reportedly increased with some returnees incorporating into local gangs. For vulnerable youth lacking purpose and prospects for the future, joining a gang can provide them with a sense of belonging and an opportunity to advance themselves in a place where there are very few options. Gangs in Rotriak tend to emerge in the evening after having consumed alcohol and drugs. They sometimes fight amongst themselves or they frequently hang around waterpoints, making women and girls particularly unsafe when going to fetch water in the evening. Women and girls report being harassed, beaten or taken “by force” if they refuse to engage with gangs at the water point. To address this, implementing activities that would help youth at risk of gang recruitment to become positive role models and contributors to the community could help mitigate gang-related consequences on the community, especially for women and girls. This could include capacity enhancement so that youth can assist block leaders or be part of community-based protection mechanisms, assigning youth volunteer or lower level paid positions that give them an opportunity to develop their skills and careers as an alternative to crime, as well as awareness raising on how to become gender champions.

The government has responded to security issues with an increased deployment of Unified Forces, which has positively led to a reduction in incidents according to humanitarian partners and both male and female community members. Outside between Rotriak and Panakuach, there are also organised unknown armed groups from South Sudan operating and targeting commercial vehicles. The Unified Forces patrol this route but with the area being full of bushes and swamps, groups are able to hide whenever forces come. The area that the Unified Forces need to cover with their patrols is very large and they are not reaching all areas deep within the different blocks so the protection that they provide remains limited. Training and assigning youth to be a linkage between the community and the Unified Forces could help tackle the external security issue as well as the internal security issue by helping youth have purpose and value in their communities rather than gangs.

## Key Protection Concerns

Protection concerns remain profuse in Rotriak, in line with [an earlier assessment on the Sudan displacement on South Sudan](#). In particular, people are continuing to experience extensive abuses and violations whilst fleeing from Sudan to South Sudan. There are reports of CRSV and SGBV including women and boys being raped and in hotspots like Dalen and Luwait, vehicles are being detained with rampant abuses including beatings, rape, shootings and extortionate fees being demanded for release. Such experiences cause deep-seated and widespread trauma and there is a clear need for widespread mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) in addition to dedicated post-incident services, to reduce the long-term impact that this can have on both individuals and communities as a whole. This includes awareness raising to combat any stigma associated with such experiences and tailored services such as protective accompaniment to facilitate safe and discrete access to services for female and male survivors.

Once arriving in Rotriak, women and girls still regularly move far beyond populated areas to collect firewood and wild food in bushy areas where multiple occurrences of SGBV have been reported. To mitigate the likelihood of attacks, women and girls try to move in groups to deter attacks but this is not always possible due to competing burdens and responsibilities. When any incident occurs, they are reported to the local authorities but the growing population and area of coverage makes it more difficult to implement an effective response. Conducting protective patrols in hotspot areas such as waterpoints and where women are gathering firewood and water lilies can deter attackers by decreasing the likelihood of being able to attack without being identified and increase the risk of punishment.

## Community Relationships

Despite the breadth in lived experiences and motivating reasons for living in Rotriak, all the communities in Rotriak are Nuer and there is an overall understanding amongst the different populations for the trauma and suffering that their “South Sudanese brother and sisters” have endured to return from Sudan. Instead of being left to sleep under trees, returnees have been accommodated into almost every host community household due to a lack of alternatives and it is reported to be common for three to four households to be sharing one shelter. Within the mix of displaced populations in Rotriak, networks are being built across groups and survival strategies, such as where fish can be found, are being shared. Block leaders are also playing a key role as the first responder to any incidents and leading community-based solutions to issues such identifying persons with special needs (PSNs) in their blocks or arranging temporary care solutions with the community when separated and unaccompanied children are found. According to returnees, these relationships help them feel secure that there is no desire for intergroup fighting amongst those living in Rotriak, which “The deployment of security forces in Rotriak couldn’t give us”. This shows that there is strong capacity for civilian self-protection amongst the different communities living in Rotriak. Humanitarian actors can capitalise on this by working with communities to identify most vulnerable cases, priority issues and co-creating community-led solutions that encourage sustainable solutions and minimise longer-term dependency issues.



Rotriak, woman moving through flooding to reach health centre 28 Oct 2023 @ NP



Nonetheless, the situation is not without its challenges. As the host community described it, “We are sharing with them. They are suffering. We are suffering. All are suffering due to a lack of resources”. This raises concern for the longevity of peaceful coexistence in Rotriak as the Sudan conflict drags on and returnees become a more permanent feature of the population whilst overall humanitarian funding to South Sudan is expected to contract significantly in 2024. Already, there are some [tensions between host community and returnees](#) over who should be entitled and who is receiving distributions in reality as well as tensions between returnees who arrived in Rotriak earlier and those who arrived in later months, with accusations that later arrivals are benefiting more. This has led to at least one complaint being raised to authorities by host community members for returnees to leave. Consequently, returnees are largely staying silent and avoiding conflict by reaching out to family members in other locations for support rather than risk escalating tensions. Host community members seem unaware or unconcerned but this is not sustainable in the long run.

To help ease building tensions, sensitisation activities could help to spread awareness and clarity of selection criteria prior to registration and future distributions. Engaging block leaders more directly as they seem to be trusted by all groups, could also help to ensure fair allocation of resources and identify the most vulnerable cases in need of support within their blocks. Strengthening or developing community-based mechanisms that work with block leaders and include representation from different groups such as women, youth, returnees and host communities could also avoid overburdening block leaders or putting too much power in their hands and enable key issues to be identified and responded to early on.

## Recommendations

**1**

**Confront location  
challenges with  
impartiality**

**2**

**Support  
community-led  
responses to  
protection needs**

**3**

**Targeted  
engagement of  
youth**



## Confront location challenges with impartiality

Reports of birthing abnormalities are alarming and warrant immediate investigation and prompt measures to be taken as appropriate to improve safety for those inhabiting Rotriak and to avoid being complicit in encouraging greater exposure to any dangerous contamination found. If the area of “new” Rotriak itself is not deemed to be sufficiently safe for habitation, humanitarian actors must work transparently with authorities to ensure that any change to the location of response is seen and understood to be driven by impartiality, to mitigate allegations of political allegiances. Furthermore, proactive measures need to be taken to avoid new locations for humanitarian response catalysing intercommunal conflict such as peace dialogues with and between any affected populations.

## Support community-led responses to protection needs

Integrating the strength and skill that communities inhabiting Rotriak have cultivated to survive multiple shocks and challenges can not only boost the response to the Sudan displacement crisis in Rotriak, but also add greater resilience and sustainability into the response. Encouraging community-led responses by strengthening or developing community-based mechanisms for early warning and early response (EWER) and community self-protection can help mitigate the likelihood and potential consequences of SGBV, intergroup conflict and conflict spillover by proactively engaging to deter violence through presence, de-escalate tensions using nonviolent methods or move people out of harm's way.

## Targeted engagement of youth

Engaging youth at risk of recruitment with targeted activities linked to community needs such as establishing and mentoring youth protection teams can provide a healthy alternative to gangs and provide a positive role model for others. Roles that also give opportunities for building life skills and networks such as working as volunteers for humanitarian organisations, becoming youth representatives or liaisons with duty bearers can also help youth to be part of the problem-solving of issues including thefts, SGBV and food insecurity.



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