



Shelters at Zero informal displacement site, Dec 2023 @NP

SUSTAINING SUPPORT

Renk, South Sudan

January 2024

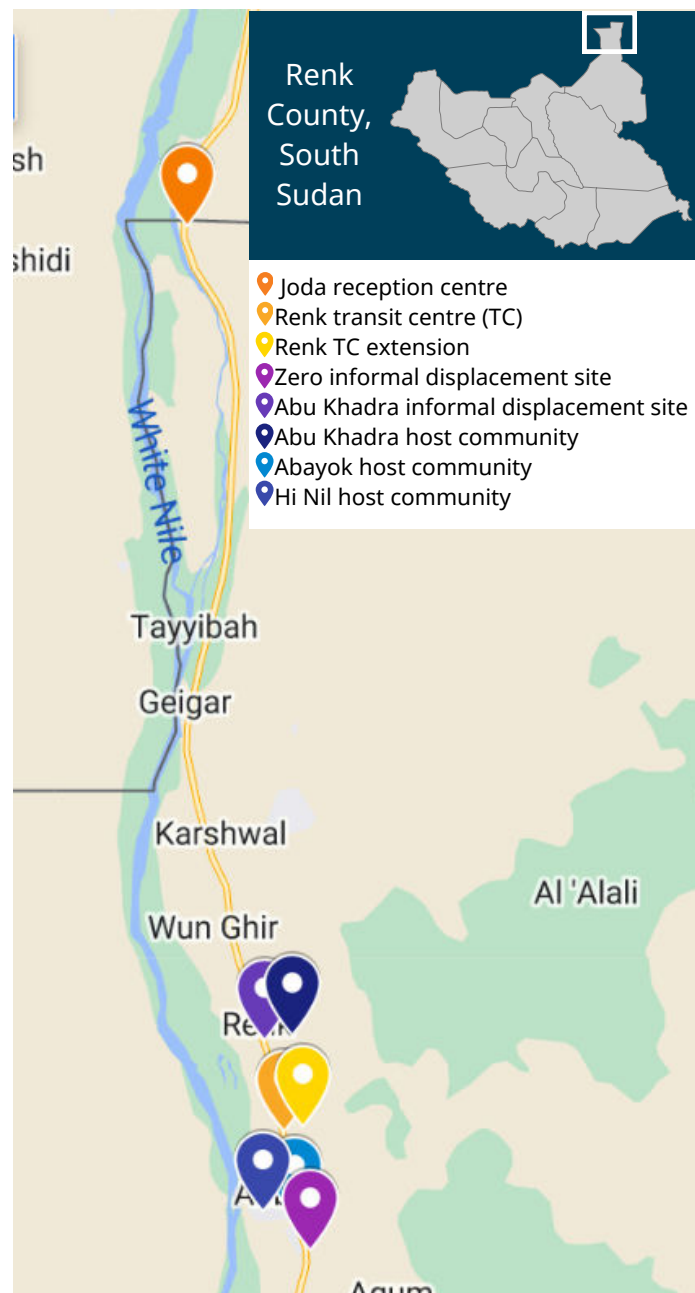
Executive Summary

As the conflict in Sudan spreads southwards, the devastating impact on civilians continues to escalate and force people to seek sanctuary in South Sudan. This is resulting in an immense strain on resources, especially in Renk county, which is the first point of arrival for the majority of those displaced. Without any political solution to the conflict in sight, decision makers need to identify and prioritise needs in order to continue supporting the hundreds of thousands of people desperately in need of basic services. In this difficult situation, we need to continue centring the protection needs of civilians by providing comprehensive support to affected populations from arrival to final destination, prioritising a proactive SGBV approach, advancing conflict sensitive programming and integrating a relational approach to humanitarian access.

Methodology

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), in partnership with Solidarités International (SI), deployed a mobile emergency response team to Renk County, Upper Nile state and gathered primary data between 24 November to 8 December, with a follow-up between 12 to 26 January. The objectives were: to understand the current context of Renk; 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.

During this period, NP engaged with over 500 people across host and displaced populations, government and humanitarian actors during 14 focus group discussions (FGDs), seven key informant interviews (KIIs), and six community protection meetings. This was supplemented with insights gathered from eight patrols and four community dialogues. The map indicates locations visited.



Background

[Over half a million people](#) have now fled into South Sudan since the conflict began in Sudan mid-April 2023. 85% have arrived via the Joda-Wunthow border entry point, located at South Sudan's northern-most county of Renk, [as of the end of January 2024](#). With conflict spreading southwards across Sudan, the number of people arriving in Renk county has been constant with a daily rate ranging [from 1000](#) to 3000 individuals per day and has been projected to increase to 3500 individuals per day by humanitarian agencies from December 2023 onwards. [An intention survey conducted in December](#) indicates that the majority of returnees arriving at this entry point intend to stay within Upper Nile state rather than move on to other countries or areas within South Sudan and a third want to remain at the TC at least for the short-term. Without any imminent political solution in sight, the humanitarian response has reached a critical point of transition in both its strategic direction and expected funding. This report highlights evolving needs and risks facing returnees, refugees and host communities in Renk in the wake of the Sudan crisis.

Discussions with displaced populations indicate that the main drivers for movement across the border into South Sudan are the active conflict and dire security situation within Sudan, along with overcrowding and limited capacity for service provision in Sudanese internal displacement sites. Therefore, fleeing to Renk and other locations in South Sudan is not a preference but one of few options remaining to civilians seeking to protect themselves and their families from ongoing, active violence in Darfur and beyond. Despite the recent opening of an extension to the transit centre (TC) site, conditions in Renk remain crowded. The TC and newly opened extension site is hosting a population of [approximately 20,000 people](#), despite being designed for far less and even went up to over 33,000 during December 2023. Makeshift shelters made of sticks covered with clothing and more robust informal grass tukuls line the area between the original TC and extension site. Unlike original expectations, [nearly 15% of returnees residing at the transit centre \(TC\) have stayed for four months or more](#), rather than the anticipated one to three-week period.



Identity Issues: Refugee or Returnee?

Amidst the tumultuous backdrop of conflict in Sudan, civilians arriving in South Sudan are grappling with separation, survival, and a search for long-term safety. The severity of the conflict and violence in Sudan means that many family groups separate or are separated on route to South Sudan, often with those most at risk or most able to make the journey reaching South Sudan first. They often then wait in Renk for their loved ones to arrive to South Sudan as they fear not being able to find each other again if they move onwards. Many returnees had previously moved with their families to Sudan for a better life and still cannot return to their areas of origin due to issues such as massive flooding in Unity state, continuing insecurity or a lack of livelihood options. One returnee, who intended to move on from Renk but not to her area of origin explained, “why should I take my children somewhere to be killed?”. For others, arriving in Renk is the first time they have been to South Sudan and they have no known connections in their areas of origin, “Now I am called a returnee but I have never lived here. I am a refugee really. How can I make a decision about where I want to go when I don’t know this place?”. Furthermore, identifying where to go next in South Sudan is difficult when it has [the highest out-of-school rates in the world](#) and [acute food insecurity affects the entire country](#). People alter their preferences as information on situations in other locations in South Sudan evolves and transport opportunities change. Some refugees and returnees even return to Renk because they do not find the health, education and livelihood opportunities needed to remain elsewhere in South Sudan. Returning to their lives in Sudan becomes then their primary choice and Renk becomes a place to stay near the border whilst waiting for the earliest opportunity to do so safely.

The complexity and centrality of identity needs to be considered in the humanitarian responses. The differentiation in support between refugees and returnees exacerbates the challenges that they face, especially when some returnees have never lived in South Sudan and identify more with Sudan. Refugees and returnees face varying levels of support and recognition, influenced by their identities and how they are perceived by both host and international communities. This can lead to tensions over the allocation of assistance, which affects the overall effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Responding to the multifaceted identities and dilemmas of returnees and refugees arriving from Sudan requires a multilocation response with comprehensive support packages and services delivered across areas of origin or alternative final destinations. This would help create realistic options outside of Renk, encourage onward movement and reduce overcrowding in transit and informal displacement locations too. Such action is essential when projections indicate that the number of displaced individuals staying in Renk due to the Sudan crisis could reach over 67,000 by the start of March.

Widespread Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

The overwhelming amount of violence and abuse being experienced and witnessed by those arriving from Sudan grows with continuing reports being received of violations occurring in homes or on route to South Sudan, [as documented elsewhere](#). The majority of reports of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) relate to women and girls. However, men and male youth also report being targeted for beatings and forced recruitment whenever crossing into different areas of control under the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) or the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The targeting is more extensive when they travel without their families as armed groups see them as opportunities to increase their forces or suspect them of spying for the other side. Several cases of rape directed at men and boys have also emerged and as with other forms of SGBV, this violation is likely to be much more prevalent than reports indicate.

Without sufficient space and support tailored to differing survivors and experiences, the more likely it is that people turn to negative coping strategies such as drug and alcohol abuse. This can negatively impact not only individuals but those around them, including through increased rates of family violence. Misuse of drugs and alcohol is already being reported as an issue amongst the youth in the TC, who report feeling trapped and purposeless whilst waiting to move elsewhere. In addition to providing tailored support to survivors, having trained roving protection teams build relationships with displaced populations as they move through different transit locations can help identify individuals in need. Such teams can provide protective accompaniment for safe, confidential and timely access to services and help strengthen referral pathways, especially between different transit locations such as the reception centre and TC, when survivors can often move suddenly and without notice.

Lighting is also critical in creating a safe and enabling environment for protection as well as health in transit locations. People still urinate in walkways and practice open defecation at night due to fears of using latrines and washrooms in the dark, especially at the TC. Not only is this a protection risk but it also exacerbates the risk of a cholera outbreak, which has been a major concern for the humanitarian response. Adding more solar lighting to illuminate strategic locations like walkways to and at bathrooms in transit locations is a one-off activity that benefits everyone for the duration of the displacement crisis. It can also relieve the pressure on front line health, WASH, protection and site management responders by mitigating the occurrence of SGBV and unsanitary hygiene practices, which allows these resources to be redirected to other critical measures.

“Whether I am a refugee or a returnee, I am a woman” and teams repeatedly heard across displacement sites of a desperate lack of sanitary items. Without these, women and girls are relying on dirty rags that raise risks of infections or are isolating themselves for days whilst they stay alone and unsheltered under trees until their menstruation is over. During one FGD, one woman even reported that a physical check had been required to prove ongoing menstruation and receive a sanitary pad. Though we were unable to verify this claim with additional evidence, this disturbing allegation testifies to the dire need to prioritise the safety and dignity of women and girls by ensuring adequate supplies of sanitary kits and their distribution in a respectful manner.



Community dialogue between refugees and returnees at Renk TC, Jan 2024 © NP

Social Cohesion

As a site with limited facilities designed to only briefly serve new arrivals, when conflict dynamics force many to flee at once such as in December 2023 - when over 16,000 people were stuck at Joda reception centre - overcrowding and service constraints can contribute to frustration. People arriving after arduous journeys expect to find services, support and a safe place to rest but are dismayed to find that their journeys must continue, especially if there are delays to this onward movement. This exacerbates the risk of potential conflict and violence at Joda reception centre, which is a threat to displaced populations and humanitarian workers. Having trained civilians present and patrolling around Joda reception centre would help enable early intervention and de-escalation of conflicts, identification and advocacy of critical issues as they arise and mitigate the need for sudden closures, as has happened previously.

At the TC, FGDs have revealed building resentment between refugees and returnees due to actual or perceived differences in service provision. In particular, cash distribution and the frequency of support being given to refugees in comparison to returnees was frequently raised as a point of contention, which suggests that any differences could lead to tensions between refugees and returnees in locations where they are staying together. Synchronising the amount & frequency of standard cash entitlements across both affected populations in close coordination with the Cash Working Group would help to avoid this.

Outstanding grievances from Sudan are also straining these relationships, with reports of discrimination and verbal abuse occurring between refugees and returnees. Unresolved, these exacerbate tensions when space and resources are limited in Renk and both groups are experiencing immense pressure to move onwards. Refugees report being told, "Why do you come here? This is not your home. Leave!", whilst returnees report hearing similarly, "This is your country. Why do you stay here? Leave!". Both groups are heavily relying on conflict avoidance to manage but with populations remaining for longer periods, this coping strategy may not be sufficient to prevent tensions escalating as [previously occurred in May 2023](#). Facilitating safe spaces, such as through intercommunal dialogues, for these groups to listen and express openly with each other their issues can help develop understanding of each others' needs and concerns. This can encourage empathy and build relationships across divisions to strengthen community-based mechanisms to prevent conflicts before they escalate into violence. As one participant highlighted, regardless of returnee or refugee status, "No one chooses to live here [in the TC]. No one wants to use their bedsheets as shade."

For the host communities in Renk, hosting or integrating a displaced population is not a novel situation and there is existing willingness and capacity to do so. Even amongst host communities though, there is a variety of identities; for example, the community at Abayok may be considered a host community for the current Sudan displacement response but many also came to Renk as voluntary returnees in 2011. This diversity means that different host populations may face different challenges when hosting or integrating new arrivals. As the conflict and displacement from Sudan continues, finding ways to support integration and ensure that different host communities do not feel marginalised in their own homes is critical for preventing resentment growing against those displaced and the humanitarian response. This can include providing some services according to vulnerability rather than status-based criteria, or making services available for all, such as through clean water. At Hi Nil, this has also helped the host community accommodate and maintain positive relationships with returnees now living integrated amongst them.

As at the TC, facilitating dialogues between host and displaced communities can help issues to be resolved without tensions arising. At Abu Khadra, such intervention has enabled both sides to understand each others' priorities such as food access and the school operating this year, what each community does or does not have control over and to identify a way forwards for continuing communication and problem-solving together. Humanitarian actors can support this further by checking in regularly with displaced and host community focal points to monitor the situation, intervene and adapt as appropriate to ensure that programming is conflict sensitive and not causing any unintended, adverse effects.

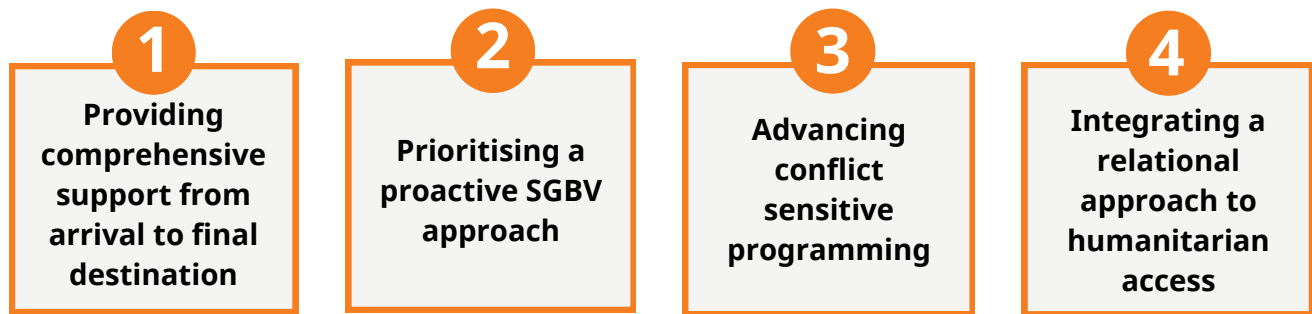
Humanitarian Space

Any potential shrinking in the space for humanitarian operations, such as interruptions in activities or constraints on recruitment, raises concerns because restrictions on humanitarians take time and energy away from dedicated service provision and can have an adverse impact on populations in need. Humanitarian actors must respect the context and authorities that they work with whilst ensuring that humanitarian principles always guide and underlie their actions. When processes are ambiguous or there is a concern that there may be conflicts of interests, communicating and coordinating with others to agree an acceptable way forwards for all can help minimise discrepancies and enable humanitarian activities to be delivered with sensitivity and maximum effectiveness for the benefit of affected populations.



Recommendations

Civilian needs remain extensive in the absence of a political solution to the conflict in Sudan. Addressing this remains critical. Responding to the needs of those in South Sudan affected by the crisis requires transitioning from an emergency response to a longer-term strategy. Despite increasingly limited resources, attention needs to remain on the following:



1) Providing comprehensive support from arrival to final destination

People are arriving to South Sudan having had their lives devastated by conflict and violence. Without services or support packages that can help new arrivals reclaim or re-establish their lives and identities at final destination locations, as well as points of arrival and transit, civilians will continue to suffer and struggle to become independent again. Providing comprehensive support packages, such as financial aid at final destinations, or considering more durable options like identifying safe and uncontested locations where setting up shelter, health, protection, water and education facilities can help people restart their lives, especially for those unable to return to their areas of origin. Strengthening cross-sector referral systems between arrival, transit and final destination locations would help to monitor and administer such support effectively. Uncertainty and gaps in funding streams have a considerable influence over the efficacy and conflict sensitivity of initiatives too. Making commitments early and following through with these can improve conflict-sensitive planning and implementation by avoiding raised expectations and creating tensions due to sudden changes in funding and activities.

2) Prioritising a proactive SGBV approach

Mitigating incidences and widespread consequences of SGBV requires a proactive approach to both prevention and response. To directly enhance the safety and dignity of populations at risk, resources need to be assigned to critical items such as strategic solar lighting and sanitary kits. Engaging with potential perpetrators through awareness raising and capacity enhancement on topics such as nonviolent communication and conflict resolution can strengthen prevention strategies, whilst responses to SGBV can be enriched by tailoring post-incident support to different survivor needs. Training community members as first responders and accompanying this with specialised protection teams moving between locations and providing protective accompaniment can help more survivors access the services they need.

3) Advancing conflict sensitive programming

Host communities need to be involved when planning, implementing and reviewing interventions to ensure that they take into consideration the different identities and challenges faced and do not undermine relationships at a local level. This needs to be accompanied by dedicated initiatives to promote integration and social cohesion between new arrivals and host communities, such as community dialogues, joint recreation activities and capacity enhancement on topics such as conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. These activities need to include a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that programming is being implemented sensitively and not marginalising any groups or causing any unintended, adverse effects that could put host or displaced communities at risk. Allocating resources to have dedicated and trained staff move between communities and locations, checking in regularly with focal points and duty bearers, facilitating linkages and enabled with the capacity to monitor, respond and advocate issues would help ensure that conflict sensitivity lies at the centre of the response.

4) Integrating a relational approach to humanitarian access

Those experiencing severe protection risks are often those with the least amount of access to life-saving support. Humanitarian actors can pave the way for improved access to services and increased safety and security by strengthening their relationships with all parties, from individual to institutional levels. Peer-exchanges can help bolster capacity and confidence to reach out, engage and negotiate with different actors. In doing so, humanitarians can become part of diverse and localised networks that cut across categories and enable collaborations to jointly prevent or overcome any impediments.



FGD at Hi Nil host community, Dec 2023 © NP

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