



© UNHCR/Reason Moses Runyanga. Conflicts between inter-communal and state armed actors in the three north-western states of South Sudan escalated, forcing thousands of families to seek safety. As they flee, women and children are particularly vulnerable to various protection risks, including family and child separations, gender-based violence, and obstacles in accessing assistance.

SOUTH SUDAN

Protection Analysis Update

A Protective Environment in Collapse: Multidimensional protection risks, conflict dynamics, and widespread displacement in Unity, Upper Nile and Jonglei states.

JUNE 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From January to June 2025, protection risks in South Sudan escalated amid renewed national conflict, particularly following the house arrest of First Vice-President Riek Machar. Intensified clashes between the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) and Sudan People's Liberation Movement-Army in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) have severely impacted civilians, especially in **Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei states**. Communities have reported a sharp increase in violence against civilians.

Two significant shocks exacerbate the rapid degradation of the protective environment: **Conflict dynamics and attacks on civilians**, which compound the most severe and prevalent protection risks domestically; and the conflict dynamics which have triggered **widespread displacement from Sudan to South Sudan**, straining limited resources and exacerbating risks for new arrivals and host community members alike. In the first half of 2025, displacement surged in South Sudan, with over 456,000 individuals newly uprooted.¹ Simultaneously, intercommunal violence, looting, and targeted destruction of homes and property have eroded safety and coping capacities.

Access to humanitarian assistance has deteriorated due to active conflict, insecurity, and attacks on aid workers and infrastructure. Medical facilities in rural areas have been damaged or destroyed, limiting access to life-saving services. Civilians in South Sudan, particularly in Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei – the states subject to the most prevalent and acute protection risk dynamics – are forced to make difficult choices between fleeing for safety or fulfilling basic needs such as livelihood generation or education in a broader context of inter-communal conflict, clashes between state and non-state-armed groups, dynamic flows of refugees and returnees from Sudan, and a general decline in the economy and governance; all of which are compounded by climate-related shocks.

Primary Protection Risks

Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei States, South Sudan

- Attacks on Civilians and Other Unlawful Killings, and Attacks on Civilian Objects
- Theft, Extortion, Forced Eviction, or Destruction of Personal Property
- Gender-Based Violence, including Child, Early or Forced Marriage
- Child and Forced Family Separation
- Unlawful Impediments or Restrictions to Freedom of Movement, Siege and Forced

The Sudan Crisis: Protection risks permeating borders.

From mid-April 2023 until the end of June 2025, 1.19 million people have fled to South Sudan from the Sudan Crisis. Of these, 190,000 sought safety in South Sudan in 2025 alone. The Sudan Crisis, now over two years old, has shaken South Sudan and negatively impacted protection risk impacts. Many new arrivals have experienced complex violations which, despite taking place in Sudan, necessitate targeted response in South Sudan. Analysis of risks related to the Sudan Crisis can be found in yellow boxes.

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- The Government of South Sudan, as the primary duty bearer, holds the primary responsibility for protecting all civilians within its territory or areas under its control—regardless of ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation—and must fulfil its protection obligations by strengthening national and local systems to prevent, mitigate, and respond to violence, and to end impunity.
- The government must ensure safe and unimpeded access of humanitarian actors to deliver services to communities affected by conflict and large-scale protection risks.
- Humanitarian actors should increase their support locally led protection systems, including investment and capacity development of communities to implement first-line protection responses such as community-led dialogue and dispute resolution platforms, demarcation of weapons-free zones, and climate- and conflict-related early warning systems.
- Integrated humanitarian assistance and development (re)integration support to returnees from Sudan and host communities must be bolstered, specifically focusing on local integration and peaceful co-existence, and ensuring continued support to refugees and internally displaced people.

UPDATE ON PROTECTION RISK SEVERITY ACROSS SOUTH SUDAN | MAR-JUNE 2025

MINIMAL	STRESS	SEVERE	EXTREME	CATASTROPHIC
Terekeka, Budi, Ikotos, Lafon, Magwi, Awerial, Cueibet, Rumbek East, Rumbek North, Wulu Yirol East, Yirol West, Abiemnhom, Guit, Rubkona, Malakal, Melut	Yei, Kapoeta East, Kapoeta North, Kapoeta South, Torit, Bor South, Nyirol, Pibor, Rumbek Centre, Aweil Centre, Aweil North, Aweil South, Aweil West, Koch, Leer, Mayendit, Mayom, Panyijiar, Pariang, Baliit, Fashoda, Maban, Maiwut, Manyo, Gogrial East, Jur River, Raja, Ezo Ibba, Maridi, Mundri East, Mundri West Mvolo, Nzara	Kajo-keji, Akobo, Canal/Pigi, Duk, Pochalla, Twic East, Uror, Aweil East, Renk, Gogrial West, Tonj North, Wau, Yambio	Abyei Region, Ayod, Panyikang, Ulang, Tonj East, Tonj South, Twic, Nagero, Tambura	Fangak, Longochuk, Luakpiny/Nasir

CONTEXT

FATALITIES IN 2025	COUNTIES FEATURING VERY HIGH LEVELS OF TOP RISKS EXPOSURE	PEOPLE EXPOSED TO AT LEAST ONE OF THE TOP FIVE PROTECTION RISKS	HNRP REQUIREMENTS	CONTRIBUTIONS
467	70%	9.18M	\$81M	19.8%

Against the backdrop of a fraught protracted crisis, characterised by intersecting and complex protection risks that affect the population of South Sudan at scale, political turbulence following the house arrest of First Vice-President Riek Machar led to an intensification of conflict dynamics between the governing South Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the SPLM/A-IO from March 2025. Political contestation and intensified military operations have particularly impacted the Greater Upper Nile and parts of the Western and Eastern Equatoria states. Civilians caught in the crossfire have been subject to indiscriminate attacks resulting in mass casualties, displacement, and forced family separation; half of the displaced population recorded fleeing from Upper Nile to Ethiopia are children.ⁱⁱ In addition to exacerbating significant pre-existing trends of gender-based violence, the recruitment and association of children with armed groups, and widespread criminality, these hostilities have brought South Sudan precariously close to a renewed civil war.ⁱⁱⁱ These conflict dynamics and the widespread displacement of new arrivals from Sudan have compounded pre-existing vulnerabilities for the people of South Sudan, particularly in Upper Nile, Unity and Jonglei states.

TARGETED ATTACKS, NATIONAL CONFLICT, AND INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE

The protective environment has eroded. Access constraints have worsened, humanitarian actors have been subject to targeted attacks, and medical facilities in rural areas have been damaged and destroyed.^{iv} As of mid-2025, conflict dynamics between SSPDF and armed groups in Upper Nile have triggered widespread displacement in Ulang, Longochuk, and Nasir counties. The temporary closure of border between South Sudan and Ethiopia further inhibited people forced to flee from seeking safety.

Between January and the end of June 2025, a total of 283,522 people were newly displaced in South Sudan, with 194,291 (68.5%) driven by national conflict and 89,231 (31.5%) by inter-communal violence.^v The displacements have also prompted around 103,00 individuals into neighbouring Ethiopia, Uganda and Democratic Republic of Congo as of early June 2025.^{vi}

“When the bombs fell, we all ran. We thought the children were behind us, but when we stopped, they were gone.”

– Father, Panyikang Country, Upper Nile (2025)

FORCED DISPLACEMENT, RETURN, AND PEOPLE FLEEING FROM SUDAN

South Sudan has experienced a significant influx of individuals arriving across borders, driven primarily by the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in Sudan. More than 116,000 individuals entered South Sudan during the reporting period, with South Sudanese nationals accounting for 52% of arrivals.^{vii} At the same time, over 109,000 individuals exited the country, 50.3% of whom were also South Sudanese.^{viii} This bidirectional movement reflects a complex pattern of forced displacement, returns, and flight from conflict-affected areas. The Wunthou/Joda border point remained the principal transit corridor, accounting for approximately 57% of total entries.^{ix} However, a substantial 43% of movements occurred through unofficial crossing points such as Emitidad, Atam, Babnis, Jerbana, and Omdulus.^x This reliance on informal crossings demonstrates the need for expanded humanitarian presence.

COMPLEX NEEDS AND HARM COMPOUNDED BY SHOCKS

As of mid-2025, South Sudan's economy remains precarious. The country faces a critical shortage of employment opportunities and access to investment capital. The economy is highly dependent on oil exports, which generate over 90% of government revenue, but the conflict in Sudan has disrupted supply chains, making oil revenues highly volatile and driving hyperinflation.^{xi}

Humanitarian assessments in areas accessible to displaced populations underscore the urgent need for protection support for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and local host communities across counties in Upper Nile (including Malakal, Nasir, Ulang, Longochuk, and Baliet) and Jonglei (Akobo, Fangak, Nyrol, Pigi/Canal, and Ayod).^{xii} These assessments found that protection risks such as sexual violence against women and girls were exacerbated by critical shortages of healthcare, shelter, and food; all risks that are particularly acute in Nasir and Ulang, where famine warnings stem from disrupted supply chains and eroded market functionality due to escalated conflict.^{xiii} Vulnerable people, including the elderly and people with disabilities, face risks due to limited mobility and reliance upon caretakers. In addition, aerial attacks by government forces in Fangak, Jonglei, have prompted large-scale civilian displacement that is expected to persist for the foreseeable future.^{xiv}

For IDPs, refugees, returnees, displacement-affected third country nationals (TCNs), and host communities affected by conflict dynamics, psychological and emotional trauma is widespread and indiscriminate. Focus group discussions and protection monitoring reveal high levels of distress linked to the violence, the loss of family members, and the ongoing uncertainty about their future. Many people report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. Despite these evident needs, psychosocial support services are limited in scope and coverage, leaving many without the care necessary to begin recovery.

Although conflict has arisen in various regions of the country, this Protection Analysis Update:

(a) Specifically relies on direct community engagement (Focus Group Discussions) within the three priority states, focusing on the six main protection risks identified by the South Sudan Protection Cluster Protection Risk Monitoring System (PRMS). It offers valuable insights into community-level perceptions, coping capacities, and needs to guide urgent, coordinated prevention, mitigation, and response measures. Simultaneously, due to geographical and operational interconnections

(b) Incorporates a series of profiling exercises conducted with individuals fleeing Sudan, along with a Protection Analytical Framework (PAF) driven desk review analysis carried out by the UNHCR-IOM inter-agency response mechanism in Renk, Upper Nile.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1

Attacks on Civilians and Other Unlawful Killings, and Attacks on Civilian Objects

Between February and May 2025, civilians in the focus areas endured intensifying violence, including direct attacks, aerial bombardments, unlawful killings, and assaults on protected civilian infrastructure. These incidents perpetrated by both state and non-state armed actors represent grave violations of international humanitarian law and contribute to the continuing degradation of the protection crisis. Explosive ordnance contamination creates an enduring hazard that remains as deadly after decades as on the first day. Migrant, displaced, and returning populations face risks due to their lack of familiarity with local terrain, settlement or traversal of previously un-used or marginalised lands, and their engagement in construction-related activities. However, children face the most disproportionate risk of death or serious injury because of explosive ordnance; 2025 incident data reported that 84% of victims in South Sudan were children.^{xv}

In 2025, civilians across Upper Nile, mainly in Nasir, Ulang, Longechuk, Fashoda, Panyikang, and Makal have faced escalating violence marked by deadly airstrikes, ground clashes, and mass displacement. Beginning in mid-March, government forces carried out aerial attacks in Nasir, Ulang, and Longechuk, killing over 58 people, injuring many more, and burning homes and civilian infrastructure.^{xvi} These attacks often targeted areas with no clear military presence. Simultaneously, intense fighting between the SSPDF and armed militias in Nasir displaced over 50,000 people, with shelling impacting both combatants and civilians.^{xvii} Meanwhile, violence and fear of further attacks forced thousands from villages in Makal, Panyikang, and Fashoda to flee toward urban centres like Malakal. As a result, Upper Nile now faces one of the worst humanitarian crises in South Sudan, with 11 of 13 counties at emergency hunger levels and famine looming in conflict zones like Nasir and Ulang.^{xviii}

In Jonglei, the combined effect of airstrikes, ground assaults, ethnic raids, and looting has plunged communities in Fangak, Ulang, Canal/Pigi, Ayod, Bor, and Akobo into crisis, with thousands displaced, healthcare systems shattered, and food insecurity rampant. In May, government forces launched devastating aerial strikes on Old Fangak, bombing an MSF hospital, pharmacy, markets, and civilian areas, killing at least seven people (including a 9-month-old), wounding over 27, and displacing more than 30,000 people.^{xix} In Ulang, armed looting of a medical facility in April further cut off critical healthcare.^{xx} Canal/Pigi experienced an SPLA/IO assault in April that killed civilians and drove over 40,000 people to flee toward Upper Nile.^{xxi} In Akobo, multiple helicopter gunship strikes targeted civilian vehicles traveling between Walgak and Akobo East in mid-March, injuring up to 15 people (women and children included), and prompting widespread panic, though no deaths were officially reported.^{xxii} Additionally, communal violence, including cattle-raids motivated by economic interests and ethnic alliances, have claimed lives and resulted in abductions of civilians in the Akobo area. Longstanding intercommunal conflicts in counties like Ayod and Bor have further exacerbated displacement.

Unity was drawn deeper into the conflict following March air raids targeting SPLM-IO positions near the Wun Aliet airstrip, with spillover effects leading to civilian deaths across multiple counties.^{xxiii} In Mayom, a series of deadly airstrikes were conducted, including a bombing near Kueryick village and grazing areas that killed at least six civilians and injured twelve more, despite survivors reporting that there was no military presence in the targeted zones.^{xxiv} Additionally, areas around Pariang and Mayom have faced intercommunal violence and cross-border cattle raids, further undermining security and food systems. The resulting displacement has devastated livelihoods, especially among pastoralist communities, while access to humanitarian aid remains severely restricted.

“When the guns stop, the fear doesn’t. Violence follows us into the places we run to for safety.”

– Female Focus Group Participant
 Rotriak, Unity (2025)

New arrivals from Sudan seeking protection services disclose a variety of protection risks and violations encountered during the displacement journey, including direct attacks on civilians, torture, killings, and forced disappearances. Arbitrary arrests and forced deportations have been particularly prevalent in Khartoum, Kalakla, and Omdurman, with South Sudanese men and boys disproportionately targeted by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under allegations of association with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).^{xxv} These actions reflect not only a generalised lawlessness but also the use of perceived ethnic affiliations as tools of political repression and control. Policies of the Government of the Republic of South Sudan in the first half of 2025 have encouraged South Sudanese returnees who have been displaced from Sudan to return and settle in their areas of familial origin in South Sudan.^{xxvi} However, the demarcation and allocation of land for resettlement by returnees this poses a particular risk in areas where contemporary conflict dynamics have resulted in contamination of unexploded ordnance, or areas with continuing concerns about legacy landmines or cluster munition remnants.

Capacity of displaced communities to mitigate risks

Communities in all three states reported that they are unaware of effective strategies to reduce their exposure to the risk of attacks on civilians and other unlawful killings, and attacks on civilian objects. These attacks often occur without warning, leaving civilians with no time to prepare or respond. Airstrikes, ambushes, and militia raids frequently target remote villages or civilian infrastructure, and the absence of early warning systems, secure shelters, and protective infrastructure leaves civilians dangerously vulnerable. Communities have been largely unable to conceive tangible examples of protective strategies they can implement, particularly when attacks involve heavy weaponry or aerial bombardment.

Community recommendations for risk mitigation

Mitigating risks to civilians in Upper Nile, Jonglei, and Unity, and across South Sudan, requires more than ceasefire agreements and cessation of hostilities. It demands structural reforms and long-term peacebuilding. Empowering young people through access to education, vocational training, and prospects for employment can redirect youth from armed groups and toward productivity. Economic development and investment in infrastructure and natural resources can offer communities a path out of poverty and conflict. At the community level, incident management and survivor care, both by specialised service providers as well as community members who are the frequent first responders, should be enhanced and the linkages to longer-term recovery and rehabilitation strengthened. To facilitate safe returns of displaced people to conflict-affected areas, clearance of explosive ordnance is essential. Additional contamination is likely to be found in areas affected by ongoing conflict, namely Upper Nile and Jonglei, but these areas

cannot be safely assessed until hostilities subside. Assessments are also essential in areas under consideration for resettlement of populations displaced from Sudan to South Sudan.

RISK 2

Gender-Based Violence, including Child, Early and Forced Marriage

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a widespread and deeply rooted issue in South Sudan; one that has been significantly worsened by current conflict dynamics and rising insecurity. Harmful gender norms and practices, the normalisation of violence, and the absence of functional protective institutions have exacerbated gendered risks for women and girls and fuelled impunity for perpetrators. Economic precarity resulting from displacement can compel households to adopt harmful coping mechanisms which can include child, early and forced marriage; irrespective of whether families support this practice in principle, dowries are oftentimes considered a financial lifeline that can offset acute financial risks.

In Unity, internally displaced persons and returnees in Rubkuay, Mayendit, and Rotriak, spoke extensively about the severe and persistent threat of GBV, driven by ongoing conflict, weak security, and deeply entrenched gender inequalities. Respondents stated that easy access to firearms and the presence of armed youth exacerbate civilian's exposure to physical assaults, rapes, revenge killings, and abductions, with soldiers and militias targeting women and girls in the context of inter-communal violence. In areas like Panakuach and Ngol, the dangers are particularly acute for women during routine activities such as collecting firewood or traveling between bomas. Despite the lack of police presence or adequate lighting in public spaces, lack of safe access to basic resources pushes women and girls into high-risk areas to generate livelihoods. Underreporting of violations is attributed to stigma, fear of retaliation, and distrust in the justice system; all of which are legitimate concerns for survivors. However, such structural and social impediments to disclosure contribute to a culture of impunity that fails to hold perpetrators accountable. Men and boys also face threats of forced recruitment and cattle-raiding-related violence, the gendered and coercive dimensions of which risk being overlooked in integrated protection responses.

In Upper Nile, gang activity, market-area harassment, and substance abuse among youth, often triggered by trauma and lack of opportunity, fuel intimate partner violence, early and forced marriages, and physical abuse of women and girls. Displacement-related stress, lack of livelihoods, discriminatory employment practices, and widespread poverty exacerbate pre-existing risks faced by women and girls. In Jonglei, GBV is profoundly linked to food insecurity, inadequate shelter, and tensions between displaced families and host communities, with intimate partner violence a major concern within crowded dwellings. In Nasir and Ulang, where thousands of people have been displaced by aerial bombardments into areas near the Ethiopian border, resource scarcity and overcrowding aggravate tensions and risk of violence. The combined impact of armed conflict, displacement, and economic desperation creates a hostile environment for women, girls, and vulnerable groups, necessitating urgent investment in protective interventions, multisectoral services, and community-led solutions.



Capacity of displaced communities to mitigate risks

In all three states, communities recognised that GBV has the potential to cause harm, and that entrenched harmful traditional perceptions and practices against children, poverty, lack of literacy and weak rule of law remain the root causes of early and forced marriage. Government-led initiatives, in collaboration with humanitarian and development actors, seek to prevent GBV and create a more supportive protective environment for women and children. In Mayendit, efforts to combat child, early, and forced marriage are supported by an active traditional court system, a functioning Ministry of Gender, and ongoing community awareness initiatives, including school-based early childhood education and radio talk shows. These are complemented by community dialogues and advocacy programmes on child and women's rights. However, despite this promising foundation, significant challenges remain. Community-based child protection structures lack jurisdiction and resources, without a clear referral system for reporting cases of child, early and forced marriages. There is an urgent need to build the capacity of local leaders, police, and religious groups,

challenging the common perception that early marriage is a protection mechanism for young girls who would otherwise remain, as one respondent described them, *“vulnerable, hungry, and susceptible to all kind of problems without a male figure to protect them”*.

Community recommendations for risk mitigation

In Unity, effective efforts to address GBV require a holistic, multi-level strategy that encompasses government accountability, community-driven prevention, and support from international actors. Key priorities include capacitating and investing in strengthening of law enforcement and justice systems to ensure the arrest and prosecution of offenders, case workers to support recovery from violations, and providing survivor-centred, inclusive essential services that are resilient despite climate- and conflict-related shocks. These systems strengthening approaches should be complemented by continuous training and coaching of traditional leaders to ensure a stronger foundation in human rights-informed decision-making and community behaviour change. Vocational trainings and livelihood opportunities for women such as farming cooperatives and microloans support autonomy and have potential to reduce economic dependence on partners perpetrating intimate partner violence, while educational incentives, safe boarding schools, and scholarships could prevent premature school departure or early and forced marriage for girls.



In Upper Nile, community-based responses centre the empowerment of youth and women to protect themselves and one another. Education and awareness-raising focused on shifting harmful norms, provision of seeds for small-scale farming, and improved local infrastructure, particularly clean water canals, are tangible ways to reduce vulnerability and poverty that exacerbate GBV. Community members call upon the government to address gang activity and ensure free schooling to prevent dropout and early and forced marriage. Access to education and legal rights for girls should be complemented by training teachers, healthcare workers, and police to recognise and respond to GBV.

In Jonglei, communities suggest that a combination of essential aid with education and advocacy could provide both safety and dignity for vulnerable women and girls, ultimately addressing immediate and long-term needs for the displaced. Though male IDPs in Upper Nile stated that they understand the implications of early and forced marriage and are aware of some customary court interventions, they were also aware of parents who refused to comply even with traditional jurisdiction, insisting that it is their right to decide their daughters' futures. In Jonglei, community actors, such as religious leaders, elders, and women leaders, play key roles in mediation and GBV awareness campaigns through Akobo radio, but broader systemic issues persist. Communities recognise that law enforcement plays a key role in reducing early and forced marriage, complemented by awareness campaigns and community-based training aimed at eliminating the exclusion of girls from education.

All three states recognised the link between education and the reduction of early and forced marriage, emphasising the importance of ensuring fair and equitable access to education as a preventative measure. The power of community radio and other information and awareness-raising approaches was also considered important to challenge the acceptability of early and forced marriage. In Upper Nile, communities stated that eliminating child marriage hinges on inclusive community engagement and the decision of parents and leaders to actively reject and discourage these practices. The creation of economic opportunities for women was also seen as central to changing the dynamics that perpetuate early and forced marriage. In Jonglei, communities considered poverty the main trigger for early and forced marriage, but emphasised a need for expanded access to education, strengthened protection systems, and empowering families with the knowledge needed to delay marriage of children until they reach adulthood. In Unity, communities felt it was vital to raise awareness on human rights, promote school attendance, and advocate for girls' right to education, supported by practical interventions such as sanitary pad distribution and cash assistance for schooling.

RISK 3

Theft, Extortion, Forced Eviction, or Destruction of Personal Property

In Unity, IDPs and returnees in areas such as Rubkuay and Tharyier face escalating insecurity driven by rampant thefts and armed youth gangs. Easy access to firearms, a lack of night patrols, and widespread food scarcity have pushed desperate community members, especially youth, towards criminal activity. Vulnerable groups such as women and children bear the brunt of this violence, while ongoing land disputes, including unlawful evictions and land-grabbing, exacerbate the risk of homelessness and compound pre-existing vulnerabilities. In Tharyier, flooding and a lack of agricultural support, hygiene infrastructure, and sanitation services have exacerbated food insecurity and heightened cholera risk.^{xxvii} Residents urgently appeal to WASH and healthcare partners for assistance, even as threats and extortion from local authorities further erode personal safety and property rights.

In Upper Nile, displacement and chronic unemployment have fuelled violence, extortion, and land dispute issues. IDPs without plots face rampant looting and theft, and cultural and legal barriers prevent women from securing land documentation and inheritance. Although county authorities have pledged to restore land rights, enforcement remains inconsistent, leaving many without recourse. The presence of checkpoints along public roads exacerbates the risk of extortion for travellers. Meanwhile, aerial bombardments in Nasir and Ulang have destroyed homes and displaced thousands toward the Ethiopian border, overwhelming under-resourced host communities in Akobo, Jonglei.^{xxviii} The resultant overcrowding, exposure, and lack of necessities have heightened issues of theft, extortion, and property appropriation, typically perpetrated by gangs in IDP sites.

Theft, extortion, and destruction of personal property are marked risks along displacement routes from Sudan. Civilians navigating both official and unofficial checkpoints are frequently coerced to surrender their money and possessions, and armed actors frequently confiscate or destroy legal identity documents.^{xxix} This creates a considerable challenge for people seeking to travel to South Sudan, as the inability to verify a person's identity becomes a barrier to their ability to travel through official border crossing points, access services, or undertake onward movement. Attempts to ameliorate this challenge can expose people to additional risks such as irregular migration, debt traps, and trafficking in persons. Upon arrival in South Sudan, people who have fled widespread starvation, the destruction of essential services, and the disintegration of both markets and job opportunities in Sudan are forced to contend with heightened economic insecurity because of their displacement. Overstrained humanitarian services and increased competition for resources can drive social tensions and heighten the risk of interpersonal and intercommunal conflict. In Renk, food and water shortages have led to increased incidents of theft, violent disputes, and general insecurity. In particular, the scarcity of water in Renk Transit Centre 2 has resulted in physical altercations among returnees, highlighting the direct link between resource scarcity and violence in displacement contexts.

Capacity of displaced communities to mitigate risks

In Unity, night-time theft and insecurity continue to burden displacement-affected communities due to the lack of mobility, patrolling equipment, and inadequate protection infrastructure. Community members have resorted to storing food in men's quarters for safety, while local leaders push for the establishment of watch groups to deter criminal activity. Despite poor coordination among agencies, lack of land documentation, and limited public understanding of legal rights, local leaders remain proactive in their engagement with authorities to implement solutions. In Maiwut and Longechuk in Upper Nile, where theft is closely tied to discrimination, displacement, and the absence of job opportunities, local leaders advocate for widows' land rights and legal accountability for in-laws who seize land, though response mechanisms to enforce protections remain limited.

Despite increased police patrols in Jonglei, insufficient resources and personnel hamper meaningful protection from theft and robbery. Host community members and people affected by displacement support one another by sharing resources and taking turns to protect one another's belongings. Host communities have provided communal shelters for newly displaced IDPs and some IDPs have built temporary shelters, but these lack doors to secure their homes from intruders or protect assets. Families often share a single saucepan or *sufuria* (a large, round pot) provided by the host community to cook, with some waiting as late as 10pm to prepare fish for their children.

"We don't sleep. We rotate guarding our food and pots like they're our last lifeline."

– Male Focus Group Participant
 Akobo, Jonglei (2025)

Community recommendations for risk mitigation

Communities emphasised the need for an integrated approach that combines security infrastructure, legal reform, livelihood empowerment, and basic service delivery, all rooted in local engagement and resilience-building. In Unity, communities take the initiative to strengthen their own security at the household level, but they are emphatic in their calls for external support to address growing risks. A key recommendation from residents is the installation of solar-powered security lights in IDP sites to deter night-time theft and violence. Community members also emphasised the urgent need for NGOs to support and train local youth in establishing community watch groups to conduct night patrols. Strengthening land tenure systems through legal aid and public education is also vital, particularly to prevent unlawful evictions and protect vulnerable families from losing their homes. Residents further recommend inclusive urban development planning those accounts for displaced populations, and the provision of agricultural tools and seeds to encourage cultivation and reduce dependency on food aid.

“We don’t have much, but when a child is alone, we all become their family.”

– Male Community Leader, Akobo, Jonglei (2025)

In Upper Nile, displaced communities describe themselves as capable and willing to contribute to their own safety and recovery despite severe lack of opportunity. With the rainy season approaching, residents stressed the need for shelter and building materials that would allow newly arrived IDPs to build their own homes. Non-food items such as cooking pots, plastic sheets, and bedding are in high demand, particularly for female-headed households. Security is a pressing concern, with community members calling for increased police presence and public lighting to deter theft and violence. Local leaders have

called upon the government to take a more proactive role in securing the area by deploying well-trained forces and ending corruption and abuse at checkpoints. The community also stressed the importance of legal reform to ensure equal access to land irrespective of gender or social status, including educational campaigns and training to enhance understanding of land rights.

In displacement-affected communities in areas such as Akobo and along the Ethiopian border from Nasir and Ulang in Jonglei, people stressed the urgent need for life-saving emergency food, shelter, and non-food items. Many are living in overcrowded conditions with little protection, leading to illness and growing tensions over resources. These communities have called for strengthened security measures, particularly the promotion of community involvement in crime prevention and protection of personal property. Families also need WASH supplies, household kits, and basic learning spaces with stationery to ensure children do not fall further behind in their education. Equally urgent is the need for national and international advocacy to end aerial bombardments of civilian areas, thereby creating the conditions for displaced populations to return home.

RISK 4

Child and Forced Family Separation

In conflict-affected areas of South Sudan such as Panyikang, Korwah Pigi, Maiwut, Nasir, and Ulang, family separation has become a widespread and deeply concerning risk, driven by a combination of violent conflict, aerial bombardments, and chronic insecurity. In places like Nasir and Ulang in Upper Nile, sustained shelling by the SSPDF has forced thousands to flee their homes, leading to chaotic displacement along the Ethiopian border and into neighbouring Jonglei, with many children separated from their families.^{xxx} The death or loss of family members particularly endanger people with limited mobility such as children, people with disabilities, and older people, increasing their reliance upon strangers or distant relatives for survival, increasing risk of child labour. Parents in Maiwut send children to other parts of the country in a desperate attempt to keep them safe from general violence and insecurity, whilst others perpetuate harmful traditional practices such as early and forced marriage as a coping mechanism for poverty. Food insecurity, overcrowding in IDP sites, and a lack of essential services intensify risks to at-risk people. Educational disruption, loss of caregivers, and negative societal attitudes – particularly toward children with disabilities – compound the effects of separation, leaving many without adequate protection or support in already-fragile environments.

Children, especially those separated from their families, face a unique set of protection challenges in the displacement journey from Sudan. Many have arrived in South Sudan either unaccompanied or orphaned, having navigated or experienced significant risks of exploitation, trafficking, and recruitment by armed actors. Reports from protection service providers indicate that child-friendly spaces and family tracing mechanisms are limited, leaving many children without adequate care, protection, and capacity to enjoy a safe and age-appropriate childhood.^{xxxi}

Capacity of displaced communities to mitigate risks

In Upper Nile and Jonglei, communities have shown remarkable resilience in responding to the widespread issue of child and forced family separation. In Upper Nile, strong community networks play a key role in identifying and tracing families of separated children, while humanitarian actors offer support for family tracing and reunification. The *Family Connect* communications hub in Renk provides free internet and phone access for new arrivals to independently re-establish contact with loved ones. In Greater Akobo, Jonglei, displacement is particularly severe, with separated children supported by distant relatives or community members who are themselves facing severe resource shortages. Many children, however, are forced to adopt survival strategies such as scavenging, labour, or subsistence fishing. Host communities provide basic shelter in tukuls or community spaces, and although local authorities offer some assistance, it is the community's collective response forms the basis of lasting protection and hope.

“These children may not say it out loud, but they carry heavy questions in their hearts. When you bring them back to family, it’s like giving them back their future.”

– Youth Volunteer, Upper Nile (2025)

Community recommendations for risk mitigation

In Upper Nile, stabilising the security situation is seen as integral to preventing further displacement and separation. Community leaders highlighted the need for collaboration between humanitarian actors and government authorities to support affected children, particularly through access to trauma counselling, as many are struggling with the psychological impact of conflict and loss. In Jonglei, community members recognise the lingering effects of children being separated from their families. While humanitarian efforts focus on delivering vital aid to separated children and IDPs, key services such as family tracing and reunification remain essential to safeguarding children's well-being. Individual protection assistance and emergency clothing also help meet urgent needs, but reunification with parents or close relatives remain the top priority to ensure the psychological and physical recovery of unaccompanied children. Long-term solutions require investment in local systems in areas of origin to promote safe return and lasting recovery.

RISK 5

Unlawful Impediments or Restrictions to Freedom of Movement, Siege and Forced Displacement

In all three states, a complex protection crisis, characterised by forced displacement, siege-like conditions, and systematic obstruction of humanitarian and civilian movements, is exacerbated by a lack of formal protection mechanisms, limited mobility, fear of retaliation, and general mistrust in law enforcement.

In Unity, communities face a series of compounding security challenges that have deeply affected civilian life, mobility, and livelihoods. In rural communities like Mayom and Abiemnhom, intercommunal violence and retaliatory attacks between armed youth have displaced families, disrupted livelihoods, and deepened ethnic tensions.^{xxxii} These localised conflicts have overwhelmed traditional coping mechanisms and created urgent protection needs, particularly for women, children, and the elderly. Displaced families report numerous roadblocks and checkpoints set up by armed groups and occasionally authorities, restricting access to essential services, markets, and agricultural fields. These barriers disrupt livelihoods and create fear, delaying or entirely preventing movement. Between mid-April and early May 2025, communities along the Sobat corridor in Upper Nile endured access blockage as armed clashes between government forces and the White Army halted critical barge shipments including emergency food and nutrition supplies intended to feed 60,000 malnourished children, with armed actors extorting suppliers and civilians in transit.^{xxxiii} Many described how airstrikes destroyed homes and even attacked the local clinics, leaving the sick without care and no resources but for burned land. From June, some people chose to return to conflict-affected areas despite ongoing conflict dynamics and absence of basic facilities and safe shelter. However, in places like Maiwut and Ulang, fears stoked by reports of revenge killings have further impeded civilian returns.

During the reporting period, communities across Jonglei, especially in Akobo, Urur, Fangak, and Canal/Pigi, faced serious violations of their right to freedom of movement, with insecurity and militarisation creating siege-like conditions in many areas. Armed clashes

between the SSPDF, SPLA-IO factions, and emerging local militias led to widespread fear and confinement, as civilians were unable to move safely between villages, access services, or flee without risk of attack. As evidenced by the aerial bombardment of the MSF hospital in Old Fangak, attacks on civilian infrastructure have impeded humanitarian access and effectively ensnared communities in a state of fear and immobility, amounting to unlawful restrictions on civilian movement.



From late April to early May in Akobo, targeted airstrikes in Gare and Buong were conducted by military aircraft pursuing non-state actors. Though the intended targets remain unclear, the strikes caused mass panic and the forced displacement of entire villages toward Walgak and Nyandit.^{xxxiv} These populations fled with nothing and largely remain afraid to return due to the psychological toll and continuing insecurity. Simultaneously, movement between Akobo East and West was restricted not just by insecurity, but by direct threats from volatile armed youth groups who can, and do, kill civilians. The increasing militarisation of roads and footpaths has turned routine movement into a life-threatening risk, violating basic humanitarian norms and further isolating already underserved populations.

In Uror and Akobo West, cattle raids by armed youth from Greater Pibor Administrative Area have resulted in large-scale displacement, killings, and abductions, particularly of women and children.^{xxxv} These raids, accompanied by looting and destruction of homes, have emptied entire villages and left survivors in makeshift shelters with little access to food or healthcare. The deliberate targeting of civilians and the destruction of livelihoods are clear indicators of forced displacement, driven not just by violence but by the absence of safe alternatives. Humanitarian actors have reported suspended operations and delayed protection services, citing insecurity, road blockades, and threats of ambushes as critical impediments to access.^{xxxvi} Constraints imposed by both state and non-state actors unlawfully restrict humanitarian movement and civilians' right to flee danger, seek refuge, or access aid.

Capacity of displaced communities to mitigate the threats

Despite the constrained environments in which they live, communities have implemented adaptive strategies to keep themselves safe. In Upper Nile, community elders and youth leaders sometimes negotiate with armed groups to secure temporary access or movement windows, but arrangements are inconsistent and highly dependent on local relationships. In Unity and Jonglei, some families rely on informal information-sharing and travel in groups to reduce risks on the road. In Bilkey payam in Akobo, Jonglei, local residents welcomed over 2,000 displaced persons from Upper Nile, offering shelter and stability amidst crises. Still, without sustained humanitarian access and the lifting of movement restrictions, such acts of solidarity – though meaningful – are limited in their impact.

Community recommendations for risk mitigation

Community members consistently call for immediate measures to improve their freedom of movement and overall security. In Unity, and Upper Nile, communities recommend that humanitarian agencies advocate with the government for an end of indiscriminate attacks, and stronger engagement from local authorities to dismantle informal checkpoints. They also request land documentation support to reduce disputes and arbitrary evictions during displacement redeployment of well-trained, neutral security forces to key areas prone to extortion or abuse. Legal assistance and public education on land rights, especially for women and widows, are also critical to resolving land disputes without violence. In Jonglei, displaced families emphasise the need for sustained humanitarian access to isolated areas cut off by conflict. They also propose the establishment of community-led early warning systems and protection committees to help manage movement risks. Above all, they call for political dialogue to de-escalate violence in their areas of origin, so they can return safely and resume normal life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The complex interplay of domestic and regional conflict dynamics poses a threat to the already fragile Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Given the political instability and rising hostilities impacting peace, civilians experience the greatest risks to safety, dignity, and wellbeing. The Protection Cluster considers the below actions essential and urgent to forestall the complete collapse of a protective environment that is already fractured and in freefall.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Civilian Protection and Cease Hostilities

To: Government of South Sudan, Parties to the Conflict

Reaffirm commitments to the Revitalised Agreement (R-ARCSS) and international humanitarian law by taking immediate steps to prevent further harm to civilians, including the cessation of indiscriminate attacks and hostilities near populated or civilian areas. Pursue confidence-building measures, including transparent communication with communities and humanitarian actors, to restore trust and ensure the safety of movement and return.

2. Facilitate Humanitarian Access and Restore Freedom of Movement

To: Government, Local Authorities, and Armed Groups

Ensure immediate and sustained access for humanitarian actors in line with legal obligations under international law, particularly in hard-to-reach and conflict-affected areas. Where checkpoints exist, it is recommended that authorities review and regulate their use to prevent extortion, enhance accountability, and promote safe and dignified civilian mobility.

3. Support Community-Based Protection Mechanisms

To: Humanitarian and Development Partners

Prioritise investment in community-led protection systems, including early warning networks, local protection committees, and dispute resolution platforms, particularly in areas with recurring protection threats and limited formal structures. Ensure efforts complement existing community-led and traditional mechanisms that reinforce community resilience while safeguarding the rights and safety of people subject to risks associated with age, gender, disability, and other conditions of diversity.

4. Address Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices

To: Donors and Programme Implementers

Mandate the integration of gender-based violence prevention and response activities across all sectoral programming, prioritising strengthened support for survivors, legal literacy (especially on land and inheritance rights for women and widows), and capacity strengthening of local actors to identify and respond to signs of exploitation and abuse.

5. Improve Cross-Border Coordination on Family Separation and Child Protection

To: Protection Actors in South Sudan and Sudan

Enhance bilateral and multilateral collaboration on child protection and family reunification, including the development of cross-border tracing mechanisms and joint protection monitoring. Prioritise efforts to safeguard children experiencing displacement or family separation during cross-border or internal displacement events.

6. Promote Dialogue and Inclusive Peacebuilding

To: National and Local Authorities, Civil Society, and Donors

Bolster efforts to de-escalate localised conflict and reduce violence through inclusive political dialogue, ensuring full participation of conflict-affected communities, civil society, and traditional leaders. Provide technical and financial support to locally driven reconciliation initiatives, especially in counties affected by inter-communal violence or high levels of displacement.

7. Mitigate the Impact of Forced Displacement and Property Loss

To: Humanitarian and Development Actors

Expand joint humanitarian-development approaches to mitigate the impact of forced displacement, promote voluntary and informed return, and support peaceful coexistence. Where feasible, support should be provided for civil documentation, land tenure, and legal aid to reduce the risk of arbitrary eviction and secondary displacement.

End notes

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Methodology: In June 2025, the South Sudan Protection Cluster held sub-national workshops in collaboration with state-level cluster coordination mechanisms to evaluate the severity of 15 Protection Risks at the county level. Additionally, the cluster analysed data gathered through partner-based PRMS tools, including KII, FGDs, and Observation methods, for further risk severity assessment. By integrating findings from two sources, the cluster worked with sub-national coordination mechanisms to conduct FGDs with newly displaced communities in the three most affected states, aiming to collect, compile, and analyse the community's perspective on the primary protection risks identified in their regions.



For further information please contact: **Kennedy Sargo** - sargo@unhcr.org | **Scarlett Hawkins** – scarlett.hawkins@nrc.no

Updates, reports, and assessments: [South Sudan | Global Protection Cluster](#) - Latest information about protection services and providers in South Sudan: [Protection Cluster SSD Dashboard](#) - Up-to-date protection risk trends and patterns in South Sudan: [SSD PRMS Dashboard](#)