Protection Cluster
South Sudan



©NRC South Sudan. Civilians in Akobo, Jonglei State, South Sudan flee across the Pibor River to Ethiopia fearing indiscriminate attacks by the South Sudan Peoples' Defence Force following an evacuation order stipulating that all civilians, humanitarian workers, and peacekeeping mission staff must leave within 72 hours.

SOUTH SUDAN

Protection Analysis Update

Protection Crisis Deepens as Families Flee Conflict, Climate and Economic Hardship

OCTOBER 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Intensified military operations in 2026 are deepening South Sudan's political and protection crisis. Northern Jonglei and Upper Nile at the centre of escalating violence and displacement. Airstrikes, ground offensives, and intercommunal attacks expose civilians to killings, sexual violence, abduction and destruction of homes and essential infrastructure. In January and February 2026, evacuation orders precipitated further flight, including into Ethiopia. More than 240,000 people are reported displaced by violence in Jonglei alone since December 2025.[1] The convergence of national armed conflict with retaliation, inter-communal violence, and competition over land and resources threatens further escalation and repeated displacement.

Civilians face danger both when they remain and when they flee. Displacement drives secondary challenges and risks, from overcrowding and inability to easily access food in Canal/Pigi, exposed shelters and sexual assault in Rotriak, and long, dangerous water-collection journeys in Pariang. Women in western Akobo describe being to frightened to flee in the midst of active conflict, despite the possibility of being killed, due to credible fears that they will be subjected to sexual assault. Between January and July 2026, the South Sudan Protection Cluster conducted 652 consultations with crisis-affected populations who described how conflict, displacement, and economic hardship function as mutually-reinforcing drivers of sexual violence, early and forced marriage, and family separation. In Upper Nile and Jonglei, sudden flight separates children from caregivers, while prolonged livelihood pressures expose them to exploitation and association with armed forces and groups. New suspected explosive ordnance contamination poses a danger that will persist long after current fighting concludes. South Sudan is a context of mixed displacement in which people seeking safety regularly arrive from Sudan[2] whilst communities in areas affected by conflict and climate shocks are subjected to cyclical displacement both within South Sudan and into neighbouring countries. For many South Sudanese returnees, this does not mean a return to safety: Insecure land and housing rights, missing documentation and weak ties to areas of origin increase the risk of eviction and further displacement. Flooding, drought, food insecurity and economic deterioration intensify pressure on displaced and host communities alike. Restrictions on movement, interference with humanitarian access and destruction of civilian infrastructure exacerbate these pressures, while weak justice systems and impunity enable repeated abuse. Decisions on access, land allocation and organised return therefore have immediate consequences for civilian safety and the prospects for durable solutions. The five protection risks requiring immediate attention in the period covered by this analysis are:

1. **Attacks on civilians and other unlawful killings, and attacks on civilian objects.**
2. **Forced displacement.**
3. **Denial and impediments to humanitarian access, including access to resources, opportunities, and services.**
4. **Displacement - related gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence.**
5. **Conflict and violence related to child and forced family separation.**

URGENT ACTIONS NEEDED

- The Government and all parties to the conflict must immediately cease attacks on civilians, including sexual violence and association of children with armed forces and armed groups, and immediately initiate necessary actions for accountability.
- The Government and all parties to the conflict must authorise safe and unrestricted humanitarian access, ensure accountability for damage, looting, destruction, and appropriation of humanitarian assets and infrastructure, and end the use of evacuation orders that include humanitarian workers.
- The Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) and Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), donors and authorities responsible for solutions must prioritise safe access to food and water in Canal/Pigi, Rotriak, and Pariang; require informed choice, secure tenure and explosive ordnance checks to support return and relocation; and link land and resource agreements to protective measures.

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

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

[1] UNHCR, *Briefing note: Renewed insecurity and rising displacement in South Sudan's Jonglei put thousands at grave risk.* (June 5 2026). https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/renewed-insecurity-and-rising-displacement-south-sudan-s-jonglei-put-thousands

[2] As of 31 August 2026, a cumulative total of 1,424,507 individuals has crossed into South Sudan from Sudan since April 2023. Among the arrivals, 67.2% were South Sudanese.

CONTEXT

CONFLICT DISPLACED 2026	COUNTIES FEATURING HIGH LEVELS OF TOP RISKS EXPOSURE	PEOPLE EXPOSED TO AT LEAST ONE OF THE TOP PROTECTION RISKS	HNRP REQUIREMENTS FOR 2026	CONTRIBUTIONS
1M	49%	9M	71M	47%

The protective environment in South Sudan is in crisis, due to the escalating conflict, political instability, and deteriorating humanitarian conditions. Intensive armed conflict between the South Sudan Peoples' Defence Force (SSPDF), conventional opposition groups and non-conventional armed groups has amplified in scale and severity, displacing hundreds of thousands, restricting humanitarian access, and heightening the risk of renewed civil war with regional implications. The harm to civilians is inextricably linked with, and compounded by, acute and protracted displacement dynamics, environmental and food security shocks (with 34 counties estimated at IPC Phase 4 and 4 counties at credible risk of IPC Phase 5) and ongoing intercommunal violence rooted in political-ethnic tensions, land and resource contestation, non-state armed group activity, and widespread criminality.

As a result of this volatility, 57 of South Sudan's 79 counties (over 70%) are classified as experiencing 'severe' humanitarian conditions or worse.[3] Of those, 12 counties experienced sharply increased exposure to protection risks. Against this backdrop, the near-total absence of formal judicial systems and basic services have resulted in limited assistance.[4] The vast majority of displacement-affected people have experienced multiple cycles of displacement. Protection risks manifest in complex and compounding ways across age, gender, disability, displacement status, and other conditions of diversity. Between January and May 2026, over 400,000 people were displaced due to -armed actor conflict, including 240,000 [5]displaced by violence in Jonglei alone and 160,000 displaced to Ethiopia as a result of military clashes across Upper Nile and Jonglei.

These dynamics are magnified by South Sudan's role as a receiving country for people fleeing violence in Sudan. Since the onset of the Sudan Crisis in March 2023, approximately 1.4 million people have entered South Sudan, including around 940,000 South Sudanese nationals, (known as 'returnees') who fled northwards years or even decades prior.[6] Returnees face significant reintegration challenges, including lack of access to land, housing security, and tenure rights, limited livelihood opportunities, and inadequate access to documentation and basic services, alongside risks of secondary displacement linked to insecurity or weak ties to areas of origin or return.[7]

The over 600,000 refugees and returnees displaced from Sudan to South Sudan have faced severe risks and violations during the displacement journey, including abduction, trafficking in persons, forced recruitment, gender-based violence, arbitrary detention, and forced deportation. Host communities in South Sudan are also vulnerable to climate- and conflict-related shocks that undermine the safety and well-being of population at large, giving rise to harmful coping mechanisms including early and forced marriage, child labour, and substance misuse and mental health disorders.[8]

The Protection Cluster estimates that over one million people in South Sudan have or are currently exposed to heightened risks of attacks on civilians and forced displacement,[9] which are further exacerbated by interconnected and compounding protection risks including forced family and child separation, conflict-related sexual violence, theft, and explosive ordnance contamination which, taken together, restrict safe movement, limit access to services and livelihoods, and prolong exposure to harm long after conflict dynamics subside. Analysis from the South Sudan Needs Assessment Working Group confirms persistent structural

[3] South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Protection Risk Monitoring System.* [Accessed online on 5 May 2026] https://globalprotectioncluster.org/south-sudan
[4] OCHA, South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. (2026) https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-january-2026
[5] IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix*. [Accessed online on 16 June 2026]. https://dtm.iom.int/
[6] South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Displaced Between Homelands: Protection Risks and Reintegration Challenges of South Sudanese Returnees.* (December 2025) https://globalprotectioncluster.org/latest/publications/south-sudan-promo-spotlight-december-2025
[7] Ibid.
[8] OCHA, South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. (2026) https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-january-2026
[9] Ibid.

vulnerabilities among crisis-affected populations, noting the particularly high share of households headed by at-risk and vulnerable individuals, including women and children.[10]

HUMANITARIAN SERVICES: UNDER-RESOURCED, OVER-STRAINED, AND UNDER ATTACK

The 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan indicates that nearly 10 million individuals require humanitarian aid. However, with a focus on providing critical life-saving assistance and protection services to just 4 million people; this means 60% of people in need will not receive assistance of any kind.[11] Although all people affected by crisis dynamics are subject to heightened protection risks that must be addressed in a holistic and multisectoral manner, protection is not consistently prioritised in funding allocations, resulting in a highly fragmented, and in some areas non-functional, landscape of specialised protection services. Hyper-prioritisation of the most severe risk counties has driven the de-prioritisation of many parts of South Sudan where protection risk dynamics remain significant, further fragmenting service delivery and leaving areas subject to acute insecurity with little to no protection services.

The HNRP 2026 initially calculated that 4.9 million will require specialised protection services. However, the global funding constraints that have resulted in hyper-prioritisation has reduced the overall number of people prioritised for protection assistance to just 1.45 million people in South Sudan in 2026. As of the end of June 2026, only 33.3% of the 2026 HNRP has been funded. If funding remains consistent until the end of the year, an additional 2.6 million people may be left without life-saving assistance. Providers of Last Resort, who serve as the backstop for the most severe protection cases, face mounting funding and access constraints that limit their ability to respond resulting in an erosion of a critical contingency measure, transferring responsibility, accountability, and risk to local partners who seldom have the resources or protections needed to sustain service delivery safely.

Between January and May 2026, Protection Cluster partners assisted approximately 353,000 individuals with approximately $30 million USD of individual-level assistance, as well as $4 million USD for community-based initiatives and capacity-building. The substantial rise in the economic cost of service delivery as well as urgent re-prioritisation of resources following the rapid degradation of the protective environment in Northern Jonglei and Upper Nile has resulted in fragmentation of referral pathways, with many counties in South Sudan with limited or no active protection actors available.

South Sudan remains among the most dangerous countries for humanitarian workers; in 2025, 83 major attacks against humanitarian workers took place, comprising 16.8% of all major attacks documented globally,[12] with locally engaged staff facing the greatest risk. By August 2026, 36 humanitarian workers and contractors had been killed in the line of duty in South Sudan.[13] Humanitarian workers face persistent access restrictions, risks of aid diversion, politicisation of aid, and bureaucratic impediments, as well as extortion, looting of infrastructure and assets, and efforts to control services along territorial lines.

Bureaucratic access impediments are imposed on humanitarian actors at all levels. This manifests in the recruitment of humanitarian staff, at transit checkpoints and border crossing points, as well as through excessive taxation of humanitarian goods and operations. Lack of consistent and unrestricted humanitarian access also limits the ability of communities to disclose violations they have experienced or witnessed, reducing humanitarian system's ability to mobilise contextually appropriate responses. The dynamism of battlelines and increased use of evacuation orders that explicitly instruct humanitarian workers to evacuate alongside civilians not only compromises principled humanitarian access, but erodes the principle of distinction under International Humanitarian Law; in contexts where response is predominantly mobilised by members originating from the communities in which they serve, humanitarians who remain behind face heightened risks of being misperceived as a party to the conflict due to their decision to remain. The World Bank has found that as internal conflicts intensify and humanitarian organisations are compelled to reduce their operational footprints, the risk of a deepening and more widespread humanitarian crisis is growing considerably in South Sudan.[14]

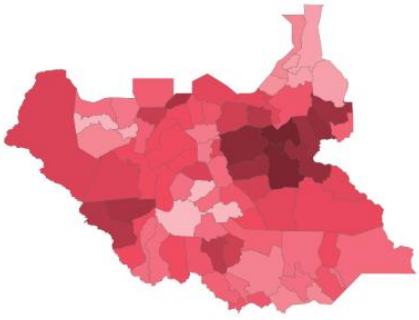
Key protection risks include discrimination and resource denial, driven by local power dynamics that limit access to food, healthcare, and essential services; these produce physical and psychological distress and push people toward harmful coping strategies such as forced marriage, child labour, and economic strain, which undermine trust and social cohesion. Furthermore,

[10] OCHA and REACH, *South Sudan – Needs Analysis Working Group: July – August 2026 Analysis.* (11 September 2026)
[11] OCHA, South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan. (2026) https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/south-sudan-humanitarian-needs-and-response-plan-2026-january-2026
[12] Aid Worker Security Database. [Accessed online on 7 April 2026] https://www.aidworkersecurity.org/
[13] OCHA, *Statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, Mr. Ramanathan Balakrishnan, for World Humanitarian Day 2026.* (19 August 2026) https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/statement-humanitarian-coordinator-south-sudan-mr-ramanathan-balakrishnan-world-humanitarian-day-2026
[14] World Bank, *South Sudan: Macroeconomic Impacts of the Middle East Conflict.* (2025)

seasonal flooding, drought, poor infrastructure, insecurity along transit routes, and overcrowding further heighten these risks, particularly for children, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, and the chronically ill.

PROTECTION RISKS

RISK 1 Attacks on Civilians and Other Unlawful Killings, and Attacks on Civilian Objects



Conflict dynamics in South Sudan have long taken place through two spheres: **armed conflict**, which fluctuates in scale and severity depending on larger-scale political and military dynamics, and through **inter-communal violence and retaliatory attacks**, which are highly localised, episodic, and generally habitual, despite variances linked to seasonal changes, cattle-raiding dynamics, housing, land, and property disputes, and social, political, and ethnic tensions. As conflict dynamics intensify through renewed hostilities, the combination of large-scale military assaults and the use of increasingly-sophisticated technology have rendered civilians all the more vulnerable to the ever-present risk of inter-communal violence, as well as opportunistic attacks by bandits, criminals, gangs, and armed actors who capitalise on the overarching chaos sparked by conflict and considerable macroeconomic precarity to steal resources, abduct women and children, and perpetrate harm to strangers and neighbours alike.

Data from the South Sudan Protection Cluster's Protection Risk Monitoring System (PRMS) registers an average severe condition of the protection risk associated with attacks on civilians, with the highest concentration of extreme bands in the southern parts of Upper Nile and northern counties of Jonglei states, with occasional pockets in Western Equatoria, Unity and Central Equatoria. As of 2026, 12% of respondents (across the entire country) indicated that attacks on civilians occur occasionally to very frequently, with 83% attributing these incidents to inter-communal armed groups.

Incidents	2024	2025	Source
Armed clashes	516	927	ACLED
Airstrikes	2	138	ACLED
Incidents of violence	4,765	6,095	Medecins Sans Frontieres
Attacks on humanitarian workers	453 (12 workers killed, 15 kidnapped)	606 (19 workers killed, 24 kidnapped)	Aid Worker Security Database
Explosive ordnance casualties	13 (85% children)	31 (90% children)	IMSMA
Sexual and gender-based violence incidents	229 (260 survivors)	144 (247 survivors)	Medecins Sans Frontieres[15]
	1,780	1,040	GBVIMS
Grave violations against children	126 violations (68 children recruited)	555 violations (147 children recruited)	MRM

More than 30% of protection monitoring key informants view displacement and homelessness as a direct consequence of attacks on civilians, leaving the community without any coping mechanisms. In contrast, nearly 70%, express greater concern regarding the insufficient community capacity and the lack of government and humanitarian assistance to address psychological distress, limited access to livelihoods, and inadequate access to essential services such as food, nutrition, protection, and health.

ARMED CONFLICT

Conflict dynamics in South Sudan have escalated in recent months, raising concerns that this could fuel renewed civil war, mass atrocities, and serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.[16]

2025 was the year with the highest number of weapon-wounded people recorded since 2018: Armed clashes almost doubled (927 incidents in 2025 compared to 516 in 2024) and there was a 69-fold increase in the use of airstrikes (138 in 2025 compared

15 Due to survivor-centred data protection protocols which restrict the sharing of sensitive information, sexual and gender-based violence incident data typically differs between service provider records and the GBVIMS. This is a result of diversified data collection and analysis and should not be interpreted as a dissonance in the reliability of the data.

16 UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, *UN inquiry finds South Sudan's political and military leaders are driving the country towards a full-scale war and mass atrocity crimes.* (February 2026) https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2026/02/un-inquiry-finds-south-sudans-political-and-military-leaders-are-driving

to just 2 in 2024).[17] These trends have continued into 2026: Between July 2025 and February 2026, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) Human Rights Division recorded 2,216 casualties (1,325 killed and 891 injured). The majority were men (1,801), but women (252) and children (113) were also significantly affected, highlighting the considerable risk to life for people of all ages and genders.[18]

The frequency, scale, and severity of these incidents belie a harrowing reality for civilians who are forced to make life-or-death decisions about the likelihood of being injured, killed, or displaced by heavy weaponry, large-scale ground assaults, and airstrikes and explosive ordnance that cause large-scale and indiscriminate harm to any person or object within range of a considerable blast radius.

While attacks on civilians occur throughout South Sudan and are highly specific to localised contexts, recent events in Akobo, Jonglei, demonstrate a compelling case study that reflects the scale, scope, and severity of the risks. In January and March 2026, the SSPDF issued directives ordering civilians, humanitarian workers and UNMISS to leave opposition-controlled areas of Jonglei State (Nyirol, Uror, and Akobo counties), prompting widespread panic and concerns about indiscriminate attacks. Together with inflammatory rhetoric and the subsequent offensive, these directives contributed to large-scale displacement, including the secondary displacement of an estimated 82,000 people who had been sheltering in Akobo, and an estimated 100,000 people fleeing across the border into Ethiopia.[19]

Humanitarian assets and infrastructure have become part of the spoils of war. The widespread looting and destruction of schools, markets, health facilities, and critical water infrastructure, as well as humanitarian assets such as vehicles, resulting in a near-total decimation of humanitarian infrastructure and service capacity in areas including, but not limited to, Ulang, Lankien, Fangak, and Akobo. The closure of several UNMISS temporary operating bases following funding reductions and a narrowing of the Mission's mandate have reduced protective presence for civilians and humanitarian workers alike and, in areas such as Akobo, sparked considerable discussion and strategisation to ameliorate the risk of potential reappropriation of infrastructure and assets by parties to the conflict to influence military outcomes. In Canal Pigi, Jonglei, humanitarian actors are constrained in reach due to poor roads, insecurity, unauthorised checkpoints, and seasonal flooding that can necessitate the use of slow canoes.

In the western parts of Akobo, Jonglei State, focus group discussions with women revealed that women and girls report a sense of reluctance to escape areas currently experiencing military operations. Despite the significant risks of remaining in areas of conflict, many respondents reported hesitance stemming from past experiences and reasonable fears of protection violations encountered during prospective long-term travel. Several respondents described a fear of being subjected to sexual assault by armed groups and other gunmen; they considered this risk significant enough to inform their decision to remain in their current locations, despite profound danger and the limited availability of humanitarian support services. Many women also described their worries about the mental health of their children who are living under siege; one respondent described "constantly fearing aerial bombardments and ground attacks". Women also expressed concerns about the risk of children in their communities becoming associated with armed groups, given the perceived high need for reinforcements by armed forces and groups in Akobo.

The confluence of such rampant insecurity, reduced UNMISS presence, and inadequate or complete absence of differentiation between legitimate combatants, civilians, and humanitarian actors has rendered conflict zones extremely high-risk for life-saving responses to be mobilised safely, despite significant need. In access-constrained areas, reporting from human rights and peacebuilding sources offer an essential complement to protection monitoring data to understand the realities lived by civilians: In July 2026, Human Rights Watch undertook an investigation into conflict in Nagero County, informed by interviews with 31 survivors and witnesses, and further corroborated by satellite imagery. The survivors listed abuses including intentional killings of civilians, rape, torture and other cruel treatment, all of which constitute war crimes.[20]

Beyond the immediate harm borne by conflict-affected communities, explosive ordnance contamination systematically delays humanitarian response, constrains recovery efforts, and reinforces cycles of displacement and vulnerability. South Sudan has long been subject to the risk of explosive ordnance, posing a significant and long-term risk to civilian populations. Explosive

[17] ACLED, 2026. [Accessed online on 06 May 2026] https://acleddata.com/

[18] UNMISS Human Rights Division, *Press Release: Sharp rise in civilian deaths recorded in UNMISS report underscores urgent need for accountability in South Sudan.* (30 June 2026) https://unmiss.unmissions.org/en/press-releases/press-release-sharp-rise-in-civilian-deaths-recorded-in-unmiss-report

19 UNHCR, *Briefing note: Akobo.* (June 2026)

[20] Human Rights Watch. South Sudan: Abuse of Civilians in Western Equatoria. (June 2026) https://www.hrw.org/news/2026/07/29/south-sudan-abuse-of-civilians-in-western-equatoria-0

ordnance rarely, if ever, becomes defunct over time; rather, it is equally lethal on the first day it is deployed as it is after years, or even decades. Consequently, this risk can persist long after conflict dynamics subside, particularly in areas subject to heavy rainfall or seasonal flooding, which can expose or shift explosive remnants that had previously been located away from communities. Given the durability and severity of explosive ordnance, this risk is typically only addressed either through identification and safe decommission, or inadvertent detonation.

In South Sudan, two population groups are particularly exposed to heightened risks of explosive ordnance: People displaced through unfamiliar, contaminated terrain by conflict or people who have, following conflict, returned to a home that has been newly-contaminated; and children, who are curious, exploratory, and typically congregate in groups to interact with unfamiliar, and therefore novel, objects. In South Sudan, children have comprised over 80% of all explosive ordnance incidents since 2021, and all but one of the casualties in the first half of 2026 – 98% of all recorded incidents – have been children.[21]

For decades, legacy contamination in areas affected by historic conflict, such as Magwi county and many parts of Jonglei and Upper Nile states, have necessitated ongoing surveying and clearance by Mine Action actors. However, Mine Action actors have determined that the recent escalation of conflict has likely resulted in considerable – and, in most areas, as-yet unidentified – new contamination. The explosive ordnance incident caseload recorded during the first six months of 2026 has significantly increased from 2025, with frequency rising sharply in both states. 40 casualties are recorded, though verification is pending for some incidents due to humanitarian access constraints. In Dengjok, Akobo, Jonglei, suspected unexploded ordnance remains lodged underneath the road in the centre of the market; earlier demarcations with ash to deter people using the road have long since washed away, and the road is actively used.

INTER-COMMUNAL VIOLENCE EXACERBATED BY CONFLICT

Inter-communal violence and retaliatory attacks remain one of the most prevalent and geographically diffused protection threats in South Sudan in 2026, taking place both in parallel to, and increasingly entangled with, worsening conflict dynamics. Driven by ethnic tensions, revenge attacks, cattle-raiding, political influence, and competition over natural resources, inter-communal violence is characterised by killings, abductions, sexual violence, and deliberate destruction and theft of property; particularly cattle. Given the high proliferation of small arms and light weapons throughout South Sudan, inter-communal violence incidents are heavily militarised and highly lethal.

Inter-communal violence is profoundly linked to theft, extortion, forced eviction, and destruction of personal property. In 2026, state, non-state, and other armed groups have been responsible for nearly all incidents related to property destruction and forced evictions reported by key informants within the Protection Risk Monitoring System. 70% of respondents indicated that although entire communities are affected by this practice, those most at risk are the elderly, people with disabilities, and boys, and these attacks further exacerbate existing vulnerabilities among those who have been evicted or targeted, thereby increasing their protection needs.

Survivors of these attacks, particularly women and children, carry significant psychological trauma from things they have witnessed and experienced. In the absence of meaningful legal remedies or specialised mental health support, harm transmutes across generations against a broader backdrop of disharmonious community cohesion, eroded trust, and loss of faith in the principles of peace and social cohesion. Divisions along ethnic, clan, and political lines are deepening, and traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms are weakening, which complicates peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts despite ongoing work by organisations such as the International Rescue Committee and UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund for Reconciliation, Stabilisation, and Resilience in South Sudan (RSRTF) consortium partners.

Cattle-herding communities seeking to reduce risks are proactive in mobilising actions to keep themselves safe. In Nyandit, Akobo, cattle-herders in communities have taken to herding their cattle to rest overnight in Bilkey each evening; this area is believed to be more protected from cattle raids. To support women and children forced to flee abruptly during inter-communal raids, protection actors have procured emergency evacuation bags and coordinated training in basic first aid to help communities address injuries incurred during flight.

RISK 2 Forced displacement

Forced displacement is driven by large-scale conflict, inter-communal violence, and climate shocks. In South Sudan it is a destructive and destabilising process that shatters protective community structures, severs family units, and it is shifting civilians

21 Information Management System for Mine Action. [Accessed online 07 June 2026)

into uncertain and unsafe environments. The analysis found that is multiplying the severity of other acute protection risks including gender-based violence (particularly conflict-related sexual violence), child and forced family separation, and human trafficking. The psychological trauma of displacement, as well as the complete severance of protective social, economic, and family ties, brings to bear negative consequences borne of desperation such as child labour, theft, and early and forced marriage; all harms that might otherwise be prevented without the inciting push of displacement.

In Jonglei alone, over 240,000 people have been displaced by violence since December 2025.[22] According to the PRMS, the main drivers of forced displacement are state and non-state armed actors (50%), lack of livelihood opportunities (45%), and natural disasters and disease outbreaks (5%). According to PRMS tracking, forced displacement generally follows the same pattern as attacks on civilians, though slightly less severe. Overall severity nationally ranges from stress to severe, with extreme conditions concentrated in Upper Nile and Jonglei, where state-armed actors are most active. Displacement flows from Sudan back into South Sudan add a further layer of distress, in some cases producing secondary displacement in the country's northern regions.

Key informants identify access to lifesaving services and livelihood opportunities as the most significant challenges during displacement. Over 40% identify conflict-related gender-based violence, kidnapping, and family separation as critical issues requiring specialised support, particularly for children.

In Canal/Pigi, Jonglei state, protection actors report that escalating violence in Nyirol and Uror has displaced 10,844 internally displaced persons into Pigi County.[23] Overcrowding in the county poses significant risks, particularly for women and girls, including gender-based violence and exploitation while undertaking everyday tasks. Families face severe food insecurity, often relying on water lilies and wild foods, while damaged boreholes restrict access to clean water. Host communities are strained by the influx, and living conditions are deteriorating. Vulnerable people, especially women, children, and persons with disabilities, face heightened risks of forced recruitment and family separation.

In Mundri East, Western Equatoria State, state officials and security forces denied humanitarian groups entry to assess conditions in areas affected by fighting in Mundri East County in February and March 2026. As a result, people displaced to Mundri town were unable to return home to source for food for their families. GBV survivors were blamed by communities after reporting incidents, and a breakdown in protective and legal systems, combined with a lack of confidential and available services, has led to a decrease in reporting of gender-based violence incidents. Internally-displaced people (IDPs) in this community report facing discrimination from the host community.

Although IDP camps and Transit Centres can be considered, in many respects, protective sites, they do not entirely insulate women and girls from violence, protection actors have documented reports of rape and sexual assault in both IDP camps and Transit Centres. Participants in protection monitoring conducted in Rotriak Transit Centre describe inadequate security management and exposed shelters as contributing to incidents in which former residents who have moved into neighbouring communities return to the Centre at night to opportunistically assault women and girls. Parents attempt to protect their daughters by restricting their movement around the Centre after dark, as well by seeking information from humanitarian service providers about resettlement options to new, safer locations; however, respondents describe a strong sense of fear exacerbated by the presence of armed actors in the area who have been known to sexually assault women and girls searching for food or attempting to generate livelihoods. Consequently, women feel it is unsafe for them to leave the Transit Centre; some send their children to look for food in their stead. This coping mechanism transfers risk but does not eliminate it: One respondent explained that several children have drowned in their attempts to gather water lilies from nearby ponds for their families to eat. Respondents in Pariang reported that, due to the closest freshwater point being an approximately 4.5-hour trip, children had, in several instances, disappeared when travelling to collect water, though some were believed to be abducted, others were later found “dead in the bushes”.

[22] IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix*. [Accessed online on 16 June 2026]. https://dtm.iom.int/
23 IOM, *Displacement Tracking Matrix*. [Accessed online on 16 June 2026]. https://dtm.iom.int/

RISK 3 Denial and impediments to humanitarian access, compounding discrimination, stigmatisation and access to resources, opportunities and services

Humanitarian access in South Sudan is matter of life or death. In a context within which two-thirds of the national population are reliant upon humanitarian assistance, seasonal flooding along the Nile severs overland routes between communities for months at a time, rendering humanitarian actors who rely upon air travel and riverine routes to provide life-saving services to communities. The exacerbation of conflict over 2025 and 2026 has resulted in stop-start access dynamics, including periods of airspace restrictions in Upper Nile and northern Jonglei states where communities are heavily affected by the confluence of conflict- and flood-driven displacement, and with few safe directions to flee.

Food insecurity, protection risks, and access constraints are mutually reinforcing and interconnected, with 7.8 million people in (approximately 56% of the population) facing high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above). This includes 5.3 million people in Crisis (IPC Phase 3), 2.5 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4), and 73,300 facing Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5). All of the counties in Upper Nile and Jonglei states identified as IPC Phase 5 have been subjected to large-scale conflict dynamics that have decimated civilian and humanitarian infrastructure, displaced civilians at scale, and restricted humanitarian access and capacity to give and receive life-saving assistance. Under such conditions, actions by duty bearers to obstruct or instrumentalise humanitarian assistance must be understood not only as a logistical impediment, but a mechanism of deliberate deprivation that can have life-threatening implications for large swathes of people. Rising insecurity heightens risks and, with the progressively reduced presence of UNMISS, may drive ancillary consequences including reduced deterrence, impeded monitoring, and possible appropriation of infrastructure and assets by armed actors. Lack of humanitarian access also limits the ability of communities to disclose violations they have experienced or witnessed to humanitarian workers, human rights actors, and media who can bear witness.

Humanitarian actors face an increasingly hostile and complicated landscape, with protections under international law eroded by targeted and indiscriminate attacks on humanitarian infrastructure, looting of humanitarian assets, abduction of humanitarian workers, and bureaucratic access impediments. Analysis by the South Sudan Access Working Group of trends from January to June 2026 reported a total of 391 humanitarian access incidents, an increase of 62% from the same period in 2025. Reported incidents took place predominantly in Upper Nile, Jonglei and Central Equatoria, with further incidents in Unity and Eastern Equatoria. Violence against staff represents the highest type of incident, followed by restriction of movement and operational interference. Organisations most affected were international non-government organisations (42%) and the United Nations (26%).

In contested areas in where battlelines oscillate across specific payams and counties and access to, for example, an opposition-controlled area is dependent on overland routes through Government-controlled areas (and vice-versa), unconditional humanitarian access must be granted by all parties to the conflict to ensure a principled response can be mobilised. However, access refusals by one party or the other may be predicated on the justification that the safety of humanitarian workers in areas cannot be guaranteed in territory beyond their control. Given the dynamism of battlelines and increased use of evacuation orders that include humanitarian workers, humanitarians face heightened risks of being misperceived parties to conflict, which could potentially result in their legitimisation as military targets.

Conflict dynamics in South Sudan in the last year have been characterised by both indiscriminate and targeted attacks on civilians and civilian objects such as hospitals, schools, and community infrastructure, including through aerial bombardment and ground assaults in Upper Nile, Unity, and Jonglei states. These attacks have sharply curtailed the availability and accessibility of essential services that conflict- and displacement-affected communities rely upon to survive. Not only has essential infrastructure been destroyed, the ability of humanitarian staff, including healthcare workers, protection actors and others to safely remain in communities and continue to deliver life-saving services continues to be seriously compromised. In counties such as Akobo, Nyirol, and Uror, Jonglei , where conflict dynamics are widespread and severe to the extent that civilians cannot move safely or meet their basic needs and much of the land is submerged by floodwater, the use of access constraints could be interpreted as a siege tactic against affected communities, or even a trigger for forced displacement to areas controlled by one party to the conflict or another in which where humanitarian actors are authorised to establish presence.

Between January 2025 and April 2026, MSF recorded at least 12 attacks on its staff and facilities nationally, including the bombing of Old Fangak and Lankien and the looting of facilities in Ulang, Pieri, and Akobo. The inability for MSF to safely provide health services to communities in many parts of the country resulted in the closure of four hospitals, leaving only two functioning hospitals, both MSF-run, to serve a conflict-affected population of over one million people in Jonglei State. MSF estimates that more than 400,000 people lost access to healthcare following the 2025 Old Fangak bombing and Ulang looting, with a further

366,000 affected in early 2026 following the attacks in Lankien, Pieri, and Akobo, and warns there is now no surgical capacity whatsoever in the conflict-affected areas of Jonglei.

The use of evacuation orders which explicitly include humanitarian workers and, in some instances, UNMISS personnel have become more frequent in the last twelve months by parties to the conflict, triggering widespread panic, mass displacement, looting of humanitarian assets, and destruction of civilian infrastructure by armed forces and groups. On 27 December 2025, the SPLA-IO issued a notice for civilians in northern Jonglei to flee to opposition-controlled towns including Pieri, Motot, and Palony, remain stay indoors during active conflict, and avoid donning any clothing that may be perceived as being affiliated with SSPDF. Three days later, the SSPF issued its own order for civilians to vacate areas around military barracks and assembly points in anticipation of a counter-offensive. On 25 January, SSPDF ordered civilians, aid workers, and UN personnel to evacuate opposition-controlled areas of Nyirol, Uror, and Akobo entirely, extending the earlier, narrower order into a blanket demand covering three counties. On 1 March, the SSPDF issued a relocation order for Akobo, then on March 6 ordered civilians, UN personnel, and aid organisations to evacuate Akobo County altogether. Hemmed at the easternmost edge of Jonglei state, the population fled for their lives *en masse*, with thousands crossing into Ethiopia. Directive relocation was again deployed in Upper Nile State: On 1 and 15 March 2026, respectively, the Nasir County commissioner issued a formal instruction, then an ultimatum, for civilians and aid workers in Mandeng town and surrounding opposition-controlled villages to relocate within 72 hours, warning that the area would be the government's next counteroffensive target. The rapid adoption by parties to the conflict of official communiques as a blunt instrument for triggering evacuation, relocation, and returns is concerning: Their broadened scope and scale from military-zone clearances to county-wide evacuations raises questions as to whether such directives can be interpreted as a trigger, in and of themselves, for forced displacement.

Participants in PRMS focus group discussions disclosed that people with disabilities and older people face systemic discrimination and limited access to essential resources, which creates institutional, physical, and social barriers to humanitarian assistance, healthcare, and public services. This lack of support exacerbates their isolation and makes it hard to access fragmented services or necessary aids. Girls encounter obstacles to education due to factors such as parental neglect, early marriage, and insufficient resources like school materials and dignity kits. During distributions – particularly those managed by local authorities – they also face risk of sexual and gender-based violence, as well as discrimination. Many families report a lack of assistance since their arrival, with shelter, food, and livelihood options severely restricted.

Older people and people with disabilities grapple with unique challenges, including health issues and poor living conditions, with many living in makeshift shelters lacking necessities. They endure specific discrimination and stigmatisation, which limits their access to humanitarian aid and employment opportunities. In rural regions, security challenges, such as livestock theft (more specifically, cattle-raiding), and environmental vulnerabilities contribute to their difficulties. Women, especially those heading households, struggle with access to services and employment, intensifying their economic hardships and increasing vulnerability. There is an urgent need for inclusive service delivery irrespective of demographic factors, as well as targeted efforts to address the shortages in basic services, education, employment, and healthcare for these marginalised communities.

Local cultural norms severely restrict women's and girls' participation in formal employment and education, confining them to domestic roles. Discrimination reinforced by corrupt practices further impedes access to humanitarian assistance for vulnerable groups like returnees and IDPs. People with disabilities particularly face societal stigma that excludes them from community involvement and resource uptake. Limited access to essential services foster continued marginalisation, while entrenched social and gender norms contribute to unequal resource distribution. Ineffective governance and systemic corruption further obstruct livelihood opportunities and service distribution.

RISK 4 Displacement-related gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence

Gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence, continues to be perpetrated with disturbing brutality and alarming frequency across South Sudan. The weak rule of law and conflict dynamics undermine community safety, and women and girls are oftentimes the first targeted and the most gravely harmed. In the absence of compliance with International Humanitarian Law, functional justice mechanisms, high acceptability of harmful traditional practices, and limited education and economic opportunities for women and girls, gender-based violence is perpetrated with near-total impunity and incidents are chronically under-reported due to stigma, fear of reprisal, and impeded access to response services. Despite these barriers, recorded incidents, particularly conflict-related sexual violence, have increased in frequency, intensity, and scale. 134 focus group discussions conducted by Protection Cluster partners between January and July 2026 found that communities consistently

identify economic hardship, armed conflict, and displacement (particularly climate-driven displacement) as central drivers of intimate-partner violence, early and forced marriage, sexual assault, and emotional abuse.

Data from the Gender-Based Violence Information Management System (GBV-IMS) and the Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Arrangement (MARA) on Conflict-Related Sexual Violence indicate a significant increase in rape and gang rape in 2025 and 2026, which together comprised 81% of all documented incidents in 2025, with rape accounting for 51% and gang rape, 30%. These patterns are consistent with the use of sexual violence as a tactic of war, intimidation, and social control. Children between the ages of 12 and 17 years of age are the most affected for the second year in a row, rising to 30% of all documented cases in the first half of 2026; a disturbing increase from 20% in 2025. Other grave forms of conflict-related sexual violence are also documented: Forced marriage, which accounts for 7% of recorded incidents, is both a practice of armed actors and a negative coping mechanism by households relying on dowries for survival, whilst sexual slavery accounts for 6% of incidents. These violations underscore the intersection of conflict dynamics, militarisation, and the extreme economic pressures upon crisis-affected families; however, it is critical to emphasise that, due to stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of safe and confidential reporting channels, and non-functional multi-sectoral referral pathways, reported figures of gender-based violence must always be understood as significantly under-reported and, due to disparities between true prevalence and reported trends, is not considered representative for trends in South Sudan as a whole.

Incidents	Jan – Dec 2025	Jan – Jun 2026	Source
Sexual and gender-based violence incidents	6,785	3,629	GBVIMS
Incidents perpetrated by armed groups or forces	300	632	GBVIMS
Rape	51%	32%	GBVIMS
Gang rape	30%	30%	GBVIMS
Forced marriage	7%	4%	GBVIMS
Sexual slavery	6%	4%	GBVIMS
Survivors who are children (between 12 and 17 years)	20%	30%	GBVIMS
Survivors who are female	97.7%	98%	GBVIMS

Critical gaps persist in accountability and survivor support. These include extremely limited availability of services outside of urban hubs, limited female service providers, and the inability to safely access services due to distance, cost, insecurity and active conflict. Community-based mediation practices often discourage formal reporting, while fear of stigma and retaliation by armed actors, family members, or communities further suppress disclosure. While 64% of documented conflict-related sexual violence survivors received urgent medical assistance, only 26% were able to access psychosocial support.[24] Access to legal assistance and justice remains significantly hampered by pervasive stigma, fear of reprisals, and a weak criminal justice system characterised by few functioning courts, prolonged procedural delays, and institutional failures, including expectations that survivors bear the costs for criminal investigations and the release of perpetrators from custody through bribery. The absence of trained healthcare workers and inconsistent supply of clinical management of rape kits prevents safe, timely, and dignified sexual and reproductive response, whilst psychosocial services are sparse and inadequately specialised to address acute mental health needs.

Persistent gaps in access to comprehensive, timely and survivor-centred services exacerbate both immediate and long-term harms. Given that responses require a coordinated multisectoral and holistic approach, the inability of survivors to access specialised services, including, but not limited to gender-based violence response; health; shelter; nutrition; and food security; particularly in the immediate aftermath of violations, can have life-threatening consequences. These include deteriorating mental and physical health; increased risk of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; inability to care for themselves or dependents; and adoption of harmful coping mechanisms such as substance misuse, self-harm, and early and forced marriage; and heightened risk of exposure to further violence, exploitation, and public health risks.

The Survivors Network in South Sudan (SUNS), a survivor-led organisation, analysed 51 rights violations in Mundri East and West, Western Equatoria state, in late 2025. This report found that 88.2% of survivors were women and girls who were disproportionately subjected to sexual violence and captivity, while male survivors more often suffered physical mutilation and targeted exposure to traumatic events and experience. Rape or gang rape accounted for 56% of all documented violations, with SUNS noting that survivors face compounding harm after the assault itself, including elevated HIV risk, severe psychological

24 These proportions concern documented survivors and do not represent all survivors.

distress, and total socioeconomic displacement. These risks are worsened by significant gaps in referral systems and a lack of post-rape medical kits; gaps that are consequences of the same displacement dynamics driving the violence.

In Unity, Protection Cluster partners haves documented several incidents in which conflict dynamics, economic precarity, and impunity of armed actors and uniformed police officers have exacerbated risks to women and girls. During armed clashes in Kaljak payam, Rubkona in February 2026, 37 women and girls were subjected to sexual violence in a single incident. This incident demonstrates with chilling gravity the ways in which spontaneous, sexual violence is perpetrated *en masse* by armed actors amid active conflict. This incident can be situated within a broader pattern throughout Unity state in which the collapse of protective systems during conflict and displacement consistently precede spikes in sexual violence.

Nation-wide monitoring from UNMISS recorded a 31% quarter-on-quarter increase in identified conflict-related sexual violence survivors in the first quarter of 2026, and a 78% rise year-on-year. UNMISS explicitly attributes this trend to the deliberate use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. Alongside these specific case studies, the data affirms that displacement-related gender-based violence in South Sudan is an intensifying feature of worsening conflict. These risks inflame dynamics in which women face systemic oppression, constrained decision-making power, and inability to fulfil basic needs due to the ever-present terror of assault. The societal stigma surrounding gender-based violence, compounded by weak enforcement and community ignorance, not only affect women but also male survivors, who grapple with the same societal pressures and the mental health repercussions of failing to meet patriarchal roles that celebrate strength, indomitability, and authority; whilst sanctioning weakness and feminisation.

Sexual and gender-based violence is deeply interconnected with, and a trigger of, retaliatory attacks and cycles of revenge-killing. Retaliatory violence is a harmful traditional practice in which a feud driven by social, cultural, ethnic, or religious differences, disputes over housing, land, and property, or sexual interactions (consensually or through gender-based violence) can fuel repeated cycles of violence that legitimise entire families, communities, and villages as targets. Through community-led protection analysis and response programming in Dengjok, Akobo, Jonlgei, women and girls described at length that unwanted pregnancy, either as a result of gender-based violence or from consensual sexual activitiy, was a significant trigger for revenge-killing in their community. Consequently, sexual and reproductive health services were identified as a potential health intervention that could disrupt the cycle of violence.[25] In other areas, communities emphasised the urgent need for comprehensive legal and policing framework, awareness programs, psychosocial support, and a robust reporting and response framework to create a safer environment for women and girls in the community.

RISK 5 Conflict- and violence-related child and forced family separation

Child and forced family separation remains one of the most pervasive and under-addressed protection risks facing children across South Sudan, with children from female-headed households, children with disabilities, and unaccompanied minors particularly at risk. Through 54 focus groups facilitated by the Protection Cluster between January and July 2026, communities describe armed conflict (particularly aerial bombardment), kidnapping, and inter-communal violence as primary drivers of child and forced family separation, with trends heavily concentrated in conflict-affected counties across Upper Nile and Jonglei.

Displacement driven by active conflict is destabilising, chaotic, and oftentimes repetitive; children can find themselves separated from caregivers not only by direct hostilities but the sudden imperative to flee in whatever direction that may seem safer than the immediate alternatives; this can result in children becoming lost, injured, or killed as they navigate unfamiliar or insecure terrain, struggle to find clean water or safe food to eat, or encounter dangerous people or wildlife. Separated children as particularly dependent on the goodwill of others, heightening their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Due to limited protection actor presence, limited functioning child-friendly family-tracing systems, and poor communication networks, reunification between separated children and their families or caregivers can take months or may never happen at all.

Protection Cluster key informants describe child and forced family separation something that occurs ‘sometimes’ or ‘often’ in 30% of the communities they monitor. While over 70% attribute these separations primarily to livelihood pressures rather than direct violence, the remaining 30% point specifically to the actions of criminals and armed groups as a key driver. Boys and girls are reported as equally affected, and 70% of informants identifying emotional distress as the most significant harm these children experience.

25 NRC, *Conflict-affected, access-constrained, under-served, and hard-to-reach: Adaptive protection programming in Akobo, Jonglei State, South Sudan.* (September 2026). https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/protection-from-violence-case-study

The Child Protection Information Management System Plus (CPIMS+) monitoring identified separated children as the single most pressing child protection concern between January and June 2026, recording 558 cases (281 boys, 277 girls), closely followed by neglect — including abandonment and denial of resources — at 480 cases. The vulnerability of caregivers themselves heightens ancillary risk to children, accounting for a further 318 cases, while unmet needs among children with disabilities were identified in 252 cases. These figures point to the intensifying nature of displacement-driven vulnerability: families under strain are less able to care for children with special needs, while children who lose caregivers are simultaneously exposed to neglect, exploitation, and labour. For children with disabilities, social stigma can itself become a driver of separation, as some parents feel pressured to distance themselves from children with disabilities amid the strain of displacement. This burden is concentrated in Upper Nile State, where 1,055 child protection cases have been recorded, followed by Unity, Central Equatoria, Abyei, Jonglei, and Lakes states, broadly mirroring the geography of active conflict and Sudan-related displacement.

Protection monitoring activities identified female-headed households, children with disabilities, and unaccompanied minors as facing the most severe risks of a broader pattern of conflict and insecurity, including association with armed groups. Separated children face heightened risk of exposure to a variety of harmful coping mechanisms that manifest under extremely coercive conditions CPIMS+ data recorded 104 children associated with armed forces and armed groups across the country between January and June 2026. Children of all genders can be associated with armed groups in functions ranging from soldiers, porters, cleaners, and for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Of the CPIMS+ caseload, 94 of 104 were boys. Children associated with armed groups are exposed to a multitude of further harms: 56 children reported experiences of physical abuse, 27 of abduction and trafficking, and a staggering 89 experiencing emotional abuse.

Though children cannot legitimately consent to associate with armed groups, nor to other harmful coping mechanisms such as child labour, early and forced marriage, and sex work, they may feel a heightened sense of personality responsibility for their own exposure to them. The implications of this misplaced sense of responsibility can be severe: Childhood experiences that stoke feelings of shame, fear, or trauma can become formative to a child's identity; when unaddressed, these can germinate into devastating and lifelong mental health challenges. The extreme vulnerability of children, as well as the protracted harm that can arise from violations of their innocence, underscore the criticality of child-sensitive, inclusive, and principled humanitarian response.

Despite these compounding risks, communities are not passive. Protection Cluster reporting notes ongoing local efforts to negotiate the return of separated children and war captives from armed groups, and to prioritise family unity and reunification even amid high food insecurity and malnutrition. Distant relatives, well-wishers, and community and youth leaders provide informal support in the absence of adequate formal capacity, though local authorities report being able to offer only minimal assistance until closer relatives are located. This leaves many separated children reliant on labour for survival in the interim, and carrying the guilt, helplessness, and long-term psychological impacts, including post-traumatic stress, that prolonged separation inflicts.

RESPONSE

PROGRESS MADE ON PROTECTION

Through July 2026, Protection Cluster partners reported reaching approximately 573,000 people, including 90,000 persons with disabilities. The 5W dashboard records 83 reporting partners and 94 implementing partners operating in 69 counties. Reported assistance predominantly responded to internal conflict and violence, followed by cross-border arrivals and floods.

HNRP activity reporting includes psychosocial and social-emotional support for 170,787 people, protective information for 117,918, referrals for 32,829 and case management for 19,809. These activity figures may overlap and should not be added together. Community efforts also continue to support family unity, negotiate the return of separated children and provide informal care through relatives and community networks. These capacities remain important where formal child-protection support is limited.

ACCESS-RELATED CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS

Insecurity and administrative interference constrain protection delivery in all areas of South Sudan, but particularly in areas affected by conflict. Flight restrictions, insecure river and road routes, evacuation orders, checkpoints, and unauthorised charges delay assistance and referrals. Interference in recruitment of humanitarian workers and efforts to ensure the impartial selection of aid recipients further restricts principled delivery. OCHA has reported 391 humanitarian access incidents between January and June 2026, 62% more than during the same period in 2025. These figures are troubling for the sustainability and efficacy of the humanitarian sector as a whole.

For affected people, distance, transport costs, flooding and fear of violence or retaliation restrict access to confidential services and discourage disclosure. Women, children and persons with disabilities face barriers. Local partners and community networks sustain support in some areas, but reduced international presence and inability for Providers of Last Resort to fulfil last-line obligations render them responsible for this critical function without sufficient resources or protection. In Canal/Pigi, Rotriak, and Pariang, unsafe journeys to obtain food and water increase risk of exposure to assault, abduction, and exploitation.

In Akobo, where the Government of South Sudan has imposed restrictions on the distribution of cash assistance and other commodities which may be instrumentalised for military objectives, partners are deploying creative adaptive strategies to support communities rather than suspend programming. NRC has adapted its response to focus on the provision of facilitated referrals from remote, under-served, and hard-to-reach communities to the humanitarian service hub in Bilkey payam using humanitarian speedboats.[26] This initiative is being advanced in coordination and collaboration with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) to ensure safe, dignified, and principled identification and triage of people in need of health services and other forms of assistance.

CRITICAL GAPS IN FUNDING AND POPULATION REACHED

The dashboard identifies 4.87 million people in need of protection services against a hyper-prioritised target of 1.45 million. HNRP activity progress remains particularly low for legal assistance, including legal identity (3%), case management (8%) and referrals (11%). These gaps constrain access to remedies and continuity of specialised support. Dashboard financial estimates derive from achievements and average unit costs; they do not establish funding received or expenditure.

The most consequential gaps concern functioning services beyond urban hubs, safe referral transport, trained female personnel and sustained psychosocial and child-protection care. Rubkona and Kaljak, Mundri East and West, and underserved areas of northern Jonglei and Upper Nile require particular attention.

Reduced protective and service presence, risks interrupting early warning, monitoring and emergency referrals. Fragmented land, documentation and mine-action support also limits safe solutions for displaced families. Geographic presence alone does not demonstrate that comprehensive protection services across general protection, gender-based violence, child protection, and mine action, are available, accessible, or continuous.

26 NRC, *Conflict-affected, access-constrained, under-served, and hard-to-reach: Adaptive protection programming in Akobo, Jonglei State, South Sudan.* (September 2026.) https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/protection-from-violence-case-study

RECOMMENDATIONS

RISK 1 Attacks on civilians and other unlawful killings, and attacks on civilian object

TO: GOVERNMENT AND COMMANDERS OF ALL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT. Immediately issue and enforce orders prohibiting attacks on civilians, sexual violence, child recruitment and looting.

Priority locations: Akobo, Nyirol, Uror, Fangak, Nasir/Ulang and Nagero.

TO: COMPETENT JUDICIAL AND INVESTIGATIVE AUTHORITIES. Promptly investigate alleged attacks and related violations through independent processes, with safeguards for survivors and witnesses. Pursue accountability for those responsible.

Priority locations: Akobo, Nyirol, Uror, Fangak, Nasir/Ulang and Nagero, subject to incident verification.

TO: UNMISS LEADERSHIP. Before further base closures, assess civilian-protection risks and maintain viable early warning and protection arrangements within the Mission's mandate, including formalisation of strategic linkages and coordination with the Protection Cluster. Assess gaps from completed withdrawals and initiate actions to support safe transitions.

Priority locations: Akobo and other locations subject to reduced or concluded Mission presence.

TO: HC/HCT AND CLUSTER LEAD AGENCIES, SUPPORTED BY DONORS. As a precondition for the withdrawal of presence and programming, assign and fund continuity of monitoring, services and emergency referrals. For completed withdrawals, assign gap responses early and review unresolved risks monthly through the HCT Protection Task Team.

Priority locations: Akobo and other locations losing services or coordination capacity.

RISK 2 Forced displacement

TO: AUTHORITIES RESPONSIBLE FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS AND LAND, HOUSING, PROPERTY. Establish informed choice, safety verification, surveying and clearance, tenure, and availability of essential services as preconditions. Support local integration and resettlement alongside return. Initiate timely joint documentation and land-claim support.

Priority locations: Rubkona/Rotriak and receiving areas in Upper Nile and Jonglei.

TO: RESIDENT COORDINATOR AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS, WITH LAND AUTHORITIES AND QUALIFIED MINE ACTION OPERATORS. Reinforce joint service and tenure support. Ensure explosive ordnance surveying and clearance before supported movement or site use, with establishment of land-rights safeguards before handover.

Priority locations: Receiving areas in Upper Nile, Jonglei, Unity, and areas of suspected explosive ordnance contamination.

TO: STATE/COUNTY AUTHORITIES AND CUSTOMARY LEADERS, SUPPORTED BY PEACEBUILDING AND DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS. Agree on inclusive arrangements for shared water, land, grazing, and assistance. Link mediation to enforceable remedies and financed improvements before the next relevant allocation or movement. Protect claims of women and marginalised people.

Priority locations: Canal/Pigi, Rubkona and verified active dispute locations in Jonglei and Unity.

RISK 3 Denial and impediments to humanitarian access, compounding discrimination, stigmatisation and access to resources, opportunities and services

TO: NATIONAL/LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND PARTIES CONTROLLING ACCESS ROUTES. Authorise safe and unrestricted humanitarian access, ensure accountability for damage, looting, destruction, and appropriation of humanitarian assets and infrastructure, and end the use of evacuation orders that include humanitarian workers.

Priority locations: Northern Jonglei, Nasir/Ulang and Mundri East.

TO: HUMANITARIAN COORDINATOR, SUPPORTED BY OCHA AND RELEVANT AGENCIES. Strengthen linkages between humanitarian access stakeholders and the Humanitarian Country Team Protection Strategy Task Team to strengthen and harmonise negotiation about access barriers, with clear communication pathways. Prioritise under-served and hard-to-reach communities.

Priority locations: Northern Jonglei, Nasir/Ulang and Mundri East.

TO: **INTER-CLUSTER COORDINATION GROUP, SUPPORTED BY OCHA AND RELEVANT AGENICES.** Ensure distributions and common-use resources are established in close proximity to households, repair boreholes, ensure safe and well-lit latrines, and improve shelter privacy.

Priority locations: Canal/Pigi, Rotriak and Pariang.

RISK 4 Displacement-related gender-based violence and conflict-related sexual violence

TO: **DONORS AND POOLED FUNDS.** Fulfil UNHCT-HCT commitments to incorporate resources for specialised protection services in 80% of all responses, including survivor care, psychosocial support, case management, and safe referrals, transport, trained female personnel, supplies, and local partners' operating and security costs.

Priority locations: Rubkona/Kaljak, Mundri East/West and underserved northern Jonglei/Upper Nile.

TO: **PROTECTION AND HEALTH SERVICE PROVIDERS.** Maintain confidential survivor care and safe referral pathways and confirm available providers and contingency arrangements. Ensure clinical management of rape services are strictly decoupled from police reporting and healthworkers are appropriately trained in survivor-centred clinical management of rape protocols, confidentiality, and psychological first aid.

Priority locations: Rubkona/Kaljak, Mundri East/West and underserved northern Jonglei/Upper Nile.

RISK 5 Conflict- and violence-related child and forced family separation

TO: **EDUCATION AND FOOD SECURITY ACTORS, WITH CHILD PROTECTION PARTNERS.** Prioritise identification and support to households and families at risk of sending children away; maintain safe learning opportunities and referral to specialist care.

Priority locations: Upper Nile, Akobo/Nyirol/Uror and Pigi.

TO: **COMMANDERS OF ARMED FORCES AND GROUPS.** Immediately end association of children with armed groups and undertake release and reintegration of children presently or formerly associated with armed forces and armed groups, including girls in non-combat roles.

Priority locations: Upper Nile and Akobo/Nyirol/Uror, according to verified recruitment and separation cases.

METHODOLOGY

This Protection Analysis Update (PAU) examines protection risks that are considered particularly egregious and on the rise, the conditions that fuel these risks, community perceptions of them, and strategies deployed by civilians to keep themselves safe. Intended to support urgent and well-coordinated prevention, mitigation, and response measures, this analysis is informed by:

- **Protection Risk Monitoring System (PRMS):** The South Sudan Protection Cluster's mixed-method data collection and analysis system, which provides insights into national and sub-national protection risk trends and patterns.
- **Needs Analysis Working Group:** Drawing from FSNMS, ISNA, IPC AFI and AMN, SMART surveys, ACLED, INSO, IRNAs, REACH data, IOM DTM, WHO IDSR, PRMS, and additional cluster inputs.
- **Information and Analysis Working Group (IAWG):** Protection Cluster specialised and interdisciplinary analysis group convening protection sector reports, analyses, and expertise to inform evidence-based analysis and advocacy.
- **Internally-displaced people:** Profiling exercises conducted with voluntary participants.
- **Inter-sectoral working groups:** NAWG, Access Working Group, Inter-Cluster Coordination Group.

The Protection Cluster in South Sudan is grateful to PRMS participating partners in 2026: UNHCR, NRC, DRC, REACH Initiatives, CIDO, HASS, NCA, ADRA, IRC, CHSS, H&I, RDA, EVE, NPA and RA as well as cluster partners engaged with the Information and Analysis WG contributing to this PAU: PHA, REACH Initiatives, HTC, UNMAS, RI, CINA, CP and GBV Workstreams, NP, UNHCR, IRC, IMC, WEFOD, SUNS, STCI, HI, and NRC.

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