

# **RETURN TO A DISPLACED NATION**

**The Sudan Crisis and South Sudan's  
Returnees**

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# Acknowledgements

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Featured Image: South Sudanese refugees returning home following the outbreak of conflict in Sudan in mid-April. At the border, they are taking a donkey drawn cart with their belongings to the registration center before heading to a Transit Center. Photo by Abdullahi Halakhe, Refugees International.

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## About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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# Summary

The fighting in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) starting in mid-April 2023 has caused a regional humanitarian crisis. In South Sudan, the return of large numbers of South Sudanese – who had fled earlier violence in their own country – is causing what is in effect a mass, uncoordinated, and unplanned spontaneous repatriation movement. Yet, the response has not been fit for purpose, woefully underfunded, and overly focused on onward movements from transit centers near the border. A modified repatriation plan is needed, one that draws on past lessons to better balance provision of emergency aid with mitigation of risks and long-term development of areas of return.

The violence in Sudan has [displaced](#) more than 3 million people, including 2.2 million inside the country and more than 700,000 who have sought refuge in neighboring countries. More than [170,000 people](#) have now crossed into South Sudan, which was already facing some of the highest levels of displacement and humanitarian need in the world.

The vast majority of new arrivals from Sudan into South Sudan are South Sudanese refugees returning to their homeland. This means that they have not faced the same barriers to entry experienced by many Sudanese refugees in countries like Chad, Egypt, and Ethiopia. But, once across the border, most of these returnees lack the means to travel onwards to their communities of origin. In addition, these communities continue to suffer from conflict and flooding, and property disputes are rife. As a result, many of these areas remain unsafe for return and, after years away, many South Sudanese lack a clear home to which they can return.

The combination of ongoing conflict in Sudan, the onset of the rainy season, and insufficient practical options for onward transport and return to communities of origin means that many returnees will remain in transit centers near the border, and the number of new arrivals will grow.

The conditions in and around the main transit center in Renk are dire, and urgent action is needed to save lives. As Refugees International witnessed, many new arrivals lack even plastic sheets to shelter from torrential rainfalls marking the start of the rainy season. People are resorting to open defecation for lack of latrines. Communicable diseases like measles are already spreading, and at the time of the Refugees International team's visit, at least four children had already died as a result. Aid workers are already reporting spikes in gender-based violence (GBV). International and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are at the forefront of responding, but face grossly limited resources.

People returning to South Sudan must not be abandoned to such conditions. The government and international donors must urgently step up the resources for adequate services, including increased food and basic medical care, protection and support for women and girls, and more durable shelters and latrines. To date, the government of South Sudan, with the agreement of UN agencies, has focused almost exclusively on moving people onward to areas of origin, seeking to avoid the establishment of long-term camps by transporting tens of thousands by plane and barge. Such onward movements will be a key part of any solution to the current challenges near the border – but they must be safe, voluntary, and supported – and these immediate returns cannot be the only approach. An overreliance on such efforts at the expense of more robust services is putting lives at immediate risk.

What is needed is a modified repatriation plan. While the scale and rapid onset of the returns will make some best practices unworkable in the near term, many others – including better information sharing, interim shelter and livelihood assistance, and conflict sensitivity awareness – could go a long way to improving the current response.

For its part, the government of South Sudan must implement the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan ([Revitalized Peace Agreement](#)), including the chapter dedicated to humanitarian issues. One of the visions of the agreement was to create the conditions in which South Sudan's displaced people could finally return home in peace. The crisis in Sudan has accelerated that return in less-than-ideal conditions. No more time can be wasted as hundreds of thousands more potential returnees wait in the wings.

# Recommendations

## The government of South Sudan should:

- Revise its de facto no camp policy to allow for more robust and long-term provision of services to the transit center for returnees sheltering in Renk and in other areas along the Sudan–South Sudan border. This should include increased food, health, and protection services (including gender-based violence and psycho-social support), and more durable shelter materials and sanitation facilities (including latrines).
- Urgently establish and implement a comprehensive repatriation plan, in conjunction with UN agencies and local governments and organizations that is informed by past efforts and guidance. The plan should include emergency aid near the border, security and conflict sensitivity assessments, transportation facilitation, livelihood and shelter support kits for returnees, community integration services, engagement and information sharing with returnees, along with sub-transit sites and longer-term development projects where possible.
- Pass the Protection and Assistance to Internally Displaced Persons Act of 2019, and implement Chapter III of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, which would secure greater attention and funding for the protection and support of IDPs and recent returnees.

## UN agencies should:

- Urgently put in place a permanent Humanitarian Coordinator and empower the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to improve collection and sharing of basic information on numbers of new arrivals, intended destinations, and needs assessments.
- The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should work with the government of South Sudan to develop and implement a comprehensive repatriation plan prioritizing and sequencing immediate life-saving aid alongside preparations for a more sustainable plan involving movement to and development of areas of return. This should include engagement with the World Bank and other international financial institutions, informed by conflict sensitivity assessments, to support livelihood opportunities and disaster reduction projects to mitigate flooding in areas of return.

- Ensure that aid and transport opportunities, whether by the government or UN agencies, are done in a neutral, equitable, and voluntary manner, conscious of the history of manipulation of such movements, often along ethnic lines, in the past in South Sudan.

## The United States and other donor countries should:

- Immediately increase funding for the emergency response to the Sudan Crisis in South Sudan, particularly considering the urgent situation in Renk, as well as for the preexisting Humanitarian Response Plan. Closely monitor to ensure humanitarian assistance is responsibly provided and reaches those in need.
- Engage the government of South Sudan at the highest diplomatic levels toward implementation of the Revitalized Peace Agreement.

# Methodology and Research Overview

A team from Refugees International traveled to Juba and Renk in South Sudan in June 2023 to assess the conditions and challenges related to the Sudan crisis response in South Sudan. The Refugees International team, in partnership with a representative of South Sudan Women United, interviewed South Sudanese recent returnees, longer-term internally displaced South Sudanese, as well as Sudanese refugees, UN and government officials, local and international NGOs providing humanitarian assistance to displaced people, and other experts. This report is further informed by several years of research by Refugees International on the humanitarian and displacement challenges in South Sudan.

# Background

The history of South Sudan, both before and after independence in 2011, has been characterized by cycles of displacement and return. The international community and the nascent authorities of pre-independence South Sudan mounted a major multi-year repatriation and internal return process following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005. From 2005–2008, 1.7 million people returned to communities of origin in South Sudan, with extensive support from international aid groups. Following independence in 2011, internal conflict in South Sudan exploded in late 2013 and persisted for several years. A peace agreement signed in 2018 has quelled outright clashes at the national level, but sporadic localized fighting, often tied to national rivalries, continues in many parts of the country. The result of this history has been a protracted displacement and humanitarian crisis with 2.2 million internally displaced people and 2.3 million refugees living in surrounding countries and three-quarters of the population in need of humanitarian assistance. Control of territory is often contested between different ethnic groups, and large-scale returns have historically held the potential to disrupt local balances of power – a major consideration in the planning and execution of safe and peaceful returns in the pre-independence period. This dynamic is particularly crucial today, with implementation of key pieces of the agreement stalled, including the formation of a single army and adoption of a constitution. Elections initially planned for 2023 have been postponed to 2024. A chapter of the agreement dedicated to humanitarian issues, including planning for returns of South Sudanese refugees from abroad, has seen hardly any progress. Abrupt and poorly coordinated returns could further complicate the already weak implementation of the 2018 peace agreement.

Humanitarian challenges in South Sudan have been further exacerbated by climate shocks that have led to historic flooding in areas like Unity and Upper Nile states, as well as droughts, particularly in the southeast. Governance challenges combined with the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and cuts in development aid have led to an economic downturn.

On April 15, 2023, fighting between the SAF and the rival paramilitary RSF in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum quickly escalated and spread to several parts of the country. The fighting has been marked by indiscriminate attacks on civilians, leading to thousands of deaths and the displacement of 3 million people, exacerbating an already challenging humanitarian situation in Sudan and across the region. Multiple ceasefire agreements brokered by the United States and Saudi Arabia have failed to hold, and there is little prospect that the fighting will end in the near term.



Fighting in Sudan has made the humanitarian situation in South Sudan even worse. The cut off of trade supply routes from Sudan to South Sudan has increased the prices of basic commodities as much as **60 percent**. New localized ethnic-based tensions have already sprung up in Renk and Malakal in Upper Nile state and threaten to reignite a long history of broader ethnic-based fighting. As returnees reach new areas, whether in their former home villages or cities like Malakal and Juba, the strain on already stretched basic services will grow. The added strains will do little to help stalled peace implementation move forward.

Since the outbreak of fighting in Sudan, tens of thousands of South Sudanese have returned to South Sudan along with thousands of Sudanese refugees fleeing their country. The UN estimates that **three-quarters** of them have crossed in through Renk County in Upper Nile state, mostly arriving after perilous journeys fleeing attacks in Khartoum. As one recent returnee described to Refugees International, “They don’t just attack the barracks. They engulf civilians as well...What brought us here is war.” Most of the remainder have crossed into Northern and Western Bahr el Ghazal states from Darfur.



Recently arrived Sudanese refugees wait to be registered at Gorom refugee camp near Juba, South Sudan. Photo Credit: Refugees International

# An Overmatched Response

The response by the government and UN agencies has focused primarily on expediting onward movements to areas of origin, while limiting the provision of more robust services in and around Renk and at least 11 other reception points identified by South Sudanese authorities along the border. As stated in the Emergency Response Plan, the idea is “to avoid the creation of camps.” On the surface, the reasoning behind this is sound – it is in no one’s interest to establish new IDP camps in hard-to-reach areas, and remaining in limbo in Renk is not ideal. However, the reality is that there are significant barriers and risks to onward movement. Tens of thousands of people have been stuck in the “transit centers” for more than three months while more are arriving daily. As one South Sudanese journalist told the Refugees International team, providing more permanent shelter and services in Renk is “not an optimal situation, but a must.”

Between mid-April and mid-July 2023, the South Sudan government and UN agencies facilitated onward movement from Upper Nile state via flights and barges of more than 70,000 people, and another estimated 23,000 people found their own ways to move beyond Upper Nile.

These efforts have been cost-intensive and hampered by poor roads and the limited size of planes able to land on the rough landing strip in Renk. Several thousand returnees were transported via barge to Malakal, but inter-ethnic fighting in Malakal in early June put such transports temporarily on hold. Even under ideal weather conditions, these would be significant limiting factors. The onset of the rainy season makes both flights and ground transport more difficult. At the same time, humanitarian workers with whom Refugees International spoke reported growing needs and dwindling supplies.

While predicting further movements is difficult, the latest UN estimates project more than 400,000 new arrivals from Sudan in the coming months. The majority will likely continue to enter via the border crossing near Renk, meaning that tens of thousands of people will realistically need to be accommodated in and around Renk in the medium to long-term. Prior to the crisis, there were 800,000 South Sudanese registered refugees in Sudan and hundreds of thousands considered South Sudanese migrants – not to mention Sudanese and nationals of other countries. Continued fighting in Sudan could mean many more new arrivals.

To be sure, onward movements will be necessary, and many of the returnees are voluntarily choosing to move directly to their communities of origin or other interior



cities. Relieving congested conditions is a must. But these efforts must be better balanced with the need for more robust and durable services at the border and at interim waypoints within the country, even at the risk of establishing longer-term camps.

Finally, there has been a lack of adequate coordination and information sharing so far in the response. Humanitarian workers with whom Refugees International spoke cited a lack of accurate information about population movements, destination intentions, and needs assessments both along the border and in areas of return. Part of this is ascribed to the absence of a permanent Humanitarian Coordinator and the dual-hatting of the interim Humanitarian Coordinator, overseeing both implementation and coordination of the response. Several humanitarian actors felt that coordination of information collection and sharing was getting less concerted attention as a result. NGOs also said that the relatively lower status of OCHA in the country has contributed to gaps in the quality and effectiveness of information gathering and sharing. To remedy this, a permanent Humanitarian Coordinator should be put in place, and OCHA's capacity to improve collection of basic information on numbers and intentions of new arrivals and needs assessments should be increased. The appointment of a high-level OCHA representative to Renk shortly following Refugees International's visit is a promising step forward, but, as of the time of this report, the gaps remain.





A South Sudanese mother explains the Renk Transit center's poor housing and sanitation following the rains. Photo Credit: Refugees International



# Catastrophe at the Border

The result of this weak and underfunded response has been a catastrophe at the border. The transit center in Renk was initially set up for a capacity of 5,000 people. As of mid-July 2023, at least **16,000 returnees** were living in the site, and another 25,000 were living nearby. An estimated 1,000 to 1,500 people are crossing the border into South Sudan each day. The result is a situation in which thousands of people are living without shelter or basic services.

Refugees International interviewed several recent returnees near Renk who described sleeping in the open, lacking even plastic sheets. Lack of latrines and access to clean water are already causing the spread of disease. Humanitarian workers in Renk told the team in mid-June that there were already more than 80 cases of measles leading to the deaths of four children.

While the Refugees International team was visiting, the body of a man who died was left in the transit center as heavy rains prevented proper burial. Aid workers further reported widespread trauma and a lack of psycho-social support.

Many women and girls have **experienced** conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) along their journeys from Sudan. Upon arrival in South Sudan, they remain vulnerable. As Refugees International has **reported**, South Sudan has been one of the most dangerous places in the world for women and girls for several years. As returnees continue to arrive, humanitarian workers told Refugees International that gender-based violence is on the rise. Increased prevention, medical, and psycho-social support services are greatly needed in transit sites and areas of return.

National and local NGOs are at the forefront of carrying out lifesaving work but are largely underresourced. Tensions have also been increasing, both between ethnic groups and between returnees and humanitarian workers. At the time of the Refugees International team's visit, aid workers reported that an INGO staffer had been attacked by frustrated returnees. The team also witnessed poor and inadequate shelter and a lack of sufficient food. Dignity kits had only been distributed once. The returnees expressed a collective sense of frustration at the lack of services.

# Mabior

Mabior is a 25-year-old university student. He was born in Khartoum.

He has never been to South Sudan. His parents fled to Khartoum in the 1980s because of conflict.

Decades later, conflict in Sudan has upended his life and education. He is stuck in Renk doing voluntary work to help fellow returnees.

Foremost in his mind is how he will complete his education because the Sudanese conflict does not show signs of ending anytime soon, and he cannot transfer his credentials from Sudan to complete his education in South Sudan.

“For two generations, war has displaced my family, and I don’t know what to do about it. My parents were married in war, I was born in war, and I still live in war.”

# Barriers to Return

In focusing primarily on onward movements, the government and UN agencies have also underplayed significant barriers to return. This is not just about the costs and trade-offs of transporting people from hard-to-reach places to their former homes. The reality is that, after years of war, many of the former homes of returnees either no longer exist, have been claimed by others, or are in areas without services or livelihood opportunities. For others, homes and farmlands have been destroyed by historical levels of flooding. Moving people back to contested areas can also stoke ethnic tensions or disputes over housing, land, and property—issues the government remains ill-equipped to mediate. As one IDP originally from Upper Nile now living in Juba told the team, “How can I have the government take me to where it is insecure? If the government wants me to go, show me where.”



Families walk in a pool of rainwater in the Renk Transit Centre after heavy rains in June. Photo Credit: Refugees International

One of the most charged areas for ethnic tensions is in and around Malakal in Upper Nile. Land disputes and past fighting between Dinka, Nuer, and Shilluk have left Malakal a tinderbox. Localized [fighting](#) between rivals in late 2022 led to tens of thousands of new IDPs arriving in Malakal. Many of these new arrivals sought refuge in the UN Protection of Civilians (PoC) site. Following the violence in Sudan, more people arrived, including some who the International Organization for Migration (IOM) had transported by barge from Renk to Malakal town to be closer to their areas of origin. The population of the PoC site has grown from around 36,000 in 2022 to [estimates](#) of more than 50,000 by June 2023. During Refugees International's visit, an incident in the PoC site between Nuer and Shilluk ignited widespread violence leading to [at least 20 deaths](#). There is no direct evidence that the increased numbers caused the incident, but several observers saw the influx as a contributing factor. Relative calm has been restored, but tensions remain high.

Stalled peace implementation and fear of a return to widespread violence has also left many IDPs and returnees uncertain about the safety of their places of origin. As an IDP in Juba told Refugees International, "The fact is that the incident that brought us in [to IDP camps], that killed us, that politics is still existing today."

Several thousand returnees have made it to Juba but continue to face difficulties. Many have come to pre-existing IDP camps facing recent cuts in aid and services. Nunu, a 20-year-old woman recently returned from Khartoum, told Refugees International, "For us to reach this country was a big struggle. We did everything to get out of Sudan, but we suffered again [in South Sudan]." An IDP camp chairperson in Juba described a lack of food, shelter, and proper latrines and told the Refugees International team, "The situation here that they face is not actually a situation that a human being can live."





Nunu, a young South Sudanese woman, recently fled fighting in Khartoum, Sudan, to return to South Sudan. She now lives in an IDP camp in Juba. Photo Credit: Refugees International



# Initiating a Modified Repatriation Program

What is needed is a rapid, modified repatriation program that includes provision for immediate emergency aid near the border, while building as quickly as feasible toward returns in line with international standards: voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable. While the emergency nature of the current returns means that plans will not be fully in line with ideal repatriation plans, they can be much closer than the current response.

Most immediately, a surge of resources is needed to Renk and surrounding areas to help people make it through the next several months of the rainy season and to prepare for likely new arrivals. These resources should include food, more durable shelter materials, latrines, and health facilities, and GBV, psycho-social, and other protections services. Where feasible – and with careful analysis of conflict dynamics – sub-transit centers should be established to relieve congestion in Renk, ideally closer to areas of return. For example, with an increase of services, more people might be moved to Paloch where an airfield for oil facilities can support larger planes. Or, with an increased UN peacekeeping presence, areas of Malakal, outside of the PoC site, might prove tenable for temporary sub-transit centers.

At the same time, a coordinated plan for emergency repatriation should be initiated, informed by past experiences in South Sudan and already written plans for returns. The [repatriation](#) of nearly 100,000 South Sudanese from Uganda between 2005 and 2009 includes valuable lessons and guidance on how to effectively facilitate returns. More recently, IDP return efforts, including a draft [IDP law](#) and the development of a National Durable Solutions Strategy and Action Plan and State and National Level Solutions Task Forces provide further valuable guidance.

Best practices like “go and see visits,” facilitated transport and cash grants for all voluntary returnees, or guarantees of livelihoods and transition to government services in areas of return may not all be immediately practicable in the near- to medium-term. But other aspects of a repatriation program, especially those related to ensuring basic voluntariness, essential aid, and safety, could go a long way in improving the current response.

As a first step, UN agencies should work with national and state officials and community leaders to better assess and share information about the level of services, safety, and conflict dynamics in areas of return. UN agencies should also work with



State Level Task Forces to carry out conflict sensitivity assessments that carefully explore potential tensions related to ethnicity, or housing, land, and property disputes. Such assessments should also look for risks of demographic engineering by actors seeking to gain political or electoral power ahead of planned elections. They can also help to identify where future investments in conflict mitigation programming will be needed. In the immediate term, in an environment of limited resources, such analysis and acknowledgement of conflict sensitivity risks will be useful in informing how best to sequence the facilitation of transport from the transit centers for returnees from various areas of origin.

Further, a repatriation plan should include the appointment and engagement of community leaders among the returnees. Such engagement can help to ensure that the concerns of returnees are heard by those planning repatriation and that returnees remain properly informed.

The government, supported by international donors, must also work to increase local government capacity to provide services and to develop livelihood opportunities in areas of return. Passing the IDP law would be an important first step, as it would enshrine government commitments to improve protection and support for IDPs, including through dedicated funding. Similarly, the government should implement Chapter III of the Revitalized Peace Agreement, dedicated to the humanitarian response, which includes commitments to support programs for “relief, protection, repatriation, resettlement, reintegration and rehabilitation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees.” It also includes a commitment to establish and provide an initial \$100 million in funding for a Special Reconstruction Fund that would include “the provision of assistance and protection to IDPs, returnees and families affected by conflict.”

The national government should also work now with state governments to identify land for returnees and work with UN agencies to start planning urban displacement responses as more returnees are likely to stay in Juba, Malakal, and other urban areas.

On the side of international donors and UN agencies, the regional emergency [response plan](#) for Sudan states that returnees should receive assistance “within their communities through the existing HRP [Humanitarian Response Plan] activities.” But the HRP was already underfunded before the Sudan crisis. This underscores the need for donors to fund both the emergency response and pre-existing needs.

A sustainable repatriation program will also require longer-term development investments. Robust security and conflict sensitivity assessments can help identify priority areas for such projects. UNHCR’s [Pockets of Hope](#) initiative, which has sought to support livelihood opportunities and resilience-building in specific stable areas in South Sudan, provides a promising example. Development actors like the World Bank – with careful attention to conflict sensitivity assessments – should seek opportunities

for development projects in these and other areas. Where possible, repatriation should be kickstarted with assistance along the lines used in past efforts. In the Uganda [repatriation program](#), for example, returnees were given both cash grants and seeds and shovels, as well as access to tractors to begin planting.

Ultimately, the sustainability of any development projects, or returns, will depend on implementation of the peace agreement. As one humanitarian worker told Refugees International, there is a need for real development to get beyond a band aid approach, but, “People need to be kept alive to take advantage of development.” Countries of influence must push the parties to the peace agreement toward implementation.

But a more voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable approach to repatriation need not wait for full peace implementation nor ideal conditions for return. Indeed, the speed and scale of returns demand an adapted approach, one that seeks to meet emergency needs where they stand, while setting the stage for more durable future solutions.





Manhil, a 26-year-old woman originally from Darfur fled fighting in Khartoum, Sudan and is now in a refugee camp near Juba, South Sudan. Photo Credit: Refugees International.



# Manhil

In addition to returnees, several thousand Sudanese refugees have also made it to Juba or joined pre-existing refugee camps near the border.

Those in the camps receive access to humanitarian services, but the increased numbers are straining registration capacities and supplies.

Refugees International visited the Gorom refugee camp outside of Juba and saw people outside in the open waiting to be registered and given shelter.

Several spoke about harrowing journeys to escape Sudan, seeing bombs and passing dead bodies.

One woman asked, “Where is the support for those with trauma?”

Manhil, a 26-year-old woman, fled Khartoum with her mother and four children. She described challenges in the camp including finding enough food, needing to go to a river to get enough water, and her children getting diarrhea.

“We are not able to go back,” she told the Refugees International team, “but life here is not easy.”

# Conclusion

As the Sudan crisis continues, the need to address emergency needs at the border and develop more durable solutions in areas of return will only grow. Onward movements should be supported but must be done as part of a more comprehensive repatriation plan, one that takes greater efforts to ensure the informed and voluntary nature of returns and that minimizes the risks of such returns only leading to further conflict, displacement, and suffering.

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