

Protection Situation Update: Leer County, Southern Unity (October – December 2015)

A. Background

In the days following the last Protection Cluster update on southern Unity (23 October 2015¹), heavy fighting was reported in Leer County. Between 23 and 26 October, the Protection Cluster received reports of over 70 civilian casualties, and attacks on at least seven towns. The intensity of the conflict over the three days marked some of the worst violence in southern Unity since August 2015.

The weeks that followed these clashes saw a relative return to calm. The lull in fighting allowed much-needed assistance to reach Buaw, Koch Town, and Mayendit Town in late November, and enabled a return of humanitarian actors to Leer Town and Thonyor in early December.² This was the first time most partners were able to resume a presence in Leer County since withdrawing in May. Community members in Thonyor have noted that there has been a marked reduction in violence since humanitarians have returned.

B. Protection Concerns

The Protection Cluster has received reports of over 200 people killed, over 50 women and girls raped, and 25 women abducted between late September and early December, bringing the estimated totals since the upsurge of violence in May 2015 to 1,200 killed, 1,430 raped and 1,630 abducted.³ During the attacks between 23 and 26 October, the Protection Cluster was particularly concerned about unconfirmed reports that 51 men and boys had been killed in a single incident outside Leer Town. While the exact circumstances surrounding these deaths remain unclear, it appears that the victims suffocated after being locked in a shipping container. It is also unclear whether their deaths were deliberate or an unintentional consequence of their captivity in closed quarters.⁴

The overall protection environment has improved considerably since the violence in late October. While smaller attacks and cattle raids continue, large-scale hostilities between the two parties appear to have temporarily ceased in Leer and Mayendit counties. Nevertheless, many civilians continue to return to hiding places on islands and in the swamps at night, which indicates that they still do not feel safe in most major towns. Attacks by youth from Koch County are also a persistent threat, and have contributed to preventing humanitarians from being able to deliver assistance in northern Leer County.

With the humanitarian return to Leer Town and Thonyor, more cases of unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) have been identified. During the recent registrations in the first week of December, 55 new unaccompanied and separated children were registered in Thonyor, and 18 in Leer Town. In addition, dozens more children reported that they were living with elderly or disabled family members since their parents had fled to Panyijiar County or the Protection of Civilians (POC) sites. Given the high presence of armed elements across Leer County, the visible use of child soldiers, and the lack of access to education facilities and support networks, there is a credible risk that these children could be exposed to recruitment.

¹ South Sudan Protection Cluster, *Flash Update: Protection Situation in Southern and Central Unity (September-October 2015)*, 23 October 2015.

² The planned return to Din Din as part of the same inter-agency mission was cancelled due to insecurity.

³ Data collected from a variety of sources, including human rights reports, local authorities, operational agencies, and the media. Wherever possible, information was verified by contacts on the ground, although some of the data could not be independently cross-checked.

⁴ These 51 deaths have not been counted in the total estimated death toll of the fighting between 23 and 26 October (estimated at over 70), as they are still unconfirmed.

The elderly, the disabled, the sick, and pregnant woman have also been disproportionately affected by the violence. During focus group discussions in Leer Town and Thonyor in December, individuals with reduced mobility reported having difficulty both fleeing during attacks, and reaching places where assistance and protection services are available. The distance between service points and places of refuge can be up to a six-hour walk through 1.5 meter deep swamps, and temperatures can drop to 16°C at night, when many women choose to travel for security reasons. There have also been numerous reports of children drowning, either while fleeing attacks alone or with multiple young siblings who could not all be assisted by their mother to navigate the deep waters.

Sexual and gender-based violence also remains a significant concern, with widespread reports of rape of women and girls. However, without GBV partners in the area, it is difficult to assess the scale of these violations. On a positive note, women in focus group discussions in Thonyor and Adok expressed a high degree of community support for and acceptance of rape survivors. Survivors themselves indicated that they were able to continue to live with their families and friends, who understood that they were not to blame. Women also indicated that their trauma was subsiding, and that visits by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and other monitoring mechanisms were having a cathartic effect, as they felt they were being heard.

C. Humanitarian Response and Needs

On 01 December, two inter-agency teams deployed to Leer Town and Thonyor, where around 2,500 and 4,000 households were registered respectively. Registration data from Leer Town shows that the vast majority of households are residing in surrounding payams. The registration created a significant pull-factor, and most households reported that it was the first time they had recently traveled to Leer Town. Since Thonyor served as the catchment area for civilians from across the southern and central Leer payams, the registration there was capped after three days to avoid people registering twice or making dangerously long journeys. The figures would likely have been higher had the registration been extended, as people would have continued to travel from distant locations to register.

Humanitarian partners were able to return to Koch Town and Buaw in Koch County in late November, and distributed food in Mayendit Town in early December. Unfortunately, the threat of new clashes and cattle raids in Koch County forced the Buaw humanitarian actors to withdraw in early December, earlier than anticipated.

IDPs and other conflict-affected communities in Leer County consistently cited food as their main need during focus group discussions in December. Many people reported surviving on water lilies and other wild foods, and indicated that they would be forced to relocate to the POC sites or Panyijiar County unless food arrived soon.

The other main needs identified by IDPs were for additional medical care, shelter materials, and non-food items (NFIs). Many people reported having diarrhea, skin diseases, and other illnesses that are likely associated with poor water and sanitation conditions in the islands where they seek refuge, and the long period of time they have spent hiding in swamps and rivers.

During focus group discussions conducted in Leer and Thonyor, every female head of household reported that her home had been burned down during attacks since May. These burnings have been corroborated by visual assessments conducted by humanitarians who were able to visit some of the affected areas. Other infrastructure across the region, such as boreholes, fencing, markets and communal facilities, also showed signs of deliberate destruction. Women also reported that they are unable to rebuild or repair their homes because the areas around many towns have been depleted of traditional shelter-building materials. Secondary occupation of intact tukuls is also reportedly high.

Household NFIs are largely unavailable due to the burning of homes and widespread looting. In focus group discussions in Leer Town, women reported that the shortage of large water containers forced them to collect water up to four times daily, considerably increasing their vulnerability to attacks.

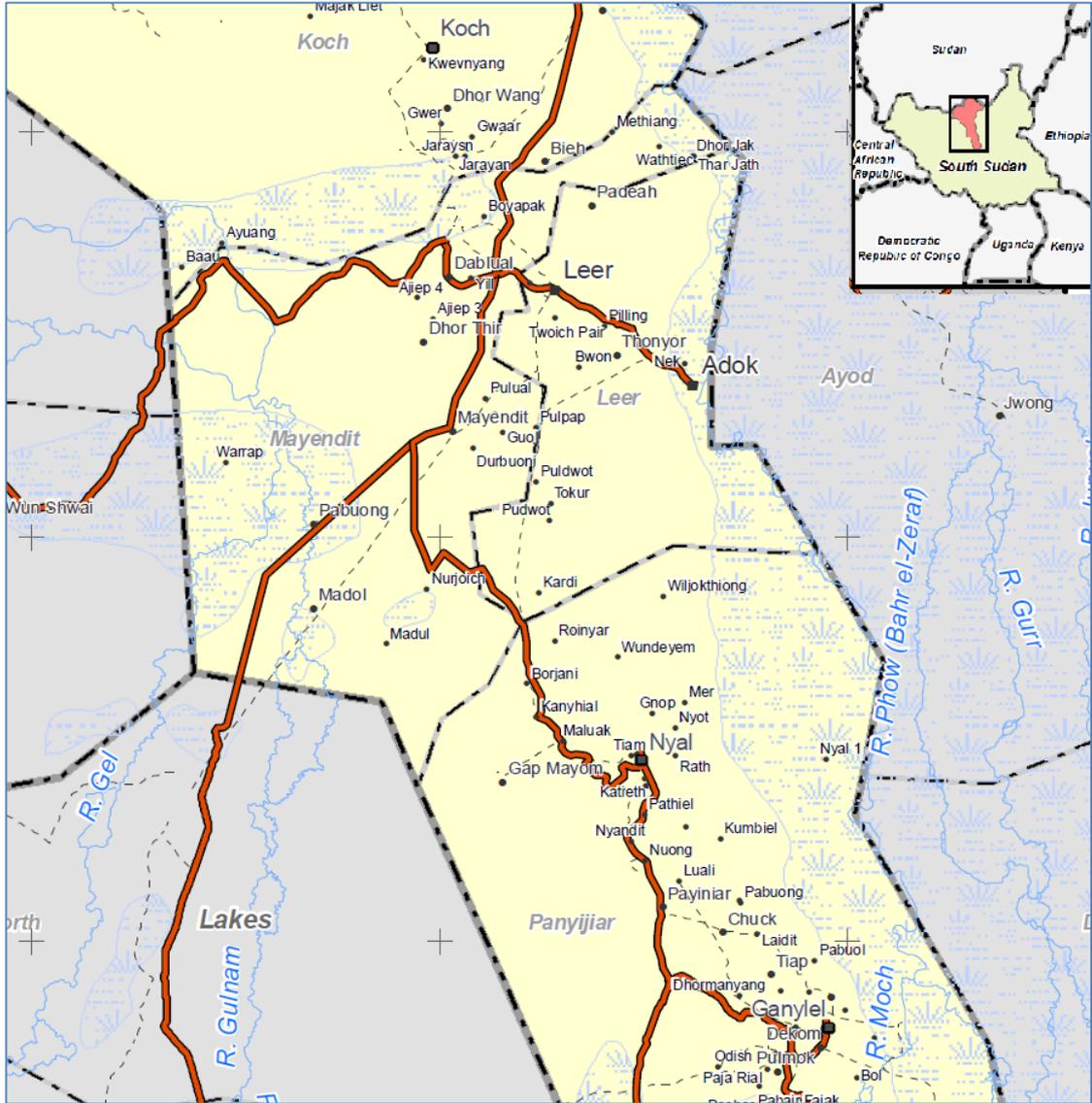
By early December, UNMISS had increased its presence in Leer Town to 80 troops, who are stationed at a Temporary Operating Base (TOB) that was established in November. Peacekeepers are conducting active patrols along the main roads in Leer County. Together with IGAD, UNMISS also hosted a peace conference between delegates from the two parties to the conflict in Pilling during the first week of December.

Humanitarian protection partners have now established a presence in Thonyor, and will conduct protection activities for civilians in the area such as protective accompaniment, monitoring, and family tracing and reunification. The Protection Cluster is working to identify a GBV partner for Thonyor and general protection partners for Leer Town.

D. Recommendations

- Many civilians have reported feeling safer now that humanitarians have returned to Leer County. To avoid creating a false sense of security, humanitarians must clearly communicate to affected populations that they can neither guarantee the safety of civilians nor protect them in the event of an attack.
- Humanitarians must be willing to stay and deliver. Withdrawing after providing assistance will create a vacuum. In the absence of international witnesses, armed actors may be less inhibited to attack civilians.
- Humanitarians should coordinate the delivery of assistance so IDPs travel only once to service points and are thereby less often exposed to harm while traveling long distances on dangerous routes.
- Humanitarians should actively work to expand services in other parts of Leer County. While separate security assurances from the parties will be required and humanitarians should not spread themselves too thin, many of the most vulnerable civilians (namely the elderly, disabled, ill, and pregnant) are not able to reach the current service points.
- Humanitarians should continue to monitor dynamics on the ground for any signs of a deterioration in the security/protection environment or threats to the civilian population. Organizations should alert local protection partners of any protection concerns and attacks on beneficiaries for follow up and onward transmission to the Protection Cluster. Threats to humanitarian actors should be reported to the Humanitarian Country Team for action and advocacy.
- Humanitarian leadership and the diplomatic community should pressure the Government and the Opposition to ensure that its representatives and affiliates in southern Unity respect humanitarian principles and operating space.

Map: Southern counties of Unity State



Source: OCHA

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