

THEMATIC SERIES THE INVISIBLE MAJORITY

This thematic series addresses the gap in awareness, data and knowledge about the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions.



“TIRED OF RUNNING”

Repeated displacement and premature returns
in South Sudan

NOVEMBER 2019

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Cover photo: An IDP in Bentiu protection of civilians site in 2017. Credit © Petterik Wiggers/UNHCR, June 2017

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Cattle rustling is a significant source of conflict in South Sudan. Photo: Tiril Skarstein/INRC, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following decades of civil war, a comprehensive peace agreement and the subsequent independence of South Sudan in 2011 prompted as many as two million refugees to return to the world's youngest country.¹ Many, however, were displaced again when internal conflict erupted in December 2013. A temporary reprieve following the signing of a peace agreement in 2015 enabled some to return to their homes, but conflict soon flared up again. A revitalised peace agreement was signed in 2018, but it is unclear whether the latest wave of returns will this time prove sustainable.

This study, which forms part of IDMC's Invisible Majority thematic series, examines the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in South Sudan.² Based on more than 200 interviews in Bentiu and Juba, it arrives at the following key findings.

| Multiple waves of violence have triggered repeated displacements

Over three-quarters of the research participants said they had been displaced more than once. Many returned to their places of origin only to be displaced again during a subsequent outbreak of violence. The lack of safe alternatives within South Sudan has forced many to seek refuge abroad, often after being internally displaced. More than 80 per cent of the returning refugees surveyed had been internally displaced people (IDPs) before they left the country.

| Security improvements are not the only motive for return

Internal and cross-border returns have increased following the signing of the revitalised peace agreement. Security has improved somewhat, but this is not the only motive for return. Some refugees have returned because of recent political instability in Sudan. Poor living conditions in displacement are an important secondary

motive. Many are hoping to regain their livelihoods, finding themselves unable to survive in displacement.

| Many refugees return to a life of internal displacement

Predominantly because of insecurity, two-thirds of those who participated in this study were living outside their area of origin, including in protection of civilians sites (POCs). Others, along with many "returning" IDPs, live in temporary shelters because their homes have been destroyed.

| POC sites provide essential protection, but more support is needed for those who return

Eighty per cent of the IDPs surveyed want to return to their area of origin, but only half think they will be able to within a year. Many are unwilling to return because they do not trust the revitalised peace agreement. POCs provide essential protection for those afraid of being targeted on ethnic grounds. Those who do choose to return are in significant need of support, which so far has not been forthcoming.

INTRODUCTION

There were 41.3 million people living in internal displacement as a result of conflict and violence worldwide as of the end of 2018, representing close to six out of ten forcibly displaced people worldwide.³ Internally displaced people flee the same violence and causes of displacement as refugees and face similar obstacles to durable solutions, but they remain the invisible majority of the world's displaced people.⁴

The relationship between internal displacement and cross-border movements is not well understood. It is clear, however, that many if not most refugees start their journeys as internally displaced people, and that many returning refugees face the risk of internal displacement.

Since becoming the world's youngest country in 2011 following decades of conflict, South Sudan has experienced multiple waves of displacement. Conflict first erupted in December 2013 following a political power struggle within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). More than 1.3 million new displacements asso-

ciated with conflict were recorded in 2014.⁵ A peace deal was signed in August 2015, only to break down the following July. Fighting between 8 and 11 July 2016 displaced around 36,000 people in Juba alone.⁶

A revitalised peace agreement reached in September 2018 has lessened the fighting, but there is widespread concern that it could collapse again over outstanding issues.⁷ The formation of a government of national unity, which was initially scheduled for May 2019, was pushed back until November to enable critical pending issues to be resolved. As the latest deadline loomed, fears the country would descend once more into conflict prompted an additional one hundred-day extension.

The latest agreement states the need to "expedite the relief, protection, voluntary and dignified repatriation, rehabilitation, resettlement and reintegration of IDPs and returnees", and recognises their right to return.⁸ The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), however, maintains that conditions are not yet in place for displaced people



Juba protection of civilians site in 2018. Photo: Ingrid Prestetun/NRC

to return, pointing to the dire humanitarian situation, ongoing insecurity and human rights violations, and continued displacement both within and across borders.⁹

Spontaneous returns involving both internally displaced people and refugees are nevertheless taking place. Many of those who return are living in IDP-like situations, the sustainability of their return undermined by “insecurity and unmet assistance and protection needs, particularly related to housing, land and property”.¹⁰

Almost 1.5 million people were living in internal displacement in South Sudan as of August 2019, and a further 2.3 million had sought refuge abroad.¹¹ Many have suffered repeated displacement, returning during relatively peaceful periods only to flee again when the fighting resumes. The future of displacement in South Sudan and the wider region will be determined to some extent by the outcome of the revitalised agreement. The regional refugee response plan foresees “increased spontaneous returns should the peace agreement hold, or a renewed influx should it collapse”.¹²

In light of this uncertainty, this report analyses the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border movements and durable solutions in South Sudan. Its objectives are:

- | To examine drivers of displacement, including onward movements within and across borders
- | To improve understanding of IDPs’ and refugees’ priorities and preconditions for their voluntary return
- | To examine the obstacles and opportunities returning IDPs and refugees face in achieving durable solutions

Methodology

Forcier Consulting collected data in and around Juba and Bentiu in July 2019. Fieldwork locations included the Juba and Bentiu protection of civilians (POC) sites, urban areas of Juba and Rubkona, and rural areas surrounding Juba.

Interviews were conducted with IDPs, returning IDPs and returning refugees. Given the challenge of conducting research with these target groups, respondents were identified through convenience sampling, drawing on the local knowledge and social networks of partners such as the Danish Refugee Council, the REACH initiative, the International Organization of Migration (IOM) and UNHCR.

The data collection team made efforts to diversify the sample in terms of participants’ age, gender, religion and socioeconomic background. The research is not representative, but offers useful insight into the experiences of displaced South Sudanese.

TABLE 1: Survey observations

	IDPs	Returning IDPs	Returning refugees	Total
Bentiu POC	27	-	26	53
Rubkona	18	18	19	55
Juba POCs	15	-	14	29
Rural Juba	9	15	7	31
Juba town	9	18	9	36
Total	78	51	75	204

A Forcier Consulting research officer led a one-day training workshop with two researchers, who in turn recruited local enumerators to conduct surveys with the target groups in Bentiu and Juba. The enumerators received two days of comprehensive training on the survey, methodology and smartphone data collection techniques. The researchers and enumerators also reviewed the survey content and agreed on standard translations into local languages as part of the training. A considerable amount of time was allocated for practice to clarify any wording or translation issues.

The researchers provided on-the-ground quality assurance checks and oversight throughout the data collection. The surveys were conducted on smartphones and data was uploaded daily from the field to a secure server. This allowed the technical team to provide a second level of data quality assurance and fieldwork supervision in near real-time.

Qualitative data was collected through key informant interviews to gather opinions and knowledge not captured by the quantitative survey. Researchers interviewed IDPs, returning IDPs, returning refugees, community leaders and NGO workers. The enumerators also took notes on qualitative narratives the survey participants shared.

“WHEN ELEPHANTS FIGHT”

Causes and patterns of displacement

Repeated conflict displacement

Following decades of civil war between the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and the Sudanese government, a comprehensive peace agreement was signed in 2005 that paved the way for the independence of the country’s marginalised south. After a referendum revealed overwhelming support for the move, South Sudan became the world’s youngest country in 2011.

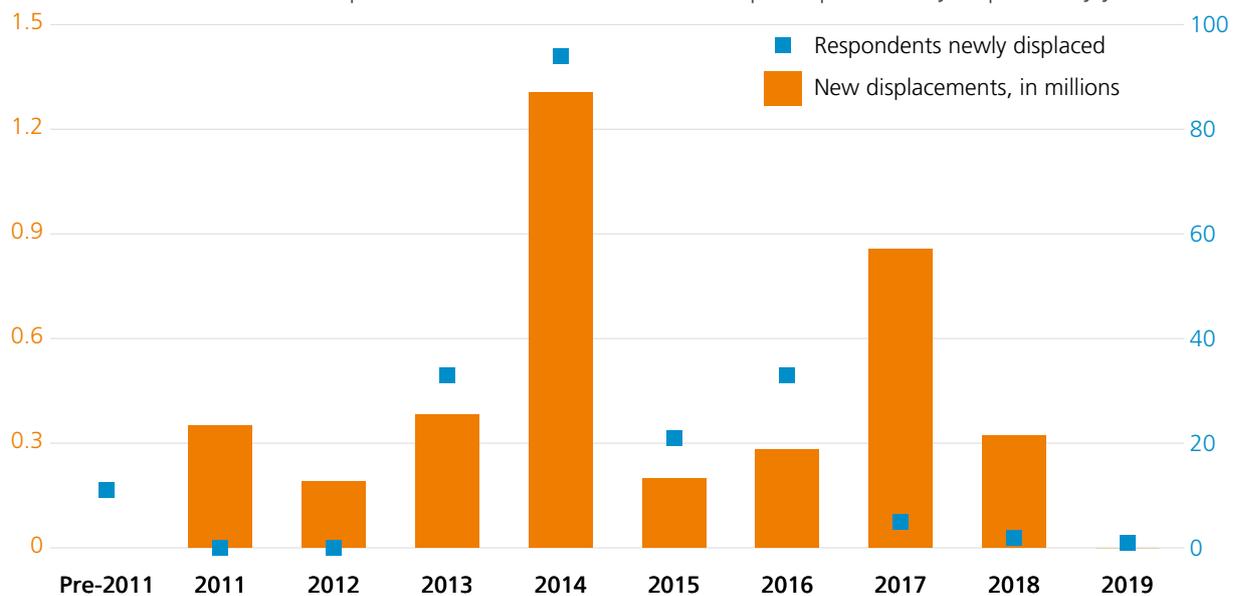
These developments prompted around two million people exiled from South Sudan to return.¹³ Optimism, however, soon turned to disillusion. Conflict erupted in December 2013 as a result of a power struggle within the SPLM. Leaders mobilised along ethnic lines, pitting Kiir’s ethnic Dinka supporters against Nuer factions loyal to Machar, which became known as the SPLA-In Opposition (SPLA-IO).¹⁴ The year of initial displacement among research participants ranged from 1983 to 2019,

but 47 per cent of respondents were displaced for the first time in 2014, reflecting the spike in new displacements recorded across the country (see figure 1).

The systematic targeting of civilians prompted large numbers to seek protection near or within UN peace-keeping bases, leading to the creation of protection of civilians sites (POCs) across the country. “We were displaced by soldiers after our people were targeted for being Nuer, so we fled to Juba POC,” said Abdo, an IDP in Juba POC.¹⁵

A peace agreement in August 2015 offered the prospect of an end to the conflict, and people began to return once more.¹⁶ The formation of a transitional government of national unity failed to resolve underlying political tensions and fighting erupted again in Juba in July 2016.¹⁷

FIGURE 1: Total new conflict displacements and number of research participants newly displaced by year



Note: IDMC does not have displacement data for South Sudan pre-independence



Returnees from northern Sudan are transported to their place of origin in Jonglei state in 2011, just before South Sudan's independence.
Photo © Benjamin Loyseau/UNHCR, January 2011

The conflict spread rapidly to the rest of the country, including the previously unaffected Greater Equatoria region, formerly South Sudan's breadbasket. New rebel fronts emerged, blurring the conflict lines further, and attacks against civilians proliferated throughout the country. "People were killed, houses burned and properties looted", said Alimah, an IDP in Bentiu POC.

A revitalised peace agreement was reached in September 2018 under the mediation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The agreement foresaw the formation of a united government in May 2019, but implementation has now been postponed twice because of unresolved disputes over security arrangements and ethnically gerrymandered internal boundaries.¹⁸

Nor did all armed groups sign the agreement. The National Salvation Front is responsible for ongoing conflict in Greater Equatoria, and the South Sudan

United Front and South Sudan People's Defence Forces also remain active.¹⁹ Sporadic clashes have been reported across the country.²⁰ About 10,000 people were displaced around Maiwut town in Upper Nile between 31 July and 5 August as a result of clashes between Cie-Wau clan and opposition forces.²¹

Loss of livelihoods, increasing resource scarcity, the polarisation of communities and the proliferation of weapons have all helped to fuel intercommunal and intracommunal violence.²² Violence involving community-based militias and other armed elements now accounts for the majority of civilian casualties.²³ Conflict over land and resources and cattle raiding are some of the causes of these violent clashes, which often trigger cycles of revenge attacks and associated displacement.²⁴ More than 70 people were killed as a result of intercommunal violence in the Greater Bahr el-Ghazal region between June and August.²⁵

Politicians fan the flames of violence by manipulating tribal and clan dynamics. The political nature of the conflict between government and opposition forces is well understood, and identity politics are also an underlying driver of intercommunal violence. A popular proverb says: “When elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.”²⁶ Political struggles among South Sudan’s ruling elites have claimed more than 383,000 lives since December 2013.²⁷

Displacement patterns within and across borders

Various waves of violence in South Sudan have triggered repeated displacements. More than three-quarters of the research participants for this study said they had been displaced more than once. Around a third had tried to return to their homes, only to be displaced again by renewed violence.

“When the 2013 war started, we had to flee to Bentiu POC,” Grace said. “Later I decided to come to Juba, but I was displaced again by the 2016 conflict and ended up in the POC here in Juba.” Grace did not try to leave

South Sudan. “We were already tired of running”, she said. Hiba, who also lives in one of Juba’s POCs, did not think it would be necessary: “We didn’t cross the border thinking peace would come back to South Sudan since the peace agreement signed in 2015. Many of us thought peace had come,” she said.

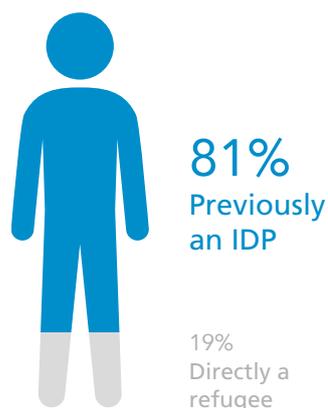
Not all internally displaced people who do want to leave the country are able to. Almost 80 per cent of the IDPs surveyed cited cost as a barrier to cross-border movement. “I lost everything that could have earned me money for travelling,” Joyce said. Two-thirds mentioned insecurity as another barrier. “I couldn’t cross the border because the roads were too dangerous,” Alimah said.

Those who do cross borders have often been first internally displaced. More than 80 per cent of the returning refugees surveyed had been internally displaced before they left the country, half of these more than once. “We were displaced by the conflict in 2013, and decided to cross the border because it was not safe in Bentiu POC. Soldiers used to fire at civilians through the fence,” said Favor. Since her return to South Sudan, she is once more living in Bentiu POC.



The POCs in Juba house nearly 30,000 IDPs. Photo: Ingrid Prestetun/INRC, 2018

FIGURE 2: More than 80 per cent of returning refugees said they had been IDPs before fleeing the country



Conditions in displacement

About 180,500 people live in six POCs across the country. Bentiu is home to more than 103,400, making it by far the largest. The two POCs in Juba house nearly 30,000.²⁸ Conditions are crowded and difficult. “Most of the tents are old and worn out, so when it rains they leak,” said an IDP in Juba POC.

In a country where 63 per cent of the population is thought to practice open defecation, there have been many outbreaks of disease, including cholera, because of poor sanitation.²⁹ “When it rains, water gets in, bringing cold and sickness, especially to the young ones,” said a community leader in Juba POC.

Outside the POCs, renting is expensive and living with relatives often leads to overcrowding, so many displaced people end up living in temporary shelters. Dissatisfaction with housing is high as a result. Across all of the respondents surveyed, a third were unhappy with their current arrangement. The three main problems cited were lack of electricity, overcrowding and shared toilets.

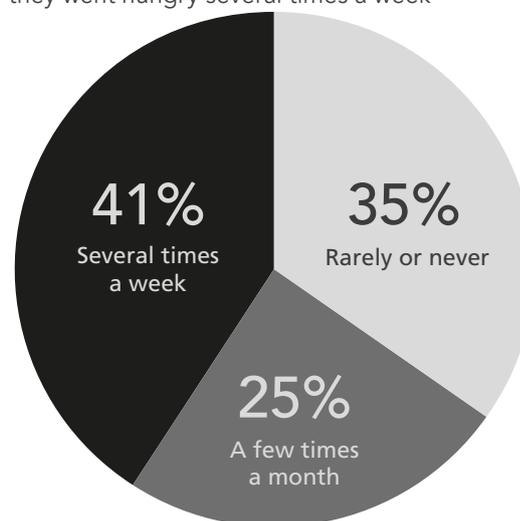
Access to services is also a challenge both in and outside the POCs. About 2.2 million school-aged children currently receive no education, and one in three schools are thought to have been damaged, destroyed, occupied or closed at least once since December 2013.³⁰ Among the research participants, 85 per cent of internally displaced people said there were too few teachers, and 80 per cent complained about the quality of education.

“Children are growing up without learning because of poor teaching or complete lack of teachers,” said Mariam in Bentiu POC. “Those who could help with teaching have gone to work for NGOs for better pay.”

Internally displaced people’s main source of income is day labour, and more than a third of the research participants said they found it difficult to get by. “We depend on NGOs’ food assistance,” said an IDP in Bentiu POC. “Women collect firewood to sell for survival. Some wives are divorcing because their husbands no longer have the means to take care of them.”

The recurrent waves of conflict have crippled South Sudan’s economy, and the inability to farm and disruption of markets have fuelled widespread food insecurity. Nearly two-thirds of the country’s population, or 6.96 million people, were thought to have suffered acute food insecurity between May and July 2019. This is the highest proportion ever recorded in the country. Additional demand from returning refugees is thought to have aggravated the food insecurity crisis.³¹ More than forty per cent of respondents said they were hungry several times a week.

FIGURE 3: More than 40 per cent of respondents said they went hungry several times a week



There have been some tentative signs of recovery, and oil production has resumed in Unity state.³² Inflation has also slowed. The price of white sorghum in Juba was still 164 per cent above the five-year average in July 2019, but it fell by 85 per cent compared with the previous year, effectively more than doubling the amount the daily labour wage could buy from seven to around 15 kilogrammes.³³

“WE HAD TO START FROM ZERO”

Sustainable or premature returns?

Motivations for return

More than 2.3 million refugees remain abroad, but over 384,000 have returned from abroad as of end of June 2019.³⁴ The majority of the returning refugees surveyed had arrived back in the country in 2018 and 2019.

Not all returns have been voluntary, particularly among those from Sudan. Some said the security forces had forced them to leave or because they had been threatened with arrest and deportation, and others because of political unrest. “Protesters accused us of being sympathetic with the former regime of Omar al-Bashir,” said Ibrahim. “I wouldn’t have returned if it hadn’t been for the threats to South Sudanese people that arose from the Sudanese protests. The situation here is still far from normal.” Around 33,000 refugees are thought to have returned from Sudan to Unity state in May and July this year.³⁵

Among those who returned voluntarily, improved security in South Sudan was the main motivation, followed by reunification with family and friends. Poor living conditions in displacement were another important secondary motivation. “Life became so hard in Uganda. There was no education and no jobs. That’s why we came back to South Sudan,” said Jean Paul.

Internal returns are also taking place. Some estimates suggest that as many as 886,000 IDPs may have returned since 2016, although they are unlikely to have been able to achieve durable solutions.³⁶ Around 22,000 people living in POC sites in Wau returned to the nearby town and other locations since 2018.³⁷ The returns resulted in the closure of one site in Wau at the end of March 2019.³⁸

The returning IDPs surveyed said they mainly wanted to recover their livelihoods. “We had been running here and there for safety because we had no money to leave the country. We came back when the situation started to normalise,” said Anita, who has returned to the town of Rubkona near Bentiu.

The UN mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) has provided some returnees with transport to their areas of origin, and around 3,000 people living in the Juba POCs are reported to have registered for voluntary return.³⁹ There are concerns, however, that many returns may be unsustainable.

Obstacles to sustainable return

Research conducted in South Sudan in 2015 found that “the sustainability of return of an individual depends largely on the accessibility of resources and livelihood opportunities at his or her return location. These include mainly, but are not limited to, the access to food, land, jobs, market and education.”⁴⁰ In most return areas, however, these resources and opportunities are lacking.

Among those who came back from abroad, 15 per cent have been unable to return to their homes. Almost a third of overall returnees are reported to have returned to severely damaged housing.⁴¹ This study found that two-thirds of the returning refugees surveyed were living outside their area of origin. Many returnees do not have access to water, basic services or livelihood opportunities, leaving them with considerable needs.⁴²

Internally displaced people who return to their areas of origin face similar challenges. Among those surveyed,



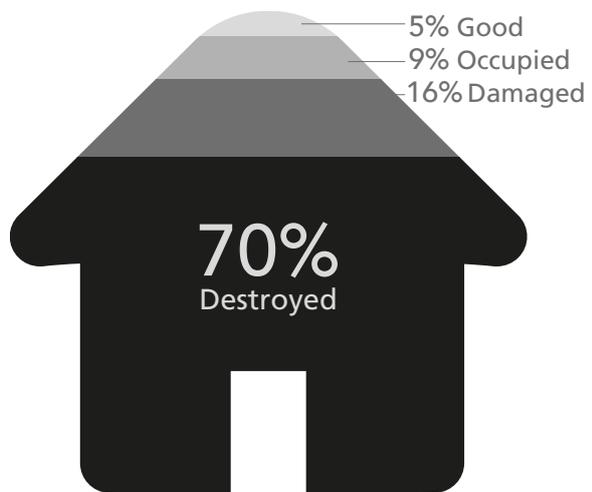
A mother collects firewood to sell to feed her children. She lives in constant fear of being raped during her forays. Photo: Ingrid Prestetun/NRC, 2018

nearly a third were not living in their former home. An NGO worker in Bentiu said many were still living as IDPs in temporary shelters because their homes had been destroyed. "Our housing conditions are almost the same as in the POC. We live in a temporary structure because our house was destroyed in the war," said Suleyman, who has returned to Rubkona. Mustafa is renting overpriced accommodation in Juba. "Everything was destroyed during the conflict so we had to start from zero," he said.

The destruction of property is a major barrier to durable solutions for both IDPs and returning refugees. More than 80 per cent of the IDPs surveyed had property before their displacement, but 70 per cent of these said it had since been destroyed. A community leader in Juba POC said many returning refugees came to the site simply because they had nowhere else to go. Talia and her family have been living in Bentiu POC since returning from Sudan because their home has been

destroyed. Ibrahim lives in a tent in an informal settlement in neighbouring Rubkona.

FIGURE 4: The condition of IDPs' former property



Given ongoing insecurity, there is no talk yet of large scale reconstruction. On an individual basis, mechanisms exist for property restitution, but they are not always accessible. For a start, many potential applicants do not have the necessary documentation. Only a quarter of the returning refugees and a fifth of the IDPs surveyed had all their documentation, either because it had been lost during displacement or because they never had it in the first place. Discrimination on ethnic grounds is prohibited under South Sudan's transitional constitution, but in practice it continues on the basis of name, dialect or physical characteristics and may impede applications for new documents.⁴³ Cost is also a barrier to access. Just the cost of transport to the relevant offices is prohibitive for some.⁴⁴

Those contemplating return have little information on which to base their decision. Nearly a third of the returning refugees surveyed had visited South Sudan

before moving back, mainly to visit family and friends, inspect their property and assess the security situation. Only a quarter, however, felt well informed before their return.

An NGO worker in Bentiu said information was only available for urban centres where good mobile network coverage enables communication. Villages in some rural areas have been deserted, which makes information even harder to obtain. "I have no information about my place of origin because there is no one there to ask, only soldiers," said Clinton, an IDP in Rubkona.

The Central Emergency Response Fund allocated \$11 million in April 2019 to "bolster health care, education, and water and sanitation activities in areas of return, and support returnees by providing them with seeds and tools, food and essential household items".⁴⁵ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs



A home destroyed in conflict between cattle herders and farmers in Western Equatoria state in 2015. Photo © Rocco Nuri/UNHCR, August 2015

(OCHA) said in August: “Humanitarian organisations plan to verify and register returnees who have gone back to their places of origin and provide assistance, depending on needs and vulnerability.”⁴⁶

Research participants, however, were not aware of any such interventions. “There is no support given to IDPs unless you’re in the POC,” said one IDP in Juba. An NGO worker in Bentiu confirmed that neither internally displaced people outside POCs nor returnees had received anything and that implementation appeared to be lagging.

Partly due to lack of support, return, for many, is currently inconceivable. “Here we have food assistance, health services, water, security protection and shelter,” said Mariam, an IDP in Bentiu POC. “But those who return don’t get any support.” Joseph, an IDP in Juba POC, thought that any forcible returns would be followed by an increase in early marriage. “Many parents would force young school-age girls to get married in order to recover lost property such as cattle,” he said.

Ongoing security challenges

Despite the revitalised 2018 agreement, there is little confidence that peace will prevail. “People live in fear of more armed conflict,” said an IDP in Rubkona. A community leader in Juba was worried that further displacement could occur. Research participants spoke of deep divisions in South Sudanese society, which will need to be healed to address the causes of conflict and displacement in the country.

“The war has divided people into government and opposition loyalists, and this has caused clashes between clans and ethnic groups, and deep poverty,” said an IDP in Bentiu POC. “Trust is completely lost as a result of the war,” agreed Ibrahim, who recently returned from Sudan.

Respondents’ perceptions of the current security situation reveal low expectations. “The situation here has improved slowly since we arrived,” said Suleyman. “People can sleep until the morning without being killed, but of course there are cases of robbery at night and women are raped in the neighbourhood.”

Around a third of women in South Sudan are thought to have experienced sexual violence from a non-partner, and two-thirds some form of physical and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.⁴⁷ “Women do not move freely for fear of rape and torture, especially during late evening hours,” said an IDP in Rubkona.

POCs continue to provide essential protection. “The security is good as long as you are inside the POC, but not good when you go out, especially at night,” said a community leader in Juba POC. The sites also house returning refugees unable to go back to their areas of origin:

“We decided to return to South Sudan because of the peace agreement, but its implementation is still in process and we’re unable to go back home for fear that the war might break out again ... so it’s better to stay here.” - Patrick, a returning refugee from Ethiopia in Juba POC

“We came back to South Sudan after we heard rumours that the security situation in South Sudan was stable, but to our surprise when we reached Juba we found that security was not good, so we had to go to the POC for safety.” - Rita, a returning refugee from Uganda in Juba POC

Eighty per cent of the IDPs surveyed want to return to their area of origin, but only half think they will be able to within a year. “Most IDPs do not want to go now because of the current unstable security situation in their home towns and lack of shelters and basic services,” said an NGO worker in Bentiu.

Fear of marginalisation and persecution are aggravated by the unresolved issue of state boundaries.⁴⁸ Afraid for his life if he is forced to return, Abdo has other plans. “If the UN leaves us with no protection, then I will become a rebel or go to another country as a refugee,” he said.

CONCLUSION

Repeated waves of conflict stretching back to before the country's independence in 2011 have displaced millions of South Sudanese people. Almost 1.5 million were living in internal displacement as of August 2019, and another 2.3 million have sought refuge abroad. Many people have been displaced more than once.⁴⁹

Many of those who fled fighting during the Sudanese civil wars returned after the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement in 2005, only to be displaced again when the newly independent country erupted into conflict in December 2013. Others who put their trust in the 2015 peace agreement were also displaced again when conflict reignited the following July. Unsurprisingly, there is little faith in the revitalised agreement signed in 2018, and the mistrust appears to be warranted. Slow implementation seems to reflect limited political commitment, and unresolved disputes continue to threaten the agreement.

Despite the unstable situation, over 1.2 million returns have taken place between 2016 and June 2019,

including one third from abroad. Few, however, are likely to have achieved durable solutions. Many of those who return from abroad are living as IDPs, as is the case for the returning refugees surveyed in the Bentiu and Juba POCs.⁵⁰

Many "returnees" are unable to go back to their former homes because of ongoing insecurity, resulting in half-way journeys from one situation of displacement to another.⁵¹ Others are unwilling to contemplate return at all. They prefer to remain in the relative safety of their place of refuge. Many feel they would be risking their lives by going back to their areas of origin. Alongside pervasive mistrust, food insecurity, lack of livelihood opportunities, and lack of services represent other obstacles. Overcoming them will require significant investment in peacebuilding, development and reconstruction. Yet until these obstacles have been overcome, returns will continue to be premature.



A UNHCR convoy returns 169 South Sudanese refugees from northern Uganda in 2007. Photo © R Redmond/UNHCR, June 2007

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