

South Sudan Humanitarian Situation

Report: Escalating Crisis in Akobo County – Jonglei State

April 2026 | Situation Report number 1



Prepared by: Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) – South Sudan Country Office

Reporting period: 6 - 31 March 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The humanitarian and security situation in Akobo County, Jonglei State, has deteriorated rapidly following a 72-hour evacuation order issued by the South Sudan People's Defence Forces (SSPDF) on 6 March 2026 ahead of planned military operations. The directive triggered large-scale civilian displacement and the withdrawal of humanitarian actors, leaving an estimated 112,000 people without access to basic services, including healthcare.

Preliminary estimates indicate that more than 200,000 people fled Akobo town and surrounding areas between 7 and 9 March, although verification remains constrained due to limited access. Women and children constitute the majority of those displaced, many of whom had already been displaced in recent months due to escalating violence in neighbouring counties, including Urur, Nyirol, and Duk.

The looting of civilian infrastructure, including Akobo hospital, the only functional health facility in the area, and humanitarian compounds, has further compounded humanitarian needs. Thousands of displaced individuals have crossed into Ethiopia's Gambella region, placing additional pressure on already overstretched reception capacities.

This escalation follows recent commitments by national authorities to ensure unhindered humanitarian access, raising serious concerns regarding compliance with these obligations. Without urgent de-escalation and restoration of access, the situation risks evolving into a major cross-border humanitarian emergency with significant implications for both South Sudan and Ethiopia.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- SSPDF issued a 72hour evacuation order on 6 March 2026
- Over 200,000 people reportedly displaced between 7–9 March
- Approximately 112,000 people left without access to healthcare
- Widespread looting of health facilities, markets, and humanitarian compounds
- Nearly 38,000 people reported crossing into Ethiopia
- Humanitarian access remains severely restricted

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Event
6 March	SSPDF issues evacuation order
7 March	MSF evacuates staff
8 March	UNHAS evacuates remaining humanitarian actors
9 March	Mass displacement and onset of clashes around Akobo

CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Akobo County, located in Jonglei State near the Ethiopian border, is a chronically vulnerable area affected by conflict, flooding, and recurrent displacement. Prior to the current crisis, the area had become a key refuge for populations fleeing violence in surrounding counties.

Jonglei State remains one of the most conflict-affected regions in South Sudan, with repeated cycles of violence and climate shocks undermining livelihoods and access to services. The influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) into Akobo had already overstretched the limited infrastructure and humanitarian capacity.

The evacuation order issued on 6 March triggered widespread panic and rapid population movements. The situation remains fluid, with ongoing hostilities reported and heightened risks of further escalation and cross-border displacement.



SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS

The security situation in Akobo deteriorated significantly following the evacuation order. After the withdrawal of humanitarian actors, heavy fighting was reported around the town, followed by widespread looting of civilian infrastructure, including the main market, health facilities, and humanitarian compounds.

Information remains difficult to verify due to limited communication, including reported network disruptions, and the absence of a humanitarian presence. The environment remains highly volatile, with continued risks to civilians.

DISPLACEMENT AND POPULATION MOVEMENTS



Between 7 and 9 March, large numbers of civilians fled Akobo toward the Ethiopian border. According to UNHCR, nearly 38,000 individuals have crossed into Ethiopia through Tiergol and Yir.

Prior to the crisis, Akobo hosted approximately 270,000 people, including an estimated 129,000 internally displaced people. If current displacement estimates are confirmed, this represents a substantial proportion of the population.

Women and children constitute the majority of those displaced. Many households are now female headed, with increased numbers of unaccompanied and separated children due to killings, family separation, and men remaining behind.

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF THE CRISIS

The crisis has resulted in widespread displacement, loss of shelter, and disruption of essential services.

Families are living in overcrowded conditions, often in makeshift shelters or under trees, exposing them to heightened protection risks.

Food insecurity is increasing; healthcare services have collapsed, and access to safe water and sanitation remains severely limited. Vulnerable groups, including women, children, older persons, and persons with disabilities, are disproportionately affected.



SECTORAL IMPACT

Shelter and Basic Needs

Displaced populations are sheltering in overcrowded informal settings, host communities, and open spaces.

Most households fled without belongings, leaving them without essential items such as blankets, cooking utensils, and mosquito nets.

NRC will prioritize household-level shelter support targeting the most vulnerable, in line with national policy, rather than camp-based approaches.

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

Access to safe water and sanitation is limited. Many displaced households rely on unsafe water sources and practice open defecation, increasing risks of disease outbreaks.

The absence of mosquito nets also heightens malaria risk, which remains a leading cause of morbidity in South Sudan.

Without urgent intervention, risks of cholera and acute watery diarrhea outbreaks will increase.

Protection

Protection risks have increased significantly due to displacement, insecurity, and the absence of services.

Women and girls face heightened risks of gender-based violence, while children are at risk of family separation, exploitation, and recruitment. Protection systems and referral pathways are largely nonfunctional.

Strengthening cross-border coordination, particularly in Ethiopia, will be critical.

Food Security

Akobo was already classified as IPC Phase 4 (Emergency) prior to the crisis and is now at risk of deteriorating to IPC Phase 5 (Catastrophe).

The looting of markets and disruption of livelihoods have severely limited access to food.

The immediate priority should be in-kind food assistance, particularly in Akobo. Cash-based assistance may be appropriate in Ethiopia, where markets are functioning.

Health

The evacuation of MSF has resulted in the collapse of healthcare services in Akobo.

The main hospital was looted, leaving communities without access to essential care.

The risk of disease outbreaks, including cholera and malaria, is high, particularly given displacement, overcrowding, and poor WASH conditions.

Humanitarian Access

Humanitarian access remains severely constrained due to insecurity, logistical challenges, illegal checkpoints, and communication disruptions.

The evacuation of humanitarian actors has halted operations.

Restoration of access will depend on improved security, re-establishment of air operations, and guarantees for safe humanitarian movement.



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KEY ADVOCACY MESSAGES

Humanitarian partners call for:

- Immediate protection of civilians in line with international humanitarian law
- Unhindered humanitarian access
- Protection of medical facilities and humanitarian infrastructure
- Safe and dignified movement of civilians
- Strengthened cross-border coordination
- Increased flexible funding for emergency response



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NRC RESPONSE AND OPERATIONAL PRIORITIES IN AKOBO

All NRC operations in Akobo are currently suspended due to insecurity.

However, NRC remains committed to responding through its Emergency Response Mechanism (ERRM) and coordination with partners.

Upon restoration of access, NRC will prioritize:

- Emergency shelter and non-food item assistance
- Protection monitoring and case management
- Legal assistance through ICLA
- Integrated WASH and protection interventions
- A significant scale-up of resources will be required to meet urgent needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Without immediate de-escalation and restoration of humanitarian access, the situation in Akobo is likely to evolve into a large-scale humanitarian emergency with cross-border implications.

Urgent, coordinated action is required to prevent further deterioration, protect civilians, and restore lifesaving services.



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Photo: Civilians displaced by insecurity gather at the Akobo River crossing point while fleeing violence in Akobo, Jonglei State, South Sudan, March 2026.

Source: Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Akobo Field Office.

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