NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

Protection from Violence Case Study

Cattle are herded from neighbouring payams and corralled each evening in areas considered safe from cattle-raiding. Bilkey, Akobo. Source: Scarlett Hawkins/NRC

CONFLICT-AFFECTED, ACCESS-CONSTRAINED, UNDER-SERVED, AND HARD-TO-REACH: ADAPTIVE PROTECTION PROGRAMMING IN AKOBO, JONGLEI STATE, SOUTH SUDAN

Context

Jonglei state in South Sudan has been impacted by tremendous levels of violence and insecurity. A drastic exacerbation of conflict dynamics since the final days of 2025 have triggered multiple cycles of displacement along border between northern Jonglei and southern Upper Nile States throughout 2026, propelled by the use of rapid-onset evacuation orders from parties to the conflict that explicitly applied to civilians, humanitarian workers, and United Nations peacekeeping personnel. As both battle-lines

and displacement pathways inched eastward, civilians arrived in Akobo; a county perched at the final frontier of the border with Ethiopia.

Earth cracked by El Nino conditions, Dengjok, Akobo. Source: Scarlett Hawkins/NRC

In March 2026, a new evacuation order advised all people in Akobo to evacuate within 72 hours, triggering widespread panic. According to estimates by the Akobo Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, 273,000 people were displaced to neighbouring counties and Ethiopia. Of these, 16,530 had experienced recent displacement from Uror, Nyirol, and Akobo West.

In the military push, civilian homes and public infrastructure were destroyed, humanitarian assets were looted, and Akobo became gridlocked, with the South Sudan Peoples' Defence Force (SSPDF) occupying the western payams of Akobo, and the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) occupying the eastern payams. In the weeks following this incident, the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) was forced to vacate its operating base in Akobo East as a result of funding contraction, rendering local communities without the protective uniformed presence of peacekeepers in the event of recurrent warfare.

Amidst these fraught conflict dynamics, humanitarian service providers have sought to rapidly re-establish operations in Akobo East despite local staff being personally affected by displacement, constrained land and river access, and significant programming costs. Prior to the conflict, the South Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (2026) assessed Akobo to be a Severity 4 county, indicating significant dependence of the population as a whole on humanitarian assistance for survival. Conflict and ensuing displacement of the community at scale have significantly deteriorated conditions: subsistence farming practices have been disrupted, market functionality compromised, and explosive ordnance contamination suspected in areas that were previously considered safe. Preliminary rainfall estimates indicate that, as of July 2026, to El Niño conditions had subjected Akobo East to its second-driest season recorded in 35 years. These conditions comprise a compounding force atop pre-existing IPC-5 conditions, indicating a credible risk of famine.

Given the SPLA-IO's present authority over Akobo East, the Government of the Republic of South Sudan has restricted the provision of humanitarian cash assistance and the transfer of communications equipment or other assets to this area, ostensibly due to concerns that these may be instrumentalised for military purposes. However, against the conflict and climate conditions besieging these communities, these constraints pose a serious risk to civilians throughout the county. For people displaced to peripheral payams

such as Dengjok, Gakdong, and Nyandit within Akobo county, the ability to access modest humanitarian services available in Bilkey, the administrative capital of Akobo East, is strenuous. To travel from Dengjok, to the immediate north of Bilkey, takes twelve hours when moving by slow canoe along the winding Pibor river, at a cost of 3,000 South Sudanese Pounds. Though overland travel incurs no cost, the journey takes at least three hours under dry conditions; under rainy conditions, the clay-like earth turns into thick, sucking mud that can extend the same journey to as long as three days. Community members described several instances in which people were ill, deterred by arduous travel or inability to pay, delayed travel to Bilkey until their condition was so severe that they died in transit.

With humanitarian assets and infrastructure damaged or looted and humanitarian staff in Akobo displaced, humanitarian service capacity, functionality, and resourcing has effectively reverted to a renewed start-up phase. Organisations attempting to mitigate costs have instituted mobile services, but many of these have limited range beyond Bilkey. In the absence of consistent static presence for protection actors, people have limited understanding of where to go to access needed services.

Safe looted during the conflict, Bilkey, Akobo. Source: Scarlett Hawkins/NRC

Programming

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Protection from Violence team sought to mobilise an adaptive response to support civilians in Akobo in their efforts to enhance their safety and access services, despite the significant structural and contextual constraints upon conventional modalities of humanitarian assistance. This rapid response is undertaken with the generous support through flexible funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Protection monitoring and analysis

Through gender-segregated focus group discussions with with women and men in Dengjok and Gakdong, as well as key informant interviews with humanitarian service providers and peacebuilding actors in Akobo East and Bor, Jonglei's state capital, NRC was able to build a clear understanding of previous and contemporaneous protection risks faced by the community. These included the exacerbation of:

- **Inter-communal attacks** by neighbouring communities who were perceived as capitalising on the chaos caused by conflict to steal cattle and abduct women and children from displacement-affected populations. This resulted in cattle-herders in communities such as Nyandit electing to bring their cattle to the road in front of the

County Commissioner's Ofifce in Bilkey each evening, as this area was believed to be more protected from cattle raids.

- **Revenge-killing**, 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 for violence.
- **Unexploded ordnance** and other explosive remnants of recent conflict in communities and farming areas, with suspected sites specifically identified in Dengjok and Gakdong.
- **Gender-based violence**, including sexual violence and violence against children, perpetrated by men both known and unknown from within the community and from neighbouring communities. This had a strong link to early marriage of girls, and forced marriage of young women, as a harmful cultural practice. Early and forced marriage was also described as a negative coping mechanism for conflict- and displacement-related families who make use of dowry payments to meet basic needs. However, women described tough negotiation practices by families to receive high dowries as a driver of resentment from the husband and his family, which heightens the commodification of brides and stokes both resentment and entitlement that increases the risk of intimate partner violence.
- **Trafficking in persons** were noted as a rising concern, with some participants describing systematic and smaller-scale movement of people, believed to be for the purposes of labour exploitation, early and forced marriage, and irregular migration to neighbouring countries, including Libya.

Participants in the civilian self-protection workshop, Dengjok, Akobo. Source: Damian Doggalle Henry/NRC

Civilian self-protection

Civilian self-protection programming recognises the expertise of local people about the protection risks their communities face, and provide technical and material support to leverage their intrinsic capacity to prevent, mitigate, and respond to these safely and with dignity. The first cohort of community members engaged in this training were 28 women and adolescent girls in Dengjok. Because civilian self-protection seeks to support those most affected by protection risks in the community, NRC specifically engaged women and girls with disabilities, elder women, adolescent girls, and single-headed households, across different displacement status categories. In total, the workshop comprised 10 returnees, 10 internally-displaced persons, and 10 members of the host community; of these, 4 were women with disabilities.

These women and girls received training in protection risk analysis in Nuer language over two days. The participants identified existing and emergent protection risks in their community and, in the development of their self-protection plan, decided to prioritise actions to respond to the risks of **inter-communal violence and abduction, revenge-killing, and unexploded ordnance** in their community.

Because inter-communal attacks are abrupt and large-scale, women and children have little time to gather what they need before fleeing into the bush or across the border to Ethiopia for safety for days and weeks at a time. To enable the greatest chance of a timely evacuation with reduced exposure to secondary risks, participants requested NRC's support to procure emergency evacuation bags. NRC has initiated the procurement of waterproof backpacks containing a variety of critical supplies, including: Ready-to-use therapeutic food, water bottles capable of filtering contaminated water, mosquito nets, oral rehydration salts, first aid kits, plastic folders to secure important papers and legal documents, solar-powered torches, whistles for safety, hand sanitiser, wet wipes, reusable sanitary pads, petroleum jelly, multifunctional kanga cloth, emergency blankets, and plastic garbage bags. Given the heightened risk of injury during inter-communal attacks and whilst fleeing, as well as the distance to specialised health services in Bilkey, the participants identified a need for basic first aid training so as to be able to administer timely assistance to themselves or others. NRC has initiated outreach to partners with relevant expertise and has committed to cover the costs of this training.

Participants described at length the diverse drivers and manifestations of revenge-killing in Dengjok. These insights highlighted the complexity of addressing this issue at a systematic or structural level, but did offer a handful of key entry-points to engage the protection threat and mitigate risks to, and manifested through, women and girls in the community. In particular, unwanted pregnancy – either through consensual sexual activity or gender-based violence – was described at length as a trigger for revenge-killing. Participants stated that they did not recall the last time in which sexual and reproductive health services were offered in Dengjok to enabled women and girls to decide the circumstances within which they become pregnant, but agreed this could be helpful. NRC committed to contact the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to enquire whether any Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) providers were presently operating within Akobo East and, if not, whether NRC could contribute resources to mobilise a response. Recognising that revenge-killing is typically perpetrated by men, NRC also committed to liaise with participants to better understand the feasibility and risks of targeting men with

influence over these dynamics in an imminent all-male civilian self-protection workshop in Dengjok. Furthermore, the community sought support to reinitiate peace dialogues that had ceased in February 2026 amidst worsening conflict. NRC committed to contact organisations previously offering this service to gauge the feasibility of re-initiating this service, either under existing resources or with NRC support.

The site where explosive ordnance is believed to be lodged under a central, actively-used road in the marketplace, Dengjok, Akobo. Source: Scarlett Hawkins/NRC

Unexploded ordnance in the Dengjok market was highlighted as a particular concern for the community. Observation of the site found remnants of destroyed shops encircling a significant indentation in the earth which was described as the point of entry of explosive ordnance. The angle of the indentation indicated the possibility that unexploded ordnance remained submerged directly underneath a road that remains in regular use by the community; this was witnessed during the observation of the site. Participants reported that explosive ordnance risk education had been provided to members of the community, describing it as particularly important for children. Children comprise over 90% of explosive ordnance casualties in South Sudan according to the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA). Analysis by the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) attributes this to the inherent curiosity of children, as well as their tendency to congregate around, and interact with, unfamiliar objects in groups. NRC committed to contact UNMAS and DRC, the lead agencies for the Mine Action workstream of the Protection Cluster, to share photos of the site and relay the information provided by the community in Dengjok to inform decision-making about potential surveying, clearance, as well as further explosive ordnance risk education. NRC further committed

to share the national Mine Action hotline (+211920001055), which is available 24 hours a day, with people in Dengjok and neighbouring communities to enable reporting of any other suspected explosive ordnance contamination.

NRC staff travelling along the Pibor river to Dengjok to provide services and training, Akobo. Source: Scarlett Hawkins/NRC

Individual protection assistance

Protection analysis conducted by NRC determined that the cost of travel to Bilkey (3,000 South Sudanese Pounds), where humanitarian services are concentrated, is high for people residing in Dengjok, Gakdong, and Nyandit. Whilst the provision of cash for protection would be an effective form of individual protection assistance, Government restrictions on the distribution of cash in Akobo impeded the ability for NRC to mobilise such a response.

NRC's visits to affected communities were conducted through the use of its speedboat. The journey between Bilkey and Dengjok takes approximately 40 minutes in this speedboat, compared to 12 hours by slow canoe. By speedboat, Gakdong can be reached within an additional 20 minutes along the river from Dengjok, and Nyandit is accessible within approximately 20 minutes in the other direction from Bilkey.

Upon consultation with humanitarian partners in Bilkey, NRC confirmed that limited resources had impeded actors from being able to bring all available services in Bilkey to other locations. To bridge this critical rupture in the service pathway and to support communities in under-served and hard-to-reach areas of Dengjok, Gakdong, and Nyandit,

NRC initiated a pilot shuttle service to identify and bring people from these communities to Bilkey for care. In order for people who are injured and ill to receive prioritised access to this service, NRC has initiated collaboration with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) and the County Health Department (CHD) to identify and triage patients across communities, situate medical staff in the speedboat to provide basic health support during the journey, and coordinate responses to prevent congestion of the health centre in Bilkey.

Children perform songs about peaceful resolution of conflict, with the red and blue flags signifying parties in conflict. Dengjok, Akobo. Source: Damian Dogalle Henry/NRC

Outcomes

These initiatives provide a promising blueprint for adaptive response by centring evidence generation, analysis, and implementation about community needs, perceptions, and priorities. The humanitarian assistance that members of the community considered most important to strengthen their safety reflected a number of interconnected actions to enhance prevention, risk mitigation, and response. Protection analysis undertaken by both community members provided a common framework upon which participants could situate their extensive knowledge about the existing risks in their communities, which was critical to prioritisation of responses to specific risks. Facilitated referral is a bridge for people living in hard-to-reach and under-served communities to access essential services in a broader landscape of of constrained humanitarian access,

structural impediments to cash assistance, and non-functional markets. Community safety initiatives including first aid training, emergency evacuation bags, and engagement of specialised partners in the areas of sexual and reproductive health services, peacebuilding, and mine action ensure future actions seek to address interconnected and compounding risks beyond the scope of NRC's expertise.

In the coming months, NRC will continue to deliver civilian self-protection programming with men and adolescent boys in Dengjok, and women and men in the communities of Gakdong and Nyandit. Facilitated referrals will be piloted, adapted, and adjusted in accordance with learning, alongside ongoing advocacy efforts for restrictions on cash assistance to be lifted so both services can be offered in tandem; ideally through continuing collaboration, and potentially more formalised and expanded partnership with, MSF and CHD. Protection monitoring and analysis will continue to feed into advocacy through the Protection Cluster, where NRC serves as the national co-lead as well as the lead for protection advocacy. Recommendations have been made to Protection Cluster members to explore the feasibility of establishing a static Protection Desk site in Akobo where several protection actors can simultaneously offer services, both to improve cost efficiency whilst providing communities with safe, accessible, dignified, comprehensive, and consistent services.

Several existing capacities in Akobo identified during the mission were identified as areas for potential expansion of services and programmes by Protection Cluster members. A spontaneous performance by dozens of children in the community who enacted a conflict resolution dialogue through song indicated that earlier violence prevention work in Akobo has retained purchase in the community's consciousness and offers a critical entry-point for transformative programming. Furthermore, key informant interviews with UNMISS generated several recommendations that transverse the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to achieve protection outcomes. These included inter-communal livelihoods (e.g. cattle-trading and fishing) between communities in conflict; technical and strategic support to, and collaboration with, women leaders; and capacitation of local authorities and trusted community leaders in de-escalation.

Conclusion

Whilst Akobo is a particularly complex context in the larger dynamic and oftentimes volatile setting of South Sudan, creative efforts to mobilise dignified, community-led, and inclusive adaptive services represent an opportunity to provide more evidence-based and efficient humanitarian services for communities affected by crisis. Protection analysis and service gap analysis provided the evidence base for NRC's programmatic approach, which will continue to be tested throughout 2026. Insights into contextual shifts, achievements, and lessons learned will be instrumental in informing the design of future programming to strengthen the achievement of protection outcomes.