



Protection Cluster Advocacy Note

Understanding and Responding to the Protection Crisis in Tambura

Background

Since the signing of the R-ARCSS in 2018, overall levels of violence in South Sudan have remained lower than in the civil war. However, this fragile stability has been regularly threatened by outbreaks of localized violence. Over the last few months, Tambura County has witnessed an escalation in attacks against civilians. The Protection Cluster continues to receive troubling reports about conflict-related sexual violence, recruitment and forced recruitment, the targeting of civilians based on ethnicity and constraints with the provision of humanitarian assistance. Concerned for vulnerable persons displaced by the violence, the Protection Cluster calls on national and international partners to place the protection needs of those affected by the conflict at the center of the humanitarian response, to ensure that de-escalation occurs to enable and expand humanitarian access and to reinforce the importance of neutrality and conflict-sensitivity.

The conflict in Tambura bears similarities to other outbreaks of localized violence as contestation over political control has shifted from the national to subnational levels. Deficits in the implementation of the transitional security arrangements and tensions around local government power-sharing enable the manipulation of ethnic differences in pursuit of partisan political interests. The current violence in Tambura occurs within this context as tensions in the area increased through the cantonment process and accelerated since the formation of the local government in February last year.

While it is highly likely that the violence around Tambura will be contained, the Protection Cluster is concerned about the trend towards multiple areas of localized insecurity with high protection risks occurring alongside a heightened potential for the manipulation of humanitarian aid, increased pressure on aid worker safety and difficulty sustaining humanitarian access amidst reducing financial and political support for international aid in South Sudan. The Protection Cluster notes that the continued targeting of civilians based on their ethnicity and gender makes enhanced protection of civilians an urgent need in Tambura and surrounding areas.

Localized violence and its consequences

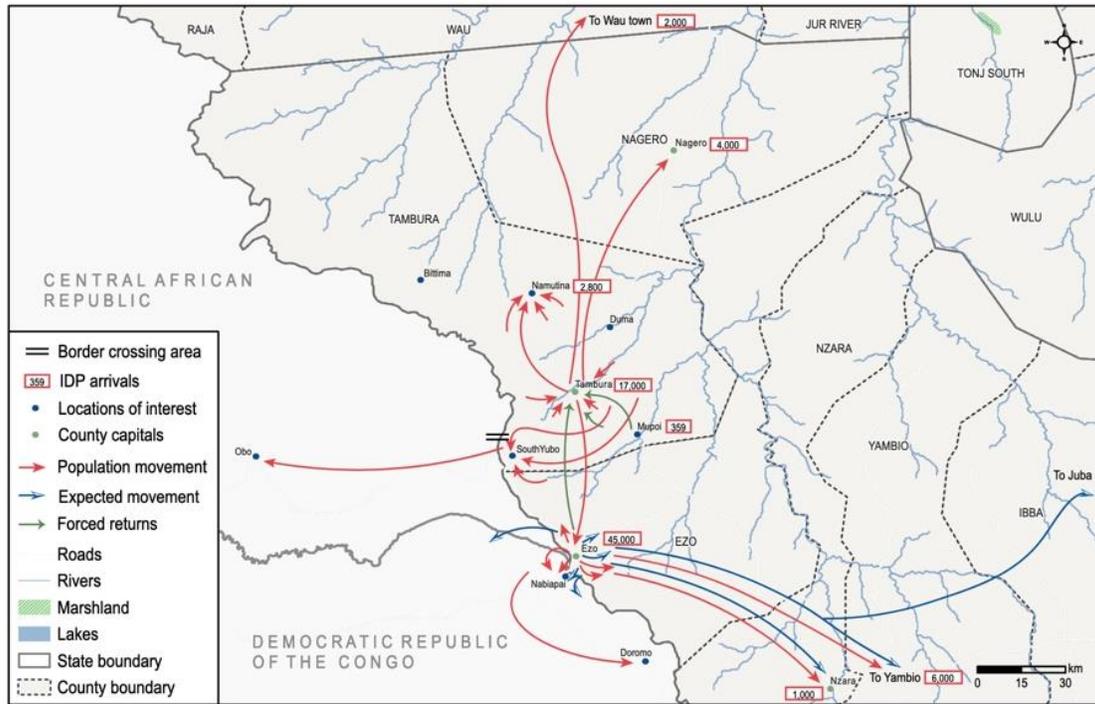
While the impact of the violence in Tambura is still being quantified, multiple testimonies evidence that the implosion of violence included the targeting of civilians based on ethnicity and gender. Initial reports indicate that at least 200 people have been killed. Witnesses and survivors report the rape of young women and girls by men in uniforms and civilian clothing with family members forced to witness, as well as the torture and killing of pregnant women and the destruction of property, including food. Assessments have found that displaced women and children are visibly traumatized, some having witnessed family members killed, others having left their disabled or elderly family members behind, with many family members abducted and separated.

The numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) are still being verified with indications that as many as 80,000 people could have been affected. Due to the ethnic nature of the conflict, displacement and

marginalization patterns have continued along ethnic lines with Balanda population groups moving into the remote areas around Tambura County, Namutina, Nagero and Wau and Zande groups displacing into Tambura, Ezo, Yambio and across the border into the DRC. From a protection standpoint, vulnerable groups displaced within Tambura County are likely to have limited access to humanitarian services and will likely be exposed to a greater risk of violence, relative to the civilians that have fled Tambura County, particularly to Ezo and Yambio.

The map below indicates displacement pathways:¹

Map 1: Population movement as reported by IDPs displaced from Tambura County to Western Bahr el Ghazal



The disparity in access to services is particularly problematic for women and children in remote areas. In Ezo, schools remain functional, and the health clinic provides services, but in Tambura, Namutina and Nagero there are limited options on access to services for women and children. Displaced and separated children and young adults are more likely to experience the negative long-term impacts of displacement, including engaging in paid labour, early marriage and recruitment into armed groups. Due to the humanitarian response largely being directed from Yambio, the Protection Cluster is concerned about the unintended prioritization of areas accessible from Yambio to the detriment of population groups displaced to remote opposition-controlled areas.

For people from the south parts of Tambura County, there are cross-border movement options which are seen to be preferred areas of safety, especially for men and young males. Assessment findings note that men fleeing the violence have been sent back to Tambura from checkpoints along the road to Ezo or in recruitment drives in Ezo town. Fragmentation of households may have a negative impact on IDPs' ability

¹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/REACH_SSD_Brief_Rapid-Assesments_Tambura_September-2021.pdf

to access to food and other humanitarian services, particularly for female headed households with many dependents and childcare responsibilities. High numbers of separated and unaccompanied children have been reported around Ezo and Yambio.

Protection Gaps and Response Options

- Attacks on cantonment sites, the militarization of towns, ethnic targeting, political assassinations, and forced recruitment are threats to the peace process. It is essential that the **international community and national actors reinforce the importance of the ceasefire**. This includes reinforcing ceasefire monitoring, verification and reporting, enabling accountability and ensuring de-escalation.
- **Demilitarizing Tambura town is required as an immediate enabler of humanitarian action** in the area and to directly respond to immediate protection needs. Removing all roads blocks that are impeding the freedom of movement and creating protection risks needs to be prioritized. **Humanitarian partners must prioritise access to remote parts of Tambura County, including Namutina, as well as access to Nagero.**
- There is a need to **document and investigate conflict related sexual violence and violence against civilians** to enable accountability through legal and human rights mechanisms. Efforts by the government and SSPDF to contain criminal conduct and ensure accountability should be encouraged.
- **UNMISS should be encouraged to develop comprehensive strategic responses** to situations of localized conflict that links the deployment of temporary operating bases with other interventions to expand protection options for people displaced in and beyond Tambura town. Safety along the roads needs urgent attention as does the use UNMISS assets enable humanitarian access to Namutina and Nagero and advance the protection of civilians in these areas.
- The humanitarian community is challenged to respond to multiple areas of concern with increasingly high levels of need alongside diminishing resource envelopes. The ability to respond quickly to crises that burn slowly and explode into regular bouts of violence will define the operational environment in the near term. **Expanding access in remote areas, ensuring neutrality and conflict-sensitivity, and creating low-cost, small-footprint, rapid responses will be essential.**
- **The international humanitarian community needs to advance responsible and effective coordination from national to state level and across the cluster system where multiple gaps have been exposed.** There will be a requirement for increased flexible humanitarian funds from donors to respond to immediate needs.
- **Consistent focus on the protection needs of the most vulnerable people is required** to ensure the provision of life-saving support, including through support for survivors of sexual violence and unaccompanied and separated children. Additional focus on expanding access to mental health and psychosocial support is required, especially for children, adolescents and women.

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