

Tambura: Violence, Displacement and Response

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The organised local and sub-national violence in Tambura County has resulted in high levels of displacement within and beyond the county since June 2021. While the conflict has been presented as ‘inter-communal’ or ‘ethnic’, it has its roots in inter-elite conflicts at the national and sub-national levels. The humanitarian response, which is urgently needed, should be conflict sensitive by considering conflict issues, primarily those related to the movement of people and its link to identity group affiliation, unequal access of humanitarian agencies to certain geographical areas, and modalities of aid provision.

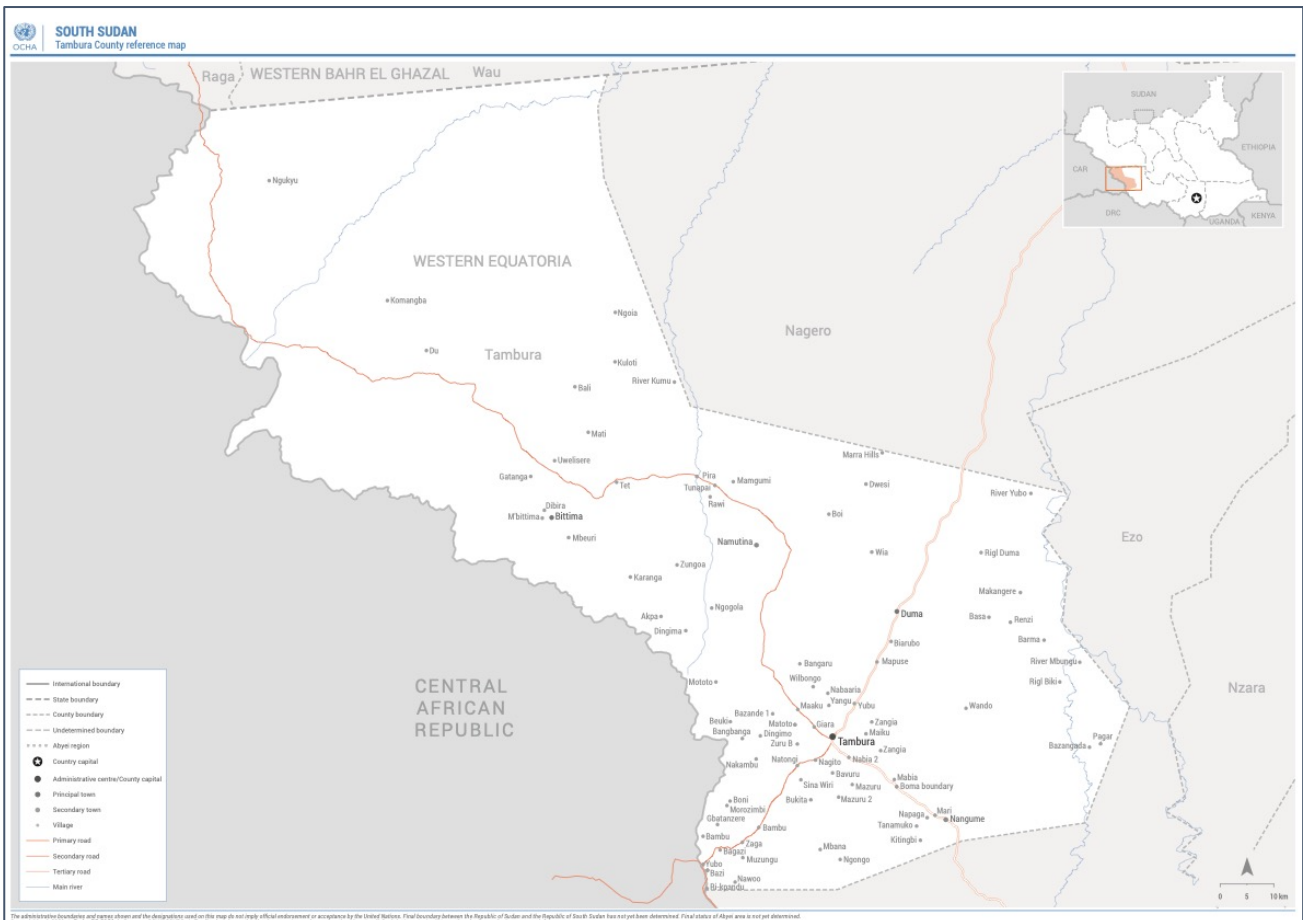
Introduction

Tambura County has been affected by organised violence since June 2021, resulting in high levels of displacement both within the county, as well as to neighbouring counties and countries. This analysis will look at the factors that are affecting population movements, access to humanitarian assistance and the targeting of such assistance. It seeks to identify how the ongoing aid response could interact with the recent sub-national organised violence in Tambura County and the wider Western Equatoria state. It will then assess the potential conflict sensitivity issues and

provide practical recommendations for donors and responding agencies. In so doing, it seeks to highlight factors for humanitarians to consider in their response planning and implementation to ensure they are being conflict sensitive and are not inadvertently deepening tensions between identity groups and are able to ensure that assistance is not being instrumentalised in a manner detrimental to peace.

Background

The outbreak of violence in Tambura County has resulted in reports of significant human rights violations, including civilian injuries and deaths.



While the numbers are still being verified, indications suggest that around 80,000 individuals have been displaced.¹ Key factors that have contributed to the situation include inter-elite conflicts over the allocation of political appointments at the state or county levels and continuing insecurity due to the slow implementation of the transitional security arrangements. While members of both the Azande and Balanda identity groups are involved in the violence, it is not based on historical divisions or longstanding tensions between these groups, but rather reflects elites, from both identity groups, using ethnicity as a mobilisation tool. This does not mean, however, that the violence is not creating tension between the two communities at the local level. And, therefore, the humanitarian response has the potential to either deepen or ease these tensions.

Like other parts of South Sudan, in Western Equatoria, identity group alliances between signatories to the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) have been fluid. The violence in Tambura County occurs within increased competition between elites over power-sharing at the local and sub-national levels since local governments were formed in February 2020.² The instrumentalisation of identity has been highlighted by some actors³, who have highlighted ‘the manipulation of ethnic differences in pursuit of partisan political interests’.⁴ Some reports also noted that elites

involved are not only seeking to strengthen political and economic power in Tambura but are also lobbying for more influence at the national level.⁵ Finally, while the duration and geographic scope of the violence in Tambura has been limited thus far, there has been some spill-over into neighbouring counties and states.⁶

In September 2021, a delegation of international partners to the R-ARCSS visited Tambura County and urged the Revitalised Transitional Government of National Unity (R-TGoNU) to end the fighting, seeing continued fighting as a risk to the ‘successful implementation of the 2018 Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan.’⁷ Following their visit, the Joint Defence Board suggested the relocation of the South Sudan People’s Defence Forces (SSPDF) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army-In Opposition (SPLA-IO) aligned forces out of the immediate conflict area.⁸ These visits were followed by the signing of an agreement by the County Commissioner, Chiefs from the Azande and Balanda communities, and representatives of the security forces (SSPDF, National Security Operations and the police) on 26 October which ended the violence that started in June 2021.⁹ The leaders of organised armed groups (OAGs) also indicated their willingness to abide by the agreement, which included penalties for individuals who fail to comply, and called for ending the organising and arming of youth. On the same day, the Governor of Western Equatoria issued a

¹ Amnesty International (2021), ‘[South Sudan: Survivors describe killings, mass displacement and terror amid fighting in Western Equatoria](#)’, December.

Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), ‘Protection Cluster Advocacy Note: Understanding and Responding to the Protection Crisis in Tambura’, October.

² Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), ‘Protection Cluster Advocacy Note: Understanding and Responding to the Protection Crisis in Tambura’, October.

³ Report from an agency providing humanitarian assistance in the area; also, see news reports:

<https://www.jubamonitor.com/tambura-communities-agree-to-lay-down-arms-end-violence/> or <https://everadio.org/conflicting-forces-in-tambura-leave-for-peace/>.

⁴ Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), op cit.

⁵ Watson D (2021), ‘Surface Tension: ‘Communal’ Violence and Elite Ambitions in South Sudan’, ACLED, August; Mapping Actors and Alliances Project in South Sudan (MAAPSS) (2021), ‘[MAAPSS Update: The Announcement of Deputy Governors in South Sudan](#)’, Small Arms Survey, 9 February

⁶ As per reported data from an NGO in South Sudan that focuses on independently collecting and analysing security incident data for humanitarians.

⁷ Joint statement by the Africa Union’s Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (R-JMEC), Representatives of the African Diplomatic Community, Norway and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) on the situation in Tambura, 19 September 2021.

⁸ See <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/joint-defence-board-visits-tambura-and-namutina-conducts-joint-patrol-with-unmiss>

⁹ See <https://www.jubamonitor.com/tambura-communities-agree-to-lay-down-arms-end-violence/>

‘Directive for all Humanitarian Agencies to resume Operations in the affected areas of Greater Tambura’. While these efforts did lead to a reduction in violence, those who were displaced are not yet returning, having been traumatised by the intensity and fearing it will start again.¹⁰

Being aware of how the current humanitarian situation reflects some of these linkages between local, sub-national and national actors, and how they play out on the ground, is critical for response planning. A humanitarian response that brings significant resources to an area and is conflict-insensitive in its approach can further exacerbate tensions or be manipulated by actors for political or economic gain.

Impact of the violence and humanitarian response

As noted above, the violence in Tambura led to large-scale displacement, and while numbers are still being verified, indications are that at least 80,000 people may be affected.¹¹ While a large proportion of those affected moved to Ezo County, there have also been population movements to other locations: within Tambura County itself, to other counties in Western Equatoria, to Wau County in Western Bahr el Ghazal and across the border to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Central African Republic (CAR).¹²

The violence and subsequent displacement has led to a heightened level of humanitarian needs. Based on humanitarian needs assessment reports and a recommendation from the Needs Analysis Working Group (NAWG), on 7 September the national-level Inter Cluster Coordination Group (ICCG) endorsed a response to scale-up assistance in Tambura, Nagero, Ezo, Nzara and Yambio counties.¹³ As of 22 November, the response scale-up was ongoing for all relevant clusters¹⁴ in Ezo County and

partially ongoing in the other counties. However, it is important to note that identity group affiliation has influenced where affected people are choosing to move, the routes they are taking to get there, and their access to humanitarian assistance once they arrive.

In the current situation, access is a key consideration for both affected populations and the humanitarian community: people’s safe access to areas, humanitarians’ access to areas where affected populations have moved and people’s access to humanitarian services. Map 1 below provides an overview of population movements or expected movements.

People’s safe access to areas

The ability, or lack thereof, for people to move to an area of their choice or have the option to stay in their homes and feel safe is concerning. Map 1 shows that people are moving into and out of both Tambura and Ezo towns, with some movement categorised as ‘forced returns’, as some men and boys were either prevented from leaving their settlements or being returned back to Tambura.¹⁵

The population movements reflect the preference of each identity group: many, but not all, members of the Balanda community have moved northwards to Namutina, Nagero and Wau towns, while members of the Azande community have moved south, east, and southeast to Ezo, Nzara, Yambio and South Yubo or into neighbouring countries. This indicates that people are moving through and to areas where members of their own identity group constitute a significant portion of the host community.

During their journeys, especially those moving southwards, people have faced an array of challenges, including insecurity along the road, checkpoints and targeted violence based on identity group affiliation.¹⁶ Vulnerable

¹⁰ Report from an agency providing humanitarian assistance in the area; Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), op. cit.

¹¹ Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), op. cit.

¹² REACH Initiative South Sudan (2021), ‘[Tambura County Population Movement Assessment](#)’, September.

¹³ ICCG meeting, 7 September 2021.

¹⁴ The response scale-up was endorsed for the following clusters: Protection, Food Security and Livelihood (FSL), Nutrition, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH), Health, Shelter and Non-Food Items (SNFI) and Logistics.

¹⁵ REACH Initiative South Sudan (2021), ‘[Tambura County Population Movement Assessment](#)’, September.

¹⁶ Information shared by several humanitarian agencies operating in the area.

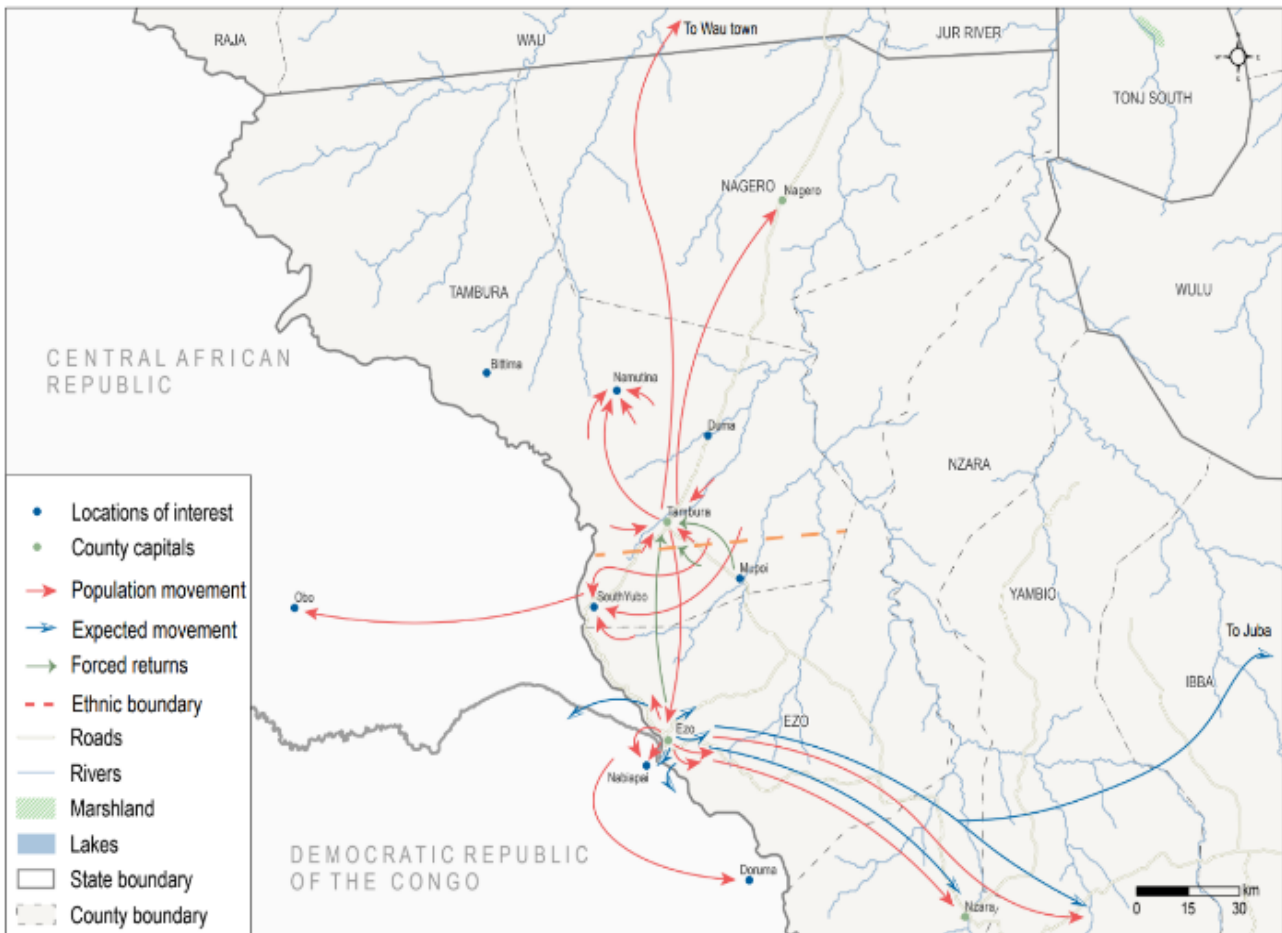
households have faced significant physical and financial burdens, with some households even being unable to make the journey at all. The challenges outlined above led some to avoid the main road(s), which extends their journey from three days to seven to ten days, while others have decided to avoid specific destinations, which can make it more difficult for them to access humanitarian assistance.¹⁷

Despite the relative calm in Tambura County, compared to the months of July and August, people who left their homes have not started returning. Reasons reported for this include the fear that the violence could flare up again and of being killed when they return home. Those displaced from South Yubu reported that some family members who went home to harvest

crops have not returned and they fear they might have been killed.¹⁸

Humanitarian access to areas with affected populations

In response to the violence, in August 2021 humanitarian agencies relocated their international and relocatable national staff from Tambura County, while staff from the area were displaced along with their families. As a result, humanitarian operations came to a halt. With the reduction in violent attacks, the relocation of some SSPDF and SPLA-IO forces and the publication of the directive for humanitarian agencies to resume operations in late-October, there has been a gradual return of humanitarian organisations to the county. While humanitarian access during the June to October period was



Map 1. Population movement as reported by IDPs displaced from Tambura county to Western Bahr el Ghazal (source: REACH Initiative South Sudan (2021), ‘Tambura County Population Movement Assessment’, September).

¹⁷ REACH Initiative South Sudan (2021), ‘Tambura County Population Movement Assessment’, September.

¹⁸ Information shared by several humanitarian agencies operating in the area.

affected (see below), violence never directly targeted humanitarian agencies.¹⁹

Factors that have affected humanitarian access to areas with affected populations include insecurity, challenges with negotiating access and the poor state of the roads and other infrastructure. For the moment, most humanitarian agencies only have secure access to Tambura town, with a few able to access a limited number of rural areas from Tambura town or Yambio. Contributing to this is the continued presence of checkpoints, which require negotiation to pass through, but to date there have been no reported incidents involving them. Further complicating access is the poor condition of infrastructure, with some roads impassable and bridges out. Agencies have also been accessing populations in Nagero County and parts of northern Tambura County from Wau, rather than from Yambio or Tambura towns. Finally, while there has been some use of force protection support from UNMISS to help access locations, this has primarily been by UN agencies, although some INGOs have indicated they are considering this as an option.

People's access to humanitarian assistance

Insecurity has compromised the ability of affected populations who are not staying in the main IDP sites to access assistance. While there have been distributions in Tambura town, displaced populations who moved north to Nagero County and Namutina are yet to be reached.²⁰ Given that much of the humanitarian assistance is being coordinated from Yambio, concerns have been raised about the “unintended prioritisation of areas accessible from Yambio to the detriment of population groups displaced to remote opposition-controlled areas”.²¹ This reflects the potential for Balanda populations who moved north to face challenges in accessing humanitarian assistance, as well as those who moved south, particularly if distributions are done within the wider

community and there is a bias in targeting based on identity group affiliation or insecurity. Similarly, vulnerable household members who remained behind, such as the elderly or disabled who were unable to travel, or women-headed households, could also face challenges accessing assistance unless agencies are considering these marginalised groups when they are providing assistance, particularly with regards to where it is being provided, and how it is being targeted.²²

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted during the May to June period in Yambio and Wau with people who had been displaced, for a variety of reasons, from Tambura and Nagero respectively. Participants had either recently arrived from these areas or had recently been in contact with someone in Tambura or Nagero. A key finding from these discussions was the **perceptions of unequal access to humanitarian services based on identity group affiliation**, even before the violence broke out. For example, Balanda FGD participants reported that security approval was generally not granted for humanitarian agencies to travel to parts of Tambura County, or to Nagero County, where there are more people from the Balanda community. Additionally, FGD participants expressed concerns about the hiring practices of humanitarian agencies based on identity group affiliation and the impact this may have on the targeting of humanitarian assistance itself.²³

Conflict Sensitivity Issues and Risks

There are several issues and risks regarding the conflict dynamics in Tambura that donors and aid agencies need to consider as they plan the humanitarian response or re-start longer-term interventions.

Narratives of ‘ethnic’ or ‘intercommunal violence’

As noted above, the violence in Tambura has often been described as ‘ethnic’ or ‘inter-

¹⁹ As per reported data from an NGO in South Sudan that focuses on independently collecting and analysing security incident data for humanitarians.

²⁰ WFP (2021), ‘WFP South Sudan Situation Report #296’, 29 October.

²¹ Protection Cluster South Sudan (2021), ‘Protection Cluster Advocacy Note: Understanding and Responding to the Protection Crisis in Tambura’, October.

²² Information shared by several humanitarian agencies operating in the area.

²³ FGDs conducted by a humanitarian agency.

communal’ in reports, public statements, and briefings by aid actors, as well as others. The oft used shorthand of ‘ethnic’ or ‘inter-communal’ violence belies the more complex factors related to disputes over allocation of political positions, shifting alliances and the ability to exercise control over state or county level resources. Finally, how the violence in Tambura is labelled by external actors may have very real implications for accountability, as well as how the aid community supports resolving the violence and addresses its drivers.

Furthermore, while community members from different identity groups are being impacted, the current violence is **creating tensions** between them and is **not** the result of a ‘long-standing’ history of tensions in Tambura. Intermarrying between groups and having communities where both identity groups live was common before this recent violence. Without a deeper and more nuanced analysis and understanding of factors other than identity group, the aid community runs the risk of inadvertently re-enforcing this narrative, as well as implementing a response that is conflict-insensitive or adopting ineffective longer-term conflict transformation strategies. The guidance developed by WFP and CSRF that outlines factors to consider with regards to organised violence is a useful framework for aid actors to apply.²⁴

Geographic targeting of assistance and unequal access by humanitarian

Only some of the areas with populations affected by the violence is in areas designated as Tier 1, mainly due to differences in numbers of affected populations in different locations. It is recognised that humanitarian needs are a key factor in determining priorities, however, response planning should also consider where different identity groups are moving to and ensure that any response is not seen as prioritising the needs of one group over another. At present, Azande populations are found in the more ‘organised’ displacement sites, while some of the Balanda populations have remained in the bush or harder to reach areas. Another example is how

geographic areas have been classified for response priority. According to the Needs Analysis Working Group (NAWG), Tier 1 locations are Ezo and Tambura Counties, while Nagero, Nzara and Yambio Counties are Tier 3. Locations currently with predominantly Balanda populations are the northern parts of Tambura County (Tier 1), Nagero County (Tier 3) and Wau County (not on response scale-up). In both cases, this may lead to the perception that aid actors are biased toward (or worse still support the claims of) one identity group over another.

In addition, there are some Balanda that are staying in the SSPDF barracks in South Yubu, primarily ‘in search of safety, as they were fearful that they would be targeted because of their ethnic affiliation’.²⁵ This presents humanitarians with a conundrum. On the one hand, if assistance is provided outside of the barracks, people who leave the barracks to access it may be targeted. On the other hand, if assistance is provided inside the barracks, it could be shared with the soldiers, either voluntarily or through intimidation, or people are incentivised to remain in the barracks which may put them at risk in the long run, especially if conflict breaks out again. In this instance, there is no ‘good’ option and humanitarians will need to consider the longer-term protection and conflict sensitivity implications of both.

Identity group affiliation of humanitarian staff

Following the instrumentalisation of identity, relations between members of the different identity groups are strained. The identity group composition of agencies’ staff could result in biased geographic or beneficiary targeting, impact on how agencies are perceived by the communities where they are working to assist or create security risks for individual staff members. Ensuring that information and input is being sought from a wide cross-section of staff and other sources, as well as considering any potential security risks to staff, will contribute to both a safe and conflict-sensitive approach.

²⁴ See WFP/CSRF (2020), ‘[Adjusting Terminology for Organised Violence in South Sudan](#)’, November; CSRF/WFP (2020), ‘[Guidance framework for understanding different forms of violence and their implications for South Sudan](#)’, November.

²⁵ Information shared by several humanitarian agencies operating in the area.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Although active violence and conflict in Tambura County has reduced since late-October, this does not mean that the county is ‘peaceful’ again, as the drivers of conflict have not yet been resolved. The underlying contestation between groups over the allocation of politically-appointed positions remains, there has not yet been reconciliation between those who perpetrated and were impacted by the violence and a large number of Tambura County residents remain displaced from, and fear returning to, their homes. Aid actors should ensure that how assistance is being provided is not seen as either incentivising return or prioritising the needs of one affected population over the other. Understanding the current conflict dynamics and their interaction with the ongoing response could contribute to deescalating the current tensions and contribute to addressing the root causes of conflict in Tambura County and Western Equatoria state.

Recommendations

- **Avoid using terms such as ‘inter-communal’ or ‘ethnic’ violence when referring to the situation in public statements, reports, or other documents.** Based on the ‘organised violence’ terminology developed by WFP and CSRF, the recent violence in Tambura should be considered, and referred to as either localised or sub-national violence. There are clear indications that it was not sparked by grassroots or community-level tensions, but rather it involved political actors, as well as militias and other armed actors, aligned with signatories to the R-ARCSS. Avoiding language such as ‘inter-communal’ or ‘ethnic’ violence will help to counter the narrative that this was grassroots driven and based on ‘historical’ tensions, and contribute to more conflict-sensitive humanitarian assistance.
- **Ensure humanitarian interventions are inclusive in terms of both geographic coverage and the targeting of beneficiaries.** As noted above, the current response could leave humanitarians open to the perception that they are prioritising the needs of one affected identity group over another. While recognising the access challenges that

humanitarian agencies currently face, moving forward it will be important to consider if current gaps in coverage or different levels of support provided to affected populations could inadvertently exacerbate tensions between identity groups.

- **Aid actors should make sure that assistance reaches those who need it, without them having to face additional security challenges to access the assistance.** This is particularly relevant with regards to the targeting of populations who are currently staying outside of the more ‘established’ displacement sites, including the SSPDF barracks. This may also mean going the ‘extra mile’ to access hard-to-reach areas where the most vulnerable populations may be located or have been left behind.
- **Clearly and regularly communicate why certain populations have not yet been reached with local authorities in Yambio and Wau, as well as with community leaders, women-led groups, and other local actors.** This will allow agencies to acknowledge the needs of both identity groups, as well as vulnerable or marginalised households or family members who remained behind and share plans to address gaps. This would also serve to improve coordination between humanitarian agencies and local structures operating from Yambio and Wau.
- **Ensure that the provision of assistance does not incentivise either returns to areas not considered ‘safe’ by displaced populations, or the influx of ‘new’ residents to an area in search of assistance.** Given recent events, the reluctance of some to return to areas they fled is understandable, and to the degree possible assistance should be provided to displaced populations *in situ* to avoid creating pull factors to potentially dispossessed and insecure areas where affected populations would be put at risk. At the same time, it should also be recognised that access to assistance can act as a draw and bring in ‘new’ residents to an area in search of support, rather than fleeing violence, who in turn could seek to ‘claim’ the land or property of those who fled.

- **Consider the identity group affiliation of team members or partners when conducting analysis and assessments, traveling to remote sites and providing assistance.** Tapping in to and drawing on local knowledge from staff and partners is critical to a conflict-sensitive response. However, ensuring that this does not create a bias in response planning or delivery, or put staff or partners at risk is also important. Teams should be diverse and include staff and partners from both identity groups (where it is safe to do so), along with staff drawn from other parts of South Sudan and international staff.
- **Consider the impact that the humanitarian response could have on future reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts.** While the humanitarian response is not expected to explicitly include peacebuilding activities, how the response is both planned and implemented could serve to either support or undermine the re-building of social cohesion and future peacebuilding efforts. Where possible, humanitarian actors should consult with local peacebuilders, leadership structures, and groups representing women and young people, to identify how interventions could complement efforts to build social cohesion or spread messages supporting peace. Activities such as the distribution of food or NFIs, nutrition or health outreach and community consultation meetings could also provide local actors with the opportunity to advocate for peace and the rebuilding of trust between identity groups.
- **Donors should ensure their implementing partners are considering conflict sensitivity issues and are able to make adjustments as needed in their humanitarian response, as well as when re-starting any longer-term programmes that had been suspended.** Donors play a key role in ensuring that a humanitarian response is conflict sensitive. Opportunities for considering how the response can impact on conflict dynamics include during the proposal review process, when decisions are being made on geographic prioritisation or the targeting and delivery of humanitarian assistance. With regards to

longer-term programmes that were suspended, donors are encouraged to discuss with their partners how activities could be adjusted to support re-establishing social cohesion at the local level and how humanitarian response efforts can be used to catalyse eventual reintegration and reconstruction. Finally, for new initiatives, consider providing agencies with the flexible funding mechanisms needed for realising conflict-sensitive programmes that are responsive, inclusive, and adaptive.