



**SOUTH SUDAN**  
HUMANITARIAN PROJECT

# **Displacement: An Auto-Protection Strategy in Unity State**

**March 2015**



## **Disclaimer**

The contents of this paper are based on perceptions of participants in this research and the impressions and analytic reflections of the author, Cathy Huser. The arguments and conclusions do not reflect the views of any member of the South Sudan Humanitarian Project or agencies providing operational support to the research.

## **Role of South Sudan Humanitarian Project**

The South Sudan Humanitarian Project is an online platform for the humanitarian community South Sudan to share information and analysis. The platform allows for the publication of materials that are written by prominent researchers and practitioners all with the goal of increasing awareness of the voices of South Sudanese affected by the current crisis. The South Sudan Humanitarian Project offers publishing opportunities to field research and analysis for independent analysis, while also sharing material published by NGO's, Agencies, Think Tanks and other established platforms.

## **Research Aims**

The research was commissioned in effort to understand the complex ways decision making processes and choice pathways that individuals and communities have when faced with armed conflict, violence and its humanitarian and protection consequences. This paper forms a series that explores different dimensions of experiences of protection risks that faced people in Unity State. In particular this paper documents the experience of displacement and it's impact. The findings are based on ethnographic field-based research (215 semi-structured interviews conducted with more than 500 randomly selected individuals<sup>1</sup> -55% female and 45% male- conducted between October – December 2014 in Koch, Leer and Bentiu towns and surrounds of Unity State; and complementary interviews in Rumbek, Lakes State; Juba, Central Equatoria State; and Bor, Jonglei State.

## **Note on Style**

In keeping with the aim of reflecting the views and perceptions of conflict affected populations the paper includes extensive 'direct' quotes in order to illustrate how various respondents interpret their circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Each quote is accompanied with an indication of the gender and location in order to provide brief insight into the specific context of the respondents.

## **Acknowledgments**

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<sup>1</sup> Some 75% of respondents are civilians with the remainder being comprised of government and local authorities (15%); and national personnel of NGOs (10%), as so-called 'key informants'.

<sup>2</sup> 'Direct' in this case is relative given that the interviews were conducted with untrained 'translators' who serve more as interpreters, often merging their own views and analysis in the translation process. Thus, the quotes are more a 'reflection' of respondents' thoughts, as opposed to technically precise quotations.

**About the Author**

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## 1. Introduction

In mid-December 2013 a political conflict plunged South Sudan back into a civil war with immense humanitarian consequences for the population. An estimated 2 million people have been displaced across Greater Upper Nile region, comprised of three states of Jonglei, Upper Nile and Unity State. Violence against civilians, along ethnic, tribal and gender lines has been a key feature of this conflict and one that continues to inform how protection of physical well being and access to basic other needs is perceived. This is no more prominent than in the considerations of those who have been displaced, often multiple times seeking to establish some certainty and regularity in a situation of adversity. The continued exposure to violence and ultimate failure of state institutions to protect has resulted in people having to take extraordinary measures to meet their own protection needs on a daily basis. Understanding how these strategies are formed, from an appreciation of the lived experience of violence, the humanitarian in South Sudan can ensure that their interactions and interventions effectively supports people to live in safe and dignified way. At the time of writing however the armed conflict in South Sudan shows little sign of abating. No real peace agreement has emerged after over a year of high-level mediation efforts led by the Inter Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and championed by senior global figures and the diplomatic community. Despite occasional lulls in violence, civilians remain the main target for attack by different armed actors and are largely excluded from decision-making processes (national and international).

This paper documents the lived experiences of some of the 345,300 (OCHA, 2015) people displaced in Unity State since January 2015.<sup>3</sup> Displacement is a primary auto protection tool available to people to address on-going violence as well as being a consequence of it. Appreciating how it has enabled people to protect themselves but also opened them up to increasingly negative risks is a subject for this paper.<sup>4</sup> Though oft repeated every respondent in this research confirmed that the scale and speed of armed hostilities in Unity's capital Bentiu and its interior caught people by surprise. Notwithstanding the political fall out within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and political instability in Unity State that had remained since 2005 the possibility that South Sudan would return to "outright" war was unfathomable. As such as the conflict emerged so did two broad displacement strategies that deeply reflected, amongst other things, the socio-economic dynamics inherent to these areas prior to the conflict. For those able to access it, the UNMISS site was seen as a safe haven. For the others, it was flight to rural areas – typically towards their 'place of origin', in order to draw on solidarity and family networks for support. In these rural localities, micro strategies were further developed that led people 'at risk' either deeper into the interior (sometimes familiar and other times not) as they desperately tried to evade the perpetrators of violence. Some moved progressively southward (avoiding neighbouring states such as Warrap and Jonglei) in pursuit of safety. Many of these people reported being pursued throughout their journey by armed actors. Far from being linear or predictable initial displacement was met with further movements as opportunities arose to access to markets, fields, trade, humanitarian assistance, and social protection (family reunification etc.). In an understanding of what is protection for people, it is important to note that physical safety is tied to meeting other goals such as access to food, water, markets, and health care services.

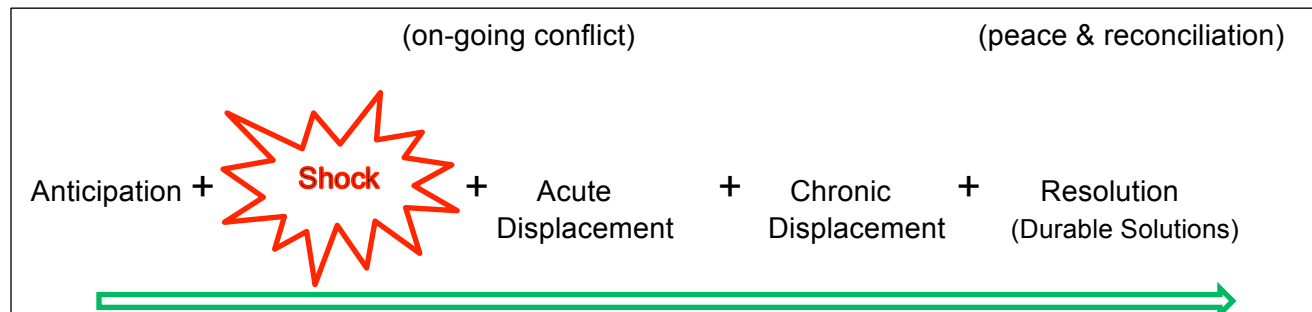
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<sup>3</sup> This document is a complement to a document entitled '*The Lived Experience of Protection in Unity State: Examining the links between Auto-Protection & Livelihoods*'. That document provides a more detailed exploration of the notion of auto-protection in relation to broader notions of protection, while this paper specifically explores displacement as a primary auto-protection mechanism that people at risk in armed conflict typically resort to. See also: '*Bentiu-PoC as a Protective Option: a critical asset within the auto-protection tool kit*' which explores the experience of protection in relation to the Bentiu-PoC.

<sup>4</sup> The analytic frame on which this paper is structured is discussed extensively in the annex.

People’s experiences and decision making about their own safety and security was in part is defined by the events that unfolded before them and those of others (family or community). The conflict in Unity State has progressed along a timeline of brutal battles for control of key towns and access routes. A key point of change came in mid-April, after months of acute displacement and reliance on a limited reserve of resources, people were able to move further afield, move temporarily to their own areas, or take decisions to move towards support (however that was defined). These movements occurred not freely but with a slightly altered approach to risk mitigation. In acute to chronic displacement situations people tend to look for reasonable windows of opportunity to allow them to progress from securing physical survival to establishing more sustainable access to basic goods. In this case none of these decisions had permanency as an end goal.

In order to further unpack why understanding displacement is important in explaining how people experienced the conflict and have subsequently attempted to deal with it. The diagramme below attempts to show different phases of displacement that people in Unity have undergone. Far from being a progressive process people in Unity have experienced cyclical and overlapping stages of displacement and within this conducted different types of movement (as will be explained).<sup>5</sup>



The diagramme indicates that there is a period of **anticipation** before the shock that forces displacement. This ‘anticipation’ phase influences especially how the acute phase of displacement plays out. The **acute phase** of displacement refers to the frantic reactive flight that typically occurs as a result of a sudden on-set acute shock (especially violence). Acute displacement is largely about escaping threat. To the extent that one continues to be exposed to imminent deadly threats, this frantic phase of chaotic acute displacement continues. A relatively **chronic phase** of displacement emerges when the conditions allow for those affected by displacement to move in a more strategic manner and factor a wider set of concerns into their auto-protection efforts. Implicit in this is the fact that the displacement crisis is intimately tied to the dynamics of the larger crisis within which it is embedded. Thus there is no resolution of the displacement crisis without resolution of the conflict crisis.

As noted, the schematic suggests a linear progression from anticipating the shock, to acute and then chronic displacement; and eventually durable solutions and the resolution of the displacement crisis. People in Unity State however have experienced an extremely prolonged acute phase of displacement in which they have suffered both the direct harm that repeated exposure to violence causes; while their efforts to cope and adapt through displacement have in themselves caused dramatic implications. Although it may serve as an important survival tactic, displacement causes an extreme draw on one’s resources. The longer people remain displaced – and are forced to continually adapt to the complex

<sup>5</sup> This model was developed in work with the ICRC. It is explored further in the annex.

challenges posed by repeated bouts of extreme violence – their capacity to cope is progressively undermined. This propels them into ever more precarious circumstances. Thus as the conflict prolongs, people are being pushed into progressively worse conditions.

As people progress in their displacement the notion of protection shifts to encompass other life sustaining needs which are essentially linked to preserving ones physical safety. This includes working towards the attainment of personal/physical, food, health, economic, social/community, political and environmental security (UNDP 1994, pp.24–25)- or human security. All of these factors are as critical in acute and chronic displacement settings as in a recovery or development context. Even in situations of armed conflict people adapt to risks and threats faced to them, and critical trade offs, often negative occur in line with attempting to secure these various securities e.g. groups of women crossing frontlines to access functioning markets or food (the group is more protective than the individual thereby reducing one threat), but women remain at high risk of rape and other forms of sexual violence by armed actors, and yet this risk is offset against the threat of male relatives being killed or tortured and the household not receiving food.



In the final months of 2014 and early 2015 expectations of renewed violence in Unity State has left people teetering on the brink. Having made decisions to move, accept new risks to access markets, or to leave the Bentiu PoC site (or to remain), people are acutely aware that any positive gains could be reversed immediately. The dynamics of the displacement crisis are intimately tied to those of the armed conflict. A full resolution of the armed conflict is required to bring the displacement crisis to an end and achieve so-called ‘durable solutions’ – that is ending the conditions that cause displacement.

### **Organization of this Paper**

Each section explores the lived experiences of violence as people describe them in relation to each of these stages of displacement (see diagramme above). Section 2 explores people’s anticipation of the original on-set of the crisis, particularly exploring how some of the advanced warnings were misinterpreted. Section 3 looks at the reaction to acute shock and the feasibility and efficacy of decision-making within such a state. Section 4 illustrates that inevitably, and indeed despite near impossible circumstances, displacement strategies do emerge. However, not all strategies are equal and not everyone has access to the resources necessary to make such strategies work. Section 5 examines how people have adapted their displacement strategies as the acuity of their context diminished. Section 6 examines how people are thinking about the future, underlining that the only solution they see for the displacement crisis is the resolution of the national crisis.

## 2. Anticipating Displacement

The more people are prepared for a crisis, the better they are able to respond. It is simple reality but and is linked to anticipation of violence and being able to take pre-emptive and proactive measures to avert the worst of threats. High levels of violence have previously dogged Unity State and in the last civil war (1983-2005) was the epicentre of some of the worst intra-South (as it was known) conflicts and brutal containment and forcible relocations of the population. Though many respondents in this research recalled these past experiences across the board few expected the type of conflict that ensued and its blatant targeting of civilians.<sup>6</sup> This section explores retrospective reflections on the 'anticipation phase' of the displacement crisis.

### Misanalysis of the Political Context

Although the violence erupted in Bentiu only short weeks after Juba, many of those affected by this violence claim that they did not expect it to reach Unity State or take on such a violent ethnic dimension. Respondents commented, "we had heard of the problems in Juba, we heard of the killing of innocent people but we did not expect it to reach Bentiu, we thought it was just a problem between soldiers", (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07). Others underline general confusion, stating that "we were not sure what was happening, we thought the problem was only for Juba, we thought it was there as a political problem and now we see it is for Upper Nile (referring to the greater region)" (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 25). Acknowledging the suddenness of the conflict people noted, "this was an emergency, we could not have known it would go like this and if we had known, we would have left Bentiu earlier" (1 male, Bentiu PoC, Nov 25).<sup>7</sup>

This is not to suggest that everyone was lacking information or unable to interpret the events in other parts of the country. Even with some concrete indicators in place however people chose to ignore them assuming that the worst would be over soon and not penetrate their areas.

### Early versus Late Warning Indicators

A day before fighting in Juba and hours following some respondents claimed, "soldiers came into Bentiu and told us that the government troops were going to arrive soon. We heard them burning their military stocks so we knew that the government was about to arrive" (5 males, Koch, Dec 04). Those with higher-level political connections or savvier to national events certainly were able to notice tell tale signs of problems. The movement of soldiers and often their families was a clear marker and indicator. The vast majority however indicated that, "I didn't leave until the government troops arrived into Bentiu. I kept hoping that the opposition (at this time the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) had split) would fight them back and we left when we heard the big artillery approaching. My wife and children had left two days before. I knew to send them because I saw the local captain bring a lorry to his house to move his family to Leer. We thought everything was lost when we saw that" (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). A few groups of people left but many were not prompted to leave by external news. One female respondent highlighted "we didn't plan as we didn't know they were there until they shot on us. When they burned the house of the neighbour we could see them and that is when we ran" (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22).

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<sup>6</sup> Expert analyst Jok Madut Jok, with particular insight as a South Sudanese, argues that the outbreak of violence in Juba 'may not have been exactly predictable, but it was not entirely surprising' (2014, p.12).

<sup>7</sup> Not everyone left late. Some took pre-emptive measures. For example, a former employee of an international agency sent his wife and children from Bentiu to Leer on December 24 2013, thus after the Juba crisis but before the government forces returned to Bentiu on January 10 (1M, Bentiu PoC, Nov 25). Equally, people in Koch said they received people from Bentiu pre-emptively, stating that 'some people left some days earlier from Bentiu; those with relatives here in Koch came earlier' (1M, Koch, Dec 04).



Immediately following the attack in Bentiu in January 2014 people in the interior were also hesitant to act on news even if some acknowledged, “we knew that this problem would reach to this side” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04). Others noted being called by people from Bentiu or witnessing the arrival of IDPs with harrowing stories: “people arrived from Bentiu and it was they who told us the Toro boro<sup>8</sup> were coming” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05); and “they passed the message that those ones were killing civilians” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10). Despite this many stayed in their homes and only tentatively explored potential options of escape. Confusion and distress as the potential that conflict could reach them in part fuelled the motivation to “wait and see”. Whether related to lack of information, belief in the information available or need to see things for themselves, these factors meant that large number of civilians were present as armed groups pushed through areas and exposed to extreme violence.

During the research it was evident that women often had little to no access to information about events and tended to not be able to act on rumours with male relatives often down playing events. Disempowered in this way many women and children were left isolated and unable to make decisions for themselves. This was a serious challenge especially as women and girls bore the primary responsibility to protect their families and secure access to food. One elderly woman commented, “here in the village we don’t have knowledge, especially us women, we have no information, we could only know there was a problem when those people arrived or when we heard the guns” (3 females, Leer, Oct 23). Who had access to what information was an important determinant of how people reacted.

However, people also referenced a number of issues that either caused them to under-estimate the magnitude of the problem or prevented them from acting pre-emptively.

### **Factors Preventing Pre-emptive Action**

Other factors that impacted people’s decisions take pre-emptive action beyond information gaps included the almost complete disbelief of a full-scale conflict with targeting of civilians underway. Unsurprisingly many people refer to the psychological impact of exposure to deadly violence and hearing about it. The sudden on-set of extreme violence proved to be paralyzing for some.

To underscore this one man in Koch who had fled from Bentiu explained, “when we heard heavy gunfire, we wondered what was happening so we went out to the market to look. It was then that I saw government troops moving in, we did not understand what was happening or that they would harm us” (1 male, Bentiu PoC, Nov 25). Only then did he, like others, realise the magnitude of the threat and the urgent need to flee. Similarly, a man suggested, “people were not thinking this conflict would reach them as civilians, they thought this is a problem between the soldiers, even when people were killed in Bentiu, the ones in Koch could not believe it. (1 male, Koch, Dec 10). Some respondents with familial connections to the SPLA also explained that they assumed the situation would pass over quickly or that protections would be afforded to them; “some of us have relatives in the government troops, those ones told them to stay in Koch, that they were coming only to chase the opposition fighters away” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09). As such “people stayed when the government troops arrived because they thought they were just coming to chase away the opposition troops” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04); and “it took them time to realise that they were also shooting on civilians” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09). Another factor here is also important in the promise of protection that different armed groups provide particular

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<sup>8</sup> The term is used colloquially for Dafur’s armed groups especially the Justice Equality Movement (JEM) or in its pejorative for persons from Sudan.

constituencies with some respondents reporting that both friendly government troops and opposition fighters assured people that they would be safe and to follow their orders to move or to stay. This was not always reliable as has become evident in the conflict but does demonstrate the interconnections between armed actors and civilians that existed prior to the crisis. In some cases soldiers turned on people they knew in other cases they acted as vital points for protection. However, this also exposed civilians to more violence by association and the perceived blurring of lines between combatant and civilian.

More generally, the delayed response to impending violence reflects a tendency to focus on the 'here-and-now', with many taking a 'wait-and-see' approach as opposed to actively anticipating and attempting to pre-empt the future. Indeed, despite anticipating further violence and thus the likelihood of further displacement with the on-set of the dry season, when asked how they will know if they have to flee next time, a woman explained that "we will sit and wait, when we hear them approaching, we will run away, we will not go before then" (1 female, Leer, Oct 23). Although there may be understandable reluctance to move the vast numbers of people adopted displacement as their central auto-protection mechanism in Unity State. The next section explores the acute phase of displacement when the anticipation phase is so limited.

### **3. Acute Displacement**

As noted the majority of people describe being suddenly forced into acute displacement by the presence of armed actors and imminent threats of violence was significant. Given the intensity of the shock, people report thinking almost exclusively of avoidance and focusing on escaping the threat; giving far less consideration to what they were moving towards. At this stage, movements were largely reflexive with people indicating "we could not think too much and only run to the nearest bush to hide" (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22). This acute phase is characterized by a relatively frantic state of being, a lack of planning, and ad hoc decision-making. Other survival concerns (such as food or health security) are typically subordinated to the urgent need for ensuring physical security.

#### **Push Factors - Frantic flight away from a threat**

For certain vulnerable individuals it was difficult to take spontaneous action and flee, especially the case for physically impaired, elderly and younger children. In Koch people said "when we heard the government had captured Bentiu, we moved some people, those who cannot run we left them there [in the displacement location] with some food and water, but we took our animals" (1 male, Koch, Dec 04).<sup>9</sup> One woman with severely impaired motor function explained that her son had carried her when they fled stating that "we heard the sound of the gun, we could only just run, my son carried me and when he was tired we stopped. The others went ahead but we were slow" (3 females, Koch, Dec 06). Another man recounted, "I carried my father with us to the river. Each time the government came we went into the tall grass and waited and my father survived" (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08). An elderly woman left behind along the way (with two young girls) explained that "they left us, I did not know which way to go, they told us the path but I kept falling. I just knew I had to move to the place where my children were" (3 females, Koch, Dec 06).

Others described the challenges of moving with small children in swamp water, indicating that "we crossed the water with the small ones who even cannot swim" (1 male, Bentiu PoC, Nov 25); and "people pulled children on tarps, some put them in basins, we just had to swim in the water like that, we

hid in the day and we moved in the water at night” (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22). This all too clearly illustrates how acute shock and its resultant chaos drive the initial phase of displacement. Action in this stage is largely reactionary and the characteristic panic compounds the heart wrenching consequences, leaving little mental space for people to be adequately strategic in their efforts to ensure their protection in such dramatic circumstances.

### **Core Displacement ‘Strategies’**

As quickly as possible, people try to move out of this state of panic into a more strategic decision-making process. For example in Koch, some people describe regrouping in the bush just outside of Koch town, indicating that “everyone fled to the bush nearby, there you could look for your people if you were separated” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 06). This pause, enabled people to shift their thinking away from what they were fleeing, towards their destination. As two women explained, “we had no plan at first, we just fled Koch town and then we moved around until we could find a place to hide” (2 females, Koch, Dec 08).

Indeed, in Unity State two broad displacement strategies emerged. The first is relatively urban-based and relies on protection provided by UNMISS;<sup>10</sup> while the second is relatively rural and is largely built on informal social safety-nets, solidarity, and support that people expect to find in their so-called ‘places of origin’. These are explored below.

### **UNMISS-Protection of Civilians Sites**

Although the UNMISS-PoC sites are now a well-established protection option, many people report that prior to the on-set of the current crisis, they did not even know of UNMISS. Following the on-set of violence in Juba, information about UNMISS quickly reached Bentiu, with people in the Bentiu-PoC explaining that “they (people in Juba) advised us we should run to UNMISS, it was the only way for those who are still alive” (1 male, Bentiu PoC, Nov 22).

Significant numbers of the current respondents in the Bentiu-PoC were originally from Bentiu/Rubkona areas and thus both geography and urbanization were important factors shaping such strategic choices. Explaining why they chose UNMISS respondents noted, “we came to UNMISS because we were living in the capital. We cannot go to stay deep in the bush” (1 male, Bentiu PoC, Nov 22). Similarly, an elder woman explained, “especially those from Khartoum, they don’t want to walk to places like Nhialdiu or Leer, that is too far” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26).<sup>11</sup>

Whether making a conscious choice or not the physical proximity of a safe location mattered to some people in combination to where would be most feasible for people given their backgrounds and experiences to date. It “depended on where you were at the time the violence broke out in Bentiu. Those in the south fled south, those on the west ran to UNMISS, and those on the east side went to Guit” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07). However, as the government troops were arriving into Bentiu (on January 10, 2014), they occupied the road to the UNMISS base and thus largely eliminated this as a protection option for many in the early phase of the crisis. Thus, although countless people from Bentiu indicated that they had considered UNMISS as an option at that time, most equally pointed to their fears of confronting the government troops. They were thus forced to flee in rural directions.

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<sup>10</sup> The UNMISS Protection of Civilian (PoC) sites are located in capital cities, and as such are particularly accessible (in both physical and conceptual terms) to those who were urban-based prior to the crisis.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to the significant portion of the Bentiu population who had spent time in Khartoum as IDPs prior to returning to South Sudan in relation to independence.

Although such movements displayed acute franticness, they were somewhat more strategic, with one man explaining that “you go in the direction that is good for you, everyone has some idea of where he can go” (1 male, Ganyiel, Nov 10); and “people normally go to where they have good relations” (2 males & 1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07). Respondents in both Leer and Ganyiel explained that “we fled from Bentiu to here because that is my home place” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 08); and “we are natives of here” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07); “we are relatives, people go to their families” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07); and “we can all stay together here, we are all Nuer” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23). As such, the following section looks at how such rural-based displacement strategies relying on this social capital actually unfolded.

This of course reflects the underpinning of the second core displacement strategy, which is, founded on ‘places of origin’, family solidarity and informal social safety nets.

### **Flight to Places of Origin**

People generally expressed significant confidence in the social networks and safety nets, which are assumed to be inherent to their places of origin. Some of the quotes above show that people displayed confidence of fleeing and locating places with familial connections. Due to the strong kinship ties amongst the Nuer people and within the sub clans this was a clear and overriding feature of movement.

At the outset it was usually the male head of the household deciding where the family would move and most typically chose his place of origin (patrilineal kin); “we heard that Ganyiel is a bit safe so my husband decided we would come here, this is his home” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 12). Another woman from Koch whose husband is in Juba-UNMISS explained that “my husband told us that the problem is coming to Koch, he told me to take the children to the place of his parents” (2 females, Koch, Dec 06). However, as this crisis has caught many households separated [i.e.: with many men either having been located elsewhere at the on-set of the crisis; now serving on the frontline; or indeed having gone missing or been killed], women are often *de facto* heads of households. These women are far more likely to seek out their own place of origin.<sup>12</sup> However, household level decision-making remains a complex matter for such women, who typically bear tremendous burden but little actual decision-making freedom.<sup>13</sup>

## **4. Chronic-Acute Displacement Strategies**

Once a person was committed to their core displacement strategy, they could be said to be in a ‘chronic-acute’ phase of the displacement cycle in that, as much as they continued to flee the threat of violence, they were also thinking ahead to where they were fleeing. Some stated that they fled to the villages because “we did not think the soldiers could reach there” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26). Unfortunately, this assumption was largely proved wrong. Indeed, for the most part, those fleeing Bentiu continued to

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<sup>12</sup> Demonstrating the sensitivities around such issues, one man became quite agitated by the suggestion that his family might consider going to the place of origin of his wife when his was inaccessible, explaining that ‘the wife cannot take me to her village; I am the boss; I control everything; I have rights; she cannot decide’ (1M, Bentiu PoC, Nov 27). However, ironically, he is in UNMISS on his own, having left his family in Nhialdiu, acknowledging that they will flee independently if armed actors attack the area.

<sup>13</sup> For example, various men claim to have the right/responsibility to make decisions on behalf of such households, thus over-ruling the wishes and interests of these women. According to the male view, the destination would almost always be the place of origin of the husband, despite the fact that many such women would prefer to go to the place of their own parents.

be pursued by armed actors, with people recounting that “those ones were following us so we just continued into the bush” (6 females, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22). For example on arrival into Koch, with the violence directly behind them, they were again obliged to flee, with one man stating that “everyone fled the town, some people crossed the river because vehicles could not follow, others went towards the bush to hide, people who had vehicles could go farther; they move on to Leer” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04). Indeed, in the face of continued acute threats of violence in these deeply rural areas, two broad displacement strategies emerged at the micro level including: either ‘perpetual’ relocation; or the seeking of local hiding places.

### **Perpetual Relocations**

In an effort to avoid this perpetual threat of violence, especially those fleeing from Bentiu simply kept moving. These people recount repeated encounters with armed actors who allegedly continued to pursue them, describing multiple relocations in efforts to evade these actors. Respondents provided sad accounts of this: “the government troops followed us, we went for five days to another location and they found us there so we just kept moving” (2 females, Koch, Dec 08); “they killed a number of women by shooting into the bush where we were hiding. We fled to another village but these soldiers followed us” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26); and “whenever the soldiers returned to our location we had to move. It could be two days or two weeks, but we had to keep moving” (4 females, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 27).

This begins to illustrate the profound limitations of a displacement strategy that relies on repeated relocations in the face of tenacious perpetrators. As one man explained, “people could not just flee to other villages, the Toro boro would just find you there” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). Indeed, he pointed out that as an alternative “most people went deeper into the forest where they could not be found” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). The next section explores these ‘local hiding’ strategies and the opportunities presented in different locations.

### **Local Hiding**

It is widely noted that in each geographic area, the natural resources (rivers, bush, grass, etc.) provide different opportunities for devising local hiding strategies. Thus, in addition to the value of social safety nets and solidarity, one of the greatest benefits of the ‘place of origin’ is familiarity with the local geography.

### **Koch**

In Koch, the local hiding strategies were multi-layered being constructed largely in relation to environmental and geographic resources. Many people describe staying in cattle-camp type settings, indicating that “it is good there because it is near the bush if we have to hide” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05); and “we fled to a cattle camp near the forest, we stayed under the trees there” (3 females, Koch, Dec 06). The first layer of this strategy was to flee to deeply rural areas and settle near the forest. A second dimension of this hiding strategy included the additional option of fleeing into the surrounding bush if the perpetrators of violence approached. Some relied more extensively on these hiding options, describing that “people didn’t talk they just stayed quiet, they stayed in very small groups and kept moving around in the bush” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). Alternatively, some opted for the river, noting that “along the river there is no forest, but the grass is tall, when we heard gunfire, we could hide in the grass” (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08); and “we went there because you can cross the river, we thought the government would not be able to cross” (3 females, Koch, Dec 09).

The protective success of these hiding strategies varied. Although some successfully avoided discovery by the armed actors, others were not so lucky, “they came many times, and they came to steal goats,

clothing” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 06). For some, repeated attacks on their hiding places led them to opt for the above strategy of multiple relocations, explaining, “when the soldiers arrived to our hiding places we again had to keep moving” (2 males, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 26).

## **Leer**

People described similar experiences in Leer. A woman from Leer explained that “we first ran to Gandor because my mother-in-law is there, when we got there, we found her already gone. The government forces were still following us, we could hear the gunfire, when we saw them, and we continued to run in the direction of the river. We thought we could hide at the river” (2 females, Leer, Oct 23). Others explained that “we wanted to go to the highlands, we were told we could be safe there but the soldiers kept attacking us there, so we went south to Ganyiel’ (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 08).

Those who opted for local hiding strategies within the vicinity of Leer relied heavily on the inaccessibility of these places. In most cases, people counted on excessive water preventing the armed actors from following them, explaining that “we went where there are no roads, the government forces cannot move with their vehicles” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24); and “we went where there was lots of water, there they cannot cross with their vehicles” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). Some such places were well known; “where we went, we know this area. It has islands which are good for security, their cars cannot cross, there is a small stream, there is water for drinking and there is good bush for hiding” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24).<sup>14</sup> In other cases, people indicated “where we went, even I had never been before, it is known from the days of the civil war, it is 7 hours walk, it has water pools, it has many wild animals” (1 female, Leer, Oct 25). Others more simply stated, “we just went where it was far so the government forces could not follow us anymore” (2 females, Leer, Oct 25).

The aim of acute displacement is typically to avoid an imminent threat. This normally entails removing oneself from the threatening environment. However, for many people in Unity State the incidents of violence were seldom once off or localized, but were rather persistent, rippling out in waves covering large geographic areas, making it next to impossible for fleeing individuals to escape. As such, people at risk were largely unable to escape the environment of violence. This has dramatically prolonged the relatively acute phase of displacement – recalling that this phase is characterized by reactive, chaotic and panicked movements being largely driven by the urgent need to flee imminent threat. However, further to this, some of the particular dynamics of violence have further compounded coping challenges.

## **Targeting of Males as Rebels**

Many of the respondents outlined that in the current context all males (of fighting age, which extends from boys as young as 11 years old) in Unity State are considered militia arguing that “the government forces are looking for young men, they think they are all rebels” (2 males, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 26). Many people reported that “if they find men they will kill them” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 06); and “they cannot see a difference between the rebel and the civilian, they see any man, even without a uniform, they think he is a rebel, so they want just to kill you” (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 26).

This problem is of course exponentially compounded by the fact that “after the opposition forces were defeated, they joined the population in the bush” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04); and “the opposition soldiers fled with the population when the government forces arrived” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23). Indeed, many respondents were very clear that this dramatically complicated their security circumstances, explaining that “because the opposition soldiers ran with us, the government forces just shot at all of us, they were

shooting on all the people even if no one fired a single shot back” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). One group explained that “we walked for 5 days with small children, the soldiers continued to shoot on us during that time, they were searching for soldiers who were running with the civilians but bullets can’t decide, they were shooting on civilians, they killed even small children in our group” (3 females & 2 males, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 23). As such, many concluded, “men had to stay far away from the others” (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 26).

Various strategies emerged to manage this risk, with people noting that men stayed elsewhere during the night, “women grouped together, men went to other locations, this was the strategy, people were hiding in different places. As a man you could not stay with your children because this could get them killed. If the Toro boro knew it was only women, they might be ok but if they found a man there they would shoot on all of them. If they saw you and you flee they might kill your children instead” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07). However, it is clear that women were at exceptional risk at the splitting of families. Whilst women grouping together formed a social safety network the conflict risks were apparent to many “women fled to the bush together but if the Toro boro found them, they would rape them. If she refused they would kill her” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 06). Countless women voiced profound fear, explaining that “we are afraid of the Toro boro, if we heard them or saw them we could only just hide, they could beat or rape you” (1 female, Koch, Dec 06).<sup>15</sup>

### **Women and strategies for coping**

These strategies in themselves have greatly exacerbated the already phenomenal burden that women bear in such acute circumstances. The centrality of the role of women in keeping their children and often the elderly safe cannot be over-stated. As one young man explained “women are always responsible to look for their children. Women worry about what might yet happen because they have responsibilities and they have to work hard for the survival of their children. Can you imagine fleeing, running with these small children” (1 male, Leer, Oct 23). Women equally asserted that “men take no responsibility, it is the women who now struggle for the family alone” (4 females, Rumbek, Nov 05). Especially in the case of displacement, women underlined that ‘if we run, the men don’t suffer; they won’t carry the children; they do not have to search for the food for the children’ (5F, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22). Indeed, the role of women in ensuring food security during acute displacement proved to be extreme dramatic in many cases.

### **Acute food security<sup>16</sup>**

In conjunction with attempting to secure physical safety securing access to food, water, shelter and health were all critical concerns. Those displaced around water state that “we relied on water lilies” (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08). Others were able to initially access waterways to fish but constant movement meant an over reliance on wild foods as the main source of nutrition in supplement to whatsoever people were able to carry with them including small livestock. Reflecting the acute chaos described earlier, one family explained, “we took only three cows, we had many more, but when we heard the heavy artillery we had to run. The remaining cows were killed by the government troops” (2 females, Koch, Dec 08).

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<sup>15</sup> In its July 2014 Human Rights Report on the conflict in South Sudan, UNMISS reported that ‘[a]ll parties to the conflict have committed acts of rape and other forms of sexual violence against women of different ethnic groups’ (2014, p.3).

<sup>16</sup> Practices around food security and indeed the broader sense of ‘human security’ are explored further in an accompanying paper developed in this same research period, entitled: ‘*The Lived Experience of Protection in Unity State: Examining the links between auto-protection and livelihoods*’.

As such to the extent that these resources lasted, people economised and entered early hunger season strategies, noting that “if you had one or two cows you could eat meat, otherwise people collected grass and wild food’ (1 male, Koch, Dec 04); and “we were only depending on our animals, we were milking and killing them because there was no other food” (5 males, Koch, Dec 04). IDPs originating from Bentiu did not have their own food security resources, with many highlighting that “we did not have cows because we are from the town” (3 females, Koch, Dec 08). As one young man who fled from Bentiu explained “all your things are there in the town, now in these villages, we have nothing, we are not farmers, we have no cattle, we have no food, we cannot stay like this in the payams” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10). Commenting on IDPs from Bentiu who were staying with them, local people explained that “they arrived to Koch in January, they fled with us to the bush, they carried nothing with them so we shared what we had” (3 females, Koch, Dec 08); and “most people hiding in the bush had cows, those people coming from Bentiu did not. If they are your relatives, you can give them one for milk for their kids” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04).

### **Confronting Risk to Survive**

These food security strategies were relatively short-lived for many and the highly precarious security circumstances were quickly compounded by health and food security challenges. For example, one group hiding in the bush some 5 hours away from Koch explained, “we fled to the bush many times as the government troops came again and again to the camp to loot and kill the animals. We had 40 cows there, we lost them all’ (3 males & 2 females; Koch, Dec 05). As such, hunger and disease quickly scaled up as deadly threats – vying directly with the violence as the most deadly threats.

Given traditional roles of women within the household, combined with the fact that men were perceived to be the primary targets of violence, the responsibility to address these ‘secondary’ threats fall largely to women. Indeed, risks for women were regularly weighed against the threat of men being killed – and were generally deemed preferential. As such, as food security became increasingly challenging, women were systematically forced into direct interface with extreme risks, with many explaining, “women had to return to the town, they had get food for their children” (3 females, Leer, Oct 23). These women eventually directly approached the same government troops who had chased them out of these towns, with one explaining that “women came back to Leer to buy sorghum from the government forces, they paid double the normal price, some sold their cows, some collected charcoal to sell to government troops” (1 female, Leer; Oct 24). The fact that it was women facing such extreme risks is justified by claims that “only women could go to town at that time” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05); “only women could go to buy from the soldiers, if they saw men they’d kill them’ (1 male, Koch, Dec 07).

Women repeatedly cited multiple and immense risks associated with this food security strategy, including being kidnapped, beaten, raped or even killed, with one group of women explaining that “women could come to Leer to buy food from the government forces, but they could be raped, women were trapped” (3 females, Leer, Oct 23).<sup>17</sup> These observations were repeatedly reiterated by respondents who explained, “when the women went to gather food, the government forces trapped

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<sup>17</sup> A report by the South Sudan GBV sub-Cluster has emphasized the ‘direct correlation between food insecurity and increased incidents of sexual violence’, arguing that the food crisis emerging as a result of the on-going violence is forcing women into ‘risking the most brutal, personal violence while struggling to keep their families alive’ (GBV Sub-Cluster 2014, p.2). In June Nonviolent Peace Force (NP) equally reported that in and around Leer women and girls were at ‘extremely high risk of SGBV due to coping with food insecurity’ (NP 2014, p.8).



them, some were forced to stay with the Dinka when they left Leer” (2 females, Leer, Oct 23).<sup>18</sup> A woman from Koch explained that “we came to these men to buy things, they would beat the women, they used women as their wives, and they stole my money. I had to go back to get more because I needed to buy medicine for my child” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05). She further stated “women were killed, my sister was killed when one of the Toro boro wanted to rape her but she refused so he killed her with his gun” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05).

When weighing their dire options, women systematically put the well-being of their children ahead of their own safety, explaining that “when you see your children suffering with hunger, if you see your children are dying you can do anything to prevent this” (1 female, Leer; Oct 24); and “they will rape you, even kill you, you don’t know even if you will survive, but you think only about your children” (2 females, Leer, Oct 25). Similarly, another woman explained that because displacement life was so difficult for the children, “breast-feeding mothers tried to return to Koch, thinking that the Toro boro would not do anything to them, they wanted to return because the place was so bad for the children, but these ones were trapped and raped” (3 females, Koch, Dec 09).

The impact of these experiences have been profound, with one man noting that, “people don’t even want to talk about this, the good thing is that many of these women were not killed, they just had sex with them and then released them back” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10). However, another observed that “they are using rape as another way of killing, the lady may die, if not she will not be able to give birth, she might have a disease, this is now another way of killing. War can come in many ways” (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22). Underscoring the widespread use of rape in this conflict a woman explained, “This problem of rape in war was not here before. I have never heard of it. They do it now because they want to destroy the Nuer, they want to destroy all the properties of the Nuer men, they want to destroy their children and their wives” (1 female, Leer; Oct 24). Similarly, another woman explained that these men are raping the women because “we have a historic problem between the Dinka and the Nuer, they want to make it so the women cannot bear children again; they want it so the man cannot use this woman again” (2 males & 1 females, building house; Koch, Dec 05).<sup>19</sup> Symbolic implications of this tool of violence are widely acknowledged.

## **5. Chronic Displacement – Settling In for the Long Haul**

Respondents in this research frequently cite mid April as a watershed period when government troops and allies moved further north which signalled a change in the local context and allowed people to return to some towns and villages previously occupied by armed groups. A gradual shift occurred from people in the acute phase of displacement into a more chronic phase, which is characterized by more strategic positioning in anticipation of what is yet to come – with the vast majority of respondents anticipating a resurgence of violence with the on-coming dry season (2014-15). This has left people in a state of hyper suspension. Rather than anticipating resolution of their displacement plight, they are preparing for more devastation and fully expect to be pushed back into the acute phase of

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<sup>18</sup> Reportedly, some 85 women who went missing from Leer town between February to April 2014 remain unaccounted for, although some suggest that the number may indeed be far higher than this (see for example: NP 2014, p.7).

<sup>19</sup> For the purposes of this paper analysis into the use of rape in this conflict and previous ones is not provided. Respondents clearly feel the scale of these attacks is unprecedented but it is also worth noting the rise of sexual violence in inter and intra communal conflicts since 2005, and major counter-insurgency operations 2010-12.

displacement. This section looks at what 'chronic displacement looks like in Unity State and how people are preparing to cope with a future of anticipated violence.

### **Departure of Government Troops**

With significant distrust in the security situation, a complicated and tentative staging of relocations began to unfold around April and May in southern Unity. Stating that "we had doubts after the soldiers left", people in Leer explained that "some came in the day but returned to hiding for the night, the men came first, some of the children did not come until July" (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). Similarly, in Koch "some men went back to confirm that the forces had left, some of the women and children followed some weeks later" (2 female, Leer, Oct 25). Women emphasized "we left the children in hiding for some time" (3 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 05). Others said, "we saw other people going back so we followed" (2 females, Koch, Dec 06). Reiterating the importance of access to information news of the departure came from various sources but mostly from women who had been travelling into town to trade.

Although this period of less intense threats allowed for some wider movement options, people were clear that this is not a progression towards the resolution of their displacement plight. Indeed, it is simply a more distinct shift into the chronic phase of displacement. The conditions that would allow for people to bring their displacement plight to an end are not in place. Illustrating this is the fact that many IDPs, especially those who originally fled from Bentiu, remain displaced in their rural places of origin. Many rural localities are still hosting large numbers of IDPs. For instance locals in Ganyiel noted that "now everyone has IDPs staying with them" (2 males & 1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07). Equally, a random group of three respondents in Koch reported that "we have a family of 4 people staying with us from Bentiu" (1 female, Koch, Dec 08); and "we have five people from Bentiu staying with us, they arrived in January and will stay until there is peace" (1 female, Koch, Dec 08).

Potentially even more telling are the movement trends among the rural residents. For example in Koch, many noted that "people are still staying outside in the villages" (4 males, Koch, Dec 09); "many people are still displaced in the villages, they have not returned to the towns, they are still afraid of heavy fighting" (2 females, Koch, Dec 08); and "many people are still staying in the villages, they will not return to the town, they are waiting for a permanent peace agreement" (1 male, trans1, Koch, Dec 04). One young man explained that "my family is constructing a new home in the place we fled to, we will not come back to Koch until there is a permanent peace agreement" (3 males, Koch, Dec 08).

Those who have relocated to urban areas have done so tentatively. Destruction has prevented some from relocating to their own compounds, noting that "I came to look for my house which I found burned" (1 female, Koch, Dec 06); "we have lost everything, we are staying here on the neighbour's compound until the owner returns" (1 female, Koch, Dec 05). Others explained that "people have not reconstructed their houses, so many were burned by the government troops, they are now just waiting to see what will happen this dry season" (1 male, Koch, Dec 08). People in Ganyiel expressed a similar view, stating that "everything is destroyed, we can only wait, we will rebuild with the peace" (6 females, Ganyiel, Nov 10); and "the government forces burned many houses, people will not rebuild now, there is no peace, we worry these ones will come again" (1 male, Leer, Oct 24). At the heart of their hesitation is the fact that there is a possibility of being attacked again. As such, rather than resolution, respondents for the most part anticipate a resurgence of violence with the dry season, as explored in the next section.

## **Anticipating the Dry Season and a Re-Escalation of Violence**

The vast majority of respondents in Unity State anticipate escalating violence with the up-coming dry season, stating that “we are still afraid, we are fearing the dry season, this war is not yet over” (1 male, Leer, Oct 24); and “if there is no peace they will come again and kill innocent people” (4 males, Koch, Dec 09). Even though the troops withdrew to Bentiu some months ago, people nevertheless underline that they do not feel safe; “we are fearing those ones, we hear they are in Bentiu, they have vehicles, guns and bombs, they travel by vehicle, it is in our heads that they will come back and when the place becomes dry it will happen again” (2 females, Leer, Oct 23).

Mirroring the notion of social amplification and the fact that previous experiences render risk ever more imaginable, many underlined that “people remember last year, they know a car can move from Bentiu to Koch in one night, they can be here fast to attack, people are fearing that insecurity will come again” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07); “we saw what they did in Bentiu” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10); and “when the dry season comes, they will come again to occupy the area and to destroy the people” (1 female, Leer, Oct 25). The following section looks at just how such preparations are taking place.

## **Preparations for Renewed Acute Violence – Micro Strategizing**

Recalling the first section of this paper, which explored the ‘anticipation’ phase of displacement, the question for this section is whether people prepare differently for acute displacement when they are in a state of chronic displacement. Indeed, emphasizing that they simply have few options, and the options available to them are highly inadequate (as has been proven during the previous period of acute displacement), many respondents simply refused to discuss the future likelihood of having to flee once again.

During this research prompting such reflections provoked a fairly strong reaction, with some being adamant that “we cannot discuss displacement, this is something very strange [i.e.: shocking] for us, it is strange because even very big people were killed, this is something that we can only discuss with the family. Traditionally if there is something very bad happening, when you are asking questions about it, it is like you are trying to provoke. It is like you are reminding people of these bad memories, you are encouraging them to think about revenge” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09). They went on to explain that “if the problem is not yet finished, we cannot discuss it, if it is ended then we can have the discussion, otherwise this is like a humiliation, when they keep repeating the violence, we see that we have no power, we have no voice, we have no influence, this is humiliating for us all” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09).

Others explained that even though they now have very pertinent experiences to draw upon, people do not discuss or review strategies together explaining that ‘we will only plan together if we are family’ (1 male, Koch, Dec 10); and “there can be no collective planning; you just think for yourself and your family; you might meet others; but this is not planned” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10). One man suggested that this is because “if we have too many people with the same plan; we will all go the same direction, this is too organized, the government troops will follow us, when we are all together they will find us, now we are spread out they cannot know where everyone is hiding” (1 male, Koch, Dec 09).

Nevertheless, some especially women engaged more pragmatically and although they generally expect to adopt essentially the same strategies if they are once again forced into acute displacement, their views on the details varied. Within a group of three women, one said “we would go to the same place”; another said “we will not go to the same place, there was no good water there”; while the third woman agreed that water was a problem, stating that “maybe we will go deeper into the bush next time” (3

females, Koch, Dec 08). Some noted that “our location was too close to town, when the government soldiers were there, they were coming, if there is another conflict, we will go to another place” (2 females, Koch, Dec 09). However, others said “the government troops found us there, but it was a good place, we will go there again, but we will go deeper” (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08). Even though their displacement strategies have so far proven to be largely inadequate, with the exceptions of relatively small adaptations, people broadly indicate that they will do essentially the same thing as last time, with many noting that “it is not good” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09), but this is “because there is no other channel available, it is all we can do” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07).

The current approach seems to reflect assumptions of “nothing left to lose”, with respondents explaining that “we will not prepare to flee again, we have nothing left to carry now, we can only just run if they return” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09); “for the future there is no plan, we just know there is a lot of forest, we know we can go there” (8 males, Koch, Dec 09); but implicitly, they also know it is an inadequate protection option. It is this realization that underpins earlier discussed ‘wait-and-see’ attitude. A young man said somewhat ironically stated that “we know the situation is not yet settled, people are watching what will happen, if the problems come again, we will hear the heavy artillery, we will see the opposition forces running, if bullets are landing around, it is then you can decide which direction you can run” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10).

As an alternative to relying on local hiding strategies, some people are taking advantage of this period of chronic displacement to relocate to what are seen as fundamentally safer locations. For some that means relocating to UNMISS, as discussed below. However, for those who remain in the interior of Unity State, the objective is to move further away from the frontline, which generally means shifting southward. Although some say that “people are beginning to think there is nowhere safe” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 13), people nevertheless continue to seek what they believe to be safer havens. It is in this sense that the above women explained that “people want to leave Nhialdiu, many are discussing to come to Leer even if it is far, we came here with our children because here we are safe, it is far from the frontline, here we can have health care; people can get food, many more are planning to come to Leer” (2 females, Leer, Oct 24).

## **Changing Core Displacement Strategies**

As indicated at the outset of this paper, the sudden and extremely violent on-set of the crisis forced people into one of two core displacement strategies which, were constructed around either UNMISS or one’s ‘place of origin’ and associated social capital for auto-protection. Shifts in the conflict context as of mid-April have gradually allowed for some to shift these core strategies. In addition to those on the frontline moving further south within the State, some people from Unity State have managed to relocate from Juba-PoCs to Unity State; and some people have moved from Bentiu-PoC into the interior of the State (albeit typically only temporarily); while others have moved from the interior of the state to Bentiu-PoC. The following explores some of these strategic shifts in more detail.

### **From Place of Origin to Bentiu-PoC**

The earlier discussions about anticipation and the on-set of the violence above demonstrated the frantic environment in which people made acute displacement decisions. Although many fleeing Bentiu say they reflected on the possibility of fleeing to the UNMISS-PoC, this was quickly rendered infeasible with the arrival of armed troops occupying the road that led to the UNMISS compound. As a result, acute displacement routes for those fleeing Bentiu were quickly reduced to those leading to the interior of the State.

Nevertheless, while the government had controlled Bentiu, people report “the government called people back in January, they controlled the local radio, people doubted, but they insisted. So some came’ (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 25); “the government called us back to Bentiu; they needed the civilians to be there” (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 23). However, more significant was the ‘opening of the roads’ by the opposition in April, with people explaining that “they opened the roads so the civilians could move to UNMISS” (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 23). A local leader from within UNMISS noted that “when the opposition opened the road, the UNMISS camp received many, many IDPs” (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 24).<sup>20</sup> However, given the Bentiu-PoC population is less than 44,000 and the total displaced population in Unity State is some 345,000 people, clearly only a small portion of IDPs are opting for the UNMISS option. So who are those IDPs who relocated from the interior of Unity State to the Bentiu-PoC?

People originating from Bentiu report less affinity, capacity and resources to survive in the rural areas, with one young man explaining that “we were in the bush, but I come from Bentiu, I am not a bush man, we kept hearing about UNMISS, we thought it would be better to be there than to be hiding in the bush” (2 males, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 26). Especially those who came to Bentiu from Khartoum after the last war, point to a greater affinity with Bentiu. The vast majority of respondents who relocated to the PoC at some point after the very initial phase of the violence had been living in Bentiu at the onset of the crisis and were thus presumably more conscious of the protection options available to them there.

For pragmatic reasons also people mentioned, “some went to UNMISS because it is closer” (2 females, Leer, Oct 24). Indeed, a Bentiu woman who had fled to Koch and was on her way to Leer after multiple displacements explained that “I decided not go to Leer [her place of origin] because it was far, UNMISS was nearer, I had 8 children to look for by myself, so I went in the direction of UNMISS” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26). Agreeing that the move back to Bentiu was risky, she equally did not believe she would be able to manage the trip to Leer. Residents from Koch equally confirmed that people from Bentiu had to go back because they had no resources to draw upon, explaining that “some left the hiding place even earlier to go back to Bentiu-PoC because they had nothing to give to the children, they had no food and no money” (1 female, Koch, Dec 05).

### **From the Perspective of Those in Bentiu-PoC**

From the perspective of those within the Bentiu-PoC, there is a diversity of driving factors prompting such movement. For example, a young man who had been separated from his family during the flight out of Bentiu explained that “I returned to UNMISS looking for my parents, we had no information of them” (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 23). Yet others referred to health issues with one man explaining that women in his family carried his critically ill brother to the PoC in August because “government forces could not allow men to move at that time” (1 male, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 25). Emphasizing profound fatigue, people systematically stated that they simply had had enough of impossible circumstances of repeated displacement in the bush and had thus decided to face whatever challenges arose in their efforts to get to UNMISS. As one group of women stated, “we fled Bentiu to Guit, but we came back to UNMISS because we heard shooting all the time, when you hear the voice of the gun you can be afraid, we were running to the bush every time, we just kept moving and now we are tired” (2 females, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 25). Others noted, “we soon saw that there was no good place, no place was safe with those ones following us, so we decided, just let us go back to UNMISS. This was not safe and there were risks, but we just thought if we die, we will just die, we decided that we must try because we will certainly die if we don’t” (5 females, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22).

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<sup>20</sup> This corresponds with the SPLA-IO retaking of Bentiu on 15 April, 2014, however, this was sustained only into early May.

From the perspective of those remaining in southern Unity, the trek to Bentiu-PoC is seen as extremely high-risk, with people reverently explaining that “these ones thought they could reach UNMISS, they thought they would be safe there but we know some were killed trying to go there” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23).<sup>21</sup> Despite these dramatic perceptions of risk, people explain that “some went to Bentiu looking for food and safety in UNMISS, life with UNMISS is secure, they will give you food” (1 female, Leer, Oct 23); and “if the conflict continues, more people will go back to UNMISS, there you can have security, they will give you food” (2 females, Leer, Oct 24).<sup>22</sup>

A complex mix of push and pull factors have all combined to spur significant movement into the UNMISS camp in November and December 2014. This includes IOM registration; lack of food due to severe flooding during the rainy season (or inability to access distributions); the approaching dry season allowing for freer movement; a desire to visit family within UNMISS; the government announcing on the radio that the roads are now open into Bentiu; and fears of scaling up of violence with the dry season.<sup>23</sup> The demographics of these new arrivals are diverse, including among others, women and children who have been living in the villages in the surrounding areas of Bentiu [i.e.: Rubkona County] who have undergone multiple displacements within the area.

This underlines that although a far wider range of considerations during this chronic phase of displacement is influencing movements, the overarching fact of persistent insecurity remains solidly in place. However, further illustrating how the PoC is simply an asset to be used to the degree that it serves one’s auto-protection needs, people are also leaving the PoCs (albeit in far lesser numbers) in effort to access their place of origin and alternative auto-protection strategies.

### **From PoC to Place of Origin**

Indicated that now “some people are managing to come this way” from the Bentiu-PoC, people in Koch suggested that they are moving because “they have been there long, they are feeling insecure, if they can get away, if they can escape the government troops in Bentiu, they are coming this way” (1 male, Koch, Dec 08). Indeed, a young man who had arrived from Bentiu-PoC only two days earlier underlined that “as of December, there is increased movement. Women can move from UNMISS to Bentiu but men will still be trapped as they can arrest you and they can do things” (3 males, Koch, Dec 08).<sup>24</sup> Others agreed that “the government troops are still searching for people but they are not as hot. Some can let women pass but it is the Toro boro who want to kill all the Nuer” (3 females, Bentiu PoC, Nov 23).

Movement to Unity State is not only from the Bentiu-PoC. People are also arriving to Unity State from the other PoCs, with insecurity being seen as the main driving force, with one man explaining that “people are coming from UNMISS-Juba by barge, it is very risky, very expensive but they are coming because this is their home. They do not feel safe in Juba” (1 male, Leer, Oct 23).

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<sup>21</sup> Many underline that a lack of communication makes this separation extremely difficult, with one elder man stating that ‘my wife and daughter with 8 people walked from Leer to UNMISS in Rubkona; I worry about them; I don’t know how they are; I want them back with me here but I cannot communicate with them’ (1M, Leer, Oct 24).

<sup>22</sup> In these speculations, some noted that ‘they give you food and water at UNMISS; but now it is overcrowded there’ (7M, Leer, Oct 24).

<sup>24</sup> This man was checking on his family and fully intended to return to the PoC immediately, however, he explained that ‘if the food security situation worsens even further in Koch, I will think about bringing my family to UNMISS’ (3M, Koch, Dec 08).

A group of five women arriving the day before into Ganyiel from Juba-PoC said they had been in Juba because their husbands had been in the army there. Being alone when the violence erupted, they fled to UNMISS. A Dinka friend had organized a boat driver to transport these women and their children to Unity State. They paid about 2000 SSP. They explained that ‘when we were getting out from Juba, if the Dinka boat driver did not say we were his wives, we would be put in a container and beaten; it was only this man who kept us safe’ (5F, Ganyiel, Nov 12). They explained that they left UNMISS because they were caring for the twin infants of a woman who died after their delivery and they wanted to make sure they could have proper food for the babies. They said that ‘if not for these little ones, we would have stayed; but we cannot just wait while these twins were going to die’ (5F, Ganyiel, Nov 11). They went on to say that ‘others are thinking to leave UNMISS to go back to their place of origin; it is expensive; but all are thinking to leave Juba’ (5F, Ganyiel, Nov 11)

### **Family Re-Unification**

Family separation more generally is a critical protection issue that has also been an important driver of movement during this chronic phase of displacement. With independence, many families had adopted diversification strategies aimed at maximizing their economic and education opportunities. This saw people moving to many different areas. The sudden on-set of the conflict caught many people in places other than their ‘homes’ with members of families widely separated.

Painful separation histories are repeatedly recounted, with one woman explaining that “I have a sister in UNMISS, she was in Bentiu at that time of the problem, we have her children with us here in Koch but we have had no news from her, we are only hoping we will find her in UNMISS” (2 males & 2 females, Koch, Dec 08). People repeatedly underlined that “when people are separated, they are always thinking about their relatives” (1 male, Koch, Dec 10).

This chronic phase of displacement allows for people to consider a wider range of issues. An ever more complex set of issues are prompting movements, such as the intent to ensure, protect, or rebuild food security & livelihoods and to protect one’s ‘human security’, all of which are explored more extensively in the accompanying paper entitled: *‘The Lived Experience of Protection in Unity State: Examining the links between Auto-Protection & Livelihoods’*. However, although people are desperately strategizing within their given circumstances to maximize their advantages, the continuing displacement crisis continues to progressively eroding their coping capacity – even in this chronic period of displacement. As such, what people most fundamentally are hoping for is the end of the conflict which would in effect bring the displacement crisis to an end allowing for so-called ‘durable solutions’. However, as two elder men who fought in the former civil war said, “it will be good if there is a solution but if it is not calm before the dry season there could be a lot of big fighting” (2 males, Ganyiel, Nov 12). People repeatedly underline the need for peace while indicating expectations of worsening violence.

### **Refugees**

As an alternative to internal displacement, a number of people point to the option of leaving the country as refugees, explaining that “if this prolongs, we can start to leave this country, those who don’t believe we will have peace are leaving if there is a way out; if there is no way out, you can just die in your country” (3 males, Koch, Dec 08).<sup>25</sup> There is an indication that relocation to Khartoum is being considered more extensively as the violence continues, with people suggesting that “if Salva continues,

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<sup>25</sup> Some explained that ‘some people have gone to Juba and moved on to Kenya; you can go if you know someone in the government side’ (1M, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 27).

we will leave this country, we will all go to Khartoum” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26); and “the situation there is going to be better than here” (1 female, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 23).

Indeed, having been in Khartoum during the civil war, a woman in Ganyiel explained that “some want to go to Khartoum, they were there before during the civil war, they have a plan but the way is too difficult now” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 07). Indeed, especially for those from Bentiu, the connections with Khartoum are important, with another woman who had been in Khartoum previously explaining, “if we knew the government would come to kill us, we would not have come here from Khartoum. If I did not have the small job I have here, I would leave to Khartoum” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26).<sup>26</sup>

Others report that displacement to Khartoum, although extremely high-risk, is taking place with one woman explaining that “some of my family has fled to Khartoum but the trip is very dangerous” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26); and “many people are leaving Bentiu PoC to go to Khartoum, they know this is very risky, there are many risks on the road, people know this very well, but they go thinking maybe they will survive” (6 females, Bentiu-PoC, Nov 22).<sup>27</sup> A leader in PoC-Juba explained that “when we realized that this war was killing without reason we decided to send our children to Khartoum” (1 male, Juba-PoC, Oct 30).

Many describe being torn over this in sentimental terms, people noting that “my sister fled with her children to Khartoum, she wanted me to go with her, but I refuse to leave my country” (1 female, Bentiu PoC, Nov 26). One young man underlined that “I have not left the country because I don’t want to be a refugee again, I spent 10 years in Kakuma, I cannot spend my whole life in a refugee camp so I have decided to stay here in Koch to see what plan God has for my life” (1 male, Koch, Dec 07).

## 6. The Future – Resolution & Returns

People living the experiences of violence in Unity State are distinctly reluctant to project into the future but it is abundantly clear that people affected by displacement want IDPs to be able to return to their habitual residences, with a group of women claiming that “everyone wants to go home” (6 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12). However, when asked if they plan to return any time soon, they just laughed, stating emphatically that “this will only be possible when there will be a peaceful solution” (6 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12); and “people cannot go now, you must wait until the war is over” (1 male, Koch, Dec 04).

The resolution of their displacement crisis requires resolution of the factors that are forcing the continued displacement- namely war and its consequences. The realization of durable solutions requires the creation of the necessary conditions; this requires the restoration of essential peace conditions.<sup>28</sup> It is from this perspective that many people affected by the continuing conflict are anticipating increased

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<sup>26</sup> She is working for an NGO within the Bentiu-PoC.

<sup>27</sup> Pointing to the psychological impact of the on-going crisis, and especially that of being ‘trapped’ in the PoC, one young man explained that ‘this is causing mental problems; people are thinking of ideas, but they cannot move because of all the restrictions; now there are no possibilities; people have to stay here; people are thinking of Khartoum, Ethiopia, Kenya; but none are possible; this creates mental problems; if you try to go anywhere you can get injured or even killed’ (1M, Bentiu PoC, Nov 25).

<sup>28</sup> Technically, the notion of “durable solutions” is understood as comprising either: returns; local integration; or relocation to a third location and local integration. Such options are to be selected by the IDP through free, voluntary and meaningful choice. Conditions allowing for this must be in place before the discussion of implementing durable solutions is relevant.



violence with the dry season. Indeed, perceptions of impending risk remain intense. There is little indication that people in Unity State believe they are moving in the direction of resolution and durable solution.<sup>29</sup>

A number of respondents regularly laughed at inquiries about returns, indicating that such questions are seen as rather bizarre at this time. People systematically asserted that “this is not possible at this time, to return is only possible when there is peace” (2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12); and “people want to go back, people want to send their children to school but they can do none of this when there is no peace” (2 males, Ganyiel, Nov 12). Two women explained that ‘we are not thinking of this now because we fear being raped and killed; we will not find food there; there are no schools; when the situation will calm down; that is when we will go back [to Bentiu]’ (2F, Ganyiel, Nov 12).

Instead of moving towards resolution and durable solutions, many people are anticipating escalating violence. Instead of returns, people expect to be pushed back into the acute phase of displacement, “we are fearing more attacks as the situation is not good” (2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 10); and “we keep hearing about continuing fighting so now we cannot even think about going back” (1 male & 2 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12). As such, until a resolution to the armed conflict is reached, there can be no achieving of durable solution in Unity State.

In concrete terms, people describe a range of indicators of peace, explaining that “we will know that the war is over when the government troops are removed from Bentiu, when people can resume their civil service work, when people have their jobs restored, when we are receiving salaries again, when the schools are re-opened but most importantly, when we can move freely back and forth to Bentiu” (2 females, Koch, Dec 08). Others specifically highlight the removal of armed troops from the urban centres, stating, “we can only go back if the Toro boro leave Bentiu” (1 male & 1 female, Koch, Dec 05). For those displaced in the interior, going back to Bentiu is largely conceivable, although this is deeply qualified with powerful statements that indicate a real conflict in decision-making. A woman who had been employed as a nurse in the Bentiu hospital explained that “I will stay here in Ganyiel, when it is safe I will go back to Bentiu to work, if we have complete peace I can go back” (1 female, Ganyiel, Nov 09).

However, those who fled other parts of the country are far more hesitant, with a group of women who fled Juba stating that they would not go back to Juba indicating that “if we were to go again, we would just be waiting for another problem like this to recur. Juba has become like a grave for the Nuer now Nuer think of going to Juba like going to their death” (5 females, Ganyiel, Nov 12). Equally, a family who fled Bor explained that “we were friends, we were living together peacefully with the Dinka people, this was a very big surprise, but this historic hatred can come out, this makes us suspicious and we will worry about another outbreak even when we have peace” (3 females, Ganyiel, Nov 08). However, they went on to say, “with peace we could think about going back there but now while the problems continue this would be very difficult. Our children have been finished off in the war [3 of 7 children were killed while they were fleeing Bor town] (3 females & 1 male, Ganyiel, Nov10).

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<sup>29</sup> Maxwell & Santschi stated in August that the IDPs throughout South Sudan ‘are expected to return as soon as it is safe to do so’ however, given that there is no indication of the conflict having been resolved, they further underlined that there is ‘no indication that now is the time to transition away from protection and humanitarian assistance’ (Maxwell & Santschi 2014, p.5). Similarly, in a July 2014 report to the UN Security Council, the UNSG asserted that ‘this will not be a short-term crisis’, speculating that ‘we will not see significant returns until as early as 2015’ (UNSG 2014, p.17). This is clearly still the case.

As such, although there is still a lot of work to be done to achieve the conditions for durable solutions for the displacement crisis, people are very clear about the necessary conditions. Unfortunately, as opposed to anticipating evolution in the direction of resolution, people are rather focused on impending shocks that are expected to catapult them back into acute displacement, with full expectation that the experience will again unfold in a very similar manner as described above. However, as people's resources and reserves upon which they draw to drive their auto-protection efforts are increasingly exhausted, the threat of renewed acute displacement is ever more untenable.

## **7. Conclusions**

Despite the fact that their coping capacities are almost always inadequate in relation to the challenges posed by repeated exposure to violence, people at risk in armed conflict are seldom passive, but rather are forced to become their own protection agents, constantly reacting to their ever-evolving 'new normal'. From the lived perspective, they are constantly analysing their environment, and are devising independent protection strategies in relation to their perceptions of risks.

Taking displacement as one of the key auto-protection tools that people responsible for their own protection resort to, the paper has examined displacement as an ever-evolving process through which people seek to extract themselves from imminent exposure to violence. However, in Unity State, threats of violence were seldom once-off but often continuous, with armed actors allegedly tenaciously pursuing people as they fled. As such, in the face of perpetual deadly threat, efforts to flee were perpetual, continuing for months on end. The direct damage of exposure to the violence became deeply entwined with the erosive impact of these continual efforts to flee. In order to gain insight into this complex process, it is helpful to conceptualise the displacement process as a series of different phases – each of which are characterized by different challenges; different states of being; and thus different objectives and options. Typically, acute displacement is the stage in which one escapes the most imminent threat; while the chronic phase is the period in which people await the resolution of the larger crisis that caused the displacement to begin with. Unfortunately, reality has not played out so neatly.

Indeed, the above exploration of displacement as an auto-protection tool illustrates just how dreadfully short such mechanisms fall in relation to the magnitude of the threats posed in the context of on-going violence. While the perpetrators of violence proved to be extremely persistent in their pursuit of fleeing civilians fleeing, people at risk have been forced to resort to often extreme measures to avoid them. Given that the persistence of the violence, the cumulative consequences at the individual, family, and community levels are ever more devastating. The erosion of adaptive and coping capacity continues at an exponential rate.

Respondents repeatedly reiterated with extreme clarity that the only resolution to their persisting displacement crisis is peace - the resolution of the larger conflict crisis is fundamental. As such, efforts to leverage decision-makers to reach a conclusion to so-called political dispute allegedly driving this crisis must be redoubled. The on-going violence must be stopped.

If people at risk are expected to perform as primary protection agents devising auto-protection efforts on their own behalf, they should be supported in their efforts to do so to the degree possible. This requires somewhat of a paradigm shift. It requires humanitarians to think differently about the types of interventions that may be most useful. As people devise and implement their auto-protection strategies, humanitarians may be able to identify different manners and means of making resources available to

them or helping them to make better use of those they do have access to, whether that means the natural resources they have in their environment; their social resources (e.g.: supporting family reunification); or material resources (potentially including humanitarian aid, health care services and even services available within the Bentiu-PoC). This framing allows for a different way of thinking about the problem.

Thinking about displacement as a dynamic process with multiple stages – with resolution of the displacement crisis being the objective, also provides a slightly different way of thinking about how a conflict impacts on those affected. It also helps to unpack analysis of the strategies and measures people might take in their efforts to navigate within their highly demanding circumstances. This may enable a more nuanced analysis. Further, in terms of conceptualizing displacement as a series of progressive stages, with those later in the process (i.e.: chronic) always being preferred to the more acute, the frame may also propose some ideas for phasing objectives in order to most constructively support the independent action of those at risk. Asking if there is something that could be done to help people to move out of their most acute circumstances might give different insights into rapid response options.

Conceptualizing people at risk as primary protection agents underlines the critical role of information. People living the experience of violence are constantly analysing their circumstances. However, they are all too often functioning with either inadequate or inaccurate information. It is often on this basis that they are forced to adapt their strategies in what is an ever-evolving context. Access to information remains a critical challenge that humanitarians are positioned to address in various ways. Albeit an obviously sensitive issue, this is critical to peoples' independent survival efforts and could be explored more extensively by humanitarians.

Associated with this, is the capacity of people at risk to access adequate information to analyse early (as opposed to late) indicators of imminent threat, as the analysis of the 'anticipation' phase provided in the early sections of this paper illustrates – although this needs to be reflected on the more fundamental realization that despite imminent threat, there are indeed few effective auto-protection options.

Indeed, the extreme incongruence between the magnitude of the threats and the capacity to cope has tremendous consequences, with livelihoods and resources taking a massive hit. Although assets quickly risk becoming part of a war economy and thus potentially foster extremely destructive economic dynamics, the local economy is nevertheless critical to auto-protection efforts in this period. And people are seeking cash resources as much as material assets. Careful reflections are required on how cash programming and livelihood programmes could be operationalized, despite the acuity of the context, in efforts to prop up people's capacity to cope in these ever difficult times.

Family separation is widely identified as a critical issue. Although this as well is a highly sensitive issue raising both extremely sensitive political and ethical questions, respondents have widely called for facilitation in reunification and thus the feasibility of such an effort should be seriously investigated with the intent of addressing the issue on a large scale.

Finally, people repeatedly refer to the mental impact of prolonged exposure to violence. These implications have in some cases had dramatic implications in terms of auto-protection capacity. When traumatized people lose their capacity to cope, and the implications for themselves and those around them can be devastating. As such, psycho-social activities need to be prioritized and operationalized in a manner that is appropriate for even those communities that are currently facing extremely precarious circumstances.

But again, most fundamentally, the causative factors provoking the displacement crisis must be resolved. People at risk have clearly articulated the conditions necessary for the resolution of their displacement crisis. This includes a joint announcement to be made by President Kiir and Dr Machar; and the withdrawal of armed troops from urban centres. The voice of the citizens needs to be heard by senior power brokers who are perpetuating this conflict. The international community is positioned to facilitate this. Efforts to encourage these leaders to account to their people should be shared extensively with the people of Unity State ensuring that their interests are indeed being well respected and that they are updated on progress made to these ends.

End.

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