
Capacities and Vulnerabilities Assessment

Leer Town, Leer County, Unity State

June 2 – 6, 2014

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1. Executive Summary

From June 2 – 6, 2014, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) travelled to Leer in order to conduct an in-depth assessment on previously identified protection concerns in Leer Town, Unity State.

The goals of the assessment were threefold –

1. Further investigate identified protection concerns for the host community in Leer and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Bentiu, Bor, and Malakal;
2. Move into the rural areas to identify outlying protection concerns and vulnerabilities; and
3. Identify capacities that may help inform and strengthen further humanitarian intervention.

Leer suffered heavily in fighting between government and opposition troops from February through mid-April, when the Opposition recaptured Leer and pushed the front line towards Bentiu. According to UNOSAT, 1556 homes were burnt by early February with several commercial buildings destroyed as well. IDPs and host community returnees are currently sheltering in schools, clinics, burned-out tukuls and in the market area. The need for **shelter** and **other NFI** items amongst both host and IDP communities is very high, as the markets have not been resupplied since the beginning of the conflict, and the majority of shops are now empty.

Local opposition civil authorities and IDPs identified three primary needs – food security, shelter, and health. The lack of these most basic necessities is forcing many into desperate and dangerous coping strategies. Those IDPs who came from Bentiu reported risking **rape, abduction, and murder** from government soldiers and allied militias to reach the Leer town, but with ongoing severe food insecurity, many are now crossing back through insecure areas to acquire sorghum and yellow maize from the few markets that are still operating in northern Unity State, crossing and returning through the front lines to Leer, which they see as safer than other areas in the region.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) has reopened the hospital in Leer that the organization operated for the past 25 years and is treating **severe malnutrition**, which is disturbingly high. The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) has established a presence and is focusing on food security and livelihoods. However, the initial half-ration distribution was only able to reach 6300 households out of 7456.¹ Small groups of IDPs continue to arrive in Leer, and many of the most vulnerable living in the market, including unaccompanied children and elderly women, reported that they were not able to access the registration/distribution. Both host population and IDPs are **severely food insecure**, and though some have acquired seeds (both through humanitarian intervention and local capacity) and have begun planting, for the great majority, who have not cleared land and have no tools, any support given may come too late.

The team observed the need for psychosocial support amongst the IDP community as a protection response. However, in terms of prevention, it seems to be primarily food insecurity that is driving civilians into taking great risks and engendering further abuses. Key informants reported cases of **rape, abduction, and extrajudicial killings** as individuals go as far afield as

¹ The total number comes from the RRA.

Mayom County (four to eight days by foot) to search for food.

If Leer becomes a humanitarian hub it will be crucial to ensure full-time presence of protection actors in order to support protection mainstreaming into all sectors. The humanitarian community must also consider the significant pull factor that humanitarian intervention may have on the populations in the counties surrounding Leer (Mayendit, Koch, and Panyijar) and explore mitigating measures where possible.

2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the short Capacities and Vulnerabilities Assessment, NP recommends:

To All Parties in Conflict

1. Respect International Humanitarian Law, International Human Rights Law and South Sudanese law regarding violence against civilians; and
2. Fully implement the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement from January 23rd, 2014 and the May 9th Agreement, with particular attention to Section 3 of the Cessation of Hostilities on Protection of Civilians.

To Protection Actors

1. Further assessment to Koch County and Mayom County to better determine protection concerns, especially among women who have travelled long distances in search of food; and
2. Provide protective accompaniment and proactive presence for civilians in areas where risk of violence is acute; and
3. Protection monitoring and direct protection support for distributions and other humanitarian activities.

To the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS)

1. Establishment of a protected corridor on the Bentiu-Guit road to allow civilians to transit south through the front lines with enhanced security; and
2. Further investigation by UNMISS Human Rights of human rights violations including rape, abduction, and murder along the Bentiu-Guit road; and

To Other Humanitarian Actors

1. Scale up humanitarian response in Leer County, focusing on Food Security, WASH, NFI/Shelter and Protection; and
2. Prioritize protection mainstreaming among respective agencies to incorporate protection concerns into planning and implementation of distributions;

3. Methodology

The assessment team gathered information and perspectives on needs by conducting several interviews and focus group discussions with local leaders, IDPs, and unaccompanied/separated children in Leer Town. The work in Leer town was supplemented by trips into surrounding

payams, including Pilling and Adok Payams in Leer County, as well as trips to Bieh and Mirmir Bomas in Ngony Payam, Koch County.

The team conducted focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) with elderly women, young mothers, elderly men, and unaccompanied/separated children. The focus groups consisted of five to seven individuals. Out of these groups, one or two individuals were selected for further interviews to narrow and qualify information gathered in FGDs. Field observations supplemented witness and informant testimony.

4. Context Overview

Leer town is the ancestral homeland of opposition leader Dr. Riek Machar, with the Nile River to the east and already-flooded roads and swamps in Mayendit County to the west. The SPLA in Opposition (SPLA-IO) took the town without violence shortly after the outbreak of violence in December and held it until early February, when the government forces re-took Leer in a campaign that saw thousands of civilians flee into the bush² amid destruction that claimed over 1500 homes and businesses.³ According to the County Relief and Rehabilitation Agency⁴ (RRA), 6323 households were burned in Leer County during the time the government held Leer. Many civilians in the area believe that the town and surrounding countryside was heavily targeted due to its link to Dr. Machar. Around town, government soldiers and supporters left graffiti marked “PK,” which stands for “President Kiir,” during their stay in the town.

Opposition forces recaptured Leer on 15 April, with fighting continuing in the area and on the road north to Bentiu on the 17th and 18th. Since then, Leer has remained behind opposition lines. The area is now considered largely safe and secure by most of the IDPs interviewed. The host community is returning from hiding, and IDPs have primarily arrived from the Bentiu area, with additional displaced persons moving down the River Nile from as far away as Phom and Malakal, though these are the minority.

Humanitarian access was granted in late May, and the first assessment team arrived in Leer 26 – 28 May. There seems to be a high-level commander assigned to Leer County however whether he is permanent stationed there or passes through was not clear during the visit. The presence of armed actors was relatively minimal, though greater numbers could be seen in the early morning and at the end of the day. Armed actors themselves reported hunger, implying a risk of diversion of food aid.

Although Leer is one of the more stable areas in southern Unity due to its relative distance from the front lines, populations there are at risk of further displacement if there is a renewed advance or retreat of armed forces through southern Unity State. IDPs in Leer reported feeling relatively physically secure in within Leer, though this is disrupted by severe food insecurity, which has forced many to travel long distances in search of food. The presence of armed actors in the area does create a level of insecurity for the civilian population as the town and its military assets,

² Voice of America, “MSF Says Thousands Flee into Bush in South Sudan State” (Voice of America, 31 January 2014) (available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/south-sudan-msf-unrest-flee-bush-unity-state-leer-hospital/1841956.html>).

³ Map from UNISAT as of 7 February 2014, available at <http://reliefweb.int/map/south-sudan/destruction-leer-unity-state-south-sudan-7-february-2014>.

⁴ The RRA is a parallel structure to the RRC in opposition-held areas.

including the nearby military barracks are potential strategic targets for government forces. Additionally the presence of armed actors, regardless of affiliation, can increase the risk of sexual violence, coercion and harassment for vulnerable populations. While the rainy season will diminish the likelihood of a traditional ground assault, there remains a risk of intra-opposition/communal clashes and attacks from militias (e.g. cattle raiding).

MSF and ICRC returned to Leer for an assessment on 2 May, and have begun initial health, nutrition, and food security responses. MSF has started treating children especially for acute and severe malnutrition, and have already filled their 1675-bed clinic in just three weeks of renewed operations⁵. Typically, the doctors will see a maximum of 700 cases in one year.

At the time of the assessment ICRC has recently finished a 15-day food and seed distribution to 6300 households out of 7546. However, many IDPs in the market informed the team that they had not been able to access the registration due to logistical problems including shortened registration time, young men cutting in line and preventing vulnerable people from access, and displaced who had gone to the bush to search for food. Since this assessment, ICRC has increased the number of households reached to 10,000 HHs for half-rations and are planning to reach 10,000 HHs for full rations again in July.

5. Vulnerabilities and Risk Management

The conflict-affected populations in Leer town are experiencing numerous vulnerabilities associated with displacement and violence. This assessment focused specifically on conflict-related vulnerabilities and livelihood vulnerabilities.

Individuals and groups become vulnerable in the face of increasing threats and decreasing resiliency and coping capacities. The speed and intensity of this process differs according to the context and includes a variety of factors such as multiple displacements, pre-existing underdevelopment, cultural practices, the prevalence of inter-personal violence, conflict-related violence, alcohol use, accessibility to markets, disease and food insecurity. The following groups should be considered most at risk in the current context:

- Residents of Leer and surrounding villages absorbing the IDP population, which deplete the already very limited resources of the host community
- IDPs who have been displaced multiple times
- IDP population in Leer displaced very recently from the attack on Bentiu on 8 May
- Elderly and women who, due to cultural norms and gender roles, become more vulnerable as a consequence of food-insecurity
- Disabled men, women, boys and girls who struggle to access humanitarian services and to engage in self-protection strategies
- Unaccompanied minors who are particularly vulnerable to protection concerns such as exploitation and forced recruitment
- Children, elderly, sick and wounded unable to provide for themselves.

The Bentiu – Guit Corridor

For many IDPs who fled Bentiu, the most dangerous section of the route south was the Bentiu-Guit corridor. At the moment, it appears that the front lines have stabilized just north of Guit town, with the government controlling several payams in the north of Guit County and the opposition controlling Guit town and everything farther south.

Witnesses describe soldiers on the road and a checkpoint supported by an armored personnel carrier (APC). According to one elderly woman – “The soldiers took my son [16 years old] and they cut his throat while I watched. They took my daughter, and I haven’t seen her since. They let me go with the grandchildren because I am an old woman.”

Many civilians took to the bush, traveling at night in an attempt to circumvent the soldiers by tracing a wide arc to the east. However, there are also soldiers patrolling in the rural areas as well. One witness shared, “We were attacked in the very early morning. They started shooting. They didn’t call out or try to speak with us, they were just shooting. We started out from Bentiu with 200, but we were scattered. Only twenty of us made it to Leer. “

Survivors describe “bodies, bodies, bodies” in the bush, but due to cultural taboos about handling the dead, they could not say whether the individuals had died from hunger, thirst or from violence. Even those who travelled through the bush often did not make it far enough south to avoid government troops. “They came to us in a truck. There were only women. The young ladies were selected. Once we realized they wanted to rape us, we tried to run away. Seven of us escaped. Eight are still missing.”

The allegations of abuses along the Bentiu-Guit corridor are serious enough to warrant further criminal investigation as well as an opportunity for the United Nations to flex its new mandate and provide patrolling for the protection of civilians in the area. Nonviolent Peaceforce strongly recommends that monitoring and investigation of abuses takes place.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)

There were numerous and consistent reports of rape and abduction of women and girls during the period government forces controlled Leer. Women and girls who had fled into the bush seeking safety were forced to return to Leer due to severe food insecurity and malnourishment. Trading sex for food during this time was reportedly common. Further investigations and psychosocial support for survivors should be a priority after the food security situation has stabilized.

The SSRA informed the team that 85 women went missing from Leer town during this period (February – April) and are still unaccounted for. There were also reports of abduction of girls by government troops. One informant said this number could be as high as 393 girls abducted after the government withdrawal. According to the same informant, five escaped and are now in Rubkona County. Further investigation is necessary to verify these reports.

The team in Leer heard many stories of rape and abduction of women on the road from Bentiu to Guit Town, Guit County (see box text). Many IDPs fled the government’s capture of Bentiu, either due to the chaos or because they feared abuses like those that have marked other attacks on the city.

Women and girls are at higher risk of SGBV in displacement. However, in Leer and the surrounding counties women and girls from both the IDP and host communities are currently at **extremely high risk of SGBV due to coping with food insecurity.**

In focus group discussions and interviews, it was reported that as a result of a lack of food in Leer County, women and girls have been forced to walk up to seven days in search of food to Mayom and Rubkona Counties, which had good harvests last year and still have grain in the market. Mayom is also one of the few major trading areas still open for business in all of Unity State.

However, these routes are very dangerous. IDPs reported numerous cases of women and girls who have been abducted, raped, and killed by armed actors including government-allied Bul Nuer militias. These trips have become so dangerous that many in Leer have adopted a coping strategy of traveling by foot to northern Koch County and hiring an elderly woman to continue the rest of the way. There is a belief, generally substantiated by survivor reports of rape, that older women are less likely to be targeted, whereas younger women, especially those who are pregnant or lactating, have been specifically targeted due to the belief that they are “clean,” i.e. free of HIV/AIDS.

Finally, it is disturbing to note that sexual violence has become so prevalent an experience amongst the IDP community in Leer that survivors and others are more willing to speak out about the experiences, overcoming some of the sense of shame that often blocks reporting. This is evidenced by women speaking more openly of their own rapes, while saying, “Everyone knows what has happened to us.” The team received reports that some survivors, due to cultural taboos regarding not having sex during lactation, have chosen to stop breast-feeding their small children post-incident, further increasing the likelihood of malnutrition in children under five. This needs further investigation on how widespread this practice is and if it is possible to implement activities to mitigate these practices. MSF offers treatment for victims of sexual violence, but many are too concerned about their basic needs to take advantage of the services offered.

The Koch-Mayom Route

The severe food insecurity in Leer Town has forced women and girls into extremely precarious survival strategies. Taking what money or possessions they have, many women walk anywhere from five to seven days to Mayom County to buy or barter for maize and sorghum.

Travelling in groups for safety, they walk north from Leer town into Koch County until they reach Koch Town. When they arrive at Koch Town those who can afford it pay a driver to take them the two hours drive to Buaw, in the north of Koch County – on the border with Rubkona County to the north and Mayom County to the west. Those who cannot afford to pay go by foot, sometimes joining other groups of women from payams in Leer and Koch counties.

Once in Buaw, these vulnerable women and girls make the dangerous crossing into Mayom County at night in order to avoid local militias who have beaten, raped, and abducted women. In the southern payams, these women move from door to door to buy or beg maize or sorghum. Once they have enough, they return to Buaw and on to Leer.

The team heard in Leer that these women had begun to hire elderly women, who were seen as less likely to be attacked; however, field observations witnessed several younger women waiting to make the trip to Buaw. Many women who have made the trip multiple times have been raped on multiple occasions, saying they had no other choice, and would make the trip as often as they could to secure food for their communities.

Child Protection Concerns

Children in Leer and neighbouring payams are especially vulnerable. Many of the children interviewed had become separated from their families while fleeing areas affected by conflict such as Bentiu. Many of these are sheltering in the market, much like the other IDPs. As schools are currently filled with IDP families seeking shelter, there are no education activities ongoing.

A large number of unaccompanied boys stay in the market area. Team members estimate that at least twenty boys are sheltering with other families or other unaccompanied boys. Unaccompanied girls are more likely to be taken in by families, but there are far fewer of them.

For children as well, food insecurity is one of the greatest risks at the current time. The unaccompanied boys have been hired by the butcher to help slaughter cattle in exchange for blood, which they then cook and either eat or sell for one pound per bag. According to a national humanitarian worker from the area, this is not something that he has ever seen before. Eating blood is not a common practice in this area and must, in this context, be considered an extreme survival strategy.

In Leer, MSF reported that the rates of illness and severe malnutrition are particularly alarming amongst children. It was reported that children had died from treatable illness in Leer and surrounding payams. Unaccompanied children, in particular, are at increased risk of malnutrition, as they have no one to care for them. In Leer and surrounding payams, many clinics have staff but no medicine or other supplies and are essentially unable to operate.

The mobilization and/or recruitment of children into armed groups is a grave child rights violation that has taken place across the country. The assessment team was able to witness children and youth in military-style uniforms and carrying weapons. Further research and observation must take place by other actors who wish to operate in this area.

Tension Between Host Community and IDPs

Several IDP women expressed concerns to the team that they had been asked to leave the market stalls in which they had been sheltering. Some of the market leaders had been pressuring IDPs to leave the market stalls. The team reported these concerns to the commissioner; however, they did not have the opportunity to follow up on suggested meetings between local leadership, IDPs, and market leaders to come to a conclusion.

These are early signs of tension between the two communities that need to be monitored, as the likelihood of inter-communal conflict over limited resources could be high. As the influx of IDPs continues, the pressures on limited resources will increase while the onset of the rainy season will further decrease access to goods and services.

Livelihood Vulnerabilities

Since the onset of the conflict, livelihood opportunities and access to basic services have been severely affected. Borders have closed, markets have been looted and destroyed, and trade routes have been closed by military movements significantly reducing livelihood opportunities. Farmers cannot cultivate; cattle herders cannot move to their grazing grounds or are stranded with their livestock.

Members of the host community and IDPs are engaging in minimal livelihood activities in Leer town. There are some farming activities taking place; however, the majority of the displaced do not have seeds or tools to begin farming. Without immediate intervention, it will be too late for many to plant. In Leer, crops must be planted by the end of June at the latest, but with the rains coming early, there is a threat that seeds and young plants may be washed away. Residents must still clear land, and for IDPs, the difficulties are compounded, as they have no land of their own to cultivate.

As the majority of the host community members are absorbing the IDP population, the few resources and assets such as shelter, food, cooking utensils and jerry cans are being shared amongst communities. This has put pressure on the household and negatively impacted local coping mechanisms already strained due to various factors related to the conflict. Women and the elderly eat last, according to focus group discussions, while children and men eat first. In addition, households ration food as they have to cope now with a larger number of individuals due to the influx of IDP's.

6. Capacities and Survival Strategies

River Access

Adok is a payam and **major river port** on the Nile located 25 kilometres southeast of Leer. The team was able to meet with several men who operate boats on the river. Few boats are still operating, and those that do are at risk of being attacked. What used to be a one-day trip to Phom (New Fangak) from Adok is now upwards of eight days, as the crew can only move at night and must cut the engine on certain parts of the river to avoid detection. The crew currently restricts movements between Kaldak (three hours past Phom) in the north and as far south as Kilo 71 in Panyijar County.

The boatmen have been operating an **informal patronage network**, collecting whatever seeds communities can spare, often one to five kilograms at a time, and redistributing these seeds amongst clan and kinship ties. This is an informal system that has the benefit of reaching some vulnerable at the cost of not being sufficiently systematic to reach those without familial or kinship ties to the host community in and around Leer. Some of this sorghum is also sold in the market, though many women felt that the price in Adok (24 SSP/kg) was higher than they were willing to pay (20 SSP/kg).

The port also allows **access to fish**, both fresh and dried. However, due to lack of ground transport, the team did not see any fish in Leer. Nevertheless, the port could be a key access point for humanitarian intervention.

Finally, the men still operating boats named the areas they consider most dangerous on the river. Tunja and Nyijuat, river communities to the north, used to house Shiluk civilians who have been displaced by Nuer. Lel is a predominately Dinka area in northern Unity. To the South, the men mentioned Duk County as being particularly dangerous, and they absolutely will not venture farther than Chambok in Lakes State for similar security reasons. These areas, especially those that were mentioned as homes of displaced Shiluk, should be further investigated.

Cattle

Cattle are a critical source of wealth, prestige, and power in Nuer culture. From the air, the team saw large herds of cattle but had no way to compare them to averages for this time of year in this location. On the ground however, one key informant, a local butcher, shared that before the crisis, he slaughtered between four and six cattle per day. Until very recently, that number had increased to between **25 and 30 cattle per day**. After the ICRC food distribution, the number of slaughtered cows has stabilized around seventeen head per day.

Obviously, this is a resource and a capacity that is not sustainable over the course of the rainy season. The community consumed **five times** as many cows as before the conflict. It is not clear who owns the cattle or if and for how long the community will be able to maintain access, making intervention all the more necessary. Considering the high profile of cattle in Nuer culture, there is no reason to believe the increased rate at which they are being killed is anything other than a response to severe food insecurity. The impact of rapidly depleting cattle stocks may result in increased incidents of cattle raiding as need increases, potentially adding yet another layer of violent conflict onto the already unstable context.

Moreover, unaccompanied children and elderly IDP women have been reduced to begging for cow's blood, which the butcher has willingly provided at slaughter. This is cooked and the pieces are sold for a one SSP per portion or eaten directly. This is not the norm. This is a new survival strategy and it is in direct response to the food insecurity currently affecting Leer County.

Position in Southern Unity

Leer is currently deep behind opposition lines, and holds significant symbolic value as the ancestral home of opposition leader Riek Machar. This cultural touchstone is its most valuable asset as a target of war.

A number of IDPs and members of the host community said to the assessment team that they believe that Leer is less likely than other areas to be subject to direct conflict and this is why they have chosen to settle there for the time being, even if their food security situation is still precarious.

However, when humanitarian intervention arrives in Leer, the town will present a major pull factor to IDPs in the three surrounding counties (Mayendit, Koch, and Panyijar) as well as from further north (Mayom, Guit, and Rubkona). Some are already arriving because they heard that Leer was safe and/or that humanitarian activities were taking place. When considering modalities of intervention in Leer, simultaneous or near-simultaneous interventions should be considered in areas from which civilians might move – this is particularly important given the extremely high number of reports of SGBV facing women, who are primarily responsible for the collection of distribution items. Although interventions need to be fast, all possible considerations should be given to the timing so as to prevent the need for such movement across front lines.

Several opposition soldiers complained about hunger and suggested that they should be eligible for food distribution. This would indicate risk of diversion of aid within the Leer area, however at this point there are no indications that this would be greater than the expected level in an active conflict.

7. Conclusion

Leer town, perhaps best known as the home of former Vice-President Riek Machar, was devastated by violence from February through April as government and opposition forces fought for control. The situation has since become relatively stable, with thousands of IDPs finding shelter in Leer's market, schools, and clinics. Leer is suffering at the moment from severe food insecurity, which will only grow worse as the rainy season continues. Severe acute malnutrition is at disturbingly high levels. Women, the elderly, the infirm, and children, in particular are most vulnerable to malnutrition, and women especially have suffered from rape and abduction in their search for food.

The need for humanitarian intervention is serious in Leer County. Both host community members and IDPs identified food and shelter as their primary needs, with health, protection, and psychosocial support identified as secondary but still very important. IDPs have arrived mostly from the Bentiu area with nothing to support themselves. Along the way, they faced severe abuses, especially on the route from Bentiu to Guit. These abuses included rape, abduction, and murder. Once these IDPs reached Guit town, however, the road was clear and few problems were reported. Some of the IDPs are now re-crossing the battle lines to acquire food in southern Mayom County, putting themselves at escalated risk of further abuses.

As humanitarian actors move forward on response in Leer, there should be a strong focus on mainstreaming protection into all interventions and consideration of the significant pull factor that humanitarian intervention may have on the populations in the counties surrounding Leer. Humanitarian intervention is an imperative that must be delivered within the framework of the contextual realities of insecurity and exposure to violence.