

## RAPID SEA RISK ASSESSMENT IN RENK, UPPER NILE

15 - 19 JUNE 2023



IOM PSEA Officer and IMC GBV Officer facilitates a focus group discussion with South Sudanese returnee women © IOM 2023

### Summary Findings:

- Risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and other misconduct committed by staff of humanitarian organizations working in Renk and at Joda/Whuntou border crossing point are high. A joint rapid SEA risk assessment, conducted on behalf of the Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) Task Force in South Sudan, identified sexual favours and payments in exchange for employment, transportation assistance, or other humanitarian aid, as well as prostitution and other forms of transactional sex, as the most likely forms of exploitation of affected populations. Single women and adolescent girls, and single female-headed households were considered most at-risk of SEA. While outside the scope of the assessment, in addition to SEA and misconduct by humanitarian workers, exploitative practices by other actors (private sector and government) were also highlighted.
- Deployment of staff from other duty stations and the rapid scale-up through 'mass-recruitment', with limited oversight of the recruitment process, was underscored by both humanitarian workers and host community members as a key risk area for SEA. Several UN and non-governmental organizations have outsourced part of the recruitment process for unskilled daily labourer by having candidates referred to them from government lists. This practice was perceived by all respondents as fueling nepotism, while some respondents shared instances of sexual exploitation or payments in exchange for job-promises. While the general opinion expressed by affected populations was that assistance is provided and distributed in a transparent, organized and dignified manner, focus group discussions did reveal examples of humanitarian staff asking for payments in exchange for assistance (non-food items). Both humanitarian staff and affected populations also reported that young women leave the transit centre and spend their night in Renk town, engaging in sex-work for payment or gifts.
- Tough working conditions, long workdays and workweeks (seven days a week without break was common practice by most organizations) and poor living conditions away from family and friends also increase risks of SEA. Additionally, with actual or perceived low oversight from main offices in Juba in combination with Renk largely being considered a place of transit further contributes to a general sense that chances of getting caught, or misconduct to be reported, are extremely low.

*This Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Risk Assessment was conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with Protection Working Group partners in Renk on behalf of the PSEA Task Force in South Sudan. It was made possible with the support of USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA).*



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## Background and Context

On 15 April 2023, fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted in Khartoum, with clashes in Darfur and several other locations in Sudan. The Sudan crisis has a significant humanitarian impact in South Sudan. As of 30 June 2023, more than 140,000 individuals and 32,000 households have crossed the Sudan-South Sudan border. 50 per cent of those who have entered South Sudan were females and 50 per cent were males, while 63,569 were children.<sup>1</sup> The real numbers are likely to be higher as some people entered the country unregistered. More than 90 per cent of the recorded arrivals are South Sudanese returning home and the vast majority of

arrivals are registered at the Joda/Whuntou border crossing point in Upper Nile State, and UN and humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have rapidly scaled-up its presence there as well as in Renk town around 45 kilometers from the border to support the needs in food, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health, mental health and psychosocial support, protection, shelter, transit site management, information management, and security. The rapid scale-up was facilitated both through deployment of staff from other parts of the country, as well as through the recruitment of new staff, including international staff, national staff from across South Sudan and from Renk town.

## Objective and Methodology

The main objective of the rapid assessment was to identify potential SEA risks associated with the Sudan crisis response, informed by the perspectives and knowledge from affected populations, humanitarian staff, and other stakeholders to improve SEA risk mitigation and response. The specific objectives were:

- To understand the risks of SEA occurrences associated with the Sudan crisis response and identify how humanitarian actors are addressing and mitigating risks of SEA.
- To provide recommendations for safe programming and inform capacity development to improve SEA risk mitigation and response.

### Methodology, sampling, and limitations

On behalf of the PSEA Task Force, the SEA Risk Assessment was conducted jointly by International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Medical Corps (IMC), the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children International (SCI) and GOAL. The rapid SEA risk assessment was conducted through primary data collection, gathered through focus group discussions with returnees,

<sup>1</sup> IOM and UNHCR. *Population Movement from Sudan to South Sudan, June 2023*. Retrieved from: [Link](#)

refugees and asylum seekers and key informant interviews with different stakeholders including community leaders of the affected populations, humanitarian service providers and local government representatives. Additionally, a separate focus group discussions was conducted with humanitarian staff. Data was collected using data collection tools (focus group discussion and interview guides) used were developed by the PSEA Task Force and adapted to the Sudan crisis response context. This was complemented by direct observation at key areas of congregation, including Renk Transit Centre, Joda/Whuntou border crossing point, Renk town market, the river side, which has become an informal settlement for returnees.

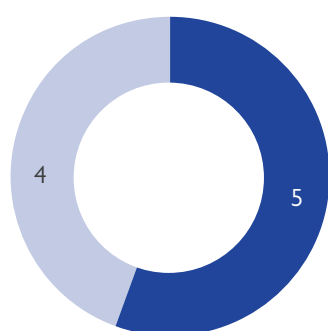
Given the novelty of the Sudan crisis response context in Renk, the lack of available information of SEA risks, and the need for data to guide humanitarian operations to better target and introduce new SEA risk mitigation measures, stratified sampling was used to ensure the representation of key groups. Focus group discussions were organized with gender-separated and homogenous groups, to facilitate open and honest discussions.

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions with returnees, refugees and host community members were facilitated by IOM's PSEA Officer and co-facilitated by protection staff from DRC, IMC, IRC, SCI and GOAL. The language used was Arabic with interpretation to Dinka and Nuer, when needed. Focus group discussions with humanitarian partners were facilitated by UNHCR Protection Officer in English.

Each discussion began with sensitizing the participants/respondents on the definitions of SEA in a sensitive, culturally appropriate manner. It also involved highlighting examples of prohibited behavior by humanitarian workers and the responsibility of the humanitarian community to uphold the highest standards of conduct. Participants were encouraged to be open and forthcoming with information, as their responses would support with putting these standards into practice.

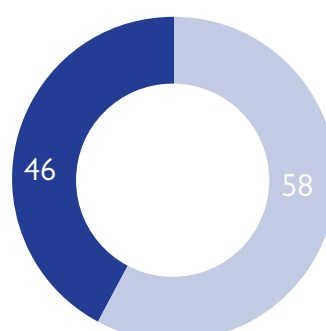
In total, 104 persons (58 females and 46 males) participated in focus group discussions and key informant interviews as per the below gender breakdown:

Key informant interviews with UN, International and National NGO and Government representatives



Male participants

Focus group discussions with Returnees, Refugees/Asylum Seekers and Host Community



Female participants

## Summary of Key Findings

- Identification of humanitarian workers:** The respondents said they are able to identify humanitarian worker because of visibility and branded clothes, such as reflector jackets, caps, hats, t-shirts, and organization IDs, and for those residing at the Renk Transit Centre, also through frequent meetings and interactions with staff. Those residing at the Riverside, Zero and Abukhadhar reported that their interaction with humanitarians was minimal as limited humanitarian services are provided at those sites.
- Understanding the policies of UN/Humanitarian organizations:** The respondents mentioned they are aware humanitarian assistance is free of charge. Nonetheless, respondents reported they were aware of incidents where some community members tried to purchase humanitarian assistance (non-food items), but that the service provider declined and informed

the beneficiary that items provided are free. Most humanitarian partners reported they are conducting awareness raising to the beneficiaries before their intervention through the local recruits. The challenge of training newly recruits on SEA was mentioned by all partners. Affected populations did not mention any language barriers.

- Safe access to assistance:** Respondents mentioned service provision at the border and in Renk, primarily within the transit centre, including food, nutrition, health and WASH, mental health and psychosocial support services, shelter and non-food items, as well as transportation assistance. However, in locations like Abukhadhar (an empty school in the outskirts of Renk town), Zero (near Renk market) and the riverside, services are limited or non-existent. Respondents mentioned they have contact with humanitarian staff

on a daily basis, and staff include females. According to respondents, humanitarian assistance has been provided in an orderly and dignified way, and girl respondents specifically mentioned that menstrual care support has been provided by female staff, with items well wrapped and distributed discreetly behind a curtain. Others however mentioned one distribution for menstrual hygiene management kits, distributed door-to-door by both male and female staff, without demonstration on how to use the items.

- **Services available to SEA victims:** According to the respondents, all services available to a GBV survivors are available to a victim of SEA. However, services are limited with Clinical Management of Rape (CMR) provided at the Renk Hospital and counselling to survivors by IMC. However, as Renk is perceived as a transit site for returnees, it is challenging to provide ongoing service.
- **Groups most vulnerable to SEA:** Almost all respondents (from both focus group discussions and key informant interviews) stated that the most vulnerable persons to SEA are adolescent girls, single female headed households, unaccompanied minors, children left unattended and persons with disabilities. They recited that in the Transit Centre, there are already single women and adolescent girls exposed to this risk, but they do not report, as there is no support to be provided. Humanitarian workers expressed that women, adolescent girls, and single mothers 'lure' humanitarians into having affairs with them through body language and the way they dress.
- **Areas less safe for women and girls:** Respondents mentioned that areas unsafe for women and girls in Renk are places they go to collect firewood, water-points and latrine facilities in the Transit Centre, especially from sunset and during night times as there is no lighting around WASH facilities, as well as around the riverbank and the roadside. Renk main marketplace and especially the tea places during night were pointed out as a high-risk area for SEA.
- **Situations where SEA is likely to happen:** The respondents mention that the situations in which SEA is likely to happen are transactional sex and other sexual favors in exchange for assistance and humanitarians procuring sex from prostitutes/ sex workers. Women specifically mentioned community leaders, the Relief & Rehabilitation Commission (RRC), and casual workers working for IOM arranging transportation of returnees to places of origin, promising women and girls they will include them in the registration for onward travel assistance.

Adolescent girls also mentioned that some girls are brought to Renk town where they sleep in lodges with men in exchange for money, phones, or other gifts. They mentioned that as the perks (money and gifts) are visible to others in the transit centre, more women may

be tempted to turn to this option as a coping strategy in lack of other options. Respondents in the transit centre reported that the police at the gate threaten women and girls, promise gifts to them, and asks girls to meet them in Renk Town.

- **Reporting of SEA:** When asked about reporting if either they themselves or others are subjected to SEA, some mentioned they would report to humanitarian organizations, IMC [manages a women and girls safe space in the transit site] was mentioned by several respondents, but the majority responded that they would not feel comfortable or see the point of reporting. Fear of retaliation, lack of trust in the system, and lack of knowledge of reporting channels were mentioned as main reasons for not reporting. A complaints office, telephone numbers for reporting, and feedback and complaints boxes were mentioned as possible channels for reporting.
- **Recruitment:** All respondents representing humanitarian organizations reported the recruitment of many new staff, while some were still recruiting additional staff. Most organizations revealed coordination with the government -- RRC, Ministry of Labour, and the Boma administrators -- which administers a list of people seeking employment, which is in turn used as a pool of candidates for humanitarian organizations recruiting locally. This is a high risk for misconduct, and one that was strongly emphasized during focus group discussions with females at Joda/Whuntou border area, where respondents reported that some women have been favoured. Respondents further reported that one agency was asking people to pay 5,000 SSP to be recruited. It was also revealed that local recruits liaise and pay some women/parents in the Transit Centre to have access to the adolescent girls, some mothers force their daughters into relationships with the local recruits or businessmen.
- **Working conditions:** All respondents reported that working conditions are tough, with many reporting working from Monday to Sunday without a break, while some had rotating schedules in place. Others have staff who work nightshifts, and during those hours there is no female staff present (Joda/Whuntou). All staff wear their visibility and are advised not to move around wearing visibility after working hours. All the respondents reported that they have a curfew, however locally recruited staff move around freely after curfew time (going to their homes, the market, etc.) Staff recruited from other locations, whether national or international staff, reported spending most of their time at their office compound or accommodation.

## Recommendations

### Awareness raising

- Increase awareness raising efforts targeting; adapt material and simplify messages focusing on identified high-risk areas for SEA and misconduct to occur, e.g., sexual favours in exchange for transportation assistance and humanitarian aid, and on available reporting channels;
- Consider targeted messaging and in-person sessions for high-risk groups, such as female single-headed households, single women, adolescent girls, and unaccompanied children. Conduct regular consultations with these groups to ensure identify emerging risks and to ensure appropriate, relevant and effective communication approaches.

### Review processes for recruitment and distribution

- Organizations to review their internal processes for recruitment, including those on full-time regular staff contracts as well as those on more flexible daily or hourly contacts, considering risks associated with third party actors (including government) referring candidates to organizations for recruitment. For recruitment of staff, ensure that HR department vet personnel using existing databases (Clear Check for UN agencies) to avoid hiring or re-hiring of individuals whose working relationship with a UN organization because of a determination that they perpetrated sexual harassment or sexual exploitation and abuse.
- Organizations to review their processes for distribution of humanitarian assistance to minimize risks of SEA and other misconduct, and to enhance transparency and accountability to affected populations. For example, clear division of roles and responsibilities throughout the process, ensuring the involvement of more than one staff member at each step: registration, individual needs assessment / eligibility assessment, distribution, post-distribution monitoring, and ensuring female staff in registration, distribution and monitoring teams.

### Gender parity among staff, training, and orientation

- Humanitarian organizations to more consciously consider the gender parity during recruitment and deployment of staff, to reduce the risk of SEA (vast majority of perpetrators are male), and to be able to ensure female staff in registration and distribution teams.
- Humanitarian organizations to ensure that newly recruited staff fully understand and sign Code of Conduct upon his/her assignment. Organizations should also ensure that policies and guidelines are available in local languages and/or simple language which is easy to understand and without jargon.
- Each partner to nominate and PSEA Focal points, including staff holding senior-level positions, invest in training and coaching to better identify SEA risks and mitigating actions.
- Immediately increase orientation and training of newly recruited staff and other contracted workers as well as refresher training of all staff on PSEA, prioritizing those involved in high-risk areas. Adapt training material to the local context, language, and reporting channels and practices, as well as confidentiality and safe referrals of victims utilizing the GBV referral mechanism.

### Reporting

- Ensure that functional SEA reporting lines are operational. Work with affected populations to adapt feedback and complaints mechanisms that are relevant to them, and which they feel safe using. Raise awareness of those feedback and complaints mechanisms to affected populations.
- Considering that Renk is characterized by a high turn-over of returnees and refugees, in the absence of a Community Based Complaints Committee (CBCM), in coordination with the PSEA Task Force, consider establishing an alternative committee consisting of local staff.