



WAR AND THE BORDERLAND: NORTHERN BAHR EL-GHAZAL DURING THE SUDAN CONFLICT

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RESEARCH PAPER • MARCH 2024

The devastating war in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has also had a profound impact on the country's neighbours, particularly South Sudan. This is especially the case for areas that border Sudan, including Upper Nile, the Ruweng Administrative Area, and Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (NBG). RVI has been working in NBG under the XCEPT programme since 2018, producing a body of work on the borderland economy and systems of labour migration that closely tie together areas on both sides of the border.² The war has upended these pre-existing systems, seriously affected livelihoods in NBG, and creating an uncertain future for the people living in the borderland.

SUMMARY

Returnees and refugees in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal

- The war in Sudan has pushed more than 30,000 South Sudanese who had been living in Sudan back into NBG. While this is lower than the numbers arriving in other borderland states it is still significant due to NBG's smaller size and population. The 'returnees' have been forced to start a new life in South Sudan, often bringing little or nothing with them and substantially dependent on international humanitarian organizations or their communities.
- Returnees who had not lived in NBG for many years (or in some cases ever), and had no close family or community to return to, were often left with nowhere obvious to go and have ended up living in very difficult circumstances with little support.

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2 See Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Monetized livelihoods and militarized labour in South Sudan's borderlands', Rift Valley Institute, 2019, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/monetized-livelihoods-and-militarized-labour-south-sudans-borderlands/>; 'Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/breaking-out-borderlands-understanding-migrant-pathways-northern-bahr-el-ghazal-south/>; Joseph Diing Majok, 'War, Migration and Work: Agricultural Labour and Cross Border Migration from Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, South Sudan', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2022, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/war-migration-and-work-agricultural-labour-and-cross-border-migration-northern-bahr-el/>.

Disruption to cross-border trade and mobility

- Prior to the war, NBG had a close trading relationship with neighbouring states in Sudan. It was generally cheaper for traders to import goods from Sudan into NBG, rather than from Juba or other parts of South Sudan. Due to the war, patterns of trade have reversed with some South Sudanese traders now bringing goods to the border from Juba, selling them to Darfuri traders, who take them for sale in Sudan.
- Migrations of cattle from South and East Darfur and West Kordofan into NBG have been affected by the war. Misseriya and Rizeigat pastoralists were forced to migrate earlier than usual, and without the holding of annual peace conferences or the consent of Malual Dinka communities, increasing the risk of conflict.

Impact on the local economy

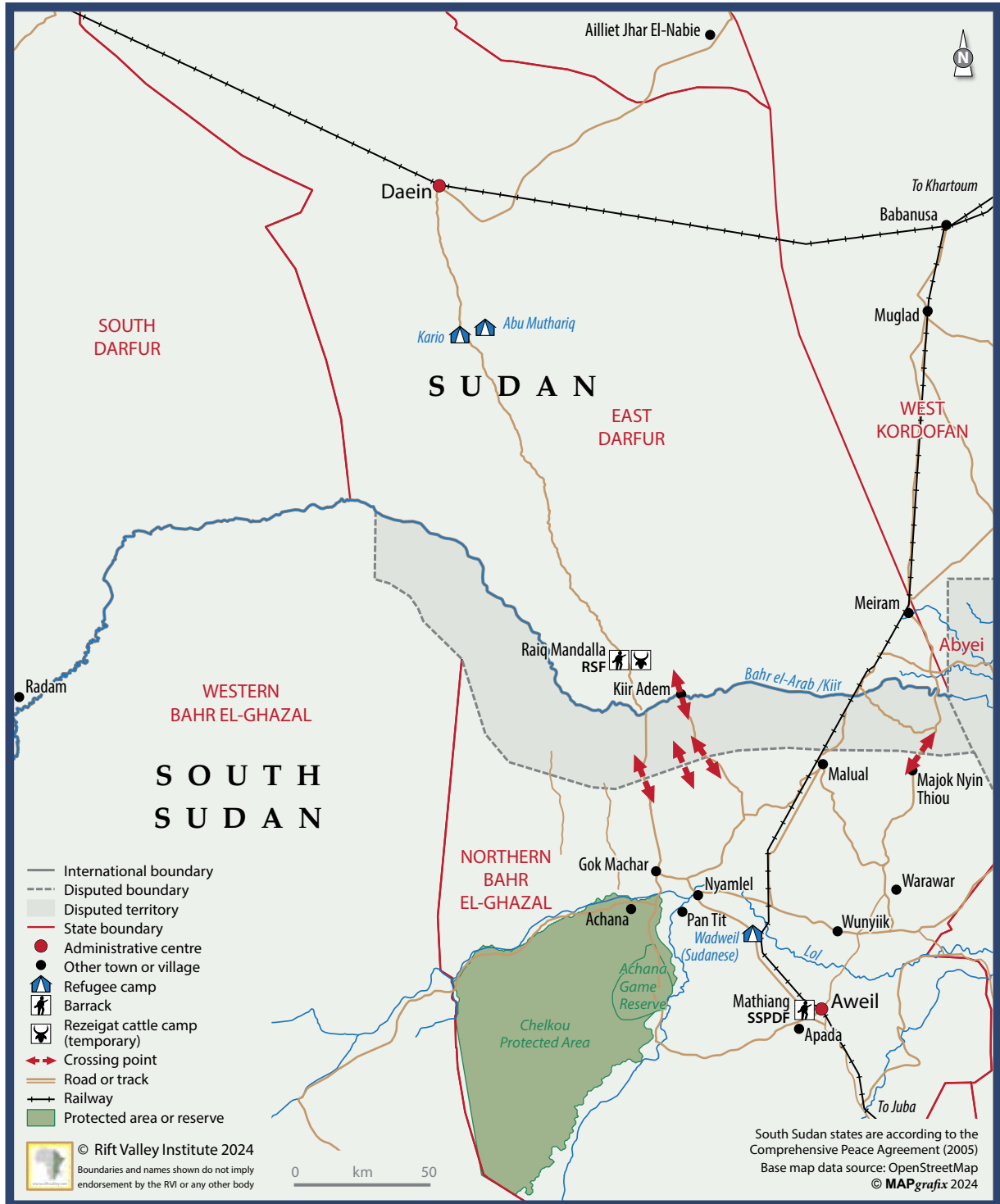
- The war and the arrival of returnees from Sudan has caused a shock to the local economy. The influx of returnees and refugees increased demand on basic commodities and led to some price rises. This was compounded by the disruption of cross-border trade, which made some commodities harder to find, and contributed to inflation.
- The disruption to the local economy, particularly cross-border labour systems, has meant that thousands of young men, who were accustomed to travel to Sudan as labour migrants, have returned to NBG without the money they would usually earn as agricultural labourers. Local people associate this with a reported rise in crime in the region.

Beneficiaries of the conflict

- Some local border officials have benefitted by facilitating the movement of illicit goods, particularly cars, from Sudan into South Sudan for sale. This is one of the only major sources of revenue for border officials and security personnel as the trade of commodities into South Sudan has mainly stopped.
- The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which controls the border between NBG and East Darfur (and has done since before the war), is able to use this to profitably smuggle goods in and out of Sudan, contributing to how it sustains its military campaign.
- Some better-off South Sudanese traders with the means to bring goods from Juba, and other parts of South Sudan, to NBG are profiting by exporting into Sudan, where basic commodities are scarce due to the fighting.

MAP

The Northern Bahr el-Ghazal-Darfur borderlands



INTRODUCTION

Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (NBG) state lies in north-west South Sudan on the border with Sudan. It borders three states in Sudan: South Darfur to the north-west, East Darfur to the north, and West Kordofan to the north-east. Two main routes connect East Darfur and West Kordofan states to Northern Bahr el-Ghazal state: 1) the Kiir Adem road, linking El Daein town in East Darfur state with Aweil town in NBG state through Gok Machar town in Aweil North County; and 2) the Majok Nyinthetau road, linking El Muglad and Meiram towns in West Kordofan state with Aweil town in NBG state through Warawar market and Wanjok town in Aweil East county (see map).

Before the war in Sudan, the Darfur and Kordofan regions in Sudan, and Northern Bahr el-Ghazal and Abyei states in South Sudan, were economically interdependent.³ Although communities on both sides of the border had decades-long political, cultural, and religious animosity, they also shared economic interests that continued to pull them towards one another.⁴ Trading in the borderlands continues to adjust and operate, as it has over time. Suffering from violence throughout history, the communities that live in these areas have learned the art of trading and making money in times of insecurity.⁵

For decades, farm labourers have migrated from NBG every agricultural season (between June and July) to work on commercial farms in the Darfur and Kordofan regions. Other young men have migrated during the dry season (between December and May) to find work in cities across Sudan.⁶ In addition to being a labour migration hub and central crossroads to elsewhere, NBG has been economically dependent on the Darfur and Kordofan regions. Most NBG food commodities were imported from these regions, and fuel and other manufactured goods imported from Khartoum also passed through. In the past, due to long distances, bad roads, multiple taxes and insecurity on the roads between Aweil and Juba, goods imported from Juba to NBG were more expensive than those imported from Sudan.⁷

The Rizeigat cattle-keeping communities in East Darfur and part of South Darfur and the Misseriya cattle-keeping communities of West Kordofan states also migrate across the border with their cattle in the dry season months every year to find water and pastures for their animals

3 See Nicki Kindersley and Joseph Diing Majok, 'Breaking out of the Borderlands'.

4 Mark Duffield et al., 'Sudan: Unintended Consequence of Humanitarian Assistance: Field Evaluation Study', Dublin: Trinity College, April 2000. Also see: Samson Wassara, 'Interests of Border Communities in Water and Pasture: Will they Influence Nile Water Policies of the Two Sudans', UNISCI Discussion Paper, October 2013.

5 At present, South Sudanese traders do not cross to Sudan due to security risks and challenges. Instead, they stop at the Kiir Adem or Majok Nyinthetau markets, where they meet and trade with Sudanese traders. In contrast, Sudanese traders can travel beyond these borderland markets to other towns in South Sudan. Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023.

6 In recent years, migrant labourers have travelled as far away as the Halaib triangle on the Sudanese border with Egypt to work in the gold mines. Yet others have gone to Egypt to find better jobs or even to Libya to find ways they can travel further afield to Europe. Some people have also travelled to look for better medical treatment or opportunities for education in Khartoum. Kindersley and Majok, 'Breaking out of the Borderlands', 27–30; Nicki Kindersley, 'Politics, Power and Chiefship in Famine and War', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2018; Joseph Diing Majok, 'War, Migration and Work', 75–78.

7 'Illegal Roadblocks Blamed for Increase in Prices', *Eye Radio News*, 30 March 2014, <https://www.eyeradio.org/illegal-road-blocks-blamed-increase-prices/>. For discussion of illegal taxation on highways in South Sudan, see: Peer Schouten, Ken Matthyssen & Thomas Muller, 'Checkpoint economy: the political economy of checkpoints in South Sudan, ten years after independence Summary report', International Peace Information Service, December 2021.

in the areas south of the Kiir River inside NBG.⁸ The home regions for these two cattle-keeping communities lie within the semi-desert climate of Sudan and have no rivers. In dry season months when rainfall stops, pasture and water for animals vanish.

NBG serves as a lucrative market for agricultural products from the Darfur and Kordofan regions. Sudanese farmers and traders generate huge cash proceeds from sales of grain, groundnut, millet, etc. in the borderland markets in South Sudan. Sudanese traders also buy semi-processed raw materials such as gum Arabic, wood, grass mats and dried fish at low prices, selling these materials in far-away cities in the north at higher prices. In addition, they buy goats and sheep to resell them to traders, who export them to other countries beyond Sudan.⁹ As soon as war started in Khartoum, insecurity spread to the Darfur and Kordofan regions, impacting cross-border mobility and trade without warning.¹⁰ Despite the absence of violence in East Darfur, parts of South Darfur and West Kordofan states (the states sharing borders with NBG and Abyei regions), law and order broke down and these areas also became engulfed in insecurity.¹¹

Goods could not continue to move across the border and the mobility of people tended to be in one direction—southwards, away from war.¹² Armed civilians and pockets of RSF soldiers began to erect private checkpoints at a few localities between El Daein and Kiir Adem, especially in areas south of Abu Muthariq, and between areas south of Meiram and north of Majok Nyinthiou. Posing as legitimate state agents seeking to enforce law and order, local militia groups set up checkpoints to mask illegal activity; namely, extracting fees (taxes) from travellers. Other armed actors started to patrol highways in the hinterland of Darfur and Kordofan, taxing travellers or goods moving across the border.¹³ To the south of El Radoum camp in South Darfur, which hosts South Sudanese and Central African Republic (CAR) refugees,¹⁴ on the road linking South Darfur to Western Bahr el-Ghazal through Raja, armed men ambush and loot trucks carrying goods to or from South Sudan and people fleeing the war.¹⁵

The flow of manufactured goods imported from as far away as Khartoum was disrupted by the war. This initially stopped the supply of goods from Sudan and forced Kiir Adem and Majok Nyinthiou, the main borderland markets, to close for trade between the end of April and the

8 Wassara, 'Interests of Border Communities in Water and Pasture'. Also the NBG state seasonal cattle migration policy drafted by the state ministry of peacebuilding, 2022, not published.

9 Cedric Barnes and Nathan Shea, managing editors, 'Border Towns, Markets and Conflict', a Joint Report from the Asia Foundation, Carnegie Middle East and Rift Valley Institute; London: Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT), 2022, 43–48, https://www.xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/AW_Bordar-Towns-Markets-and-Conflict-Interactive-version.pdf.

10 Rift Valley Institute, 'Hemedti Challenges SAF's Control over Sudan', Sudan Rapid Response Update 1, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, May 2023.

11 'South Sudanese returnees looted, tortured along Darfur–Raja road', *Radio Tamazuj*, 12 May 2023, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/south-sudanese-returnees-looted-tortured-along-darfur-rajah-road>. Also see: Alhadi Hawar, 'Fleeing returnees abandon Darfur–Raja routes after bandit attacks', *Eye Radio*, 31 May 2023, <https://www.eyeradio.org/fleeing-returnees-abandon-darfur-rajah-routes-after-bandit-attacks/>.

12 See: Chany Ninrew, 'NBGs forms task-force to settle returnees, refugees', *Radio Tamazuj*, 9 May 2023, <https://www.eyeradio.org/nbgs-forms-task-force-to-settle-returnees-refugees/>.

13 Jawhratelkmal Kanu, 'In the Shadow of Conflict: The Black Markets of Sudan's War', The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 28 February 2024, <https://timep.org/2024/02/28/in-the-shadow-of-conflict-the-black-markets-of-sudans-war/>.

14 El Radoum was a refugee camp in South Darfur close to the border of South Sudan's Western Bahr el Ghazal state and hosted a refugee population from South Sudan—mostly from Western Bahr el Ghazal—and CAR (Central African Republic). See: UNHCR in Sudan, X post, 1 June 2022, 3:38 pm, <https://twitter.com/UNHCRinSudan/status/1531993663743610883>. Also see: 'Sudan: If they didn't find money, they killed people in their homes', press release, Médecins Sans Frontières, <https://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/sudan-if-they-didnt-find-money-they-killed-people-their-homes>.

15 Radio Tamazuj, 'South Sudanese returnees looted'.

end of June 2023.¹⁶ However, about two months (around the end of June 2023) after the closure of the borderland markets, cross-border trading resumed, albeit with significant changes. At this time, the RSF-controlled areas in Darfur and even parts of Kordofan faced shortages of fuel and goods that they once imported from Khartoum, so they instead turned to South Sudan to meet these needs. By December 2023, there were new trading actors and market demands at the two main markets in Kiir Adem and Majok Nyinthiou.¹⁷ Whereas in the past, the markets were largely controlled and taxed by taxation officials, once they reopened, the militaries took over these functions; namely, the South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF) and the RSF.

This research paper examines the recent changes in the Sudan–South Sudan borderland dynamics in the context of war in Sudan.¹⁸ It is based on a desk review of recent literature on Sudan–South Sudan cross-border political and socioeconomic dynamics, and news reports from media outlets and other online sources (principally *Eye Radio*, *Radio Tamazuj* and the *Sudan Tribune*). It also draws on first-hand observation of events in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal, including the influx of refugees and returnees, and the disruption to cross-border trade, labour migration and local economic livelihoods.¹⁹ Specific focus is on Gok Machar, where most refugees and returnees fleeing the war from the Darfur region of Sudan entered South Sudan, and Wedweil refugee camp in Aweil West county (NBG), which hosts Sudanese refugees. This benefits from additional input from six key informant interviews.²⁰

RETURNEES AND REFUGEES IN NORTHERN BAHR EL-GHAZAL

Two weeks after war began, in the first week of May, thousands of South Sudanese returnees and hundreds of refugees fleeing the war arrived at the Kiir Adem (Bahr el-Arab or the Arab River) and Majok Nyinthiou crossing points on the South Sudanese border with Sudan.²¹ Most returnees who arrived in NBG had fled in 2016, when the country was beset by economic hardship and war, and had been living in the Kario refugee camp in East Darfur and other settlements in the Darfur and Kordofan regions. Some returnees had not returned to South Sudan since the 1980s and 1990s, when they fled the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005). Other returnees were seasonal labour migrants, mostly young men who went to find mostly manual work in cities, towns and in the gold mines in Sudan.²² Refugees from central, western and northern parts of South Darfur fled from war and violence. In contrast, returnees and refugees, particularly those

16 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader, Gok Machar, 16 December 2023; interview with local RRC official in Aweil West County, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

17 Before their closure at the end of April 2023, both markets had two marketing days every week, Friday and Monday. On these days, traders from Darfur, Kordofan and beyond, and Dinka from NBG and beyond, met to trade.

18 The war began on 15 April 2023 when fighting broke out in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by General Abdelfattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), under the command of General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo.

19 The author of this report was living in NBG, and frequently visited Gok Machar, at the time war broke out in Sudan, which provided an opportunity for direct observation of these events.

20 The key informant interviews were all conducted by telephone with: two returnees (one from Khartoum and one from Darfur); a motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar; a Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) official in Aweil West; one local International Organization for Migration (IOM) staff based in Gok Machar; and one local medical staff person working at Wedweil camp.

21 '6,000 returnees, 2,700 refugees arrive in Northern Bahr el Ghazal', *Radio Tamazuj*, 5 May 2023, <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/6-000-returnees-2-700-refugees-arrive-in-northern-bahr-el-ghazal>.

22 Nicki Kindersley and Joseph D Majok, 'Breaking out of the Borderlands: Understanding Migrant Pathways from Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2020, 22–24); Nicki Kindersley and Joseph D Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods and Militarized labour'.

from East Darfur, parts of South Darfur and West Kordofan states, fled from rising insecurity due to an increase in armed robberies and fears that the war could possibly reach them in the next few weeks, which would be too late for them to safely evacuate with their children.²³

Arriving with nothing

The sudden arrival of a large number of returnees and refugees into NBG, an already economically stressed region with weak governance, was a big shock to the local economy and livelihoods.²⁴ Many returnees and refugees arrived empty-handed as the cost of transport was expensive.²⁵ Families fleeing the war from cities such as Khartoum, Nyala, Zalingei and elsewhere had to hire taxis to evacuate, before finding other transport to travel to safe areas. For example, in April 2023, one young man and his family who were caught up in the war at Hai Yusuf in Khartoum had to evacuate the city with his family in a private hired taxi: he paid SP 30,000 (approximately USD 50), before taking a public bus to Jodha, Shimalia and then to Renk in South Sudan, which cost him an additional SP 70,000 (USD 110).²⁶ Returnees fleeing war in Darfur also paid over the odds for transport, with one young male returnee who fled from Ailliet Jhar-El-Nabie in East Darfur explaining that he had to spend five times more than the normal cost.²⁷ Drivers identify several reasons for their increased rates such as needing to take long journeys on bad roads, security risks to their lives and their vehicles, expensive fuel, and the possibility of paying high taxes to armed men in exchange for safe passage.²⁸ With few exceptions, many refugee and returnee families fleeing their camps or homes found it difficult to reach South Sudan. They were also entirely unable to pay to transport their food stores, bedding, kitchenware, and shelter materials, which were left behind.²⁹

Many returnee families, particularly those who were living in camps such as Kario, are headed by women and were already poor.³⁰ While living in camps in Sudan they did not have enough food and were dependent on aid or wages from menial work on farms or houses outside the camps for survival.³¹ Most of these women are former wives of *Mathiang Anyoor* (brown caterpillar) militia members and their husbands are dead, wounded or have disappeared.³² In 2016, when inflation spiked and food prices worsened in South Sudan, most of these women had no support and were unable to provide for their children. As a result, they chose to migrate with

23 Joseph Diing Majok and Machot Amuom, 'How is Sudan's conflict being viewed in South Sudan?', Juba: Rift Valley Institute, unpublished.

24 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023; interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

25 Interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023; interview with young male returnee from Ailliet Jahr el Nabi in East Darfur, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

26 Interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

27 Normally, a young man travelling from East Darfur to South Sudan spends between SP 7,000 and 10,000 (USD 11 and USD 16) but this young man spent more than SP 49,000 (USD 81.53) on transport and taxes, arriving home with nothing. To raise the amount of money he needed, he sold his share of food to the sharecropper (his boss) to top up his cash savings.

28 Interview with young male returnee from Ailliet Jahr el Nabi in East Darfur, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

29 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

30 For details on the livelihood condition most returnees experienced in Sudan, see: 'I was selling tea when fighting erupted', OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). <https://www.unocha.org/news/sudan-i-was-selling-tea-when-fighting-erupted>.

31 Kindersley and Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods', 34–36.

32 For more about the Mathiang Anyoor, see: Alan Boswell, 'Insecure Power and Violence: The Rise and Fall of Paul Malong and the Mathiang Anyoor', Geneva: Small Arms Survey, October 2019; and Kindersley and Majok, 'Monetized Livelihoods'.

their children to Sudan,³³ with the outbreak of war in April 2023 compelling them to return to South Sudan. Returnee families and refugees initially gathered at Kiir Adem or Majok Nyinthiou on the bank of the Kiir River, where they spent weeks sleeping in the open air.³⁴ They expected quick intervention from the South Sudanese government and international humanitarian organizations in the form of food, shelter and clean water.³⁵

Task force failure

In response, the NBG state governor, Tong Aken, formed a task force to resettle the returnees and refugees stranded at the Kiir Adem and Majok Nyinthiou entry points. This task force, the 15-member Sudan Crisis Border Management Committee, was headed by the state governor himself, with the deputy governor the deputy of the committee, and included representatives of different state-level ministries and commissions.³⁶ In agreement with the local host community, the task force committee allocated land for Sudanese refugees at Wedweil in Aweil West, and together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) relocated them there.³⁷ In contrast, South Sudanese returnees were either neglected or mistakenly transported to Wedweil along with Sudanese refugees. Other returnees found their own means of transportation to get to Wedweil, where they expected they would be provided with support.³⁸

The task force allocated Sudanese refugees with land far away from the border in response to a claim these refugees made when they arrived at Kiir Adem. In a meeting with representatives from the NBG state government and international NGOs, the Sudanese rejected the label 'refugee', instead claiming they were internally displaced persons (IDPs) because Kiir Adem lies within the Mile 14 buffer zone area, a contested area between the Sudan and South Sudan governments.³⁹ In Sudan, Kiir Adem is referred to as Bahr el-Arab and is considered to be one of the nine districts in East Darfur state, whereas in South Sudan it is considered to be a *payam* (second-lowest administrative division, below a county) in Aweil North county.⁴⁰ The Sudanese refugees based their claim as IDPs on these contested political narratives.⁴¹ The task force realized that settling Sudanese refugees somewhere close to the border with Sudan would add weight to Sudanese government claims to own this land in the future. As a result, the task force moved the refugees to Wedweil in Aweil West, away from the border and where the Sudanese

33 Refugees Fleeing South Sudan Pass One Million Mark. 16 September 2016, UNHCR, 16 September 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/refugees-fleeing-south-sudan-pass-one-million-mark>.

34 In contrast, returning seasonal labour migrants (mostly young men) were able to once again live with their families upon their return to NBG.

35 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. Also see: Radio Tamazuj, '6,000 returnees'.

36 The task force did not include a representative from the Dinka Malual-Messeriya and Rizeigat Peace Committee. The peace committee, comprised of representatives from the three communities of the Malual Dinka, Messeriya and Rizeigat, was established to manage the cross-border migration of people and animals, and resolve inter-communal disputes. See: Ninrew, 'NBGs forms task-force to settle returnees, refugees'.

37 Ninrew, 'NBGs forms task-force'.

38 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

39 Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023. Also see: Majok and Amuom, 'How is Sudan's conflict being viewed' unpublished.

40 Yach James Garang, James Alic Garang and Joseph Geng Akech, 'On Designating the 14-Mile Area in the Cooperation Agreement: Missteps and Implications for Peace in South Sudan', AJCR 2022/2, Accord. <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/on-designating-the-14-mile-area-in-the-cooperation-agreement-missteps-and-implications-for-peace-in-south-sudan/>.

41 'The 14-mile area', Geneva: Small Arms Survey, <https://smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/HSBA-14-Mile-Area-Historical-Sep-2013.pdf>.

government would lack any claim to the land.⁴²

For the host community in Wedweil, the selection of their village to host Sudanese refugees was initially seen as a blessing in disguise. Wedweil, a small rural town, is located south of Nyamlel (the headquarters of Aweil West County) on the main road connecting Nyamlel to Aweil town. The people of Wedweil willingly gave their land to accommodate Sudanese refugees with the expectation that the camp would attract support from international humanitarian organizations and the government to their area.⁴³ In particular, they expected international NGOs to open new clinics where they could access free medical services, schools where their children could study, new boreholes where they could access clean drinking water and other necessities, along with employment opportunities.

Surprisingly, between the end of May and June 2023, the task force announced that the camp would only host refugees and asked returnees to go to the homes they had left earlier or to live with kinfolk. They promised returnees that they would receive humanitarian support from both the government and the humanitarian agencies working in their areas. To distinguish returnees from refugees, task force officials checked the names on the registration cards that the returnees and refugees were issued upon arrival at the border by the IOM.⁴⁴ The attempt by some returnees to reject task force directives was met with force: police were deployed to Wedweil and returnees were identified and expelled from the camp.⁴⁵

As a result of the task force decision that returnees could not relocate to the camp, these families were pushed into a crisis of food and shelter. Without shelter materials or relatives to accommodate them, some families went without food for days, and slept in schools and churches to shelter from rain.⁴⁶ Some returnees with relatives who offered accommodation went to join them; others who found it hard for their children to survive life in rural areas moved to towns to find shelter and work.⁴⁷

In June 2023, the IOM began repatriating returnees from the greater Bahr el-Ghazal region (Lakes, Northern and Western Bahr el-Ghazal, Warrap and Abyei), who had entered South

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42 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. Also see: Majok and Amuom, 'How is Sudan's conflict being viewed'.

43 Aweil West: Host community welcomes new camp for Sudanese refugees', *Radio Tamazuj*, 6 June 2023, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/aweil-west-host-community-welcomes-new-camp-for-sudanese-refugees>.

44 IOM DTM (Department of Tracking Matrix) placed its staff at all entry points from Sudan to register and issue all returnees and refugees with registration cards.

45 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. According to this same key informant, in the process, seven Dinka women who married Darfuri men in Sudan were separated from their children and forcefully sent away from the camp after they had been identified. Their appeal that they were Sudanese and wanted to live with their families and children in the camp was rejected by both task force officials and the police. After some weeks, UN agencies intervened (after the women had appealed for help) and only then did the police allow them to reunite with their families in the camp.

46 Hou Akot, 'Returnees Struggling to Find Shelter in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state', *Juba Echo*, 17 November 2023, <https://jubaecho.com/2023/11/17/returnees-struggling-to-find-shelter-in-north-bahr-el-ghazal-state/>. For more information about their living conditions, see: Peter Louis, 'Over 121,000 Returnees Starving in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal', YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeJMAtnKBL0&ab_channel=PeterLouis.

47 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023; interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023; interview with young male returnee young man from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

Sudan through Renk, in Upper Nile State.⁴⁸ These returnees were airlifted from Malakal and Paloch airports and landed at the airports in Aweil and Wau. Before they left Malakal or Paloch, each returnee family or individual was given a small amount of cash to be used upon arrival to pay for a taxi to take them to their places of origin—the villages or towns where they would go to live.⁴⁹ The IOM also issued registration cards, instructing the returnees to report to the nearest Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) office in their area to be registered for aid. Airlifted and dumped at their destination airport, then left to decide for themselves where to go, this was one of the most chaotic and disorganized returns many people in NBG had ever seen.⁵⁰

At the airport in Aweil, some returnee families did not have relatives to offer them accommodation. Unsure of where to go, they slept under trees for days, while weighing their options.⁵¹ Some returnees from Khartoum had lived there for more than two decades and had not returned to South Sudan after fleeing the south in the 1980s or 1990s. Others were born, grew up and married in Sudan, without ever having visited South Sudan. They had also lost contact with their kin in NBG or elsewhere. Some fortunate returnees were offered accommodation by their kin but this put a huge burden on their relatives to provide food and shelter, with limited resources of their own.⁵²

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE ECONOMY AND SECURITY

A combination of factors has converged to impact both local markets and household economies, and the security situation in NBG. These include: the sudden cut in the supply of goods from Sudan upon which NBG, Abyei, parts of Warrap and Western Bahr el-Ghazal historically depend; the influx of an overwhelming number of refugees and returnees; and the interruption of labour migration to Sudan upon which some households in the region rely on to raise their cash incomes. These specific factors are exacerbated by a persistently weak economy and inadequate governance systems.

Price shocks in local markets

The abrupt commodities price shocks in local markets can be attributed to two inter-related developments due to the war in Sudan. First, the influx of large numbers of returnees and refugees from Sudan resulted in a sharp increase in the demand for food commodities, which put great pressure on the local markets across NBG.⁵³ Second, pressure on food commodities

48 'Stranded group of migrants returns to Aweil', *Radio Tamazuj*, 19 September 2023, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/stranded-group-of-migrants-returns-to-aweil>. This is confirmed in the interview with IOM local staff based in Gok Machar and Jaac entry point, Gok Machar, 23 December 2023.

49 Interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023; interview with IOM local staff based in Gok Machar and Jaac entry point, Gok Machar, 23 December 2023.

50 Interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023; interview with IOM local staff based in Gok Machar and Jaac entry point, Gok Machar, 23 December 2023.

51 Interview with IOM local staff based in Gok Machar and Jaac entry point, Gok Machar, 23 December 2023.

52 Interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023. Despite he and his family being provided with accommodation, they continued to face enormous challenges, as he explains: 'In Aweil, my cousin who has no decent job and is struggling with his own family, gave me one of his rooms to live in with my children. Throughout the rainy season, my wife and I slept outside and allowed the children to sleep inside as there was not enough space to accommodate all of us. Whenever it rained, we relocated with the children in the house and returned to sleep outside when rain stopped.'

53 FEWS NET, 'South Sudan Price Bulletin', Juba: Famine Early Warning Systems Network, August 2023, https://fewsn.net/sites/default/files/2023-08/PB_SS_202308.pdf. This report shows the sharp increase in the price of food commodities in April 2023, which continued to worsen in the following months.

was exaggerated by the cut in the supply chain of goods from Sudan, depriving local markets of access to goods.⁵⁴ This combination of high demand and low supply forced the price of food commodities in local markets to skyrocket. For example, in the two-month period after the war began, the price of a 10 kg bag of sugar in NBG rose from SSP 9,000 (USD 6.9)⁵⁵ to SSP 20,000 (USD 15.4). A *malwa* (3.5 kg) of grain which cost approximately SSP 1,500 (USD 1.5) has doubled, and it is now sold at SSP 4,000 (USD 3).⁵⁶ During the 2023 harvest, although the price of grain decreased to its pre-war level, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) December 2023 update predicted a sharp price rise in the coming months.⁵⁷

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) cash transfer plan also served to worsen the price shocks in food commodities. The IOM paid cash to each Sudanese refugee family upon arrival at the Wedweil camp to buy kitchenware and food to sustain themselves until the WFP (World Food Programme) could provide them with food assistance.⁵⁸ The distribution of cash increased the supply of money against the supply of goods in local markets, which consequently pushed prices up.

Impact on household economies

The war in Sudan has been an equally big shock to many household economies across NBG. Two factors explain this. First, some households that received and accommodated their returning relatives went the extra mile to provide them with food, despite the shocks to their own household food and shelter budgets. If there was not enough in the house, some households sold their livestock (cattle, goats, sheep or chickens) to purchase food or shelter materials to support their relatives.⁵⁹ Second, many households in this region used to depend on remittances sent from Sudan. Many young men used to migrate each year to work in Sudan, sending back remittances to their families in NBG to purchase food, especially in the lean season when many households run out of food and food prices in local markets soar.⁶⁰ In 2023, however, farm labourers, who constitute the largest number of labour migrants from the region, could not migrate for work in Sudan. Migration to Sudanese farms usually happens between May and July each year—the time when cultivation starts in Darfur and Kordofan—but the war cut this short. Even young men who had lived in Sudan before the war began could not provide their families with money. Instead, they had to spend their savings on expensive transport to escape the violence in Sudan and return home.

54 Interview with a local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023; interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023.

55 Based on February 2024 exchange rate at USD 1 = SSP 1,300.

56 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023. Also see: Hou Akot, 'Governor Tong Storms Aweil Market Over High Food Prices', Juba Echo, 3 April 2023, <https://jubaecho.com/2023/04/03/governor-tong-storms-aweil-market-over-high-food-prices/>.

57 FEWS NET, 'Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and worse outcomes persist during harvesting period', Juba: Famine Early Warning Systems Network, December 2023, <https://fewsn.net/east-africa/south-sudan/food-security-outlook-update/december-2023>.

58 Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023.

59 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023; interview with young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

60 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023. Also see: Kindersley and Majok, 'Breaking out of the Borderlands'.

Rising crime

When the war started it caused the shutdown of the cross-border trade and forced many formerly displaced people and labour migrants to return to NBG. As a result, labour migrants lost the cash income they had earned in Sudan, depriving many households of remittances that they had expected to receive. This has jeopardized the household income of many families in NBG. In the absence of adequate available economic opportunities in NBG, some people have turned to stealing in their desperation to generate income. As a result, crime is becoming increasingly common, including pickpocketing and snatching telephones, handbags and briefcases; burglary and motorcycle thefts; and robberies along the roads, particularly at night.⁶¹ In addition, the theft of livestock (cattle and goats) has also increased. For example, Aweil East, South, and North Counties have recorded a significant rise in cattle thefts starting from July 2023.⁶² Fuelled by suspicion, many people believe that these crimes are typically executed by young people who returned from the cities in Sudan, where they were accustomed to having cash in their pockets.⁶³

Disruption to cross-border cattle migrations

Before the war in Sudan, seasonal cross-border cattle migration from South and East Darfur and West Kordofan states into NBG happened during the dry season when water and pastures became scarce in the Sudanese regions. The cattle migrations were usually preceded by two annual peace conferences,⁶⁴ bringing together members of the local peace committees, comprised of traditional leaders selected as representatives from three herder communities: the Malual Dinka, the Rizeigat and the Misseriya.⁶⁵ The conferences were organized in either Aweil, Warawar/Wanjok, Gok Machar or Nyamlel towns and supported by UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan), NBG state government, and other international and local peace actors.⁶⁶ Peace committee members revisited the locally written law governing cross-border cattle migrations and reaffirmed their commitment to upholding it for peaceful resource sharing and coexistence.⁶⁷

When the war began and insecurity intensified across Sudan, the Misseriya and Rizeigat herders

61 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. In August 2023, in a monthly forum conducted by the state high court judges and legal administrators, police departments, members of CSOs, and the UN, the Aweil town police revealed that it had recorded 364 crimes in Aweil town in July alone. 187 of these were cases of theft and 7 were robberies with violence—the highest level of crime recorded since the start of the Sudan war. Michael Daniel, ‘NBGs police recorded 364 crime incidents in July’, *Eye Radio News*, 26 August 2023, <https://www.eyeradio.org/nbgs-police-recorded-364-crime-incidents-in-july/>.

62 Hou Akot Hou, ‘Cattle theft threatens Northern Bahr el Ghazal State’, *No.1 Citizen Daily News Paper*, 15 July 2023, <https://onecitizendaily.com/index.php/2023/07/13/cattle-theft-threatens-northern-bahr-el-ghazal-state/>.

63 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

64 The first conference is held in December, before the Misseriya and Rizeigat cattle cross into NBG and the second in April, shortly before the cattle return to Darfur and Kordofan. The December conference is the reaffirmation and commitment, and perhaps improvement of the resolutions made in the previous year. The migration follows in January, after all the farms have been harvested. The April conference reviews relations between the herders and hosts, and addresses any wrongdoing before the herds return to Sudan.

65 Samson Wassara, ‘Interests of Border Communities in Water and Pasture: Will they Influence Nile Water Policies of the Two Sudans’, UNISCI Discussion Paper, October 2013.

66 ‘Annual peace conference starts in Aweil town’, UNMISS (United Nations Mission in South Sudan), <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/annual-peace-conference-starts-aweil-town/>. Also see: ‘Aweil North County, Northern Bahr el-Ghazal State’, CSRF (Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility), https://www.csrf-southsudan.org/county_profile/aweil-north/.

67 The law defines a range of key issues: the routes, pastures and water points assigned; the entry and exit months for migration; compensation for murder, rape and adultery cases; and fines for violating assigned pastures, routes or water points and abuses of local resources such as setting a forest fire. For example, see: Dinka Malual–Misseriya and Rizeigat Peace Committee, ‘Resolutions of Dinka Malual–Misseriya 2017 Pre-migration Conference held in the ACDF compound’, Wanyjok, Aweil East, 17 December 2017.

in Darfur and Kordofan could not wait for the pre-migration conference to determine when they could cross the border into South Sudan.⁶⁸ Without prior consent from the Malual Dinka, they chose to migrate in December, earlier than normal, when roads were dry and passable.⁶⁹ Although most NBG farms harvest their crops before December, those in Aweil Centre and part of Aweil South counties harvest some of their crops from December to January. The early arrival of cattle from Sudan thus created a standoff between cattle keepers and the host community. The host community initially rejected the entry of Rizeigat herds in their areas prior to the usually agreed date.⁷⁰ This potentially increases the risk of conflict between herders and hosts in the future. This risk is exacerbated by the recent side-lining of local peace committee members, as demonstrated by their absence in managing the early arrival of several herds in Achana village, an entry point from South Darfur. Instead of contacting the committee, the NBG state governor (also the chairperson of the state-level task force, the Sudan Crisis Border Management Committee) sent the commissioner of Aweil West and Aweil North counties to meet the herders, negotiate between herders and hosts, and allocate grazing land.⁷¹

WARTIME BENEFICIARIES IN THE BORDERLAND

In contrast to the mostly negative impacts of the war on borderland security and economic systems in Northern Bahr el-Ghazal (NBG), a small group of people have benefitted enormously. This includes the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and better-off local traders amongst others.

Rapid Support Forces

The RSF controls and maintains *Darb-al-arba'in* (the 40-day road), one of the roads that links Darfur to Khartoum, and has long used it⁷² to smuggle valuables, stolen goods and undocumented migrants in and out of Khartoum and farther afield.⁷³ Since the beginning of the war, the RSF has retained firm control of this road, using it both to transport stolen goods and assets out of Khartoum and to send military reinforcements from Darfur to Khartoum.⁷⁴ When the war started, many young men in Darfur voluntarily joined the RSF and headed to Khartoum, doing so for two primary reasons. First, as the RSF is an ethnically dominated militia, they went to save their brothers in Khartoum from being killed by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Second, as news about the ongoing and widespread looting in Khartoum reached Darfur and

68 'War, Drought Forced Sudanese Pastoralists to Migrate to Northern Bahr el Ghazal Pre-maturely', *Radio Tamazuj*, 26 December 2023; <https://www.radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/war-drought-force-sudanese-pastoralists-to-migrate-to-n-bahr-el-ghazal-prematurely>.

69 FEWS NET, 'Emergency (IPC Phase 4)'.

70 'NBGs Rejects Unschedule Return of Reizegat Cattle', *Aweil Community Radio*, 8 November 2023, <https://theradiocommunity.org/nbgs-rejects-unscheduled-return-of-reizegat-cattle/>.

71 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West County, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. This approach may also signal that the task force wants to expand its mandate beyond the management of refugees and returnees, a possibility that is reinforced by their exclusion for task force membership.

72 In an interview with a young male returnee from Khartoum, Aweil town, 17 December 2023, he confirms his knowledge about the route and it being controlled by Hemedti even before the war began.

73 When Sudanese police began to prevent undocumented South Sudanese migrant labourers (mostly young men) from entering Khartoum at Kosti town unless they first paid for a foreign identification number certificate, which was expensive, many of them opted to enter Khartoum through *Darb-al-arba'in* (now commonly called 'Shaa'ra-al-hawa', or the windy road, because of the strong desert wind). Many undocumented migrants who went from Khartoum to Libya to reach Europe by sea left Khartoum on this road. This is because the desert is vast, and experienced drivers find it easy to navigate around police posts and security checkpoints by driving through the desert.

74 In informal conversations with many people who arrived from Darfur, they believe that much of the RSF reinforcement in Khartoum from Darfur used this road. To avoid SAF aerial bombardments, they drive at night and park their vehicles under camouflage during the day.

Kordofan, they went to take part, too.⁷⁵

The RSF also controls the major roads linking North and East Darfur states, as well as those roads that link South and East Darfur to NBG.⁷⁶ As the RSF has controlled the East Darfur border with NBG for years (long before the outbreak of war), their officers were already part of the well-established networks of cross-border smuggling through Kiir Adem on the Sudanese side. Given this, and with weak border security on the South Sudanese side, the NBG road is one of the routes the RSF uses to transport stolen goods and assets (money, cars, gold and so on) to South Sudan and other countries. There are also claims that stolen assets are being smuggled into the Central African Republic (CAR) across the porous, RSF-controlled border.⁷⁷ The war has simply offered yet more opportunities for this business to profit. In August 2023, the Sudanese police reported that 153,572 vehicles were stolen in Khartoum alone. Almost half of all reported stolen vehicles were taken to the city of El Daein in East Darfur, one of the RSF's strongholds.⁷⁸ These cars are either retained in El Daein or smuggled across the border for sale in South Sudan or CAR.

Local traders, traffic and immigration officers

Officials stationed at crossing points between Sudan and South Sudan benefit from the taxes they charge for unlicensed vehicles to be brought into South Sudan from Sudan. Since the war began, many vehicles without registration documents have been sold in Kiir Adem, Gok Machar, Aweil, and on to Wau and beyond.⁷⁹ Before reaching Gok Machar town where they are taxed by the immigration officials and issued with temporary road user permits by the traffic police, they must pay the 'rope charges'—an amount paid to those manning a checkpoint to lower the rope and allow the vehicle to pass—at checkpoints between Kiir Adem and Gok Machar. The amount paid at each checkpoint varies and depends on the car owner's relationship and familiarity with the security officers on the road. The amount ranges between SSP 2000 (\$1.5) and SSP 10,000 (\$7).⁸⁰

In Gok Machar, cars arriving from Sudan are regularly issued with temporary road user permits

75 In an informal conversation with a young man who was caught up in the Sudanese war while on his way back to El Daein after a medical check-up in Khartoum informally explains how he saw young people flocking to the RSF base in El Daein to take up arms and head to Khartoum.

76 Published by ACLED on 3 November 2023, a map of conflict incidents reported throughout Sudan indicates that RSF forces are more likely to attack SAF bases located close to roads linking Darfur to South Sudan through East Darfur and the Central African Republic (CAR) through South Darfur. These roads are important RSF transport routes for stolen goods and assets from Khartoum. They are also used to import fuel, which the RSF purchases in South Sudan. See: 'Country Hub: Sudan', ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project), <https://acleddata.com/africa/horn-of-africa/sudan/>.

77 'Sudan's Central Darfur Reopens Border with Central African Republic', *Sudan Tribune*, 9 March 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article271686/>.

78 'Where did the cars looted from Khartoum arrive?', *Sudan War Monitor*, 31 August 2023, <https://sudanwarmonitor.com/p/where-did-the-cars-looted-from-khartoum>.

79 One week after a meeting with the Sudanese technical team in Juba where evidence of stolen cars smuggled into South Sudan was presented, the South Sudan police confirmed that it has seized an unspecified number of stolen vehicles from Sudan in Aweil and Renk towns. See: 'South Sudan police help Sudan recover smuggled vehicles', *Eye Radio*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.eyeradio.org/s-sudan-police-help-sudan-recover-smuggled-vehicles/>. This followed the initial denial by the South Sudan's police Inspector General of any involvement in the smuggling of cars stolen from Sudan. See: 'South Sudan denies involvement in illicit trade of stolen goods from Sudan', *Sudan Tribune*, 9 January 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article281141/>.

80 Interview with motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp call, 29 February 2024. See also: Peer Schouten, 'Illegal Checkpoint 'Taxes' in South Sudan—the World's Most Expensive Roads', *Global Bar Magazine*, 15 December 2021, <https://globalbar.se/2021/12/illegal-checkpoint-taxes-in-south-sudan-the-worlds-most-expensive-roads/>.

with little investigation into their origin or ownership status.⁸¹ This is done for two reasons: First, at the start of the war, the temporary licenses were issued under the assumption that the owners of those cars were unable to pick up their ownership documents when they fled; second, as a means to generate funds for the local government and security sector. This also functions as a means to offset tax revenues lost due to the fall in tax revenue due to the decline in trade from Sudan to South Sudan.

The main buyers of cars imported from Sudan (mostly from El Daein) are local traders with significant cash capital. This is another group of local elites that benefit from the sale of cars and stolen building materials from shops in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan.⁸² They buy them at cheaper prices from RSF soldiers or their agents at markets in Kiir Adem, Majok Nyinthiou, and Gok Machar.⁸³ Between June and July 2023, just after the RSF overran the police headquarters in Khartoum, and before the roads flooded in August, many stolen cars arrived at Kiir Adem and their prices ranged approximately from SSP 4 million to 6 million (USD 4,000 to 6,000) depending on the type and condition of the car. Since November 2023 the number of cars arriving for sale at Kiir Adem market has declined and their prices have gone up.⁸⁴

After buying stolen cars at cheaper prices, the traders are able to obtain new registration documents.⁸⁵ Sometimes, less connected traders use brokers to run the vehicle registration and taxation processes in return for payment. It can be cost-effective to those traders that are less well-connected, who may be overcharged if they run the process themselves.⁸⁶ Once the cars have new documentation, the traders take them to Aweil or Juba, where they resell them at higher prices.⁸⁷ Dealing in looted cars imported from Sudan since the war began has worked out well for some local business people in Aweil, Nyamlel, and Gok Machar and also in Renk where looted cars have reportedly also been smuggled into South Sudan from Khartoum.⁸⁸

In addition to the trade in Sudanese cars, some traders are benefitting through exporting basic commodities—food, fuel etc—to Sudan, reversing the pre-war direction of trade across the border (see ‘Reshaping Borderland Relations’). When demand for fuel increased in the Darfur and Kordofan regions due to supplies from Khartoum being cut off, local traders with the financial capacity to import fuel from Juba were the first to sell it across the border.⁸⁹ Some Sudanese car sellers in Kiir Adem spend large sums buying fuel and other goods that are in high demand in Darfur and take them for resale where they earn additional profits.⁹⁰

81 Interview with motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp call, 29 February 2024.

82 Interview with motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp call, 29 February 2024.

83 See Mohammed Amin and Oscar Ricket, ‘Looted goods for sale in Sudan’s ‘Dagalo’ markets’, *Middle East Eye*, 15 July, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-dagalo-markets-shop-stolen-goods>. Some of these goods sold at cheaper prices in Daglo market find their way into South Sudan through Kiir Adem market.

84 A Hilux pickup in good condition costs approximately SSP 15 million (USD 11,530 at the current rate), a truck at SSP 25 million (USD 19,230), and other cars at SSP 8 million (USD 6,150).

85 Interview with motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp call, 29 February 2024.

86 Interview with motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp call, 29 February 2024.

87 ‘South Sudan Police Help Sudan Recover Smuggled Vehicles’, Eye Radio’.

88 Interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023; interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023. See also, ‘South Sudan Police Help Sudan Recover Smuggled Vehicles’.

89 Interview with a motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023.

90 Interview with a motorcycle spare part trader in Gok Machar, whatsapp, 29 February 2024.

RESHAPING CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY

With the war, South Sudanese traders—once major importers of food and goods from Sudan—have become major exporters to Sudan. They import flour (wheat and maize), medicine, sugar, biscuit and other commodities from Juba, which Juba traders import from Uganda, and transport these items to the borderland markets in NBG where they sell them to Sudanese traders. In turn, Sudanese traders bring stolen goods such as cars, iron sheet metal and cement for sale in South Sudan.⁹¹ As traders from Darfur could neither continue to supply the Kiir Adem and Majok Nyinthiou markets with food commodities nor buy livestock and semi-processed raw materials, these markets became inaccessible to the majority of the local population.

As is usually the case in August during the heart of the wet season, cross-border trading and the number of returnees and refugees arriving in NBG from Sudan significantly declined. The roads that connect NBG and Abyei to Sudan are seasonal and remain impassable due to flooding. With high demand for fuel in Sudan, however, RSF soldiers at Raiq Mandalla—about 8-10 km north of Kiir Adem—and other Sudanese traders continued to buy fuel in South Sudan and transport it to Sudan. They used donkeys and horse carts, along with tractors or pickup trucks whenever possible, to move the fuel across the flooded areas.⁹²

In November, after the roads dried up and mobility became possible again, trading resumed. The number of refugees and returnees arriving at Wedweil camp in South Sudan each day also increased.⁹³ In addition to being able to once again find transportation to South Sudan, the timing of reopening the road coincided with an RSF attack on SAF positions in and around El Daein town and other towns and villages in the area,⁹⁴ forcing many families in East Darfur to seek refuge in South Sudan. The fighting in East Darfur also raised fears in West Kordofan, causing many of these residents to flee to South Sudan.

The war has reshaped cross-border transport routes. In the beginning, for example, more refugees and returnees chose the Kiir Adem road over the Raja road because there was a higher incidence of violent robberies along the latter.⁹⁵ The road from El Daein to Kiir Adem may have been safer because the RSF had a higher presence, hence scaring armed robbers away and making this route less risky compared to the Raja road, where the RSF presence was lower. In November 2023, however, the choice of routes began to change again after military clashes in East Darfur. More refugees and returnees arriving from Sudan tended to enter NBG via the Majok Nyinthiou and Amiet–Abyei roads compared to the Kiir Adem road. Fighting in El Daein town and surrounding areas transformed this once comparatively safe road into an insecure route.⁹⁶ Some families who fled the conflict in East Darfur even took a

91 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023; interview with motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023.

92 Interview with a motorcycle spare parts trader at Gok Machar, 16 December 2023.

93 Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023. This is confirmed in the interview with IOM local staff based in Gok Machar and Jaac entry point, Gok Machar, 23 December 2023.

94 'Sudanese army, RSF clash in El Daein, East Darfur', *Sudan Tribune*, 20 November 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article279575/>.

95 Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 22 December 2023; interview with young male returnee from Ailliet Jahr el Nabi in East Darfur, Aweil town, 17 December 2023.

96 'Sudanese army, RSF clash in El Daein', *Sudan Tribune*.

longer route, entering South Sudan from West Kordofan to avoid potential risks on the way. However, the inter-sectional conflict between Ngok and Twic Dinka exacerbated the transport situation, making the Amiet road unsafe and thus unsuitable. Refugees transiting to the camp in Wedweil from Abyei travel through Twic areas, which puts their convoys at risk of being ambushed and looted by armed Ngok or Twic youths.⁹⁷

To mitigate the transport risks they face, returnees and refugees use their phones to contact others who went ahead (via phone calls, WhatsApp or Facebook) to ask about the safety of a particular route before they decide which road to take. At present, the safest road, and the one many refugees and returnees take, is the Majok Nyinthiou road through Aweil East.⁹⁸ The Sudanese police in Meiram also organize escorts for all vehicles crossing into South Sudan to ensure that they arrive safely; in return for doing so, they tax the drivers and the people they have accompanied across the border.⁹⁹

THE FUTURE OF THE BORDERLAND

The war in Sudan has long-term implications for borderland socioeconomic and political systems, as well as for regional security and stability. While the war has created the potential for instability in NBG, particularly due to the arrival and resettlement of returnees, and also the proliferation of arms being smuggled in from Sudan, it has also created some economic opportunities, mostly related to the expanded export market NBG traders are exploiting in Darfur and Kordofan.

Cross-border trade relations and labour migration

The war in Sudan has fundamentally altered pre-existing patterns of trade between NBG and the neighbouring regions of Sudan (Darfur and Kordofan). For decades, NBG had relied on commodities imported from Sudan. However, a few months after the war started, NBG became an exporter of commodities into Sudan.¹⁰⁰ Today, better-off traders in NBG import food stuff and fuel from Juba, sell these commodities to Darfuri traders who take them to Darfur for re-sale. This has proved to be an economic opportunity for NBG traders. Security along the Juba–Aweil road is still challenging but has reportedly recently improved. Coupled with the recent directive by President Kiir to tackle the problem of checkpoints nationally,¹⁰¹ it is likely that this will remain a profitable export route. NBG’s farmers are also anticipating being able to intensify agricultural production during the 2024 season due to the increased availability of cheap labour from returnees. There is also an expectation that food prices will

97 ‘IOM and UNHCR are deeply concerned over the risks faced in relocating refugees and returnees away from border areas’, press release, UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/press-releases/iom-and-unhcr-are-deeply-concerned-over-risks-faced-relocating-refugees-and>.

98 ‘South Sudan records surge in refugees fleeing from West Kordofan’, *Sudan Tribune*, 9 November 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article279181/>.

99 According to the young male returnee from Ailliet Jahr el Nabi in East Darfur, who arrived in South Sudan towards the end of November 2023, he paid SP 2,500 (USD 4.2) to the police in Meiram who escorted him across the border. He also says that women travelling with children pay less or are exempt from payment when they do not have money. See also: Kanu, ‘In the Shadow of Conflict’.

100 ‘East Darfur Sends Delegation to Boost Ties with Northern Bahr el Ghazal’, *Radio Tamazuj*, 15 January 2024, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/east-darfur-sends-delegation-to-boost-ties-with-northern-bahr-el-ghazal>.

101 ‘President Kiir Meets the Heads of Economic Institutions over the Soaring Inflation’, *Eye Radio News*, 5 March 2024, <https://www.eyeradio.org/president-kiir-meets-heads-of-economic-institutions-over-soaring-inflation/>.

remain high as NBG's farmers are able to target the export market in Darfur and Kordofan where agriculture is likely to continue to be disrupted as long as the war continues.

Arms proliferation and insecurity

Since 2013, NBG has been one of the most peaceful states in South Sudan. Although the government recruited a large number of young men into the *Mathiang Anyoor* (brown caterpillar) during the war against the South Sudanese rebel groups between 2013 and 2016, the region has largely been free from physical violence except for a few skirmishes on the border with Sudan.¹⁰² However, the current proliferation of arms from Sudan and the recruitment of young men and women into the South Sudan People's Defence Force (SSPDF) are negative indicators for future regional security and stability. The weapons being smuggled across the border from Sudan and into South Sudan may end up in the hands of both criminals and young army recruits, with the risk that the latter could also resort to robbery. It is also possible that these guns may be smuggled into other parts of South Sudan, particularly Warrap state, where they would be sold to Twic and Ngok Dinka men who have been fighting,¹⁰³ or to Apuk and Wau Dinka men,¹⁰⁴ who have also been fighting in recent months. If there are no serious security mechanisms available both to control the proliferation of arms into the already heavily armed Bahr el-Ghazal region, the security of the entire region remains in danger, especially as the economy continues to worsen.

Food prices and markets

NBG is currently facing a food shortage and food prices are already high because of the poor harvest in 2023.¹⁰⁵ In addition, NBG is no longer able to import food commodities from Sudan, upon which it has historically depended. Food commodities imported from Juba are prohibitively expensive due to the long distance, bad roads, and insecurity. The population in some parts of the state has also risen significantly due to the more than 33,000 returnees who have arrived over the last year, which has increased the pressure on food at a local level, especially as most returnees arrived with nothing.¹⁰⁶ The World Food Programme (WFP) is currently facing logistical challenges in transporting food for distribution to NBG to help ease the situation.¹⁰⁷ As a result, and to minimize the cost and risk of transporting food to NBG, the

102 These have mainly been launched by rebel groups based in Sudan or herders from Kordofan. See, for example, 'South Sudanese Rebels Attack Aweil Centre County', Radio Tamazuj, 7 July 2015 and 'Armed Messeriya Men Burnt Villages in Aweil East in a Suspected Revenge Attack', Eye Radio, 17 February 2021.; Schouten, 'Illegal Checkpoint 'Taxes' in South Sudan'; 'Senior rebel commander killed in Lol', *Radio Tamazuj*, 21 August 2019, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/senior-rebel-commander-killed-in-lol>.

103 'Dozens of SSPDF Soldiers Killed in the Latest Abyei-Twic Fighting', Radio Tamazuj, 15 November 2023; 'Dozens of SSPDF soldiers killed in latest Abyei-Twic fighting', Radio Tamazuj, 15 November 2023, <https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/dozens-of-sspdf-soldiers-killed-in-latest-abyei-twic-fighting>. See also: 'UN envoy calls for urgent, intensive dialogue in Abyei', Sudan Tribune, 24 February 2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article282611/>.

104 'Fighting Between Apuk and Wau Resumed, Leaving Three Dead', *The Radio Community*, 1 January 2024, <https://theradiocommunity.org/fighting-between-apuk-and-wau-resumed-leaving-three-dead/>.

105 Towards the end of February 2024, a sack of grain containing 30 malwas (each malwa weights 3.5kgs) costs SSP 120,000 (USD 92); a 50kg bag of maize flour at SSP 85,000 (USD 65.4); a 10kg bag of sugar costs SSP 20,000 (USD 15); and a bar of soap costs SSP 3,000 (USD 2.3). This will likely get worse as the inflation is continuing to worsen in the latter months of the lean season.

106 See UNHCR/IOM dashboard on arrivals in South Sudan: <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiZTMwNTljNWYtYmVhYiooZGIzLTgwYzAtN2UyNDZmZTRlNjBkIiwidCI6IjE1ODgyNjJkLTlzMltnNDNiNCiZDZlLWJjZTQ5YzhlNjE4NiIsImMiOiJh9&pageName=ReportSection95859b8850a76994e6fb>

107 See: 'Illegal road-blocks blamed for increase in prices', Eye Radio, 30 March 2014, <https://www.eyeradio.org/illegal-road-blocks-blamed-increase-prices/>; 'Floods submerge roads in Lakes State, passengers stranded', The City Review, 21 November 2023, <https://cityreviewss.com/heavy-flooding-overturms-moving-vehicles-along-bahr-el-ghazal-roads-in-lakes-state/>.

WFP is now planning to follow in the footsteps of the IOM and distribute cash to refugees at Wedweil and returnees so they can buy their food in local markets.¹⁰⁸ If the WFP implements this plan, however, there may be unintended economic consequences with the result being rapid price inflation in NBG's markets as too much cash chases too little food.

Electoral politics

The war in Sudan and the massive displacement of South Sudanese back into the country they had once fled could impact the upcoming elections in South Sudan. The way returnees were received and resettled in NBG has exposed the myriad weaknesses of the state government.¹⁰⁹ The NBG government was well aware that settling returnees in temporary camps before their reintegration back into their communities would require the provision of basic needs and services, which it has failed to provide. To avoid taking responsibility, the NBG state government refused to accommodate returnees in temporary settlements, saying that this would encourage a life completely dependent on aid, and instead promised to provide returnees with support in their *bomas* (village-level administrative unit) and villages.¹¹⁰ While this argument has some truth, the reason the government refused to host returnees in a temporary settlement was to avoid showing its inability (or unwillingness) to look after its people when they most needed support. The returnees, who now make up a significant proportion of the population in several areas, could have a political impact during the upcoming elections by voting against SPLM candidates for MP in both national and state-level races.¹¹¹

108 Interview with local humanitarian aid worker based at Wedweil camp with frequent travels to Kiir Adem, 23 December 2023; Hou Akot, 'IOM Provides Cash To 17,000 Returnees In N. Bahr El Ghazal State', *Juba Echo*, 22 November 2023, <https://jubaecho.com/2023/11/22/iom-provides-cash-to-17000-returnees-in-n-bahr-el-ghazal-state/>.

109 'RRC says humanitarian situation in Aweil East "catastrophic"', *Sudan Post News*, 21 February 2024, <https://www.sudanspost.com/wfp-aweil-east-rrc/>.

110 Until today, IOM continues to transport the arriving returnees from Kiir Adem or Majok Nyinthiou every week and take them straight to the villages that returnees themselves identify as belonging to.

111 Interview with local RRC official in Aweil West county, Nyamlel, 16 December 2023.

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

ACLED	Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
CAR	Central African Republic
CSRF	Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility
DTM	Department of Tracking Matrix
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning Systems Network
IDP	internally displaced person
IOM	International Organization for Migration
Mathiang Anyoor	(Dinka) brown caterpillar (local militia)
NBG	Northern Bahr el-Ghazal
NSS	National Security Service
RRC	Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
RSF	Rapid Support Forces
SAF	Sudanese Armed Forces
SSM/A	South Sudan Equality Movement/Army
SSPDF	South Sudan People's Defence Force
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMISS	United Nations Mission in South Sudan
WFP	World Food Programme

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CREDITS

This research paper is a product of the FCDO's Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme, funded by UK aid from the UK government. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The programme carries out research to better understand the causes and impacts of conflict in border areas and their international dimensions. It supports more effective policymaking and development programming and builds the skills of local partners. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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