

Agencies battle to stave off starvation in South Sudan's civil war sanctuaries

Remote villages like Pathai have been engulfed by refugees and agencies have been flying in rapid response teams to provide food and medical aid

- [Andrew Green](#) in Jonglei state
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The village of Pathai, Jonglei state, a relative haven for nearly 14,000 people who have fled violence elsewhere in South Sudan. Although people there are currently out of the way of the fighting, they are also hard to reach with food supplies. Photograph: Jacob Zocherman

Kwene Biel has moved as far away from Bor as she can, but she has still not managed to escape the conflict in South Sudan.

The capital of Jonglei state was one of the early frontlines when the fighting started in mid-December and for two mornings in a row the 30-year-old awakened to the sound of gunfire. Finally, she and her husband decided to flee. He was

shot and killed a few metres from their house, but she kept running with their six children in tow.

It took them 10 days to reach Pathai, a scrubby village in remote central Jonglei. Though still within the war zone, she decided to stay because it is far from rivers and roads that could bring fighters. “If I had not come, I would have been killed,” she says.

Biel is one of nearly 14,000 people who have spilled into Pathai and the surrounding areas in Uror county since the fighting started, according to local leaders. It has brought the recent incomers relative security, but the war has choked off their access to food.

Traders refuse to make the trip to Pathai and for months the market has been empty of salt, oil and sugar. Stocks of sorghum from last year’s harvest are nearly exhausted. This year’s crop failed because there was not enough rain. Biel, who brought nothing with her and has no land to plant, is feeding her children boiled leaves.

“Hunger is here in this county,” says Peter Gai Dual, a local representative of the country’s relief and rehabilitation agency. “Death is even here.” But aid workers are scarce, because they cannot safely sustain relief efforts.

The conflict has left South Sudan riddled with these pockets of hunger, especially in the north-east, where most of the fighting has been concentrated. Officials have warned for months that the country is teetering on the brink of a man-made famine. Jean-Louis de Brouwer, a senior European commission official, says that while the worst appears to have been averted for the time being, 3.5 million people still face severe food shortages.

“Whether there is a famine or not, when you look at the number of people who are estimated to be in emergency or crisis food situations, all the conditions for a major humanitarian catastrophe and disaster are already met,” he says.



People in Pathai wait to register for food distribution. Photograph: Jacob Zocherman

And officials readily admit they do not know just how severe the situation really is because of the difficulty of reaching places like Pathai.

In the best of circumstances, delivering aid in South Sudan is fraught with logistical challenges. Even more so during the [rainy season](#) between April and November, when frequent downpours turn the country’s few roads to glue. Relief must come from the air, which multiplies the cost. And then there is the added complication of gaining permission for access from the warring sides.

Over the past six months, the World Food Programme and UN Children’s Fund (Unicef) has turned to a rapid response mechanism (RRM). When the combatants allow, the agencies fly teams of experts by helicopter into remote areas to gauge

food and health needs. Local leaders rally communities to come and register. While people sign up for food rations, health workers are on standby to put measuring tapes around children's arms and quickly assess whether they are malnourished.

At the end of the registration, after health workers have started underweight children on a course of treatment and injected vaccines, there is a massive distribution of sorghum, lentils, salt and oil. Children who are under five years old also receive a heavily fortified porridge.

There have been 23 completed RRM's so far, reaching more than 460,000 people, according to Unicef.

Pathai is one of the newest missions. Kibrom Tesfaselassie, Unicef's team leader, arrived late last week. He says at the start of each visit they are unsure what to expect. From Pathai, all they knew was that "community leaders had communicated there is a need."

Tesfaselassie's initial impression was that the "biggest problem is that there is no health system," but was delighted there was no evidence of widespread malnutrition. The first few hours of registration had turned up only two severely and two moderately malnourished children. But he cautions that without the intervention, the situation in Pathai could become dire. Depending on how long the registration takes, the food drop should happen this week. They are scheduled to recur each month, though any fighting in the area could disrupt those plans.

Like Biel, Nyagik Duok Riang, a 60-year-old blind woman, was one of the first of nearly 2,700 people to turn up for registration on the first day, arriving at sunrise with several of her grandchildren.

She has lived in the area all of her life, even through the decades-long civil war between southern rebels and Khartoum, and says she had never experienced anything like the current food shortages. “During that time, the traders came. This,” she says, “is worse.”



Nyangik Duok Riang (centre), a 60-year-old woman who is blind, was one of the first people to show up for the registration. Nearly 2,700 people turned up to register on the first day. Photograph: Jacob Zocherman