



Attacks on Relief Workers in South Sudan

Policy Leads: Aisha Foday

Policy Analysts: Isabel Mylnarsky, Preet Shukla, Evan Kung, Lediya Kajer, Alishba Syed

Rapid Response Team, Institute for Youth in Policy

aisha@yipinstitute.org

Abstract — This brief will cover the growing violence against humanitarian personnel in South Sudan, including the scale, drivers of the killings, and the humanitarian and political consequences of shrinking access.

Keywords — South Sudan, relief workers, humanitarian access, UNMISS, civil conflict, humanitarian security, Jonglei State, protection of civilians

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

South Sudan has become one of the deadliest places in the world for humanitarian workers. Violence against relief personnel has already surpassed 2025 levels.¹ As of mid-August 2026, at least 36 humanitarian workers and contractors had been killed since January, a toll the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, Ramanathan Balakrishnan, said had already surpassed the 31 deaths recorded across all of 2025. Between January and July, UN figures recorded more than 450 attacks on humanitarian workers and assets, more than double the total for the same period the year before.² The deadliest single attack of the year occurred on June 29, 2026, when unidentified assailants ambushed a

clearly marked humanitarian convoy traveling between Payuel Payam and Pajut in Duk County, Jonglei State, killing 17 people, including five staff of the John Dau Foundation. The danger has extended beyond civilian relief personnel. On August 24, 2026, armed men ambushed a UNMISS patrol traveling toward Pajut in Jonglei State, killing two peacekeepers, wounding three others and injuring two South Sudanese police officers and two civilian UN staff.³ Violence displaced more than 420,000 people between January and June 2026. The security crisis compounds an already severe funding gap. The 2026 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan is only 35 percent funded, a shortfall that threatens to disrupt critical food supplies starting October.⁴ Roughly 10 million people are expected to need humanitarian assistance in 2026, including more than 7.5 million facing high levels of acute food insecurity. Humanitarian organizations and the UN are urging the South Sudanese government and all parties to the 2018 peace agreement to protect humanitarian personnel, investigate

¹AP, "Ambush in South Sudan Kills Peacekeeping Troops."

² United Nations Mission in South Sudan, cited in "Ambush in South Sudan Kills Peacekeeping Troops," *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2026.

³ Anita Kiki Gbeho, quoted in "Ambush in South Sudan Kills Peacekeeping Troops," *Al Jazeera*, August 27, 2026.

⁴Xinhua, "UN Calls for Protection of Aid Workers in South Sudan Amid Escalating Violence."

attacks, and ensure safe humanitarian access. Without stronger commitments to humanitarian protection and accountability, continued insecurity could further undermine both the humanitarian response and confidence in the planned December 2026 elections.⁵

II. OVERVIEW

South Sudan is experiencing a significant escalation in violence against humanitarian workers, with attacks on relief workers and assets sharply increasing in 2026. The country's ongoing civil conflict, political fragility, and systemic failures in protecting civilians have created overlapping political, security, and humanitarian pressures, rendering humanitarian operations perilous and access to vulnerable populations nearly impossible. The situation is further exacerbated by a severe funding gap, which threatens to collapse critical aid programs just as needs reach record highs. This brief examines the drivers of this violence, its consequences, and the urgent policy responses required to mitigate further harm.

A. Pointed Summary

- **Scale of Violence:** Attacks on humanitarian workers in South Sudan have more than doubled in 2026 compared to 2025, with 36 deaths and 450+ attacks recorded by mid August.
- **Deadliest Incident:** On June 29, 2026, an ambush in Jonglei State killed 17 people, including five humanitarian personnel, marking the year's most lethal attack.
- **Broader Impact:** Violence has displaced 420,000+ people in early 2026, while a

65% funding gap threatens to halt food aid by October.

- **Political Stakes:** The crisis risks undermining the credibility of South Sudan's December 2026 elections and the viability of the 2018 peace agreement.

B. Relevance

The escalating violence against relief workers in South Sudan is not merely a humanitarian crisis, it poses a significant risk to humanitarian protections, human rights, regional stability, and South Sudan's political processes. The shrinking access to aid exacerbates food insecurity, displaces communities, and fuels cycles of violence, while the failure to protect humanitarian workers erodes trust in international law and peacekeeping efforts. For policymakers, this issue is critical for three key reasons:

- **Humanitarian Imperative:** South Sudan's 10 million people in need of aid represent one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises, with 7.5 million facing acute food insecurity. Without safe humanitarian access, food insecurity and preventable starvation could exacerbate.
- **Political Stability:** The December 2026 elections hinge on the credibility of the 2018 peace agreement, which is increasingly at risk due to unchecked violence and impunity.
- **International Law:** Deliberate attacks on aid personnel may constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law, yet perpetrators operate with near total impunity. Addressing this issue is essential to upholding global norms and protecting those delivering life saving assistance.

⁵ DENG MACHOL — Associated Press, "Deadly Attacks on Aid Workers and Contractors Surge in South Sudan as UN Urges Protection."

III. HISTORY

Attacks on humanitarian workers became a persistent concern following the outbreak of South Sudan's civil war in December 2013, as fighting between government and opposing forces made humanitarian operations increasingly dangerous⁶. During the conflict, relief workers faced killings, assaults, looting, roadblocks, and restrictions that made delivering assistance to civilians more difficult. Although the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement sought to reduce violence and stabilize the country, continued armed conflict, and weak security have prevented humanitarian workers from operating safely in many areas.⁷

A. Current Stances

The United Nations has called on South Sudan's government and parties to the 2018 peace agreement to protect humanitarian workers, investigate attacks, and guarantee safe humanitarian access⁸. Humanitarian organizations have emphasized that continued insecurity could force agencies to reduce or suspend operations, potentially cutting vulnerable populations off from essential assistance. Human rights organizations have also supported greater accountability for attacks through measures such as sanctions and hybrid courts, although these proposals face concerns over enforcement and government cooperation.

⁶United Nations, "UNMISS Background | United Nations Peace Operations."

⁷United Nations, "Bitter Foes Reunite to Sign Revitalized Peace Agreement to End Civil War in South Sudan | United Nations Peace Operations."

⁸ DENG MACHOL — Associated Press, "Deadly Attacks on Aid Workers and Contractors Surge in South Sudan as UN Urges Protection."

B. Tried Policy

The United Nations Mission in South Sudan has been used to protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access, although continuing attacks demonstrate the difficulties peacekeepers face in areas affected by armed conflict⁹. The 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement also sought to reduce conflict and establish greater stability, and the South Sudanese government now faces pressure to enforce the agreement to better protect humanitarian personnel. International actors have also used targeted sanctions, including asset freezes and travel bans, against individuals considered responsible for threatening South Sudan's peace and security.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders in this matter range anywhere in occupation, from civilians to workers to governments. The affected community, however, chiefly includes local humanitarian personnel alongside the United Nations and Non-Governmental Organizations who deploy such aid missions. Records show a current count of 36 personnel to have been killed since January of 2026. On top of that, the local South Sudanese population who rely on such assistance for survival have also been put in an incredibly vulnerable and precarious position, and estimates of this population sit at around 10 million, meaning 2/3rds of South Sudanese people.¹⁰

Courtesy of this tragedy, pressure is mounting on the South Sudanese government to enforce the

⁹ United Nations, "UNMISS Factsheet | United Nations Peace Operations."

¹⁰ UNOCHA, "South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026 (January 2026)."

2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement to protect humanitarian workers and properly investigate the attacks.¹¹

B. Risks of Indifference

A failure to address and investigate the attacks on humanitarian personnel will result in catastrophic losses, both to the South Sudanese population and to humanitarian organizations. If these violent acts are not adequately handled and prevented, the lack of safety standards for relief workers will eventually push humanitarian organizations to pull their workers (as the World Food Programme (WFP) has already warned it may halt its missions in South Sudan),¹² risking millions of civilians the access to proper aid.

As aforementioned, 2/3rds of the South Sudanese population are heavily reliant on these aid missions to have access to nutritious food, leaving approximately 10 million people hungry. This would even worsen the current conditions in South Sudan that the United Nations has already labeled as a crisis-level hunger and flagged as a potential famine.¹³

C. Policy Challenges

Though this crisis needs immediate action, this matter is very multi-faceted as its complexities range from governmental insecurities to financial challenges. The South Sudanese government is a Transitional Government, pointing to a lack of stable authority, and leaving localized militias to

proliferate and grow across the country. Such a challenge means that setting uniform safety protocols and laws regarding humanitarian workers will prove incredibly difficult, with no long-term power to legitimate any sort of agreement.

Adding to that, the United Nations estimates that it needs a total of 1.46 billion for its humanitarian plan in South Sudan in 2026, and of that large sum of money, only 35% has been met, and now with the additional challenge of dangerous conditions for relief workers in South Sudan, it faces more difficulty in meeting this goal and has narrowed its financial requirements to 1 billion to fulfill the most urgent needs.¹⁴

V. POLICY OPTIONS

Expanding and strengthening the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) is a critical policy option to address the attacks on humanitarian workers. Currently, UNMISS lacks the resources and mandate to effectively deter violence against humanitarian personnel. Policymakers are considering increasing troop numbers, providing better equipment, and granting UNMISS the authority to use force beyond self defense¹⁵. While this could enhance protection for relief workers, it faces resistance from the South Sudanese government, which may see it as foreign interference. The financial and logistical costs are also substantial, and there is no guarantee militias would comply. Still, UNMISS remains the most viable international force on the ground, and strengthening it could serve as a deterrent against further attacks. Targeted sanctions against individuals and entities

¹¹DENG MACHOL — Associated Press, “Deadly Attacks on Aid Workers and Contractors Surge in South Sudan as UN Urges Protection.”

¹²Le Poidevin, “650,000 Refugees in South Sudan Could Lose Food Aid Within Weeks Due to Funding Squeeze, Say UN Agencies.”

¹³ UN News, “Security Council LIVE: Warnings of Famine and Collapse as South Sudan’s Peace Deal Frays.”

¹⁴UNOCHA, “South Sudan: Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan 2026 (January 2026).”

¹⁵ UNMISS, “UNMISS Military | United Nations Peace Operations.”

responsible for attacks on humanitarian personnel are another option being discussed. Sanctions could include asset freezes, travel bans, and penalties for businesses funding militia groups. The goal is to hold perpetrators accountable and pressure the government to take action. However, sanctions often face weak enforcement, and targeted individuals may evade restrictions¹⁶. The government could also retaliate by restricting aid operations or expelling international staff. Despite these challenges, sanctions remain a tool for signaling serious concern and pushing for accountability. Establishing hybrid courts to investigate and prosecute war crimes, including attacks on aid workers, is gaining support among human rights organizations¹⁷. These courts, combining international and domestic legal systems, have worked in other post-conflict settings like Sierra Leone. They could deliver justice and deter future violence by holding perpetrators accountable under international law. However, the South Sudanese government may resist hybrid courts, viewing them as an infringement on sovereignty. Logistical and financial challenges, along with the need for regional cooperation, further complicate this option. Without government buy-in, hybrid courts risk becoming ineffective¹⁸. Addressing the severe funding gap for humanitarian operations in South Sudan is another urgent policy option. The 2026 Humanitarian Response Plan, requiring \$1.46 billion, is only 35.5% funded¹⁹, forcing organizations like the WFP to

cut food rations²⁰. Policymakers are exploring alternative funding models, such as pooled donor funds, flexible funding for NGOs, and localizing aid delivery by empowering South Sudanese NGOs. However, the government may resist conditional funding, and local NGOs often lack the capacity to handle large-scale operations. Donor fatigue and competing global crises also limit additional funds. Reforming funding mechanisms is essential to ensuring humanitarian aid reaches the 10 million people in need. Diplomatic pressure and regional mediation, particularly through organizations like IGAD and the African Union, offer another pathway to address the crisis. Strengthening regional diplomacy could involve emergency summits, engaging economic partners like China and Russia, and threatening to reduce diplomatic ties if attacks continue²¹. This approach avoids military intervention and relies on regional leverage, which may be more acceptable to the South Sudanese government. However, the AU and IGAD often lack unity and enforcement capacity, and countries like China and Russia may block stronger measures. Despite these limitations, regional diplomacy remains a tool for pressuring parties to uphold their commitments to protecting relief workers. Revitalizing disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programs could reduce the power of militias and restore government control. DDR programs incentivize fighters to surrender weapons through amnesty, cash payments, or vocational training. However, past efforts in South Sudan have struggled due to corruption, lack of political will, and the proliferation of

¹⁶ Accord, “How the Use of Targeted Sanctions Can Undermine Peace in South Sudan.”

¹⁷ Watchowski, “The Hybrid Court of South Sudan: Progress Towards Establishment and Sustainable Peace.”

¹⁸ U.S Department of State, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

¹⁹ OCHA, “South Sudan 2026 | Financial Tracking Service.”

²⁰ UN World Food Programme, “UN World Food Programme (WFP).”

²¹ Omar, “IGAD and African Development Bank Officially Launch SECURES-IGAD Project to Strengthen Early Warning and Crisis Prevention in the Horn of Africa.”

splinter groups²². The government may use DDR to consolidate power rather than promote peace. Still, DDR remains a critical component of long-term stabilization, and policymakers could explore ways to improve transparency and involve local leaders. Public advocacy and media campaigns could also play a role in addressing the crisis by raising global awareness. High-profile campaigns by organizations like MSF and ICRC have drawn attention to the plight of aid workers. Social media, documentaries, and visits by influential figures can amplify local voices and create pressure for change. However, public attention is often short-lived, and without sustained political follow-through, campaigns may fail to lead to action. Despite these limitations, public advocacy keeps the crisis on the global agenda and ensures the protection of humanitarian workers remains a priority.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the most effective response to violence against humanitarian workers in South Sudan would combine immediate protection measures with longer-term efforts to address impunity and political instability. In the short term, the South Sudanese government and opposition forces should establish and respect protected humanitarian corridors, while UNMISS should increase patrols and escorts along routes where relief workers face the greatest risk. International donors should also provide flexible emergency funding to prevent food and medical programs from being suspended. These measures would protect both humanitarian personnel and the millions of South Sudanese civilians who depend on their work.

²² UN News, “Government Corruption Fuels Human Rights Crisis in South Sudan, Independent Panel Finds.”

Protection alone, however, will not deter future attacks unless perpetrators face consequences. The government should investigate attacks against humanitarian personnel and cooperate with the African Union to operationalize the long-delayed Hybrid Court for South Sudan. If domestic authorities fail to act, the United Nations and regional partners should impose coordinated sanctions on individuals credibly linked to attacks or obstruction of humanitarian aid. Over time, renewed disarmament as well as reintegration programs could reduce the influence of armed groups, but these programs should include independent oversight to prevent corruption and political misuse.

The most likely next steps are increased UN and regional diplomatic pressure rather than a large international intervention. IGAD and the African Union will probably continue urging the parties to implement the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement, while humanitarian organizations press for safer access and additional funding. However, the government’s concern over sovereignty and the weak enforcement of previous agreements may delay stronger and more effective action. The approaching December 2026 elections could potentially create additional pressure for cooperation, since continued insecurity would weaken their credibility. Without enforceable commitments and sustained funding, international condemnation is unlikely to produce lasting changes or solutions.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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