Statement from InterAction

100,000 People in Flight from Conflict in Pibor County on Independence Day

Juba, South Sudan, 9th July 2013

On the day of South Sudan’s two-year anniversary humanitarian agencies working on Jonglei express their extreme concern for the dire humanitarian crisis unfolding in Pibor County, Jonglei State. Since September 2012 hundreds of civilians have lost their lives and tens of thousands more have been forced to flee their homes due to indiscriminate violence and insecurity arising from armed conflict between the Government of South Sudan’s Armed Forces and non-state armed actors.

Humanitarian agencies believe that of an estimated population of 149,000 in Pibor County, over 100,000 people have been forced to flee their homes. Out of the six major populations centres (Lekonguele, Gumuruk, Pibor, Manyabol, Boma, Muruwa Hills) in Pibor County, five have been almost entirely depopulated. These civilians are currently without access to clean water, food, shelter and critical life saving medical services. As rainy season is beginning, large groups of people may become trapped in flood-prone areas that will turn into malaria-infested swamps. These areas are also in close proximity to armed actors and violent clashes.

Humanitarian assistance has been severely disrupted in the county due to increasing insecurity and the violent targeting of humanitarian actors and services. Many agencies were forced to suspend services and evacuate many parts of Pibor earlier this year. In recent weeks some relief has trickled through to more than 3,000 people in Gumuruk town where the county’s only remaining health facility is in operation.

The current humanitarian crisis in Pibor County comes on the back of a series of devastating events since the beginning of 2011. These include escalating and unresolved inter-communal violence; a forced disarmament campaign in early 2012 that was accompanied by abuses against civilians; and severe floods in late 2012. These events have led to a succession of displacements and civilian fatalities while communities have struggled to secure or maintain their livelihoods.

Even prior to the start of armed conflict the UN and the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWSNET) reported Pibor County was experiencing chronic levels of food insecurity and predicted that 39,000 people would be
severely food insecure in early 2013 with food insecurity potentially reaching emergency thresholds by July-August. Between January and July 2012, pre-harvest malnutrition rates for Jonglei State were approaching emergency thresholds and it serves as an important indicator for this year as 2013 information is not available due to access constraints. Given the widespread insecurity in the last twelve months in Pibor County, it is unlikely that civilians have been able to recover from these multiple shocks.

Though the full scale of need cannot be fully determined due to access constraints, initial humanitarian assessments indicate large scale suffering. Humanitarian agencies are worried that with already chronic food insecurity, limited humanitarian assistance, the deliberate destruction of markets and humanitarian facilities by armed actors, and the loss of another planting season, people are resorting to extreme coping strategies to protect families from hunger. Concerning reports are already coming from across the county that families have started to consume female cattle which means they cannot replenish their stock, and will no longer have a source for milk.

Humanitarian agencies urgently appeal to the Government of South Sudan and to the international community, to acknowledge the gravity of the situation in Pibor County, and emerging in other parts of Jonglei State, and to engage in immediate and concerted action to respond to the crisis. With the rainy season beginning time is running out before humanitarian agencies will no longer be able to access large parts of Pibor County and other affected parts of Jonglei State.

**To Government of South Sudan and Non State Armed Actors**

All parties must respect and fulfill obligations under international human rights and international humanitarian law to protect civilians and allow humanitarian agencies immediate, unconditional, and unimpeded access to the affected population across Jonglei State. Civilians must be allowed to move freely within and outside Jonglei State. Finally, all parties should refrain from attacking, misusing or interfering with the provision of humanitarian assistance.

All parties must immediately halt actions that might result in further loss of civilian life and damage to civilian property.

The Government of South Sudan is requested to urge its armed forces to provide guarantees at all levels in the chain of command that all humanitarian relief is allowed to reach civilians in need, without delay.

A negotiated political settlement to the current conflict should be sought in order to bring to an end the violence and enable civilians to begin the process of recovery. Humanitarian assistance is not conditional upon this.
To the Humanitarian Community

The Humanitarian Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordination Team should take and maintain strong leadership in facilitating the humanitarian system to effectively, safely and adequately respond to current and emerging humanitarian and protection needs and vulnerabilities in Pibor County and the rest of the state. All planning and response must integrate basic protection standards and Do No Harm.

Strongly urge that all parties to armed conflict respect, grant and facilitate safe and unhindered humanitarian access—without conditions—to UN and international humanitarian organizations to all areas of Jonglei, to allow the provision of critical life saving assistance—medical care, food, water and shelter to civilians in need. This includes providing clear assurances that humanitarian personnel and assets shall not be misused or targeted.

Seek the removal of onerous obstacles and barriers to the use of critical humanitarian assets within the UN system.