UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

SOUTH SUDAN EMERGENCY

GAMBELLA FACTSHEET

MAY 2026

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UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, supports the Government of Ethiopia in providing protection and assistance to refugees and host communities in Gambella, Ethiopia's largest refugee-hosting region. With over 446,000 South Sudanese refugees, the operation is responding to **one of the most protracted and complex displacement situations in the region**, within an economically fragile and climate-prone environment.

An already fragile situation was significantly strained by the 2025 influx, which stretched basic services and infrastructure. Earlier this year, renewed conflict in South Sudan triggered a fresh influx, prompting the **activation of a Level 2 emergency response** to address the needs of up to 100,000 anticipated new arrivals, further exacerbating pressure on already overstretched resources.

In a context marked by **insecurity driven by inter-communal tensions, recurrent flooding, and severe funding constraints**, UNHCR and partners are providing life-saving assistance for South Sudanese arrivals while sustaining essential services for protracted refugees and advancing inclusive, solutions-based approaches under the Makatet framework.

KEY FIGURES

446,009
registered refugees living in 7 camps and 2 settlements

100,000
planning figure (2026 arrivals)

49,750
registered refugees living in Luakdong

>50%
of new arrivals are women and children

1 in 5 children are malnourished

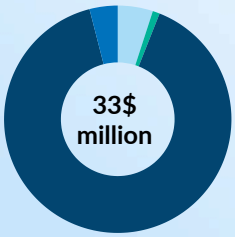
30%
households without adequate shelter in Luakdong

6
liters of water per person daily, below emergency standards

1:64
latrine per people, below emergency standards

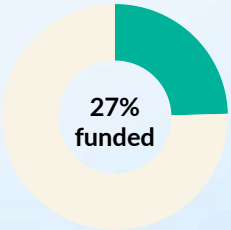
FUNDING

Allocation by Impact Area



- Respond 90%
- Protect 5%
- Empower 4%
- Solve 1%

Funding Gaps



Note: These funding requirements reflect only the identified needs of populations currently registered under the emergency and protracted response components of UNHCR's Gambella operation, and do not account for the planning figure of 100,000 arrivals in 2026.

CONTEXT

Gambella hosts **Ethiopia's largest refugee population**, with over a decade of continued displacement from South Sudan. Fragile security and humanitarian conditions continue to drive cross-border movements, further straining already limited local capacity and resources.

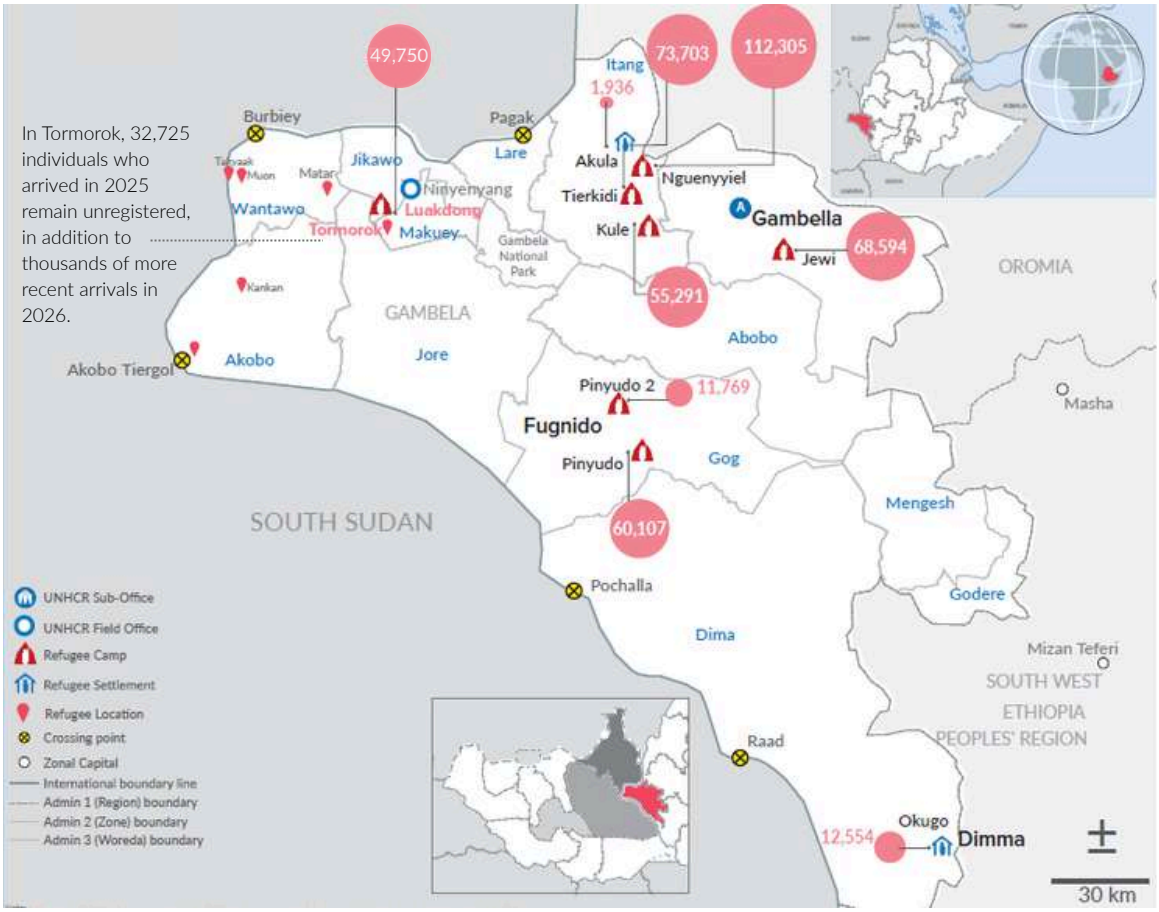
Since early 2026, a **rapidly escalating influx from South Sudan** has brought thousands of new arrivals into Gambella. Populations are concentrated in Tormorok (originally established as a transit centre), Luakdong refugee camp, and surrounding communities, where many live in precarious conditions and rely heavily on humanitarian assistance. Movements remain fluid, with **people moving across locations in search of services**, while humanitarian access to key entry points such as Akobo Tiergol still remains constrained.

Cross-border movements are further shaped by evolving security dynamics and the recent partial resumption of assistance in Akobo (South Sudan), with some households reportedly returning temporarily to cultivate land and restore livelihoods. These movements remain very fragile and likely unsustainable, underscoring the **need for a coordinated, sub-regional response**.

As one of Ethiopia's least developed regions, Gambella faces significant infrastructure and service gaps, including poor road networks, limited electricity, and unreliable connectivity. **Inter-communal tensions, coupled with recurrent flooding and seasonal droughts, further displace populations**, disrupt livelihoods, and risk isolating affected areas, especially during the rainy season. In addition to systemic challenges, operational constraints such as persistent fuel shortages, continue to disrupt logistics and service delivery across all sectors of the response.

Refugees face **growing food insecurity** due to ration reductions, restricted access to land, and rising living costs. These pressures affect both refugee and host communities, weakening coping capacities and increasing aid dependency.

Efforts are underway to progressively **shift from emergency response toward more sustainable, area-based approaches** through partnerships with government and development actors. However, the scale of new arrivals, combined with structural and operational constraints are limiting progress and require sustained support.



UNHCR PRIORITIES

IMPACT AREAS	OUTCOME AREAS
PROTECT	• Scale up border monitoring, registration, and documentation for new arrivals while preserving access to asylum • Strengthen gender-based violence prevention and response, child protection, and access to justice in overstretched sites • Support government capacity and protection frameworks amid displacement pressures
RESPOND	• Scale up delivery of core relief items and targeted assistance for the most vulnerable • Expand shelter capacity in emergency sites and investing in drainage and flood mitigation, while upgrading infrastructure in protracted camps • Strengthen health and nutrition services, including prevention, referrals, and mental health support • Increase water supply to meet standards and scale up climate-resilient WASH solutions
EMPOWER	• Strengthen community structures, feedback systems, and women's participation in decision-making • Expand socio-economic inclusion and livelihoods opportunities for refugees and host communities
SOLVE	• Advance inclusion into national systems and area-based approaches under the Makatet framework • Implement "solutions from the start" approaches to integrate refugee self-reliance into the very first phases of the emergency response, ensuring long-term sustainability

ACTIVITIES

This section summarizes progress and key operational challenges across sectors in May

PROTECTION

- Protection monitoring in accessible locations identified critical needs, informing prioritization of urgent interventions across shelter, food, health, and WASH
- Coordination was strengthened through the Protection Working Group, alongside onboarding of a new partner to expand protection and peacebuilding activities
- Community engagement was reinforced through continued support to representative structures and community-based mechanisms, although growing needs and operational constraints continue to outpace response capacity

Out of the 49,750 individuals in Luakdong,

10,482 children identified as at risk

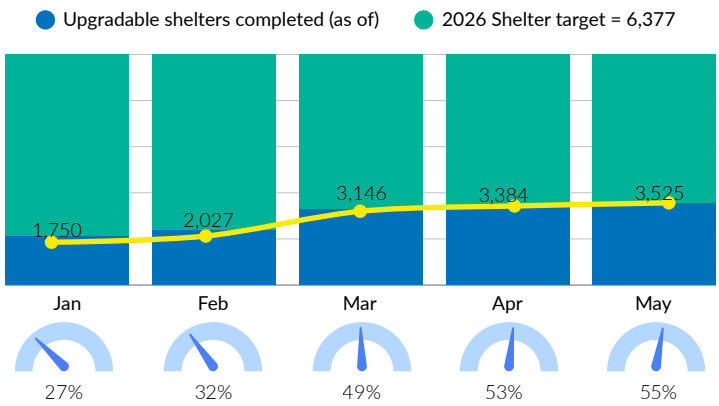
Child protection

307 children supported through individual case management

400 children attending 6 child-friendly spaces daily

SHELTER

- Site development for the Luakdong emergency site advanced with full clearance of the permanent dike base and continued road works, strengthening flood mitigation
- Shelter construction progressed, alongside key infrastructure such as the registration space and administrative facilities
- Engagement of refugee labour groups in dike construction further strengthened community participation



HEALTH

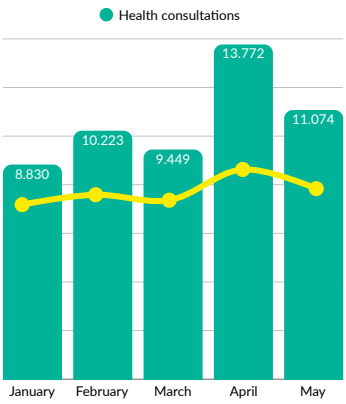
- Sustained delivery of life-saving health services across emergency sites of Luakdong, Tormorok, and Muon, with malaria remaining a leading cause of illness, alongside strengthened prevention measures, vaccination activities, emergency referrals, and expanded community outreach
- Heightened risks of communicable diseases due to overcrowding and weak infrastructure, combined with staffing shortages—including limited mental health expertise—along with referral delays and gaps in medicines continue to constrain service quality and coverage

WASH

- Emergency WASH services were sustained across Luakdong, Tormorok, and surrounding areas, ensuring continuity of water supply, sanitation, and hygiene promotion, with ongoing maintenance and expansion of water systems and pipelines to improve access
- Construction of communal and household facilities, distribution of WASH items and rehabilitation of systems in host communities continued, alongside solid waste management improvements and large-scale community outreach
- Increasing demand for WASH services across locations requires sustained investment in more durable, climate-resilient solutions

FOOD & NUTRITION

- Nutrition screening, referral, and treatment across Luakdong and Tormorok, enabled early identification of vulnerable children and pregnant and lactating women, alongside community engagement and group outreach
- Monthly food distribution in Luakdong, targeted supplementary feeding, fresh food voucher assistance, and hot meal provision in Tormorok improved immediate food access and strengthened coordinated support for the most vulnerable populations
- Despite these efforts, the nutrition situation remains critical and persistent food security gaps—particularly for newly arrived, unregistered populations—combined with the absence of blanket supplementary feeding continue to limit response capacity



COORDINATION

The inter-agency emergency response in Gambella is jointly coordinated by RRS and UNHCR, ensuring strong government leadership and alignment across all levels. Established coordination mechanisms — including regular inter-agency and sectoral meetings — enable partners to align interventions, share information, and respond to operational challenges in a coherent and complementary manner.

Since the onset of the emergency, partners have scaled up life-saving assistance to South Sudanese arrivals, supported by weekly field-level coordination and monthly national and regional forums. Sectoral Working Groups across Protection, Health & Nutrition, Food Security, WASH, and Shelter ensure integrated responses, while joint monitoring and assessments strengthen accountability and support timely, targeted assistance.

Partnerships:

UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency

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For more information, please contact:

In Addis Ababa **Susanne Butscher, Senior External Relations Officer |** butscher@unhcr.org

In Gambella **Maria Chiara Massetti, Senior Inter-agency Coordination Officer |** massetti@unhcr.org