Returns from Kenya to South Sudan

11 September 2025

South Sudanese returnees from Kakuma wait with their belongings at the Kapoeta bus park before continuing onward to their home areas.
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9,336
new refugee returnee arrivals from Kenya

222
daily arrivals in August 2025

201,387
South Sudanese refugees in Kenya

HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 9,300 South Sudanese refugees have returned from Kakuma and Kalobeyei (Kenya) since June 2025, with peaks of more than 220 daily arrivals in August.
- Food ration cuts under the WFP targeting system left nearly 45% of South Sudanese in Kakuma/Kalobeyei (around 85,000 people) without assistance, sparking protests and community engagement in the camps.
- Profile of returnees: two-thirds are children; average household size is six or more members. Larger families face higher expenses for transport and daily food needs. Cases of family separation and unaccompanied children have been reported.
- Main route: Nadapal crossing into Eastern Equatoria, with onward movements to Kapoeta, Torit, Budi, and Ikotos. Families face risks of ambushes and extortion on onward roads.
- Conditions at the border: no reception facilities, limited water, widespread open defecation, no functioning health center, and high exposure to GBV, theft, and disease.
- Host communities overstretched: Returnees rely heavily on relatives in Eastern Equatoria, further straining food, shelter, and health services already under pressure.

Operational context

Kenya hosts 860,297 refugees and asylum-seekers, including 201,387 South Sudanese. Most live in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, where South Sudanese make up 62 per cent of the 308,609 refugees in Kakuma. Many fled to Kenya during the conflict that erupted in December 2013 and later flare-ups.

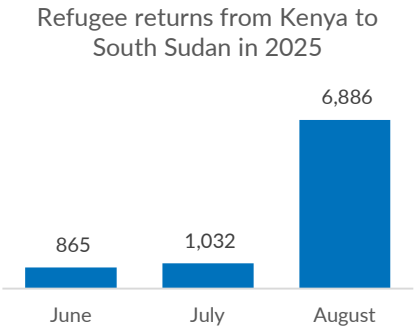
In 2024–2025, the humanitarian situation in the camps has been significantly impacted by global funding shortages. Humanitarian partners introduced a system of food targeting, whereby assistance is no longer provided uniformly to all refugees but instead allocated according to assessed levels of vulnerability. Households considered most at risk continue to receive a full or partial ration. By contrast, families determined to have some coping capacity no longer qualify for food assistance. For South Sudanese in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, this means that only around 55 per cent of the community remains eligible for regular food distributions, while nearly 45 per cent — some 85,000 people — have been cut off from food aid entirely as of August when the food cuts are being implemented. This decision sparked visible frustration among refugees. Protests were organised in the camps, and community leaders repeatedly engaged with humanitarian agencies to express their concerns and to call for a reversal of the targeting system or for alternative livelihoods support to be put in place. Despite these engagements, funding realities have meant that food targeting remains in effect, with little prospect of immediate change.

Faced with prolonged uncertainty and an absence of viable alternatives, some families have opted for the difficult choice of returning to South Sudan. Many sold off their assets, including their shelters, to raise the transport fees required to reach the Nadapal border crossing. According to border monitoring data, 9,336 South Sudanese have returned since June 2025, with the majority transiting through Eastern Equatoria. Returns have been particularly visible in Greater Kapoeta and Torit counties, where local authorities and the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission report a steady influx throughout August and September.

UNHCR undertook an assessment mission to the Nadapal border crossing from 2–9 September 2025 to review conditions on the ground and engage with local authorities and communities.

Returnee Arrivals Overview

The majority of those returning from Kakuma and Kalobeyei are women and children, with children under 18 accounting for two-thirds of arrivals. Women make up just over 40 per cent, while men represent around 59 per cent. The average household size among returnees is large, often six or more members. Larger families face higher expenses both for transportation back to South Sudan and for meeting daily food needs once they arrive, which heightens their vulnerability and places added strain on already overstretched host communities. Families with young children and elderly relatives are particularly at risk, and in some cases, children have been sent ahead alone due to the



Source: IOM DTM

inability of parents to afford transport for the entire household, leading to family separation and increased protection concerns.

The primary driver of return is the reduction of food aid under the targeting system, which excluded many households deemed less vulnerable. Refugees explained that the loss of rations left them with no viable alternatives, particularly in Kalobeyei where livelihood opportunities are limited. Many larger families resorted to selling parts of their shelters or other assets in the camps to cover transport costs. Nearly all returnees—about 98 per cent—reported travelling by taxi or small car, with a one-way trip from Kakuma to South Sudan costing around 100 USD per person, an amount unaffordable for many. Some families received financial help from relatives in South Sudan, while others were compelled to leave members behind until funds could be raised.

Return routes converge at the Nadapal crossing in Eastern Equatoria. From there, returnees disperse through Kapoeta South as a transit hub, before moving onward to destinations in Torit, Budi, Ikotos, and other counties. Some families prefer the Kush road for safety, while others travel by unofficial routes to avoid harassment and demands for bribes at checkpoints. Along the way, returnees face exposure to ambushes, theft, and protection risks.

Situation at the border

Nadapal is the main crossing point between Kakuma/Kalobeyei in Kenya and Eastern Equatoria State in South Sudan. The town has become the first point of arrival for the majority of returnees, many of whom wait there for onward transport or support. With limited infrastructure and minimal humanitarian presence, Nadapal is under growing strain as numbers increase.

- **Protection**: Families with young children and elderly relatives are particularly vulnerable, as many are forced to sleep in the open without shelter, food, or services. Women and children face risks of sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation. Cases of theft have been reported in Kapoeta South bus park, where many returnees transit. Unaccompanied and separated children are increasingly identified, as some parents send children ahead when unable to pay for transport for the entire household. Harassment and extortion on the Kenyan side of the border are common, and in one tragic incident, a child died after being hidden in a container to avoid fees.
- **Food Security**: Returnees often arrive with little to no resources and report going without food for two to three days after reaching Nadapal. Local markets have food items, with trucks crossing daily from Kenya, but most families cannot afford them. Many depend on sporadic support from relatives or host community.
- **Health and Nutrition:** Nadapal has no functional public health facility. The only clinic is privately run, poorly stocked, and inaccessible to most. The nearest operational health services are in Lokichogio, Kenya, which is out of reach for families without transport. Children and mothers arriving after long journeys show signs of exhaustion, malnutrition, and dehydration. Poor sanitation further increases the risk of outbreaks.
- **Shelter and NFIs**: There are no reception facilities in Nadapal. Families arriving at night often sleep outside, in closed tea shops, bus parks, or with relatives. Some who can afford it stay in small guesthouses, but this is out of reach for most. Many returnees sold household items in Kenya to finance transport and now lack bedding, cooking utensils, and clothing.

- **WASH**: Only a few boreholes are functional in Nadapal, leaving many without safe drinking water. The lack of latrines has led to widespread open defecation, exposing returnees and host communities to a heightened risk of cholera and other waterborne diseases. Women and girls are particularly affected by the absence of sanitation facilities and lack of access to menstrual hygiene items. Hygiene practices are visibly poor, and no structured hygiene promotion is in place.

Upon arrival

The majority of returnees arriving through Nadapal are originally from Eastern Equatoria, which accounted for over 70 per cent of those recorded between August and early September 2025. Most are returning to their home communities in Kapoeta, Torit, Budi, Ikotos, and surrounding counties. While this allows many to reconnect with relatives and resume life in familiar settings, conditions upon arrival are challenging. Families often reach their destinations exhausted and without resources, facing immediate challenges such as lack of food, inadequate shelter, poor access to clean water, and overstretched health services. Host households already struggling with limited means are now accommodating additional family members, leading to overcrowding, increased food insecurity, and heightened protection risks for women, children, and the elderly.

Recommendations

- **Immediate Humanitarian Response**: Integrate new arrivals from the border into existing humanitarian response mechanisms at their final destinations. Strengthen coordination among cluster partners to ensure a unified and effective response based on needs and a community-based approach.
- **Protection**: Reinforce protection monitoring at Nadapal and key transit hubs to promptly identify unaccompanied and separated children (UASC), survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), and persons with specific needs (PSNs).
- **Advocate** with Kenyan and South Sudanese authorities to curb harassment and extortion at checkpoints, while establishing accountability mechanisms for reported abuses.
- **Border and Data Monitoring**: Scale up return monitoring in the areas of final destinations to identify when local systems are overstretched and require additional support.
- **Communication with Communities**: Expand CwC initiatives in Kakuma and Kalobeyei to explain the food targeting system, clarify return options, and communicate available assistance in South Sudan, reducing misinformation and false expectations.
- **Preparedness**: Develop contingency plans for potential increases in return flows should assistance cuts in Kenya persist or escalate.

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South Sudan Operational Data Portal