

# Sudan

## Events of 2023

A man cleans debris of a house in Khartoum that was destroyed during fighting between Sudan's armed forces and the Rapid Support Forces on April 25, 2023.

© 2023 AP Photo/Marwan Ali, File

### AVAILABLE IN



On April 15, 2023, fighting broke out in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), an independent military force, and quickly spread across the country. This followed months of mounting [tensions](#) between SAF leader General Abdelfattah al-Burhan and RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti") over the integration of the RSF into the SAF. Burhan and Hemedti had jointly carried out a [military](#) coup against the transitional government in October 2021.

Since the fighting started, both forces have repeatedly used heavy explosive weapons in densely populated areas, resulting in numerous civilian casualties and destruction of civilian property and critical infrastructure. As of September, the United Nations [reported](#) that at least 9,000 people had been killed since the start of the conflict, most likely a significant underestimation, and [5.4 million forcibly displaced](#), including 4.1 million internally and over 1 million to neighboring countries.

From late April, West Darfur state was the site of some of the worst attacks on civilians and serious violations of international humanitarian law. Large-scale attacks by RSF forces and allied forces—mostly Arab militia—primarily targeting the ethnic Massalit population took place in multiple towns in the region.

August, the UN [said](#) at least 19 aid workers had been killed. Sudanese community healthcare workers and support networks were also targeted. Twenty million people are estimated to need [food assistance](#) in the country. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [warned](#) in August that ongoing fighting and widespread bureaucratic impediments hamper the scaling up of humanitarian assistance across the country.

## Conflict and Abuses in Khartoum

Since the start of the conflict, both the SAF and RSF have used heavy explosive weapons in densely populated areas across the Khartoum, including Omdurman and Bahri areas, killing [thousands](#) of civilians, damaging critical infrastructure, and leaving millions without access to necessities. The fighting destroyed many homes and other civilian objects.

In Khartoum and in towns in Darfur and Kordofan, indiscriminate attacks, including shelling by both parties and SAF airstrikes, killed hundreds. The UN [reported](#) that a June 4 airstrike [by the SAF](#) in southern Khartoum that hit a refugee center killed at least 10 refugees. In mid-September, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders, MSF) [said](#) at least 49 people were killed and that they had treated over 100 injured after two deadly attacks in a busy market and another in residential area in Khartoum.

On April 15, the Bahri Water Treatment Plant, north of Khartoum, was [damaged](#), leaving residents in the area without water. Water authorities reported that fighters had repeatedly prevented them from accessing the plant due to insecurity, hampering repairs.

Several medical facilities across Khartoum were [damaged](#) due to airstrikes or shelling, forcing many of them to close. As fighting intensified in the capital from August onward, humanitarian agencies warned of the risks to the few remaining functioning hospitals. As of October, OCHA [said](#) more than 70 percent of health facilities in conflict-affected areas were not functioning.

On July 20, MSF [said](#) four of their staff members were stopped by “armed men” who assaulted them with whips and stole their vehicle.

Warring parties also arbitrarily arrested, held incommunicado, and mistreated civilians, including health workers. As of late July, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [said](#) at least 500 people, including 24 women, were reported missing. He said that many of those detained were reportedly ill-treated and in some cases tortured. In September, the Emergency Lawyers, a group of human rights lawyers, released a [report](#) documenting



According to rights monitors, the SAF and RSF have also repeatedly intimidated, attacked, and detained several activists and volunteers facilitating the delivery of aid and other essential services.

In May, SAF military intelligence [reportedly](#) detained two volunteers operating an ambulance, accusing them of collaborating with the RSF, and releasing them shortly after. Activists also [said](#) the RSF detained three doctors coming to Khartoum to volunteer in a hospital in September.

The conflict saw the systematic looting of aid warehouses and humanitarian goods and property throughout the Khartoum area. The UN secretary-general [declared](#) in May that most, if not all, UN agencies and humanitarian partners had faced large-scale looting of their humanitarian supplies. Meanwhile, RSF conducted widespread [looting](#) including of private property throughout the capital.

## Conflict and Abuses in Darfur

From April 24, RSF and Arab militias carried out attacks against non-Arab communities in El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur. Thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands of Sudanese, overwhelmingly from non-Arab communities and specifically the Massalit, were forced to flee to nearby Chad because of the fighting and the abuses. The RSF and allied militias committed widespread killings of civilians in El Geneina, including while they were seeking to flee to safety. And they committed widespread looting and arson and attacked critical civilian infrastructure, including camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), hospitals, and markets. Assailants also targeted local leaders and [human rights defenders](#), searching for them, detaining some, and killing four [lawyers](#) who represented victims of the RSF and allied militias' previous attacks in El Geneina.

At least seven other towns in West Darfur state were attacked and burned, some almost completely, between April and July.

On May 28, thousands of RSF and allied militia attacked the town of [Mistere](#), 42 kilometers from El Genaina. They summarily executed at least 28 ethnic Massalit, killed and injured dozens of civilians, and conducted widespread looting before burning much of the town to the ground.

Attacks continued in other parts of West Darfur. In Murnei, the RSF and allied militias killed residents as they fled, looting and burning down the town on June 27. The Darfur Bar Association reported that the attacks in Sirba locality started on July 24 and lasted for



Since April, [over 300,000](#) people have fled to Chad, many from West Darfur. As of late July, the UN was recording a significant drop in the number of displaced people still in West Darfur, “reportedly attributed to an increase in the level of internally displaced people (IDPs) who have crossed into Chad.”

Fighting between the SAF and RSF also took place in other urban areas of Darfur. In Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, renewed clashes in [August](#) left at least 50 civilians dead and forced 50,000 to flee. On September 13, an SAF [airstrike](#) in the city killed at least 40 civilians. At time of writing, intense fighting was also [reported](#) in El Fashir, capital of North Darfur, with increasing risk to civilian lives.

## Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

UN experts [raised](#) concerns about the surge of sexual violence during the conflict, including in [Khartoum](#) and Darfur.

The Strategic Initiative for Women in Horn of Africa (SIHA), a women’s rights group, [said](#) in July that they verified more than 70 cases of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence across the country, largely attributed to the RSF.

In El Genaina, RSF and allied Arab militias raped several dozen women and girls in the city and while people fled fighting between April and June. Survivors who spoke to Human Rights Watch [said](#) that their attackers explicitly mentioned their ethnic identity and used ethnic slurs about the Massalit or non-Arabs more generally.

Survivors’ access to urgent services, including the clinical management of rape and psychosocial support, were hampered by attacks on medical facilities and organizations providing care for sexual violence survivors as well as by a communications network shutdown in El Geneina and weak health infrastructure in Chad, to where many survivors have fled. Persistent stigma around sexual violence exacerbated barriers to care.

## Accountability

Prior to the outbreak of the conflict, the Sudanese civilian political alliance, Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), signed a framework agreement with military leaders in December 2022, which was not [supported](#) by protest groups due to concerns that it downplayed accountability.

Sudan’s army leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan set up a committee to investigate abuses, but only those committed by the RSF.



committed in Darfur, [left](#) prison in Khartoum following attacks. The army [said](#) that both al-Bashir and former Defense Minister Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein—both sought by the ICC for international crimes committed in Darfur—were being held at the military hospital prior to the current conflict.

On July 13, the ICC prosecutor [announced](#) that his office is probing recent atrocities in Sudan's Darfur region as part of its ongoing Darfur investigation, underscoring the gravity of current [abuses](#).

## Refugees and Migrants

As of early August, [according to the UN](#), nearly 1 million people had fled from Sudan to Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and other countries since April, with Sudanese nationals comprising two-thirds of those. The others included South Sudanese nationals as well as refugees and asylum seekers, including from Eritrea and Ethiopia.

Those fleeing faced multiple challenges and restrictions on their access to safe and legal routes. As embassies evacuated their diplomatic staff out of the country at the start of the conflict, several reportedly left passports of Sudanese [locked](#) in their premises or [shredded](#) without offering alternatives, hampering people's ability to flee.

In June, Egyptian authorities required all Sudanese to obtain visas to enter the country, [resulting](#) in reduced access to safety for women, children, and older people fleeing.

Prior to the conflict, Sudan hosted more than [1.1 million refugees](#) and asylum seekers during 2021, mostly South Sudanese.

## Key International Actors

Despite the gravity of the situation in Sudan, the regional and international response has been underwhelming. To date, the UN Security Council has failed to take any concrete steps to address the conflict or constrain the ability of warring parties to continue inflicting harm on civilians.

On April 15, the UN secretary-general [condemned](#) the violence, voicing concerns about the devastating impact of the conflict on the population, and called for immediate cessation of hostilities. The UN Security Council held its [session](#) on the situation in Sudan 10 days later.

In response to the outbreak of the conflict, the United States and Saudi Arabia embarked on a process in Jeddah, primarily aiming at facilitating ceasefires and humanitarian access.



international humanitarian law.

On May 11, the UN Human Rights Council [held](#) a special session to address the conflict in Sudan, deciding to [strengthen the existing mandate](#) of the designated expert of the high commissioner on human rights in Sudan. This move fell short of the demands of Sudanese, regional, and international rights groups that had [called](#) on the council to establish a new independent mechanism. Five months later, however, given the further spiraling of the situation and in response to [further appeals from Sudanese, regional, and international rights groups](#), on October 11, the UN Human Rights Council followed up with more robust action, adopting a [resolution](#) to establish an independent international fact-finding mission for Sudan. This mission has a mandate to investigate crimes committed by all parties in the context of the conflict, gather and preserve evidence and identify those responsible for abuses, and make recommendations on advancing accountability.

On September 12, the UN [High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) and his designated expert on Sudan both [reiterated](#) concerns about ongoing widespread violations in the country, including ethnic-based violence, targeted killings, torture, and acts of sexual violence, and emphasized the [importance of holding perpetrators accountable](#).

In June, the US [sanctioned](#) three private Sudanese companies and one private Emirati company. About a month later, the United Kingdom applied similar sanctions on business entities affiliated with the SAF and RSF. In September, the US Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Abelrahim Hamdan Dagalo, a senior leader in the RSF and brother of the RSF's leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Additionally, the US State Department imposed [visa restrictions](#) on Abdul Rahman Juma, an RSF commander in West Darfur state. The latest sanctions were the first time that individual sanctions were imposed during the current conflict.

In July, the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs, Josep Borrell, condemned violations of international human rights and humanitarian law and called for those responsible to be held accountable. In February, the [EU imposed targeted measures](#) under its human rights [sanctions](#) framework against entities identified as linked to the Wagner Group in Sudan and their leaderships. The EU rolled out its new sanctions [framework](#) in [October](#), but it has not designated any individuals or entities in connection to the conflict at time of writing.

On June 2, the UN Security Council unanimously [voted](#) for a technical rollover of the mandate of the UN political mission in Sudan, UNITAMS, until December 3. Shortly after, Sudan's foreign ministry [declared](#) the head of UNITAMS, Volker Perthes, *persona non grata*. Perthes [announced his resignation](#) during a briefing to the Security Council on

[DONATE NOW](#)

as a conflict between two military formations could be morphing into a full-scale civil war.”

At its July meeting, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) quartet (Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and South Sudan) condemned violations by the warring parties while committing to work with the international community to establish a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism that will be instrumental in bringing perpetrators to justice. The meeting also considered deploying regional peacekeeping forces to protect civilians and guarantee humanitarian access.

## Browse Countries

Choose

---

## Keynote



DONATE NOW



## The Human Rights System Is Under Threat: A Call to Action



**Tirana Hassan**  
Executive Director

### Protecting Rights, Saving Lives

Human Rights Watch defends the rights of people in close to 100 countries worldwide, spotlighting abuses and bringing perpetrators to justice

**DONATE NOW**



### Get Daily Updates On Rights Issues Worldwide

Enter an email address    Sign Up

### Connect With Us



[DONATE NOW](#)

---

© 2024 Human Rights Watch

---

**Human Rights Watch** | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700

**Human Rights Watch** is a 501(C)(3) nonprofit registered in the US under EIN: 13-2875808