

SUDAN: UNDERSTANDING THE WAR AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The war in brief

Since April 2023, Sudan has been engulfed in a devastating war between the **Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF)** and the **Rapid Support Forces (RSF)**, a powerful paramilitary force.

The conflict has devastated cities, displaced millions, destroyed healthcare and education systems, and created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises.

Sudan has a population of approximately 40–50 million people, with a very young population — the median age is around 24.

How did the war begin?

In 2019, a popular revolution brought an end to the 30-year rule of Omar al-Bashir.

A transitional arrangement was established with the stated objective of eventually moving Sudan towards civilian government. One of the major unresolved issues was the relationship between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces.

The RSF was expected to eventually be integrated into the national army under the principle of “**one nation, one army.**”

Disagreements over the timeline for integration became increasingly serious. Proposals reportedly moved from approximately two years, to five years and eventually to ten years.

On **15 April 2023**, fighting erupted between the SAF and RSF across Khartoum and other parts of Sudan.

The conflict rapidly spread beyond the capital.

Who are the Rapid Support Forces?

The RSF developed from the Janjaweed militias that were active in Darfur.

Its leader, **Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo — known as Hemedti** — rose to prominence under the Bashir government. Bashir reportedly described the RSF as a force providing personal protection.

The RSF has developed a significant tribal base in Darfur, with senior leadership drawn particularly from several Arab-identifying tribes.

The Sudanese Armed Forces, by contrast, have historically drawn personnel from across Sudan's different communities.

The conflict should not simply be reduced to an "Arab versus African" war. Darfur contains a complex mixture of ethnic, tribal and linguistic identities, and both sides have supporters from different communities.

However, ethnic identity has played a significant role in some of the atrocities committed during the conflict.

Darfur and the atrocities in El Fasher

Darfur has once again become one of the worst-affected regions of Sudan.

The city of **El Fasher**, the capital of North Darfur, endured a prolonged RSF siege before the RSF captured the city in October 2025.

UN investigators documented thousands of killings during the final offensive, alongside executions, sexual violence, torture, abductions, starvation and attacks against civilians based on ethnicity or perceived affiliation. The UN has said some of these acts may constitute crimes against humanity. ([United Nations Sudan](#))

According to activists, the scale of the killings in and around El Fasher was substantially higher than the figures initially documented internationally, with estimates reaching tens of thousands of deaths.

According to activists, El Fasher's siege lasted longer than the famous siege of Stalingrad, and as many as **60,000 people may have been killed** during the fighting and subsequent massacres.

These higher figures remain contested and should be understood as activist estimates rather than independently verified totals.

Ethnic violence

The conflict has increasingly taken on an ethnic dimension, particularly in Darfur.

According to activists, RSF forces and allied militias have targeted communities including the **Zaghawa, Fur and Masalit**, among others.

The UN has independently documented attacks in which civilians were targeted based on ethnicity or perceived affiliation with the Sudanese Armed Forces. ([United Nations Sudan](#))

Reports include:

- Mass killings
 - Summary executions
 - Sexual violence
 - Abductions
 - Torture
 - Forced displacement
 - Looting
 - Starvation
 - The recruitment and use of children
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Foreign involvement

Sudan's war is not solely an internal conflict.

Foreign weapons, money, fighters, military technology and logistical networks have contributed to the continuation of the war. A 2026 UN investigation reported extensive external support networks involving weapons, fighters, drone operators, technicians and military specialists. ([Investing.com](#))

UAE support for the RSF

According to activists and multiple investigations, the **United Arab Emirates has played a significant role in supporting the RSF.**

Investigations have identified extensive UAE-linked flights to **Amdjarass in eastern Chad**, which has been alleged to be a major supply route for the RSF.

The UAE has denied supplying weapons to the RSF and says its flights to Chad have been carrying humanitarian assistance.

Reuters previously documented dozens of UAE-linked cargo flights to Amdjarass and reported that UN experts had raised credible allegations that the route was being used to supply the RSF. ([Yahoo](#))

According to activists, additional support has reached the RSF through Libya and forces associated with **Khalifa Haftar**, as well as other regional networks.

Why would external powers be interested in Sudan?

Sudan possesses significant strategic and economic resources, including:

- Gold
- Agricultural land
- Livestock
- Potential mineral resources
- Access to the Red Sea
- Major geographical importance between Africa and the Middle East

According to activists, control over Sudan's gold and other resources is a major factor behind foreign involvement.

Sudan's Red Sea coastline also gives it major strategic importance.

Its position connects the Horn of Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, North Africa and the wider Middle East.

Israel and the RSF

Israel's relationship with Sudan has existed for several years and developed significantly after Sudan began moving towards normalisation with Israel following the fall of Bashir.

There have also been contacts between Israeli officials and figures connected to the RSF.

Recent reporting citing the investigative outlet **Africa Intelligence** states that senior RSF figures travelled to Israel during the war, including delegations in 2025 and 2026, and met officials from Israel's Foreign Ministry Africa Division and Israeli intelligence personnel. The reported relationship is said to pre-date the current war. ([The Jerusalem Post](#))

According to activists, Israeli military and intelligence specialists have also provided advice, technical assistance or other forms of support to RSF-linked networks.

These claims of direct Israeli military assistance to the RSF have not been independently established to the same standard as the documented contacts between RSF figures and Israeli officials.

According to activists, Israel's interest in Sudan is connected to the country's strategic position on the **Red Sea**, its proximity to Egypt and the Horn of Africa, and the wider regional competition for influence.

The wider regional struggle

Sudan has increasingly become part of a much wider regional struggle involving the Gulf, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea and the Middle East.

According to activists, the same regional networks involved in Sudan have also been involved in conflicts and political projects in places such as:

- Yemen
- Libya
- Somaliland
- Chad
- The wider Horn of Africa

The war therefore has consequences far beyond Sudan's borders.

Foreign fighters

Sudanese civilians have reported encountering fighters who are not Sudanese.

According to activists, RSF ranks have included fighters and mercenaries from countries including **Chad, Niger, Libya and Colombia**, alongside other foreign nationals.

The presence of Colombian mercenaries has also received international attention, with Colombia's president publicly addressing the recruitment of Colombian nationals to fight in Sudan.

The UN has independently reported the presence of foreign fighters and military specialists supporting the conflict. ([APA News](#))

The humanitarian catastrophe

The human cost of the war is enormous.

Millions of Sudanese people have been forced from their homes.

Estimates cited in the briefing include approximately:

- **18 million internally displaced people**
- Millions of refugees in neighbouring countries
- Millions of children unable to attend school

- Tens of thousands of documented deaths, with much higher estimates from activists
- Widespread food insecurity and hunger
- Extensive destruction of homes and infrastructure

Current international estimates are also likely to significantly underestimate the true death toll because many areas remain inaccessible and deaths are not consistently recorded.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence has been one of the most devastating features of the conflict.

Women and girls have reported rape, sexual assault, sexual slavery and other forms of abuse.

According to activists, the majority of documented sexual violence cases have been attributed to RSF fighters, with estimates cited in the briefing ranging from approximately **69% to 79%**.

Victims reportedly range from very young children to elderly women.

The UN has independently documented widespread sexual violence, including rape and sexual slavery, particularly in areas affected by RSF operations. ([United Nations Sudan](#))

The collapse of healthcare

Sudan's healthcare system has been devastated.

Hospitals have been:

- Attacked
- Damaged or destroyed
- Occupied by armed groups
- Used for military purposes
- Forced to close because of a lack of staff, medicine and electricity

Medical workers have themselves been targeted or displaced.

The destruction of healthcare infrastructure has meant that people are dying not only from war injuries, but also from conditions that would normally be treatable.

Education

Millions of Sudanese children have been pushed out of education.

Schools have been destroyed, occupied or converted into shelters for displaced people.

A generation of Sudanese children risks losing years of education because of the conflict.

The consequences will continue long after the fighting ends.

Why is Sudan receiving so little attention?

Despite the scale of the crisis, Sudan has received considerably less international media attention and humanitarian funding than several other major conflicts.

According to activists, this lack of attention has allowed the suffering of Sudanese civilians to become one of the world's most overlooked humanitarian emergencies.

The humanitarian response remains severely underfunded.

Greater international attention is needed not only to provide immediate assistance, but also to pressure those supplying weapons, money and logistical support to the warring parties.

Sudan and Palestine

Sudanese activists have frequently drawn parallels between the suffering of Sudanese civilians and the experience of Palestinians.

Both conflicts have involved mass displacement, attacks on civilian infrastructure, destruction of homes and widespread allegations of war crimes.

According to activists, the RSF has at times used language portraying the Sudanese Armed Forces as an Islamist or "terrorist" organisation comparable to Hamas.

According to activists, RSF representatives have also made statements through Israeli media describing the Sudanese army in these terms and presenting their fight against it as part of a wider struggle against Islamist forces.

The comparison between Sudan and Palestine is political and contested, but activists argue that both crises demonstrate the devastating consequences of armed conflict, displacement and international involvement.

Hope amid devastation

Despite the destruction, large areas of Sudan have changed hands during the course of the war.

The Sudanese Armed Forces and allied forces have retaken significant territory from the RSF, including areas of Khartoum and parts of Kordofan.

According to activists, government forces have now regained approximately **70% of the territory previously controlled by the RSF**, including **North Kordofan**.

The humanitarian situation nevertheless remains extremely serious in areas affected by fighting.

There have also been significant movements of displaced Sudanese people returning to areas that have become more secure.

According to figures cited in the briefing, approximately **5 million people have returned to Sudan** from displacement or neighbouring countries following territorial changes.

What can we do?

Sudan needs greater humanitarian attention.

People can help by:

- Supporting reputable humanitarian organisations working inside Sudan and neighbouring countries
- Raising awareness of the crisis
- Supporting Sudanese-led humanitarian initiatives
- Advocating for greater humanitarian funding
- Challenging the lack of international attention given to Sudan
- Calling for an end to the supply of weapons and military support that prolongs attacks on civilians

The Sudanese people should not have to suffer in silence simply because their crisis receives less media attention.

Sudan needs to be seen.Sudan needs to be heard.And Sudan needs humanitarian support.