

Conflict Dynamics in South Darfur

December 18, 2023

South Darfur has been the site of significant violence since the start of the April 15 war. Nyala fell to the Rapid Support Forces on October 26, 2023. The city had eight military bases which makes it the site of the largest military capacity outside Khartoum. Fighting in Nyala in the run up to the city's fall reportedly resulted in at least 130 civilian



Entrance to army headquarters in Nyala (Sudan Tribune)

deaths and the displacement of more than 670,000 people.¹ Following the fall of Nyala, the RSF has continued to advance across Darfur, taking important sites in Zalingei and attacking El Fasher and Wad Medani.

Citing increasing attacks on civilians in Darfur, including the killing of between 800 and 2,000 in Ardamata in West Darfur,² the Finance Minister Gibril Ibrahim of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and Darfur Regional Governor Minni Minnawi of the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) announced on November 16 that they were renouncing their policy of neutrality and committing to fight the RSF in Darfur.³

In addition, in mid-October, conflict broke out between the Habaniya and Salamat people, both pastoralist groups that self-identify as Arab and have long been at the core of both Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) recruitment and benefitted from Bashir era policies that supported the arming of these groups. The Salamat, however, do not control a traditional *dar*, or homeland, in Darfur. Fighting between Arab groups with a *dar* and those without has recurred in waves in Darfur since the 1970s, deliberately fueled, at times, by the Bashir regime. The conflict caused thousands of casualties and displaced tens of thousands.

The region, therefore, stands both traumatized by recent violence and facing an increasingly fractured, and intensifying violence. In this context, this paper is intended to offer some perspectives on the ongoing conflict from the perspective of people fleeing from South Darfur.

¹ ACLED, "ACLED Regional Overview Africa: October 2023," November 8, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/acled-regional-overview-africa-october-2023>

² Mohammed Amin, "Sudan: 'At least 1,300' killed in new massacre in West Darfur's el-Geneina," *Middle East Eye*, November 12, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-west-darfur-ardamata-new-massacre>

³ Sudan Tribune, "Key Darfur groups join Sudanese army in its war against RSF paramilitary forces," November 16, 2023, <https://sudantribune.com/article279446/>

Based on 25 interviews with individuals who had recently fled from South Darfur, it offers local perspectives on the motivations for the violence, the actors involved, and the potential implications for the war in Darfur.

Background

South Darfur is the second most populated state in Sudan after Khartoum with population of four million,⁴ and covers 81,000 square kilometers.⁵ It has borders with South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Chad. Nyala, its capital, is the second most populated town in Sudan, accommodating a diverse population, including merchants from northern Sudan who settled there and became part of the city's social fabric, Zaghawa and Tama, indigenous Fur and Dago and various Arab groups. The Zaghawa and Tama dominate business. Indigenous Fur and Dago dominate the modest farming sector, and the Arab groups are diverse including the Beni Halba, Taisha, Habaniya and Falata, Salamat, and Turgem. Some of these groups have roots in West Africa, although the Habaniya have roots in Sudan's White Nile State. Many of the Arab groups are pastoralists, but others are predominantly farmers. South Darfur lays in the savanna belt, with a semidesert climate, but includes fertile lands with sufficient rainfall to sustain agriculture. It also contains significant gold deposits, particularly in the Songo area, whose gold resources have, over the past six or seven years, become an increasing source of revenue in the state.

The Arab tribes of the region have long been targeted for recruitment into armed groups. Arab herding tribes such as the Baggara, have formed the bulk of the junior ranks and foot soldiers in the army since before Sudan's independence. Over time, however, the army's infantry functions were largely handed over to the RSF, which came under the increasing control of the Dagalo family. Arabs were also the core of the notorious *Janjaweed* militias that perpetrated much of the violence in the Darfur violence of the early 2000s and also in the RSF since its official establishment of the militia in 2013. They have been deployed to fight rebel groups in Darfur and South Kordofan as well as in Yemen.

The conflict in South Darfur

Fighting between the RSF and the SAF broke out in South Darfur at around 4 pm on Saturday April 15, just a few hours after the war began in Khartoum. As in Khartoum, each party accuses the other of starting the conflict, which escalated as a direct result of breakdown in the central military command system. The belligerents began shelling one another on April 15 and continued to do so over the next two weeks. Both heavy and light weapons were used in residential areas of Nyala, which housed military installations for both sides.

After several nationally announced ceasefires collapsed in the first few weeks, a local initiative in May led by tribal notables, the chamber of commerce, and civil society organizations, including lawyers and teachers, negotiated a ceasefire, dividing Nyala in two. The army

⁴ OCHA Sudan, "South Darfur State Profile," March 29, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/ocha-sudan-south-darfur-state-profile-march-2023>

⁵ UNICEF, "State Profile: South Darfur," undated, <https://www.unicef.org/sudan/media/8781/file/South%20Darfur.pdf>

remained in the west and the RSF maintained a corridor heading from north to south of the city, with the two sides maintaining indirect communications. This tense ceasefire lasted for about a month, until the SAF accused the RSF of breaching the agreement by sending both foot soldiers and motorbikes westwards into SAF territory and looting the town's main market and banks. The army responded and heavy shelling using all types of weapons began, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties. At the same time, looting continued, targeting banks, government offices, companies, organizations and market shops.

Many residents of northern part of the city moved to the south seeking safety and protection, and the majority of Nyala residents left the state capital heading for central areas of Sudan less affected by the war, many were robbed or tortured on the way.

Methodology

This paper is based on the views of persons who fled the war in South Darfur to less affected areas of Sudan such as Wad Madani, Al Gedaref, and Kassala. 25 such individuals, each of which had fled in family units of seven to ten, were interviewed. Respondents were asked to express their views on the ongoing war and their opinions about possible solutions. These represent important insight into the conflict and how it is being perceived by those that it is directly affecting.

However, it is important to recognize that this methodology has important limitations. It offers the views of those caught up in conflict and their assessments about the situation. These individuals have been exposed to traumatic experiences and propaganda, and this may have skewed their views. They may be mistaken or deliberately skewing realities. Nonetheless, understanding their perspectives is a critical piece of understanding the conflict and to formulating solutions.

Second, it is important to remember that this research represents the views of only a portion of those affected by the conflict. Due to time and logistical constraints, only 25 respondents could be interviewed. All were originally from South Darfur and had fled to eastern Sudan. Because fleeing, especially over such long distances, requires considerable resources, the interviewees are probably wealthier on average than those who have been displaced within Darfur itself. An indication of this was the fact that the majority of interviewees were university graduates. We were unable to interview those who remained behind in Darfur due to ongoing insecurity and disruptions in the communications network. In addition, we were unable to identify respondents originally from elsewhere in Sudan, but who had lived in Nyala for long periods and were also forced to flee. Although this group only constitutes about 5% of the population, they have significant economic and cultural influence, and thus their view would be worth considering in later research.

Seizure of payments from passengers on buses or private vehicles appears to have become a main source of income for the fighting forces, principally the RSF. The informants reported being stopped at more than 70 illegal "toll gates" in the 195 kilometers between Nyala and El Fasher. They had to pay a thousand pounds at each gate, provided that the driver of the car was Arab, otherwise, the RSF fighters manning the toll gates robbed the passengers of their phones and all their cash. Passengers who travelled through El Daein reported encountering no problem up to that point, after which they were subjected to harassment and beatings at toll

gates if they failed to pay the RSF. Those who rented private vehicles reported paying between \$1,200 and \$1,500 for the rentals. When they arrived in their current locations, they found rents for the few houses were also very high, ranging between \$1,000 and \$1,500 per month for a two- or three-bedroom house. Therefore, most of them are living now in school classrooms, while others have left their families in the villages in the suburbs of Kosti, Sennar, Madani, Gadaref and Kassala, and come to the cities searching for work opportunities, although none had yet been successful at the time of the interviews.

To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, we did not record their names. Most, however, were happy to have the chance to reflect on and share the difficulties that they faced. Interviews were conducted on the basis of an interview map which allowed respondents flexibility in expressing their views but centered around five key questions:

- Conflict Drivers: Why is the war so fierce in South Darfur?
- Spoilers and Stakeholders: Who are the participants in this war?
- Triggers: What triggered the war in South Darfur?
- Resources: Where do the resources to sustain the war come from?
- Peace Prospects: How do you see the solution from your point of view?

Drivers of conflict

A number of drivers of conflict were cited by the respondents in this research. Many focused on the region's rich natural resources and infrastructure and the potential that this offers to the belligerents. Building on this, many talked about the desire of the RSF to create a state or homeland of their own centered in the region. Other factors cited included the availability of weapons, the lack of alternative livelihoods and the political opening provided by relatively sympathetic civilian leaders in the run up to the war.

South Darfur's resources

Violence in South Darfur has been particularly intense. In considering what has driven this particularly virulent conflict, most of those interviewed referred to factors that make South Darfur a particularly important prize for the belligerents.

South Darfur receives sufficient rainfall to support both farming and grazing, including production of rare and valuable crops. The region also, as noted above, contains significant gold deposits, capable of generating significant resources. The region, respondents argued, also has a relatively developed infrastructure in terms of a railway and airports that are capable of linking it to the rest of the world.

It is noteworthy that the RSF second in command Lt.-Gen. Abdel-Rahim Dagalo is the owner of Al Junaid Company for the Treatment of Mineral Waste, a subsidiary of Al Junaid Company for Multi Activities, which since 2017 has been the sole operator of a gold tailings processing factory in Songo area. RSF soldiers guard the facility and routinely coerce thousands of artisanal miners operating in the area to sell their "karta," or tailings, the byproduct resulting

from their rudimentary treatment of the ore that extracts only a third of its potential content in gold, to the facility.⁶ Greater control of South Darfur's rich resources is a major motivation of the clans that dominate the RSF command structure. During the close partnership between the SAF and RSF, the Bashir government also contracted another subsidiary of the holding company, Al Junaid for Roads and Bridges, to build roads in the area.⁷

Another compelling resource is the region's location. South Darfur has long and poorly controlled borders with Chad and the Central Africa Republic through which cross border trade can flow and through which they can receive supplies of weapons and ammunition. During the Bashir regime, the RSF imposed its military dominance on the southern fringes of South Darfur, an area rich in minerals that borders the Central African Republic and South Sudan. As noted above, RSF commanders developed a lucrative gold production and trading business in Songo, and used their forces to repress local miners and acquire tailings of local miners by force. Shortly after the establishment of the civilian-led transitional government, a government official complained that government geologists had to obtain a special authorization from the RSF commander Hemeti in order to enter the "copper pit", an area rich in copper deposits on the border with South Sudan.⁸

According to media reports, the RSF developed business and military connections with Wagner Group units deployed in northeastern CAR and defending the Bangui government against armed movements seeking to topple it. Wagner Group's trucks routinely crossed into al Radom, headquarters of the locality. After the war, the small, isolated SAF units in the area, including the one in Songo, crossed into South Sudan without a fight and handed their weapons to South Sudanese army.⁹ Building on this legacy, respondents also reported that RSF controls well equipped military garrisons across the region.

Both sides are likely interested as well in controlling the region's natural resources and infrastructure for cross border and internal trade. In addition, South Darfur had a strong army base with lot of weapons and ammunition, making it a key prize.

War as a livelihood

Some respondents focused on the lack of other livelihoods and the role of the RSF and the SAF in providing this for otherwise wayward youth. Some respondents recognized that Arab Darfuri youth have few opportunities. The traditional nomadism that sustained their grandparents no longer appears viable. Most, respondents argued, desire to settle instead of constantly traveling with cows and camels looking for grazing areas. However, they "don't

⁶ Alraya News, "Protest in Nyala against Aljunaid Company," October 17, 2022, in Arabic, available at: <https://alrayanews.net/21646>

⁷ Alintibaha, "Protests against the injuring of 17 persons by regular forces in al-Radom mines," February 16, 2023, in Arabic, available at: <https://alintibaha.net/online/151665/>

⁸ Kush news website, "Ministry of Minerals: entering of geologists to the copper pit is conditional on Hemeti's agreement," September 17, 2019, in arabic, at: <https://kushnews.net/2019/09/188981>

⁹ Alrakoba, "The gold mines, another more violent war between the SAF and the RSF," October 13, 2023, in Arabic, (reported on the Darfur 24 news website, available at: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31858475/مناجم-الذهب-حرب-أخرى-أغف-بين-الجيش-الس/>)

believe in farming” and there are few other options. High levels of unemployment among this population makes them susceptible to recruitment.

Against the backdrop of this despair, fighting, and fighting with the RSF in particular, had produced conspicuous wealth for some. Those who fought with the RSF in Yemen returned home with a lot of money, unsurprisingly creating an air of allure of opportunity around the RSF. This reinforced a lesson for Sudanese, that weapons are the path to success. Not only did these fighters have material advantage, respondents reflected, they also enjoyed social success. These fighters communities expressed pride in their behavior as long as it brought in money, and encourages it with feasts and poetry, strengthening the allure of the fighting force. The SAF, on the other hand, might have projected a similar allure, but “the army was neglected despite its huge budget allocation.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, however, respondents also argued that the reliance on fighting as a livelihood also encouraged its continuation. The decrease in fighting in Yemen meant that many RSF fighters came home with skills in fighting and nothing else and questions about how to sustain themselves.

These resource dynamics have only intensified in the context of the war. Respondents reported that those who mobilize have received good money from the RSF even before entering the war, and they have been promised greater payment for military successes. Formal payments have been supplemented by organized and large-scale looting for profit. Respondents reported that the RSF has expelled many homeowners from their homes, in some cases allowing the owners to return in exchange for a payment, or else forcing the owners to sign over legal ownership for a fraction of their worth.¹¹ They have also engaged in kidnapping of wealthy persons or their relatives for ransom. Even foreigners have paid ransoms. The SRF zonal commanders are also known to exact hefty payments from businessmen who want to move stored goods from fighting areas to safer locations. The RSF treats income from such actions as legitimate.

Creating a homeland

Beyond immediate material gain, most respondents saw the RSF as motivated by a desire to create a state or a homeland. Some argued that the RSF already considers South Darfur as a homeland. It represents the family home of their leaders and most of their members, both those who were recruited as RSF and those who were originally part of the SAF and who later defected to the RSF. Respondents reported that most of the RSF’s leadership are from South Darfur, including Hemedti who has claimed on several occasions that his home is in the state. He has built a modern village for his tribesmen at Umalgora about 30 km north of Nyala city. Former President Omar Al Bashir attended the inauguration of the village in 2017.¹²

¹⁰ Interview with displaced woman, Wad Medani, October 2023.

¹¹ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023 and interview with displaced man, Gedaref, October 2023.

¹² Interview with displaced man, Wad Medani, October 2023.

This hasn't always been the case. The pastoralist, camel-herding Abala of North Darfur didn't have roots in South Darfur until recent years. Areas of their traditional settlements and pastoralist activities were in the northern parts of North Darfur. Under pressure from the deteriorating environment and the rapid pace of desertification of the pasture lands for their camels, they began migrating south for better grazing lands. Culturally they are "as tough as the desert where they came from," one respondent noted. Hemeti's family is reportedly among those who moved in this way.

The Abala Arabs represented a majority of the recruits during the first phase of the war in Darfur that began in 2003. To entice them to join the Janjaweed, the Bashir regime promised the different smaller clans of the Abala that they would be rewarded with traditional "homeland" entitlements and chieftain titles. The cattle herding Baggara Arabs, who remain dominant in South Darfur, had their own tribal lands, or dars, and didn't feel the urge to fight their neighbors, the *Zurga*, or the "Blacks," as the Bashir government told them to do in 2003 and remained largely indifferent to the call to arms. By the start of the 2023 war, however, the South Darfur Baggara had grown into one of the the main components of RSF. The change began around 2015 with the possibility of deployment for six months to fight in Yemen with the RSF. Foot soldiers who survived the experience had their regular salaries in Sudan going to their families in Darfur, were paid a decent salary in foreign currency during the deployment and were to collect a one-time payment ranging from 5 to 7 million Sudanese pounds (equivalent at the time to US\$15,000 to US\$20,000). Those wounded in combat had their treatment expenses covered by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Families of RSF soldiers killed in combat received *diyya* (blood money), but at the rates practiced in Saudi Arabia.¹³ For young, unemployed youth, these seemed attractive terms. The Arabs of Darfur represented most of the infantry in the Sudanese army before independence, but they were in the junior ranks due to their lack of education. Higher pay drew them to the RSF like a magnet.

South Darfur is also home to the largest number of Arabs in the Darfur states. The migration of Arab camel herding tribes from north to south has created tension with settled farmers in the region, who have traditionally controlled the majority of land in the state and increased the concentration of Arab tribes there. Although respondents acknowledged that they were not the majority there, the fact that this was the home base of the largest part of its constituency, they argued, made it particularly important for the RSF to secure this base, which is particularly important to their constituency and in which they are likely to be particularly strong. Some argue that they are encouraging other Arabs to immigrate from other areas, in particular West Africa, to reinforce their demographic supremacy in the region.

Having found a foothold in South Darfur, enabled in part by the weakness of national state institutions, the RSF has pressured the central government to accept them constitutionally and legally, expanding their presence. Although the RSF articulates other political objectives, most respondents saw this as merely cover for the imposition of a new reality in South Darfur, one which acknowledges control over it by Arab tribes.

Some respondents speculated that this demographic maneuvering, reinforced by the large scale forced displacement of non-Arab people, could allow the RSF to gain political recognition

¹³ The New York Times, "On the Front Line of the Saudi War in Yemen: Child Soldiers From Darfur," 28 December 2018, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/world/africa/saudi-sudan-yemen-child-fighters.html>

of this homeland. In the words of one respondent, “People from other parts of Sudan, especially northerners, might accept that after what they have seen over the years and particularly after his war has driven them from their homes in Khartoum.”¹⁴ The implication seems to be that in the face of their *de facto* control over the region, weary Sudanese might be willing to offer political recognition for peace. Similarly, they speculated that RSF offers of trade and natural resources to the West and other members of the international community could be used to extract similar recognition. Respondents also argued that influential African States could support the acceptance of an Arab homeland in South Darfur as a magnet for Arab tribes in other countries in the region, relieving some what those countries see as their own demographic problems. They believe that some African and Arab states are pushing the international community and African Union to support such an initiative. Pointing out the potential viability of this new hypothetical state, one displaced man said, “The market of South Darfur is bigger than that of the capitals of neighboring Chad and Central Africa, so if the RSF capture South Darfur, they will constitute their dream country.”¹⁵

Claims that the tribes are trying to create a state were also cited by the Darfur rebel movements as part of the basis of their decision to fight the RSF. This claim has been characterized by analysts as unfounded, pointing out that similar accusations of seeking to create a Greater Zaghawa state were leveled against the rebel movements by the former Bashir regime. Regardless of whether it correctly corresponds to the RSF’s actual objectives, it appears to be widely believed by the displaced.

Political openings

Another factor that our respondents presented as playing a role in the outbreak of the conflict was the relatively welcoming stance of political leaders towards the RSF in the days leading up to the start of the war.

Although they were seen to have quite different political goals, respondents saw political actors as willing to accept the RSF, including the suffering that they have imposed on the Sudanese people, as the price of ruling. Respondents, however, predicted that the RSF and political parties would eventually clash and that the RSF would prevail.

Of course, given their brutal behavior in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan, populations generally reject rule by the RSF. If they were able to prevail militarily, the RSF would face a huge challenge in governing, given the depth of hostility of the population towards them. Darfuris interviewed for this research, however, seemed to think that the RSF saw this problem as manageable. In the words of one, “The RSF believes that there is an opportunity for their leader to become the president of Sudan.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023.

¹⁵ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023.

¹⁶ Interview with displaced woman, Kassala, October 2023.

At a minimum, respondents were clear that by consolidating their position in Darfur, the RSF seeks to strengthen its negotiating position as negotiations resumed in Jeddah and also any other, future negotiations.¹⁷

Tribal dynamics

Tribal dynamics are playing an increasingly important role in the conflict. The maintenance of tribal alliances appears to be at the core of the RSF's strategy for maintaining control of the region. As noted above, Arab Darfuris constitute both the core of fighters in the SAF and in the RSF. Respondents reflected that because of this there are many cases in which you may find two brothers fighting on either side of the conflict. Since April 15, however, new groups have reportedly been mobilized to fight with the RSF, among them youth from the Turjum, Miseria and Salamat tribes. Many Rizeigat came from East Darfur to Nyala to fight with RSF in the recent offensive.

In July 2023, Baggara tribal leaders declared allegiance to the RSF. This declaration was contrasted with efforts early in the war by some tribal/traditional leaders who tried to calm tensions. As the war progressed, respondents argued, these leaders found themselves under increasing pressures to take sides. Those who refused to do so faced repercussions from the RSF in particular, from the withdrawal of previous benefits to outright attack. Respondents cited examples such as the RSF confiscating the vehicle of the nazir of the Beni Halba and holding his driver for a few days before his release could be negotiated.¹⁸ Another respondent reported that the nazir's brother had been killed.¹⁹ Another example of these threats were the intentional looting of the house of the nazir of Habaniya tribe in Nyala. In another incident, Salamat tribesmen burned two Beni Halba villages after fighting between the two Arab groups. In the words of one respondent, "The local community leaders have declared support for the RSF to protect their communities from attacks and destruction and to preserve their property."²⁰

Some have presented these attacks as a sign of the lack of command and control in the RSF,²¹ but South Darfurians interviewed for this paper tended to view these acts a warnings to Baggara tribal leaders that their villages would be attacked if their support for the RSF was not publicly declared.

In addition, tribal identity has been the basis for a round of very serious attacks in Darfur over the past few months. As tribal identities are being used by the RSF to mobilize attacks against various groups, especially non-Arabs, the displaced also voiced tribally based understandings of the RSF and its allies, which included problematic, and at times even racist, generalizations of the groups that form, or are seen to form, their key constituency. These are discussed here with a view to increasing understanding of the dynamics of the current conflict, not as an

¹⁷ Interview with displaced man, Gedared, October 2023.

¹⁸ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023.

¹⁹ Interview with displaced woman, Kassala, October 2023.

²⁰ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023.

²¹ Bakry Eljak, "The Unthinkable Inferno is Yet to Come: Sudan's Expanding War," Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker, August 2023.

endorsement of these views. Some respondents attributed the ferocity of the conflict to an inherently violent nature in RSF members, who they described as illiterate, ignorant, immoral and without faith. Much of this seemed to be seen as inherent characteristics of their ethnic groups. For example, one displaced young person said, “The violent nature of RSF members as well as most Arab tribes in Darfur, even wars between them is constant, so they enjoy chaos and killing people or at least humiliating others to feel proud of themselves, they kill for fun.”²² Some of these characteristics, like the violence, could be attributed to the harsh environments within which these groups operate. The impressions of the group as illiterate and ignorant could be related to the lack of education that predominates in those groups.

In addition, respondents reported that members of the Arab Rizeigat, Mahamid and Mahriya tribes have been incentivized with money to come from West African countries in large numbers and fully equipped to fight with RSF in both South Darfur and Khartoum. Ethnic stereotypes were extended to groups from West Africa on described on an ethnic basis as fierce, aggressive, barbaric, excessively cruel and fearless. They were said to be clearly distinguished from Sudanese by both their appearance and behavior (it was not clear how this was compared with the criticized behavior of Arab Darfuri groups).

Repondents believed that these West African groups were motivated by a desire to stay in South Darfur, which in their view is blessed with many sources of wealth. These fighters are said to ride on militarized motorcycles, have the latest weapons, and be familiar with the tactics of urban warfare. They have reportedly plundered government ministries, banks, companies and organizations for both their own personal benefit and that of the official RSF.

Although some comments appeared to essentialize the ethnic groups from which RSF fighters come, others attributed these characteristics to environmental factors. Some noted that most young RSF members lacked education, including religious education, which respondents argued inhibited their moral development. It is also possible that they see RSF training and internal pressures as playing a role.

Dysfunctional governance

Respondents also perceived the dysfunctional political system in Sudan as playing a role in the current violence. They explained that as state the weakened and state institutions stopped functioning during the Bashir era, people lost faith in the state playing a protective role and instead looked to their tribes for protection. One respondent commented that there was greater openness to other tribes among the older generation, who remembered a time before the Bashir era collapse than in the younger generations who could not. Respondents argued that along with this generational shift, tolerance and acceptance of the other, especially between Arab and African tribes in Darfur, dissolved.

Since the end of the Bashir era, however, the political system has hardly become more functional. Recognizing the unpopularity of the Bashir era Islamist regime, political actors have increasingly relied on spreading unfair accusations of membership in the Islamist movement to get rid of those with different opinions.

²² Interview with displaced student, Kassala, October 2023.

In addition to these dysfunctions, there is a continuous supply of weapons and ammunition coming across the borders, especially with Central Africa Republic. Respondents noted the availability of weapons and drugs in the markets of South Darfur at cheap prices and pointed out that the ease of acquiring weapons increases the likelihood that conflicts will escalate into violence.

Impunity

Another factor to which respondents attributed the level of violence in South Darfur was the impunity with which previous rounds of violations in Darfur have been treated. Since the outbreak of violence in 2003, there has been a failure to implement international resolutions or hold those responsible accountable. Serious international crimes committed at the time were referred by UN Security Council to the International Criminal Court. The court's arrest warrants against former President Omar Al Bashir, his Minister of Defense and State Minister of Interior at the time of the genocidal campaign in Darfur were never implemented. Respondents argued that had this been done, this war would not have broken out.

Over the past ten years since its formal foundation, RSF members have taken the lands of farmers by force, ambushed citizens, disrespected police and judicial forces and so on, without serious consequences. Similarly, there has been little effort to provide protection for civilians or to stop previous rounds of violence, which contributes to an atmosphere of impunity. RSF members who were involved in previous rounds of massacres and ethnic cleansing in El Geneina, West Darfur, in the transitional period were neither brought to justice nor even thoroughly denounced or condemned by the international community.

Respondents did not see this impunity as limited to Darfur. Several also cited the failure to punish, or even properly acknowledge, the massacre of the sit-in protesters in Khartoum in June 2019, despite clear evidence that the RSF was involved in perpetrating the massacre. Although the transitional prime minister, Hamdok, formed a national committee of inquiry to investigate the incident, the committee was forced to suspend its work in 2022 as a result of pressure from the post-coup government.²³ It never even issued a formal report.

Outside of Sudan, respondents pointed to the lack of response to the string of coups across the continent (including in both Sudan and in West Africa).

Funding sources for the current war

War is an expensive proposition, and respondents recognized that the parties needed significant financing to continue the fighting. They pointed to the following sources of financing of the current war:

- a- The proceeds of gold mining in the Songo area, which contains large deposits of gold. Al Junaid Company for the Treatment of Mineral Waste, which is owned by the RSF

²³ Radio Dabanga, "June 3 Massacre investigation committee forced to suspend its activities," May 20, 2022, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/june-3-massacre-investigation-committee-forced-to-suspend-its-activities>

commanders, operates the only tailings treatment factory operating in the area and has used its monopoly to pressure artisanal miners to sell the company their artisanally produced gold. This gold is primarily sold, respondents reported, to the United Arab Emirates and Russia.

- b- Proceeds that accrued to the RSF from their previous participation in the war in Yemen.
- c- Indirect logistical aid and capacity building in dual use technologies from the European Union in exchange for the RSF's role in stopping illegal immigration from Africa across the Sahara Desert.
- d- Some respondents also claimed that Western countries subsidized RSF with weapons to stimulate the weapons trade around the world, although the research found no independent evidence of this.

The RSF's proceeds from its participation in the war in Yemen, respondents argued, are used to buy weapons and ammunition, and pay salaries for RSF members, supporters and other elites, facilitated by the United Arab Emirates, whose support they saw as critical to the supply of the RSF. It was also reflected that the region's importance is, in part, due to its role in facilitating cross border trade, which is also a source of income sustaining the RSF.

The way forward

Whatever their reasons for wanting to control South Darfur, there is little indication that the RSF will be satisfied with just this prize. Their continued advances since taking Nyala across South and Central Darfur and attack on El Fasher and, more recently Wad Medani, are evidence of this. As the crisis persists, human suffering increases exponentially.

At the same time, respondents also reflected that the major powers in the international community are, at the moment, preoccupied with many wars and economic crises and are therefore not devoting sufficient time, attention or resources to supporting a resolution to the crisis in Sudan or protecting civilians.

When asked about their views about potential solutions to the conflict in South Darfur, respondents suggested the following:

- Notable leaders of Arab tribes in South Darfur should be engaged to mediate to stop the war and prevent attacks on civilians. Recognizing that a similar initiative was already undertaken in South Darfur and achieved only limited success, respondents suggested that such efforts should not be limited to tribal leaders, who are not seen as neutral by the SAF and rather should be pulled from other groups, such as Imams, university professors, lawyers, and civil society leaders who may be seen as more independent.
- Devoting more time to communication with the two sides.
- All respondents focused on the need to address the RSF, but in different ways. In the words of one, "The RSF must be stopped by any means."²⁴ Others argued that all RSF

²⁴ Interview with displaced man, Kassala, October 2023.

fighters should be expelled from the city, while non-Sudanese ones should be returned to their countries because their behaviors are not in line with Sudanese values. Others argued that the RSF as such should be disbanded, but that some fighters could be absorbed into military institutions.

- Some respondents argued for a religious solution, saying that only by returning to God and imposing sharia can progress be made. Of course, others are suspicious of a religious course, having been thoroughly disillusioned by the consequences of the three-decades of Islamist rule under Omar al-Bashir.
- Others insisted a long-term approach must be taken. This would mean spreading education and raising the culture of faith while accepting each other to live on the land in a way that can accommodate everyone. Therefore, they argued, major concessions must be made by the army now so that citizens can avoid the effects of the war and displacement which they blamed on the RSF.
- Some argued that there is a need for development in Darfur and the citizens of the state must benefit from the its resources through the implementation of effective and inclusive development projects such as road construction between localities and reconnecting the intentionally damaged railway to reconnect transport facilities to allow the products of the region access to markets inside and outside Sudan, with the establishment of factories such as cement for urban development, as in other states of Sudan. Some talked about the need to create cities in the desert for camel breeders and address pasture problems. Others talked about the need to ensure youth employment and ensuring that such projects are inclusive and don't only benefit a few lucky individuals, as they did during the Bashir era.
- Finally, a few suggested that the immediate solution lies in inviting some strong countries, such as Germany, Japan, and Turkey, to create a force to help restore security and order in Sudan for agreed upon period. Support should be requested by the government of Sudan to the relevant governments and not go through the UN. This security force would allow space for development projects in the less developed states of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile to proceed and build a stronger foundation for peace. The invited countries could also finance these projects and other costs by exploiting the natural resources of South Darfur and other states of Sudan. During this period, Sudanese would also be trained in various fields to later bear the management of the country after end of the period of joint rule.
- Some respondents highlighted the need to encourage engagement from women and youth in mediation processes in order to make them more effective.

Conclusion

The violence in South Darfur has taken a serious toll, and the regional and international response has been woefully insufficient. We hope that these insights into the views and the perspectives of the displaced will help to both motivate and inform more robust engagement and solutions.