

# The military, economic and humanitarian consequences of the RSF's control of Mellit, North Darfur



*Cover art by graphic artist Obada Gumaa Gabir*

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# Introduction

On April 14, 2024, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), engaged in conflict with the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) since April 15, 2023, seized control of Mellit, a town situated approximately 60 km from El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur. Mellit holds strategic significance as it sits at a pivotal junction linking El Fasher to Kufra in south-eastern Libya and Al-Dabbah in the SAF-held Northern State. This capture allows the RSF to exert *de facto* control over cross-border trade routes, particularly from Libya, crucial for smuggling resources like fuel and weapons vital for the conflict. In addition, the RSF's control over toll gates they set at security checkpoints along the trade routes enables them to levy illegal fees on incoming trucks transporting essential supplies such as food and medicine, escalating commodity prices across Darfur, and barring select goods from rural areas. This chokehold on resources is exacerbating the siege on El Fasher, amplifying its vulnerability.

These developments carry weighty consequences, not only intensifying the struggle for control over El Fasher but also obstructing access to critical provisions like food and medicine across Darfur. As famine looms over the region, the viability of these supply routes becomes a lifeline for millions of lives at stake. The RSF will use its military dominance of the roads to generate new income streams for its war chest.

# Background

In early November 2023, El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur State and its vicinity was on the verge of sliding into an all-encompassing war. Seven months after the outbreak of war between the SAF and the RSF, the RSF had already taken control of most of Darfur's main cities. Fortunately, the RSF attack that was expected at the time on El Fasher did not occur. The city's inhabitants and large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other states were not saved by international pressures alone, but primarily by local mediation efforts led by local notables including the traditional leaders, professional elites, civil society organizations, and women's and youth associations.<sup>1</sup> The Elders and Mediation Committee in El Fasher (EMC), which was formed by these actors, succeeded, through persistent and complex communication between the SAF, RSF and the Joint Protection Force (JPF), composed of the signatories of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), in achieving a truce that granted the city relative calm. However, this did not prevent occasional breaches of the truce, and serious violations by both sides of hostility. However, the city and its vicinity, which seemed once to be the only theater

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<sup>1</sup> Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker (STPT) published a paper in March 2024 on the unique experience of the Elders and Mediation Committee in El Fasher (EMC). It also reviewed the security and social contexts in El Fasher and other North Darfur cities. See STPT, 'Challenges and Opportunities for Local Mediation: The experience of the elders and mediation committee in El Fasher', March 2024, available at: <https://shorturl.at/ehC57>.



*Military commanders from the JPF visit defensive points in El Fasher, April 17, 2024, JPF page on FB.*

during the Sudan war in which three armed parties shared the presence, have today entered confrontations in more than one location in a real test of wills that could turn at any time into an all-encompassing regional war.

The security situation in the region was fragile even before the outbreak of the war on April 15, 2023, as the region witnessed frequent tensions due to incidents related to the conflicts between farmers and herders. The frequency and intensity of these

conflicts, which were resolved through community conflict resolution mechanisms, have increased due to the interventions of RSF in favor of herders, and the interventions of the armed movements (signatories of JPA) in support of farmers. In recent years, the region has witnessed many violent confrontations, including, for example, the Kolgi clashes on December 7, 2022, and the events in Tawila on February 14, 2023.

## The control of warring parties of North Darfur

One year into the war in Sudan, the security conditions in North Darfur have deteriorated badly. Military confrontations have reemerged. The RSF has taken complete control of several localities, including Kabkabiya (202 km west of El Fasher), Al-Sareif Beni Hussein (approximately 250 km west of El Fasher), Saraf Omra (276 km west of El Fasher), and Kutum (110 km northwest of El Fasher), and Al-Kuma (approximately 85 km east of El Fasher). The RSF also took control of Al-Wahah locality, a shadow locality without a fixed territory, that includes the seasonal living areas of nomadic in several localities with headquarters in Kutum. There is coordination between RSF and some notables and government officials in these areas. Some localities are also managed by Emergency Committees (ECs) composed of traditional leaders, community notables,<sup>2</sup> and some government employees in the health and education sectors. This includes localities of Mellit, Al-Malha, Al-La'it, Al-Tawisha, Umm Kadada, Dar Al Salam, Kelemando, and the Dar Zaghawa localities in Ambro, Karnoi, and Al Tina. Only Tawila locality, approximately 56 km west of El Fasher, is controlled by the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM)/Abdulwahid Muhammad Al-Nur, which did not sign JPA. As for El Fasher itself, it is run by the state government and a large part of it is controlled by SAF, including its Grand Market, government premises, military headquarters, and neighborhoods in the west and south of the city.

Divided control in North Darfur State and its capital city has negatively impacted the daily lives of citizens. The financing of local governments depended on the levies and fees collected from

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<sup>2</sup> RSF has long standing relationships with the traditional leaders in North Darfur. Back in 2016, for example, RSF offered 22 brand new Pickups to traditional leaders. See <https://shorturl.at/hpuEL>

merchants, business owners, and small producers in the various localities, and on the allocations sent from Khartoum government to its loyal parties before the current complete blockade. However, the revenue from taxes was not reflected in the services provided to the local communities, and as a result large numbers of the population migrated to safe states in Sudan or were forced into exile.

## Mellit: Dynamics of domestic security and regional trade

Since the outbreak of war on April 15, 2023, supplies of medicines, food, fuel and humanitarian aid were delivered to Darfur via the West Salvation Road (WSR) linking Khartoum and El Fasher until October 2023. However, transportation along this road was interrupted after some Darfur movements in the JPF renounced their neutrality.

When this happened, significant traffic was diverted to Mellit located approximately 60 km north of El Fasher. Mellit is a land transport hub linking Darfur to Libya and to the rest of Sudan states through Al-Dabbah in the northern state. This helped revive commercial activity in Mellit, and reinvigorated border trade with Chad after it had declined in recent years. Trade was also intensified between the Kufra region of Libya and Mellit. This revival made Mellit a destination for merchants, business owners, and investors from all cities in Darfur.<sup>3</sup>

Mellit had a population of about 206,000 people according to the 2010 census, in addition to 20,000 IDPs from El Geneina, Zalingei, Nyala, El Fasher, and Kutum. The number of IDPs has more than doubled after the displacement of residents of surrounding villages to the city. Agriculture, including the cultivation of both plants and animals, is the main activity of Mellit population, in addition to trade and handicrafts. Inhabitants come from many tribes, including Berti, Al-Zaydia, Al-Maidub, Tanjur, Fur, Beni Imran, Shanagit, Zaghawa and others.

With increased commercial activity between Al-Dabbah and Mellit since the blocking of the WSR, Darfur merchants sent camels, sheep, *tombac* (tobacco), and some local agricultural products such as watermelon, sesame, hibiscus, peanuts, and Gum Arabic to Al-Dabbah. From there, they can cross to either Egypt, or Gedaref, Sennar, and other relatively safe cities in Sudan. Al-Dabbah merchants ship onions, dates, sugar, lentils, and some food items to Mellit.

Border trade between Sudan and Libya has historical significance, as it facilitated the exchange of goods and strengthened economic relations between the two countries. The road between Kufra and Mellit is a vital piece of this connection. This trade route is a vital lifeline for communities on both sides, as it allows the flow of basic goods including food and fuel. However, political instability, security concerns and conflict in the region have affected trade dynamics.

Trade between Darfur, Libya and Egypt has continued after the outbreak of war and the interruption of the flow of goods and laborers from central and eastern Sudan to the Darfur

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<sup>3</sup> Mellit was the third largest city in terms of population and prominence, but this status has deteriorated in recent years due to the local conflict between Berti and Al-Ziyadia, and due to the repeated attacks by armed movements, which led to the closure of the customs station that made it an important commercial center in trade between Libya and Sudan. See: Ishaq, Idris Ibrahim Zakaria, "The Impact of Population Mobility in the areas of North Darfur during the Period 1956-2019," Arab Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, Issue 11/Part One, February 2022. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/asKQX>

region. Darfur exports camels, sheep, and agricultural products such as peanuts, hibiscus, sesame, gum arabic, and watermelon seeds to Libya and Egypt via Mellit, and in return imports sugar, flour, rice, lentils, carbonated water, and fuel (diesel and benzine) from Libya, and solar panels and cement from Egypt.

Since the first months of the war, the Libyan government has provided significant facilities for the export of food and fuel from Libya via Kufra. It reduced local and export fees on fuel (diesel and benzine) and food items, namely sugar, rice, flour, pasta, lentils, and some other strategic commodities shipped to Darfur. The Libyan government also provided fuel for the trucks transporting these goods from Libya to Sudan at local cost. This increased the goods available in all states of Darfur, and even other states such as Kordofan at reasonable prices despite the large number of checkpoints and levies collected between Kufra and the states of Darfur. As a result of the facilities provided by the Libyan government to export goods, commercial activity in Mellit has significantly revived. Merchants from all over Darfur flocked to Mellit and began exporting the local products. This helped facilitate the flow of food and fuel to the states of North, West, Central and South Darfur. The movement of trucks between Mellit and other states of Darfur has not stopped throughout the war except after RSF captured Mellit, therefore, movement halted on the Al-Dabbah – Mellit and Kufra – Mellit roads in April 2024. This led to a noticeable increase in the prices of some goods and food items.



Sources: Jespersen, S; Henriksen, R; Pravettoni, R; Nellemann, C (2021), 'Illicit Flows Fueling Conflict in the Tri-Border: Migration and Artisanal gold mining in Sudan, Chad and Libya', RHIPTO, XCEPT Research Report, June 2021. The map is adapted by inserting some towns in West Sudan and East Chad.

## Key highway checkpoints as an effective tool for collecting levies

Before RSF took control of Mellit, some traditional leaders, and JPA signatories established checkpoints along Mellit – Kufra and Mellit – Al Dabbah roads. These checkpoints were established under the pretext of protecting commercial convoys from plunder and theft and were managed by Darfur movements including the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF) led by Al-Tahir Hajar, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) led by Minawi, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led by Jibril Ibrahim, the Sudan Liberation Movement/the

Transitional Council (SLM-TC) led by Al-Hadi Idris, and the Sudanese Alliance (SA) led by the late Khamis Abbakar. There were 23 checkpoints between Al-Dabbah and Mellit, and 11 on the Kufra - Mellit road. Although these checkpoints contributed to the flow of truck and vehicle traffic to Mellit, and from there to the rest of Darfur, they became a burden on trade by imposing high fees ranging from 50,000 to 100,000 Sudanese pounds (SDG), equivalent to 38 - 76 United States dollars (USD) at each checkpoint, on cargo trucks. These fees were reflected in increased prices of most commodities in Mellit. Generally, prices in Mellit are considered the lowest in Darfur, as other checkpoints on the road from Mellit to elsewhere in Darfur impose additional fees. Other checkpoints take in-kind fees such as fuel from trucks, sometimes amounting to 25% of the total shipment. The entity responsible for the checkpoint sells its proceeds for goods in local markets at high prices. Although this practice led to a reduction in the prices of some commodities for a time, it led to the exit of the traders and investors from the Al-Dabbah and Al-Kufra roads unwilling to tolerate these armed actors as competitors, especially fuel in local markets in El Fasher and Mellit.

## Transnational criminal activities

After taking control of Mellit, the RSF appropriated all fuel coming from Libya and Chad via Al Tina, to supply their fighting vehicles on the one hand, and control the market on the other hand with a view to excluding all competitors. According to a report by the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) led by General Haftar, have been smuggling fuel to the southern borders of Libya and onward to the RSF since 2022 under the protection of its Subul Al Salam Battalion. This indicates that General Haftar's support for the RSF began before the April 2023 war.<sup>4</sup>

Using mercenaries across borders is prohibited under international law. Sudanese and Chadian armed movements have been documented fighting alongside General Haftar's LAAF in exchange for payments up to one million euros per month, according to the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime. The armed groups were also incentivized by acquisition of military equipment. The most important Darfuri armed groups supporting Haftar's LAAF were the two factions of the SLM led by Minni Minawi and Abdelwahid Mohamed Nour, in addition to the GSLF led by Al-Tahir Hajar. However, with the decline of Haftar's ability to continue disbursing payments, the Darfur movements returned to Sudan. On the other hand, hundreds of Chadian fighters joined the RSF after the April 2023 war began.<sup>5</sup>

Sudan's borders with Libya and Chad have historically been, and still are, a porous opportunity for the smuggling of arms and ammunition. On one hand, the Darfuri armed movements benefited from their presence in Libya to attain significant military equipment, including armored personnel carriers. Due to the ease of movement between Mellit, the southern border of Libya, and the northeastern border of Chad, the trade in arms, drugs, alcohol, and other prohibited goods such as cosmetics has flourished, especially in Mellit. Because the armed movements were responsible for security in the region, some of their members helped transport and smuggle weapons and illegal imports in their military trucks into Mellit and then

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<sup>4</sup> Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, "Illicit Economies and Peace and Security in Libya," 2023, p. 12, available at: [https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Matt-Herbert-et-Al\\_Illlicit-economies-and-peace-and-security-in-Libya-GI-TOC-July-2023-1.pdf](https://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Matt-Herbert-et-Al_Illlicit-economies-and-peace-and-security-in-Libya-GI-TOC-July-2023-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Op.cit., p. 15.

sell them. Before the RSF took control of Mellit, traffic in illegal arms increased, and small arms of various types were now openly offered for sale in the city's markets. Significantly, there is an area in the northwestern part of Mellit market known as "Wagner," which is famous for open arms trading. This has continued even after the RSF took control of the city. The gold trade is almost non-existent due to the distance of large major mining areas from Mellit.

## Renewed clashes in North Darfur: The consequences of RSF control of Mellit

Intense clashes were renewed in North Darfur after the SLM/Minawi, JEM/Jibril, and SLM/ Mustafa Tambour announced abandoning neutrality and joining the fight with SAF. As a result, the RSF burned down a group of villages that were under the protection of JPF west of El Fasher and displaced their residents claiming that they represented social incubators for the JPF. The RSF had also previously refused to allow humanitarian aid through Port Sudan - Al-Dabbah – Mellit – El Fasher route, controlled by SAF and their allies, alleging that this could be used to deliver military supplies to the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in El Fasher and threatened to use force to prevent it. In early April 2024, it took control of all the checkpoints between Al-Dabbah and Mellit after the JPF withdrew. RSF diverted commercial trucks to the Al-Kuma locality, which it controls, to collect fees before allowing them to continue to Mellit causing significant to traders and truck owners.

RSF seized Mellit on April 14, 2024, to control the traffic of commercial and humanitarian aid trucks between Mellit and Al-Dabbah, as well as the traffic between Mellit and Kufra. General Ali Yaqoub Jibril, Commander of RSF in Mellit, dissolved the EC composed of traditional leaders, local notables, and some local government employees in health, education, and water sectors that had been managing the locality. He formed a new administrative committee of twelve people, most of whom are from the RSF's Civil Support Committee (CSC) in Mellit, most of whose members were from the Al-Zayadiyya Arab community. People in the city whispered that this committee was behind RSF plans to capture the city, because Mellit was the hub of food transport to the entire Darfur region. This control supports RSF efforts to besiege El Fasher, blocking the entry of food and fuel trucks, weakening the city's ability to resist.



A local leader addressing his community in Mellit in late April after an air raid. It was reported that 7 were killed and around 350 camels. A screen shot from video on social media that went viral.

Reacting to the fall of Mellit to the RSF, SAF air forces launched three raids on the city. The first was on April 25 and targeted a cluster of wells on the outskirts of the city, killing seven people and 350 head of camel. Local residents are concerned that water supplies are being contaminated with explosive residue. The repeated bombing of civilian targets in RSF areas represents a form of collective punishment.

Various pressures have been weakening the endurance of the RSF since the beginning of this year. Iranian drones were introduced into SAF's combat arsenal, SAF's increased its reliance on aerial bombardment of RSF sites, RSF experienced repeated defections, lack of discipline of their fighters, and their tendency toward looting, widespread violations, and humiliation of citizens in the areas they control. It appears that RSF's seizure of Mellit and the trade routes to and from Darfur has contributed to easing these pressures. It also contributed to weakening the flow of financial resources and supplies to the armed movements loyal to the army and to the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in El Fasher in the context of the RSF siege.

As a direct result of El Fasher siege, SAF was forced to resort to airdrops to supply about 30,000 fighters in the besieged at the 6<sup>th</sup> Division headquarters with weapons, ammunition, drones, and funding. However, airdrop operations were limited, according to local sources.

## **The humanitarian consequences of the situation in Mellit**

Before the RSF took control of Mellit, the local EC supervised customs processes. The average revenue from customs and fees is estimated at SDG 188,000,000 (about USD 144,615) per month based on the official USD exchange rate of SDG 1,300 to USD 1. By agreement, the revenues of customs and local fees were to be distributed as follows:

- 10% for health services
- 40% for the local JPF
- 43% for Mellit locality workers and employees
- 7% for collectors.

However, JPF did not adhere to the agreement taking more than 50% of the revenue every month, under the pretext of maintaining security and providing its members for some checkpoints within the city, according to individuals close to the local EC. After the RSF took control of the locality, their commander in Mellit announced that customs revenues and local fees would be distributed evenly between security and services in the locality.

Truck traffic between Al-Dabbah and Mellit and between Kufra and Mellit were halted after the RSF took control of the locality. Commodity prices rose as a result. For example, the price of a 50 kg sack of sugar in Mellit before the RSF took control was SGD 76,000 (USD 58), but it reached SDG 88,000 (USD 67) afterward. The price of a 25 kg sack of rice was SDG 35,000 (USD 26) but reached SDG 39,000 (USD 30) after the RSF took control of the area. Also, the price of a barrel of diesel rose from SDG 420,000 (USD 323) to SDG 460,000 (USD 353), after the RSF took control. Eyewitnesses reported that most of those who trade fuel in Mellit are members of the RSF or their supporters. However, it was noted that the price of onions in Mellit decreased from SDG 110,000 per sack (USD 84) before the RSF took control, to SDG 95,000



(USD 73) due to the arrival of local onions from the Kabkabiya and Kutum localities, which are controlled by the RSF.

Concerns increased in Darfur when the security authorities in Northern State restricted the permits for trucks loaded with goods, especially food, from Al-Dabbah to Mellit. In a similar move, RSF prevented the movement of trucks carrying local agricultural products such as sesame, watermelon, gum arabic, hibiscus, peanuts, lamb, camels, and *tombac* (tobacco) from North Darfur to Al-Dabbah via Mellit. They also blocked the movement of trucks loaded with food and fuel from Mellit to El Fasher. Commercial traffic between Kufra and Mellit also stopped at the beginning of April 2024 due to the controls imposed by the Libyan government on the transfer of goods and fuel to Sudan. Accordingly, the joint force of the JPF and SAF, which is stationed in the border area between Libya, Sudan, and Egypt, approximately 1,800 km northeast of Mellit, prevented the traffic of trucks loaded with goods and fuel to Darfur. This raised the prices of some commodities in Mellit and El Fasher, and some, such as diesel and benzine, disappeared altogether. The cost of passenger tickets between Mellit and El Fasher doubled, and the operation of water stations and grain mills in Mellit and El Fasher, which rely mainly on diesel, were disrupted. The movement of trucks from other cities in Darfur to Mellit was also disrupted.

According to knowledgeable sources, the RSF is preparing to announce a unified administration for all territories under their control in western and central Sudan as soon as the *de facto* authority in Port Sudan<sup>6</sup> announces the appointment of an emergency government to be based there. One of the motives behind this move is the RSF's quest to fully control the flows of humanitarian aid that are expected to flow across the Chadian border to Darfur to stave off the famine expected to affect millions in the areas under their control. RSF is trying to persuade the international humanitarian community to accept the Kufra-Mellit road as a humanitarian aid route. This implies that humanitarian aid coming through Libya will be subject to the complete control of the RSF, as is already the case now with aid coming from Chad via El Geneina, the capital of West Darfur State.

With heightened insecurity in North Darfur since October, the refugee influx from Darfur to Libya via the Mellit-Kufra Road increased. The municipality of Kufra announced in early May that the number of Sudanese refugees in the city had exceeded 15,000.<sup>7</sup> According to specialized reports, it does not appear that the thousands of Sudanese who were forced to seek refuge in Libya have sought the help of human smugglers in pursuit of migration to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. However, it is not unlikely that they will resort to this risky option as the pressure on them in Libya increases.

## Concluding remarks

Citizens in Darfur are caught between the hammer of the RSF and the anvil of SAF and their allies. We have witnessed the expansion of the war in Darfur from military confrontations to the control of commercial convoys, illicit economic activities, and control and exploitation of humanitarian aid as a weapon. This situation will suffocate the entire Darfur region and threaten

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<sup>6</sup> Investigations carried by STPT via SMS exchanges, first week of May 2024.

<sup>7</sup> Medameek, "The Number of Sudanese refugees in Kufra has doubled," May 2, 2024, available at: <https://www.medameek.com/?p=145171>

the lives of millions in the region unless the UN system and international community intervene to save them.

We at the Sudanese Transparency and Policy Tracker (STPT) and the Sudanese Crisis Research Network (SCRN) believe that RSF's tactics aim at preventing the supply of SAF in El Fasher at any cost, regardless of the suffering caused to civilians, directly contributing to exacerbating the food crisis in the city and the entire region. Such tactics have already resulted in an escalation in the number of deaths of children suffering from malnutrition in IDP camps. Further, the blockage of roads from Al-Dabbah and Kufra simply means that no relief or commercial supplies can reach Darfur via these two vital routes.

One of the clear results of the use of food as a weapon in the context of the current war is the steady increase in the number of IDPs. However, if the RSF go ahead and declare a civil administration in the areas under their military control, this will create a reality in Sudan similar to the situation in Libya, with the actual division of the country into two competing administrations at the expense of its unity.

Finally, the continuation of the policy of militia recruitment by SAF along ethnic lines for the purpose of weakening RSF and fueling tribal conflicts between the groups that make up RSF, as indicated by the ongoing attempts to re-recruit Musa Hilal and his fighters in support of the SAF's war effort, will make matters worse. This means fueling conflicts directed from afar for many years to come and destroying the diminishing societal peace in Darfur.