

# Fighting deepens around El Fasher in Sudan, al-Shabaab loses territory in Somalia, and police crack down on tax-related protests in Kenya

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*ACLED data updates were paused for four weeks starting from 25 May to 21 June 2024. During this time, there were no situation updates. Data covering the period of 25 May to 21 June were released starting on 24 June. This report covers the main political violence trends in Horn of Africa — Sudan, Somalia, and Kenya. The normal Horn of Africa situation updates will resume in July, with the Sudan situation update report which will be published on 12 July.*

## The SAF calls on local militias to defend El Fasher from the RSF's advances

A new major battle broke out in the North Darfur city of El Fasher, which has been surrounded since April by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). El Fasher is the only capital city in Darfur that is still controlled by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The SAF, backed by its allies, managed to conduct multiple offensive maneuvers on RSF strongholds in rural territories in North Darfur. During the clashes, the SAF claimed to have inflicted several casualties on the RSF, including killing the local operation commander.

ACLED records at least 700 reported fatalities in connection with fighting around the city since the RSF began the attack on El Fasher on 10 April; around half of them — 320 — were recorded during the reporting period, 25 May to 21 June. Additionally, the violence has heavily hit health care facilities in North Darfur, causing them to go out of service and aggravating an already dire humanitarian situation. According to the Sudan Doctors' Union, at least 4,000 people may have died from violence, diseases, and starvation in El Fasher alone.<sup>1</sup>[Asharq al-Awsat, 'Sudan Doctors' Union: War Death Toll Tops 40,000,' 26 June 2024](#)

Unlike other battles that led to [the RSF capturing the remaining states in Darfur by the end of 2023](#), the battle for El Fasher has been unique for two main reasons: the wide-scale mobilization of Darfur Joint Forces and Zaghawa ethnic militias, and the areas where the conflict has been occurring, as the conflict is not only concentrated in the city. The Darfur Joint Forces and the Zaghawa ethnic militias supplemented the infantry troops that the SAF lacked for the conflict in El Fasher. The Darfur Joint Forces, a coalition of armed groups established to protect civilians in El Fasher, began to mobilize in November.<sup>2</sup>[Kamal Abdelrahman, 'After 10 Months of negotiations, these are the key provisions of the Sudan peace agreement,' Sky News, 31 August 2020; Sudan Tribune, 'Armed movements deploy hundreds of fighters to secure North Darfur capital,' 27 April 2023](#) This timeline allowed the proper training of volunteers and facilitated the movement of troops and supplies, as there were only sporadic clashes between the RSF and the SAF due to a peace deal brokered by the native administration of El Fasher.

The Zaghawa ethnic group, based in North Darfur and East Chad, has a long history of conflict with Darfur Arab militias — also known as the Janjaweed — who are now fighting with the RSF.<sup>3</sup>[Victor Tanner and Jérôme Tubiana, 'Divided They Fall: The Fragmentation of Darfur's Rebel Groups,' Small Arms Survey, July 2007](#) The Zaghawa have benefited from their cross-border

presence between Chad and Sudan and their historical connection with the ruling Déby family in Chad.<sup>4</sup>[Victor Tanner and Jérôme Tubiana, ‘Divided They Fall: The Fragmentation of Darfur’s Rebel Groups,’ Small Arms Survey, July 2007](#) Many members of the Zaghawa ethnic group responded to a mobilization call from the SAF, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) faction led by Minni Minnawi, and the Zaghawa native administration on 24 April, after the RSF and its allied Arab militias attacked non-Arab villages west of El Fasher and seized Mellit on 14 April.

Together, the Darfur Joint Forces and the Zaghawa ethnic militias were better prepared to defend El Fasher against the RSF’s multiple front offensives. The RSF and its allies continued multipronged offensive maneuvers, employing heavy artillery shelling and drone strikes to distract the defenses of the SAF and Darfur Joint Forces and secure advances inside the city. They engaged in multiple hit-and-run rounds of fighting, which led their troops to advance from the south, east, or north fronts between 25 May and 21 June. Meanwhile, the SAF responded with airstrikes and artillery shelling, slowing down RSF movements in the east and north of the city. On 16 June, the RSF attempted to advance to attack the SAF 6th Infantry Division. However, the SAF repelled an RSF offensive on the 6th Infantry Division, killing the RSF’s operations commander in El Fasher, General Ali Yagoub Jibril. General Jibril was the third top leader in the RSF, after Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) and second-in-command Abdul Rahim Dagalo.

The battle for El Fasher extended across the region surrounding the regional capital. Violent incidents were reported in at least 20 distinct locations outside the city, including RSF strongholds in rural areas such as al-Zorg — home to one of the main RSF weapons warehouses — Wadi Arambaa, and Umm Baar (*see map below*). The expansion of the clash outside El Fasher arguably distracted the RSF and reduced its ability to amass its forces for an all-out offensive on El Fasher. Thus, the RSF lacked the factors that would typically give its troops an advantage over the SAF. In previous battles, larger infantry numbers gave the RSF an advantage over the SAF. However, the mobilization of the SAF’s allies in El Fasher has created a more even competition between the SAF and the RSF, with the RSF forced to disperse its troops across a wider area.

The RSF siege around El Fasher failed to prevent military supplies from reaching the city, as the SAF continuously provided ammunition and weapons through airdrops.<sup>5</sup>[Sudan Tribune, ‘Fighting intensifies in El Fasher as Sudanese army airdrops supplies,’ 5 June 2024](#) However, the severe humanitarian and health crisis persists, with almost all health facilities out of service.

Approximately 129,825 people were displaced between 1 April and 31 May.<sup>6</sup>[International Organization for Migration, ‘DTM Sudan Focused Flash Alert North Darfur \(Update 002\)’ 2 June 2024](#) The ability of the Darfur Joint Forces and Zaghawa ethnic militias to defend and fight back in North Darfur gives the SAF the potential to reverse the war equation in its favor.

## **The battle to control strategic locations in central and south Somalia**

After a series of wins gaining territory back from al-Shabaab, the federal government renewed its commitment to the counter-insurgency operation. In June, security forces captured strategic villages serving al-Shabaab strongholds and command centers in Lower Juba and Middle Shabelle. While al-Shabaab lost the strategic villages without any confrontations, it is possible that this is a tactic used by the militants to draw the security forces close and subsequently launch an attack. Nonetheless, the territorial gain is significant for the government in the fight against al-Shabaab amid increased attacks on security forces. Clashes between al-Shabaab and security forces continued as the two parties fought for territorial control. This is a clear indication of the ongoing and escalating conflict. Most of these clashes were recorded in Lower Shabelle, Galgaduud, Lower Juba, Bay, and Bakool regions (*see map below*).

Since the counter-insurgency operation started in August 2022, the government and al-Shabaab have been fighting for control of the Ceel Dheer district in Galgaduud region. Ceel Dheer district is located in a strategic area that connects the Galgaduud and Middle Shabelle regions in Galmudug and Hirshabelle states, where the operation is active. In this region, the militants have regrouped and advanced to gain control of the main towns, including Galcad, Masagaway, and Ceel Dheer. The Somali National Army (SNA) deployed troops on the frontline to target al-Shabaab hideout positions in the region's most remote areas.

The village of Run-nirgod, in the Adan Yabaal district of Middle Shabelle region, became a flashpoint of violence. On 2 June, SNA troops were deployed near Run-nirgod and along the border areas with the Ceel Dheer district in the Galgaduud region.<sup>7</sup>[Hiiraan, 'The largest number of troops in the area of Ruunirgood,' 3 June 2024](#) Security forces launched operations targeting al-Shabaab strategic areas in the Middle Shabelle and Lower Juba regions to control and maintain al-Shabaab movements and attacks. On 9 June, security forces took control over Run-nirgod village from al-Shabaab. The recapture of this strategic village gives security forces an advantage in disrupting al-Shabaab movements and cross-border attacks.

Despite the heavy presence of SNA troops and allied clan militias in the border areas between the Middle Shabelle and Galgaduud regions, the al-Shabaab militants conducted raids on military bases to safeguard Ceel Buur and Galhareeri. These two areas are the largest remaining strongholds in Galgaduud. The raids began on 8 June when al-Shabaab militants launched an early morning attack against the SNA, Gorgor special force, and Abgal clan militia in four bases in Ceel Dheer. The detonation of vehicle-borne IEDs and RPGs initiated the raid and was followed by a heavy exchange of gunfire between the militants and security forces. Al-Shabaab claimed to have killed more than 60 soldiers and injured several others.<sup>8</sup>[Horn Observer, 'Al-Shabaab Assault on Somali Forces Leaves Over 60 Dead, Vehicles Destroyed,' 9 June 2024](#) The militants also claimed to have captured several soldiers, looted weapons, and destroyed vehicles. After the attack, security forces conducted an operation supported by airstrikes targeting the militants near the town. The government claimed to have killed more than 60 militants.<sup>9</sup>[Somali News Agency, 'Press release: details of the operation in Eeldheer district in which the Khawaarij were defeated,' 8 June 2024](#) On 26 August 2023, al-Shabaab conducted a similar attack in Oswein village during the [second phase of the counter-insurgency operation](#), which led to a slowdown of the counter-insurgency operation.

Further south, in Lower Juba, Jubaland security forces (JSF) and Danab special forces launched an operation targeting al-Shabaab stronghold positions in the Badhaadhe district, where the militants control swaths of remote villages and towns. On 10 June, the security forces took control of Bula Haji village without any resistance from al-Shabaab, which is a tactic al-Shabaab has been using to avoid offensive attacks and counter-attack security. The militants had controlled this village for the last two decades. Jubaland administration continued to deploy troops in the newly liberated village as holding forces for the Danab special forces, and JSF continued to advance toward Badhaadhe town. Despite the loss of the village to security forces, al-Shabaab militants battled to regain Bula Haji village. During the ongoing operation in the Lower Juba region, four al-Shabaab district-level leaders surrendered to the security forces. They included the al-Shabaab leader for Bula Haji village, the group's head of finance, the head of intelligence, and the person in charge of collecting money for the group in the village.<sup>10</sup>[Goobjoog, 'Top Al-Shabaab Leaders Surrender to Somali Forces in Bula Haji,' 18 June 2024; Somali Dispatch, 'Somalia: Several Al-Shabaab leaders surrender to government forces,' 18 June 2024](#)

Security forces' regained control of these strategic villages — Run-nirgod and Bula Haji in the Middle Shabelle and Lower Juba regions, respectively — represent a major setback for al-Shabaab. The villages have been al-Shabaab stronghold positions, serving as command centers in coordinating and planning attacks targeting troops. The takeover helped security forces to disrupt al-Shabaab activities and advance toward other al-Shabaab-controlled areas. Despite these gains, the SNA has not shown that it is strong enough to achieve its goal of counter-insurgency operations, which is to eradicate the militant group from central and south Somalia.

# Kenya's new round of anti-tax protests may be different, but police crackdowns remain

Kenya is once again being rocked by anti-tax protests. While the mobilization this time is led from the grassroots level, in contrast with [the opposition-called demonstrations in July 2023](#), the response from the government has been just as heavy-handed. On 18 June, hundreds of demonstrators marched in Nairobi to “occupy parliament” and demand it reject the 2024 Finance Bill, which President William Ruto has since said he will not sign.<sup>11</sup>[Stephanie Busari, ‘Kenyan President Ruto withdraws controversial finance bill following deadly protests,’ CNN, 26 June 2024](#) The bill included a 16% value-added tax on bread, as well as taxes on items like diapers, tires, batteries, smartphones, and cameras.<sup>12</sup>[Evelyn Musambi, ‘More than 200 arrested in Kenya protests over proposed tax hikes in finance bill,’ Associated Press, 18 June 2024](#); [Mohammed Yusuf, ‘Thousands of Kenyans demonstrate against proposed tax increases,’ Voice of America, 20 June 2024](#) That day, President William Ruto withdrew the bread tax and several other proposals and later said he would “have a conversation” with the demonstrators.<sup>13</sup>[Martin Siele, ‘Kenya’s protest movement forces a U-turn on tax hikes,’ Semafor, 18 June 2024](#); [Al Jazeera, ‘Kenya’s Ruto agrees ‘for conversation’ with protesters over tax hikes,’ 23 June 2024](#) However, on 18 June, police still cracked down on the marchers, arresting key organizers and over 200 demonstrators, as well as firing water cannons and tear gas at the crowds.<sup>14</sup>[Martin Siele, ‘Kenya’s protest movement forces a U-turn on tax hikes,’ Semafor, 18 June 2024](#); [Al Jazeera, ‘Kenya’s Ruto agrees ‘for conversation’ with protesters over tax hikes,’ 23 June 2024](#) The protests continued into 20 June, with thousands of demonstrators taking to the streets of Nairobi, Nakuru, Eldoret, Kisumu, Mombasa, and Nyeri.<sup>15</sup>[Mohammed Yusuf, ‘Thousands of Kenyans demonstrate against proposed tax increases,’ Voice of America, 20 June 2024](#); [Reuters, ‘Kenya police use tear gas, water cannon as hundreds protest over tax hikes,’ 20 June 2024](#); [Amnesty International, ‘Joint Public Safety Statement on Nationwide Demonstrations,’ 20 June 2024](#) Yet again, riot police responded by tear gassing reportedly peaceful protests, arresting at least 105 people around the country in one day.<sup>16</sup>[Basillioh Rukanga & Mercy Juma, ‘Police battle anti-tax demonstrators as Kenya protests spread,’ BBC News, 20 June 2024](#) Human rights groups released a joint statement that police had injured 200 people with batons, tear gas, vehicles, and rubber bullets in Nairobi alone, with live ammunition killing at least one person.<sup>17</sup>[Amnesty International, ‘Joint Public Safety Statement on Nationwide Demonstrations,’ 20 June 2024](#); [Reuters, ‘At least 200 injured, 100 arrested in Kenya tax protests: Rights groups,’ 21 June 2024](#)

The violence culminated on 25 June, when demonstrators stormed parliament and set part of it ablaze, while Kenyan police shot and killed several people and injured over 30 demonstrators.<sup>18</sup>[Basillioh Rukanga, ‘Five killed and parliament ablaze in Kenya tax protests,’ BBC, 25 June 2024](#) The parliament was in session to vote on the 2024 Finance Bill, and members of parliament passed the bill just before the demonstrators stormed the parliament building. Part of the Nairobi governor’s office was also set on fire.<sup>19</sup>[Evelyn Musambi, ‘Anti-tax protesters storm Kenya’s parliament, drawing police fire as president vows to quash unrest,’ Associated Press, 26 June 2024](#) That night, President Ruto stated “dangerous criminals” would be thwarted “at whatever cost” and deployed the military.<sup>20</sup>[New York Times, ‘Kenyan President Vows to Prevent Violence “At Whatever Cost,”’ 25 June 2024](#) The following day, on 26 June, the president stated that he wouldn’t sign the bill into law due to “widespread dissatisfaction.”<sup>21</sup>[Citizen Tv Kenya, ‘WATCH | President Ruto’s Press Briefing at State House, Nairobi,’ 26 June 2024](#)

In the summer of 2023, Kenya saw [147 protest rallies in response to that year’s Finance Bill](#). However, the two protest waves have varied in their organizers and tactics. Last year’s demonstrations were called for by presidential runner-up Raila Odinga’s Azimio la Umoja political party and became highly partisan.<sup>22</sup>[Allan Kisia, ‘Why Raila missed ‘Occupy Parliament’ protest – Boniface Mwangi,’ The Star, 18 June 2024](#) In contrast, civil society and youth leaders organized and led the 2024 demonstrations from the front, and were promptly arrested by police.<sup>23</sup>[Denis Omondi, ‘Gen Z redefines protest dynamics with “Occupy parliament” movement,’ The Standard](#)

19 June 2024 Furthermore, this year's demonstrations have employed social media and different protest tactics, as users spread hashtags like #OccupyParliament and #RejectFinanceBill2024 while spamming lawmakers' phones and websites.<sup>24</sup>Basillioh Rukanga and Mercy Juma, 'Police battle anti-tax demonstrators as Kenya protests spread,' BBC News, 20 June 2024; Martin Siele, 'Kenya's protest movement forces a U-turn on tax hikes,' Semafor, 18 June 2024 Organizers developed a code of conduct for demonstrators, guidance on interacting with police, a crisis helpline, medical services, and a bailout fund and legal advice for those arrested.<sup>25</sup>Denis Omondi, 'Gen Z redefines protest dynamics with "Occupy parliament" movement,' The Standard 19 June 2024; Basillioh Rukanga & Mercy Juma, 'Police battle anti-tax demonstrators as Kenya protests spread,' BBC News, 20 June 2024

Conversely, it is unclear if anything has changed in Kenyan police forces' often disproportionate responses to anti-tax protests. Mass arrests, water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets, and even live bullets were [repeatedly used by police during the 2023 demonstrations](#) and during the current round of tax-related demonstrations. Between 1 January 2023 and 21 June 2024, excessive force was used at least 13 times in tax-related demonstrations compared to only twice in non-tax-related ones (*see image below*). This is despite the former having 203 and the latter over 1,700 demonstration events. There is a clear discrepancy in the prevalence of violence at tax-related versus non-tax-related demonstrations. Though demonstrators are using new tactics and the current wave of protests is ongoing, the events in Nairobi have raised the stakes. Police in Kenya have long been accused of disproportionate, even violent responses to opposition-led or anti-government demonstrations.<sup>26</sup>Human Rights Watch, 'Kenya: End Abusive Policing of Protests,' 31 May 2023 With Ruto running on a platform to reduce taxes and the cost of living, it remains to be seen whether Kenya's police will change their treatment of demonstrators who ask him to honor that pledge.