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Sudan: Warring Parties Execute Detainees, Mutilate Bodies

Halt and Investigate Abuses as War Crimes



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Still image from a video posted to social media showing Sudanese Armed Forces soldiers setting the bodies of persons they have apparently executed, on fire. © User via X, 2024

(Nairobi) – The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and affiliated fighters have summarily executed, tortured, and ill-treated people in their custody, and mutilated dead bodies, Human Rights Watch said today.

Leaders of both forces should privately and publicly order an immediate halt to these abuses and carry out effective investigations. They should cooperate fully with international investigators, notably from the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the [Sudan](#), who should include these abuses, which constitute war crimes, within the scope of their investigations.

“Forces from Sudan’s warring parties feel so immune to punishment that they have repeatedly filmed themselves executing, torturing, and dehumanizing detainees, and mutilating bodies,” said [Mohamed Osman](#), Sudan researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These crimes should be investigated as war crimes and those responsible, including commanders of these forces, should be held to account.”

Human Rights Watch analyzed 20 videos and 1 photograph of 10 incidents uploaded to social media platforms between August 24, 2023, and July 11, 2024. Eight videos and 1 photograph depict 4 incidents of summary executions, including mass executions, of at least 40 people. Four videos show torture and ill-treatment of a total of 18 detainees, including some who appear wounded; and 9 show mutilation of at least 8 dead bodies.

Many of the abusers and victims appear to be wearing military uniforms, suggesting they may be fighters, although some victims are wearing civilian clothes. In all the incidents detainees appear to be unarmed, posing no threat to their captors, and in several they are restrained.

Human Rights Watch has recorded another 20 cases appearing to show similar violations by both parties, but has not investigated these cases.

Four cases of executions appear to have been filmed by the perpetrators themselves, 3 by the RSF, including the execution of at least 21 men in El Fula, West Kordofan, in June 2024; the execution of at least 14 men in the aftermath of RSF attacks on Belila Airport, 60 kilometers southeast of El Fula, in West Kordofan in October 2023; and the execution of 2 men 12 kilometers south of El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan. The fourth is of the SAF's execution of three detainees, possibly children under the age 18, in October 2023 in Omdurman, northwest of the capital city, Khartoum.

Human Rights Watch analyzed another four instances in which SAF and RSF personnel filmed themselves torturing and ill-treating detainees, including by whipping, beating, and forcing detainees to walk on their knees on gravel roads. Analysis by Human Rights Watch suggests that these incidents occurred in Khartoum, Gezira, and North and West Kordofan states.

Three cases show SAF soldiers committing outrages against the bodies of apparent RSF fighters or civilians, including one in which they brandish two heads.

Since the conflict broke out in Khartoum on April 15, 2023, the leadership of both the SAF and RSF have failed to halt or address abuses. In July 2023, SAF-affiliated authorities [announced](#) national investigations into RSF abuses, headed by the attorney general, but made no mention of investigating crimes committed by their own forces.

The RSF, in a July 23, 2024 [letter responding](#) to a previous report by Human Rights Watch, provided a [code of conduct](#) that in vague terms bans mistreatment of detainees, and wrote that it had established a committee to investigate violations or abuses and to prosecute those responsible. But it has not provided any public evidence of its investigations or prosecutions.

On August 19, Human Rights Watch sent a detailed email summary of its findings with specific questions to Lieutenant Colonel Al-Fateh Qurashi, the RSF spokesperson, and to Brigadier-General Nabil Abdallah, the SAF military spokesperson. Neither has responded.

In February, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [reported](#) that hundreds of fighters had been detained by both parties and that the condition and whereabouts of most remain unknown. Human Rights Watch has previously documented widespread torture and execution of unarmed people by RSF forces in [El Geneina](#) and its suburb [Ardamata](#), West Darfur, in 2023. [Other monitoring groups](#) and nongovernmental groups have also [reported](#) on abuse, torture, and execution of detainees by both sides in various parts of the country.

The [UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan](#), established by the UN Human Rights Council in October 2023, is the only independent investigative body with the mandate to probe conflict-related violations across Sudan. Given the scale of abuses and the dearth of credible investigations by the parties themselves, council members should renew the mission's mandate at the council's September session, Human Rights Watch said.

Regional and international bodies, including the European Union and African Union, and individual countries should work together to hold those responsible for these abuses accountable, including by imposing individual targeted sanctions, Human Rights Watch said. Countries leading ceasefire and humanitarian access talks should also address the warring parties' abuses and ensure that there is provision for robust monitoring of violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, in any agreement reached.

“Sudan’s warring parties have shown a shocking disregard for human life and dignity,” Osman said. “The commanders need to be held to account for failing to prevent or punish these crimes.”

Methodology

Human Rights Watch did not find the videos it analyzed online before the suspected incident dates. Researchers analyzed the videos frame by frame to identify the abuses, determine as best as they could the affiliations of perpetrators and victims, and verify the locations of the incidents to determine how they corresponded to areas of territorial control at the time the videos were made. To assist in identifying the perpetrators and victims, Human Rights Watch analyzed comments made by those filming themselves that identified them or the detainees, and information shared alongside the videos on online platforms.

The videos were posted to various social media channels, including Facebook, X (formerly known as Twitter), and Telegram. A large majority of the videos were uploaded to pro-SAF or pro-RSF channels. Human Rights Watch has not included links to the online videos due to their graphic nature, but has preserved the visual evidence. In the report, audio or captions from the videos originally in Arabic were translated into English.

Summary Executions

Human Rights Watch investigated four cases of executions.

Mass Executions by the RSF

Human Rights Watch analyzed 3 videos capturing the RSF’s execution of at least 21 men—possibly 23—on the outskirts of El Fula, the capital of West Kordofan state. The RSF [reportedly](#) took control of the city on June 20, 2024.

A video uploaded to X on June 28, and analyzed by Human Rights Watch, shows 21 detained and unarmed men, many in SAF camouflage and some in civilian clothes, sitting on the ground near a communication tower, 1.5 kilometers west of El Fula. RSF fighters surround the detainees, lift their guns in the air, and intimidate the detainees, pushing one of them over. An RSF fighter comes into view, walks over to the detainees, and shoots at least four, one by one. As more shots ring out, other fighters move in front of the camera, obscuring the scene.

Another video uploaded to Telegram on June 20, captures the same scene shortly afterward as dozens of RSF fighters stand over the bodies. The person filming says, “Look at these rotten ones,” showing the motionless bodies. Then he says, “He is still alive ... take him,” and a single shot is heard and one of the men in SAF uniform is hit while a second shot is fired off camera. The person on the ground stops moving. The camera pans and shows two additional people motionless on the ground, some distance from the main group. Blood surrounds one of the men, whose hands are tied.

Human Rights Watch also analyzed three videos and one photograph with RSF fighters executing, or in the immediate aftermath of the execution of detainees, during offensive operations in West Kordofan. On October 30, 2023, the RSF posted a statement on X, stating it had begun an operation to liberate Belila Airport and nearby oil fields, 60 kilometers southeast of El Fula.

One of the videos, uploaded to a pro-RSF Telegram channel on October 31, captures the moments after RSF fighters execute 14 unarmed detainees, some in SAF camouflage and others in civilian clothes, in a parking lot by the airport.

The video shows at least nine people, some in RSF camouflage and most of them armed, surrounding the bodies. As the person recording the video approaches, another person points a rifle toward the bodies, followed by the sound of gunfire and a dust cloud that quickly dissipates. As the person filming approaches the bodies, a pool of blood is seen surrounding most of the victims.

The photograph uploaded to a pro-RSF Telegram channel on October 30 shows the same scene, based on the position of the bodies lying on the concrete and the victims' clothes, and shows some of the wounds. It was uploaded with the caption: "The end of anyone playing with readiness." Readiness is a motto often used on social media by the RSF and its supporters to refer to the force.

Another recorded execution of 2 detainees by RSF fighters took place 12 kilometers southeast of El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan state. A video uploaded to X on May 8, 2024, was initially analyzed by [Mustafa](#), an open source researcher with [OSINT Sudan](#), and later analyzed by Human Rights Watch. It shows a group of armed men in a mix of civilian and military clothing surrounding two men in typical SAF camouflage.

The fighters instruct the detainees several times to say "readiness." The man filming grabs a fighter's assault rifle and says, "Don't shoot," then steps back and turns away. He then pans to show the 2 SAF soldiers, as assailants fire 25 shots, executing the 2 detainees. The man filming points to a third body a few meters away, near an ambulance surrounded by fighters, apparently already dead. A fourth body wrapped in fabric lies inside a nearby abandoned structure.

Executions by the SAF and Affiliated Forces

Human Rights Watch also analyzed a video uploaded to social media on October 5, 2023, showing the execution of three detainees by the SAF in Omdurman, which was [reportedly](#) partially under SAF control at the time. Five armed men, one of whom appears to be in full uniform of the Central Reserve Police, a paramilitary force affiliated with the SAF, and another who wears CRP trousers, are moving three detainees in civilian clothes in a courtyard between buildings.

The three detainees are possibly children under 18 and are blindfolded and shirtless. One has a bandaged foot. The soldiers force them into a pit, and one says, "These are mercenaries ... snipers...." At least 3 soldiers fire 31 times over the next 44 seconds at the people in the pit. The location was initially established by [Mustafa](#) and confirmed by Human Rights Watch.

Torture and Ill-Treatment

Human Rights Watch analyzed four incidents that show SAF and RSF fighters repeatedly torturing and ill-treating detainees.

Torture and Ill-Treatment by the SAF

A video reviewed but not geolocated by Human Rights Watch, which was uploaded to Telegram on November 7, 2023, shows several armed men – some in SAF uniforms, one in Central Reserve Police camouflage trousers, some carrying assault rifles, and some in civilian clothing – torturing six blindfolded detainees with their hands tied behind their backs by whipping and beating them with sticks.

Torture and Ill-Treatment by the RSF

A video uploaded to a pro-RSF Telegram channel on November 5, 2023, captures an incident of torture and humiliation by RSF fighters at Belila Airport in West Kordofan. Human Rights Watch was unable to determine if this event took place around the same time as the execution of the 14 unarmed detainees.

At least four armed people, three in full or partial RSF camouflage, are seen forcing a man to undress on the airport runway. As the man takes off his pants, leaving him in a white undershirt and blue boxer shorts, an RSF soldier kicks him in the back. As the camera moves, it shows a man in RSF uniform placing his boot on the neck of the same man lying on the tarmac. A second victim, a man in a red T-shirt, is lying still on his side on the tarmac with a pool of blood surrounding his lower back. He opens his eyes as the person filming approaches.

The person filming asks the first detainee, “Who are you affiliated with?” Then another fighter kicks the first detainee in the back. The person filming says: “Don’t hit him!” and orders the detainee to get up and for someone to take him to a vehicle. Human Rights Watch was unable to determine what happened to them after that.

A video uploaded to X on August 24, 2023, depicts a third incident. The video was initially analyzed by [Mustafa](#), who found that it was recorded in Al-Ozozab, Khartoum. It shows six armed men, one in RSF camouflage, forcing nine detainees, including at least one older man, to crawl or walk on their knees on a gravel street. All nine are in civilian attire and have their hands tied behind their backs.

More armed men, at least one in uniform with an RSF arm patch, are visible behind the group. A tenth detainee with a possible blood stain on his chest is being pushed along. The RSF fighter filming repeatedly calls the detained men “dogs.” A man in civilian clothes and with an assault rifle hits the detainees on the back with a stick.

A fourth incident, that according to the commentary accompanying the video says took place in Gezira state, was uploaded to Telegram on March 30, 2024, and shared widely by pro-SAF channels and accounts. The video shows two men in civilian clothes, one with his hands tied behind his back, in the back of a pickup truck, surrounded by three men with assault rifles and some fighters in partial or full RSF uniform.

RSF fighters gather around the detainees, force them out of the truck, and repeatedly ask, “Where are your guns?” A person in civilian clothes whips the detainees for about 20 seconds. The RSF fighters then force the detainees into a building. Once inside, the RSF fighters and a man in civilian attire begin hitting and kicking the detainees. Human Rights Watch was unable to determine what happened to them after the video clip ends.

Mutilation of Bodies by the SAF

Human Rights Watch has documented three cases of SAF soldiers mutilating bodies of apparent RSF fighters since January, including one case in which they are mocking severed heads.

Four videos of one incident show the SAF soldiers setting alight bodies after possibly executing them. Human Rights Watch could not independently verify the location.

The first video posted to X on June 5, 2024, shows several SAF soldiers in three pickup trucks surrounding a fourth pickup truck in an undetermined location. Seven armed soldiers, some in typical SAF camouflage, approach the fourth vehicle, in which a body hangs out from the driver’s seat. One soldier drags a body dressed in dark pants from the back of the pickup and throws it onto the ground. Three more bodies are visible on the other side of the truck wearing RSF camouflage. A fighter can be heard saying, “One [of them] is alive!” Another fighter says, “Shoot him,” and shots are fired.

One of the SAF soldiers is later seen firing four rounds, apparently into the back of the truck, the gun just out of view of the camera. The video shows what appears to be a cartridge casing ejecting from the gun and landing next to the person filming. A third soldier appears to be searching the front of the car. The person filming makes their way back toward the other side of the truck.

A soldier takes aim towards what looks like the direction of the person with the dark pants and fires two shots. There are sounds of cheering. This raises concerns about a potential execution, though it remains unclear whether the person in dark pants was still alive, as the camera pans away when the gunshots are heard.

A second video, uploaded to the same post, appears to show the soldier who fired the two bullets igniting something and throwing it beneath the car. The SAF soldiers run away, while shouting in apparent celebration. The camera pans back toward the vehicle, from which large flames and dark plumes of smoke emerge.

Two videos uploaded to a Telegram channel on June 4 and 5 show the same vehicle burned and at least three scorched bodies lying next to it. The video uploaded on June 4 shows 18 men standing in a semicircle around the vehicle, with one of the bodies still aflame. Nearly everyone is wearing SAF military fatigues. One officer stands inside the semicircle, pointing to the burned bodies and saying, “This is not a human fire ... this is a god’s fire ... burning these people....”

Human Rights Watch also analyzed three videos of SAF fighters holding the severed heads of two victims.

Two of the videos of this incident were uploaded to Telegram on February 15, and the third on July 3. In all three, men in SAF camouflage are seen in the same location, as one soldier is holding a decapitated head referring to the person killed as “habeshi,” a term used in Sudan to refer to people from Ethiopia and Eritrea that can sometimes be used as a racial slur to describe a foreigner. The same person points at the camera while parading the decapitated heads of two victims. A senior SAF officer is seen addressing the soldiers, pointing to the two decapitated heads while saying: “this is the fate every [RSF] will get.”

OHCHR [said](#) it has credible video evidence, also posted online on February 15, to show that several students travelling by road to the capital of North Kordofan, El Obeid, “may have been beheaded by men in SAF uniform in Obeid City,” because the “victims [were seen] as being RSF supporters based on their perceived ethnicity.” The SAF issued a [statement](#) on February 18, pledging to investigate the incident, but is yet to share publicly any evidence of an investigation or any findings.

Another case of mutilation by SAF forces took place in Omdurman in March, when two videos analyzed by Human Rights Watch were shared widely on pro-SAF Telegram channels on March 21, 2024, and in the following days. The videos were initially identified by [Mustafa](#), as having been filmed on al Arda street in Omdurman, and later confirmed by Human Rights Watch researchers.

In one video, a person in SAF camouflage holding an assault rifle is showing four apparently dead and unarmed men lying close together in the middle of the street. A pool of blood surrounds two of them. The person filming shoots one of them in the head at point blank range, and then they do the same to two of the others.

In another video, filmed after the incident based on the dried pools of blood, six men in SAF uniform stand over the bodies. One appears to be a commanding officer, based on the epaulettes on his uniform, which includes the emblem of the Corps of Engineers, a SAF division [known](#) to be battling in Omdurman.

Relevant Legal Standards

While detainees in a non-international armed conflict, as is the case in Sudan, are not accorded the status of prisoners of war under the laws of war, international humanitarian law prohibits arbitrary deprivation of liberty and guarantees due process rights regardless of whether a detainee is a civilian or a fighter.

Summary executions, as well as ill-treatment and torture of detainees, are illegal under any circumstances under both international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions applies to situations of non-international conflict, and explicitly forbids, among other acts, summary executions, committing outrages upon personal dignity, and torture, mutilation, and inhuman and degrading treatment of all detainees. Serious violations of common article 3 are deemed war crimes for the purposes of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

[International humanitarian law](#) applicable to the conflict in Sudan prohibits the “mutilation of dead bodies.” Mutilating bodies in non-international armed conflicts is the war crime of “committing outrages upon personal dignity” under the Rome Statute.

Under international [human rights law](#), the United Nations Human Rights Committee, the body of independent experts that monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by its states parties, has indicated that the disrespectful treatment of human remains may amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of the family of the dead.