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Sudan: Tackle Spiralling Violence in West Darfur

Killings, Attacks on Infrastructure, Blocked Humanitarian Aid



A Sudanese refugee who fled the violence in Sudan's Darfur region, at her makeshift shelter in Koufroun, Chad, May 15, 2023. © 2023 REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

(Nairobi) – The United Nations Security Council and other international bodies should adopt urgent measures to better protect civilians and provide assistance to affected communities in [Sudan's](#) Darfur region, Human Rights Watch said today. Since April 2023, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), an independent military force, and allied Arab militias have been attacking non-Arab communities in West Darfur.

“Communities in Darfur faced ethnic cleansing and have continued to face other abuses for two decades while the international community largely stood by,” said [Mohamed Osman](#), Sudan

researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The UN Security Council needs to urgently impose targeted sanctions and other measures against military commanders and militia leaders responsible for horrific abuses.”

Sudan’s doctor’s union has reported that 1,100 people have died in the West Darfur capital of El Geneina alone since mid-April, when the RSF and allied Arab militias attacked ethnic Massalit self-defense militias in the town. The fighting resulted in the mass displacement of non-Arab communities, and the RSF and militias committed widespread looting and arson and attacked critical civilian infrastructure, including internally displaced camps, hospitals, and markets. Assailants have also killed local leaders and [human rights defenders](#), including [at least two lawyers](#) who represented victims of the groups’ previous attacks in El Geneina.

Sudan’s national army, the Sudanese Armed Forces, retreated to their barracks in El Geneina instead of protecting non-Arab communities, in apparent dereliction of their duties.

Of the nearly [2 million people](#) displaced in Sudan since the conflict started on April 15, over 280,000 have been displaced within West Darfur alone according to the [UN](#), and about 150,000 have [fled](#) into Chad. In 2022, West Darfur already had the highest rates of food insecurity in Sudan. Civilians fleeing across the border to Chad have been attacked while many, notably Massalit young men and boys, have been trapped in El Geneina. Human Rights Watch has previously documented incidents of violence leading to serious abuses against civilians in the area over the past three years, including in [January](#), [April](#), and December 2021, and in April 2022 by heavily armed Arab militia alongside RSF members.

On June 14, the West Darfur governor, Khamis Abbakar, was brutally killed shortly after he [told the media outlet Al Hadath](#) of the horrors unfolding in El Geneina and blamed the RSF and its aligned forces. Videos on social media last showed Khamis alive under the groups’ custody. Human Rights Watch confirmed the location where these videos were taken as inside a compound in El Geneina. “Commander’s Office” is written above the door of the building where the governor was taken, reportedly referring to the office of the town’s Rapid Support Forces leader. The group has denied responsibility for Khamis’s death, issuing a statement attributing his “assassination” to “[outlaws](#).”

Humanitarian aid and property continue to be targeted, looted, and destroyed in the region. Aid operations in El Geneina have come to a standstill, humanitarian workers told Human Rights Watch.

The UN Security Council should closely follow the situation in Darfur and promptly and publicly condemn the most serious violations. It is essential for the UN to publicly identify those responsible while calling on the warring parties and allied militias to urgently end attacks on civilians and guarantee safe and unfettered humanitarian access and safety for those fleeing, Human Rights Watch said. Council members should put forward strong measures, including imposing specific sanctions against those responsible for serious abuses. Individual governments as well as the European Union and the African Union should adopt and implement similar measures.

Acts of violence in West Darfur since 2019 were visible warning signs, yet instead of stepping up

measures to protect civilians there, the Security Council and others took no measures to assist those at risk. Given the escalating ethnic attacks, the mounting civilian toll, and apparently inadequate civilian protection in Darfur since the Security Council's decision to withdraw peacekeeping forces from the region in December 2020, there is a need to explore options for increasing civilian protection, Human Rights Watch said.

The RSF and allied militias have continued to clash with the Sudan Armed Forces across the country for three months. Both parties have been implicated in serious human rights abuses, including indiscriminate attacks, blocking humanitarian aid, and using explosive weapons in densely populated areas in [Khartoum](#), where fighting has led to mass displacement.

In May, under the auspices of a [United Kingdom](#)-led special session initiative, the UN Human Rights Council was unable to establish an independent mechanism on Sudan and instead opted to provide the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights designated expert on Sudan with additional resources. The UK and other countries on the Human Rights Council, including African group members, should not wait for regional and bilateral actions to address the spiralling abuses, notably in Darfur. The council should convene on Darfur during its June session and allow the participation of Darfuri civil society groups in the proceedings.

The AU Peace and Security Council, which has so far deferred to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development in East Africa (IGAD) and failed to concretely intervene, should also take urgent steps to strengthen civilian protection and ensure humanitarian assistance.

“Darfuri communities under attack have been sounding the alarm bells in vain as the UN and regional bodies have ignored their pleas for better protection,” Osman said. “With ample evidence of increasingly heinous abuses, the UN and regional bodies urgently need to adopt measures to deter further atrocities and pave the way for meaningful accountability.”

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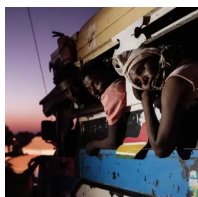
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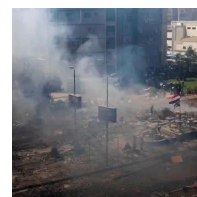
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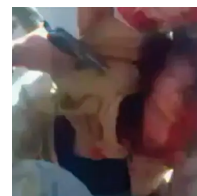
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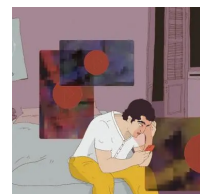
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