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Civilians at Risk as Large-Scale Fighting Looms in Darfur

Civilian Casualties, Threat of Atrocities Mount Following Fighting in El Fasher Vicinity



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Destruction in a market area in El Fasher, the capital of Sudan's North Darfur state, September 1, 2023. © 2023 AFP via Getty Images

After a months-long, uneasy *détente* between Sudan's two warring parties, hundreds of thousands of civilians sheltering in the city of El Fasher in Darfur are in the crosshairs.

In the past few days, several villages near El Fasher appear to have been [burned](#) to the ground. People in one camp for internally displaced people have reportedly been killed by [shelling](#) and in clashes. Alarming reports of mass mobilization of fighters on both sides raise concerns that fighting in one of Darfur's most populated cities could lead to atrocities against civilians.

El Fasher, the only capital in Darfur not controlled by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), is home to 2 million people, half a million displaced by hunger and war from other parts of Darfur including over the last year.

A patchwork of armed actors, including the Darfur Joint Protection Forces, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and the RSF control different parts of the El Fasher area. Tense calm alternating with episodic fighting has prevailed for months.

Over the last two weeks, there have been [reports](#) of an uptick in civilian casualties, with many killed and injured in both RSF & [Arab militia](#) attacks on non-Arab [villages](#) west of El Fasher as well as during [fighting](#) between these forces and SAF and allied forces, including shelling and bombing. In February, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF or Doctors without Borders) [warned](#) of catastrophic levels of malnutrition among children in the city. Further fighting risks entirely cutting off already malnourished displaced people from critical care.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [said](#) reports of an imminent attack raised the “risk of further violations and abuses against civilians.” The United States special envoy for Sudan [called](#) “on the RSF to end the siege” and urged “them, the SAF and its aligned fighters to respect IHL [international humanitarian law] and protect civilians.”

For almost a year, the RSF and allied groups have targeted the ethnic Massalit people of West Darfur with [summary executions](#), [sexual violence](#), and massive destruction of property, while also abusing people in other areas under their control, most recently in [Al Gezira state](#). The SAF have [reportedly](#) also arrested, tortured, and extrajudicially killed Darfuris. All warring parties have carried out indiscriminate attacks in [populated areas](#).

The risk of atrocities against El Fasher’s non-Arab civilians is all too clear.

The UN Security Council meeting tomorrow on Sudan should urgently ask the secretary-general to consider what kinds of measures the UN can adopt to better protect Sudan’s civilians. The African Union’s Peace and Security Council should warn against further attacks on civilians, call for respect for the UN arms embargo on Darfur, and make clear support for international investigations. Influential governments should make clear warring parties will face consequences for violating the laws of war. Without such basic steps, global leaders’ condemnations this week on the devastating one-year anniversary of the conflict will ring even more hollow.