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THE NUBA MOUNTAINS

A Window into the Sudan Crisis

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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Executive Summary

Sudan is in the midst of a human rights and hunger crisis. Khartoum has been destroyed. Darfur is once again experiencing mass atrocities including possible genocide. [Famine](#) has already been declared in part of the country and is likely to spread. Nearly every part of the country and many neighboring countries have been affected by the war, whether through direct violence, economic collapse accelerating food insecurity, or the arrival of refugees seeking safety and aid across borders.

Amid this turmoil, the area of the Nuba mountains bordering South Sudan and long controlled by the Sudan People's Liberation Movement North (SPLM-N) has become a haven of relative security, but far from untouched. An estimated 700,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) have arrived in the Nuba mountains since the start of the war in April 2023. A poor rainy season last year and a plague of locusts had already increased food insecurity in the area. Now, a sharp increase in arrivals of displaced people from other parts of Sudan and the closure of trade routes to the north due to the conflict have exacerbated the challenges.

During a Refugees International visit to the Nuba mountains, interviews with IDPs who recently arrived from various parts of Sudan attested to the ongoing atrocities and growing food insecurity in Sudan as the broader war continues. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo (popularly known as Hemedti), and their allied militias continue to commit serious human rights abuses and to hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

Those arriving in the Nuba mountains report indiscriminate killings in Khartoum and other conflict affected areas formerly controlled by SAF and looting along the way. Others, arriving from SAF-controlled Kadugli just west of the Nuba mountains, report dwindling food reserves amid harassment and denial of exit by SAF soldiers. Those who did arrive had to sneak out of the town, and some passed through areas controlled by RSF-allied militias. Many traveled several days on foot and arrived looking gaunt and weak. The manager of one IDP camp told Refugees International that three children had died of hunger in the previous week. A national NGO leader, long active in the Nuba mountains said, "we've never seen it this bad before." The state of the new arrivals is a warning sign of what is happening more broadly in Sudan. Famine is underway and is growing.

Urgent diplomatic pressure is needed to bring the warring sides to a ceasefire, and even more urgently, to allow access for humanitarian aid. In the immediate term, food must be surged to areas that are still accessible, whether across borders from Chad and South Sudan or across lines. The most effective way to deliver aid is through support for the local Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) and other mutual aid groups standing at the front lines of the humanitarian response in Sudan. This includes support for

long-established local groups in the Nuba mountains. These groups of local Sudanese know the needs of their communities best and have far greater access than international groups.

In areas of relative security, food and other humanitarian materials should be prepositioned and development aid given to build resilience, help bolster crops, and mitigate future food insecurity. With rapidly increasing needs and relatively safe accessibility, the Nuba mountains are one of the few places in Sudan where a robust aid response could be scaled up. It is an island of refuge and an opportunity that cannot be missed.

Recommendations

UN agencies and aid groups should:

- **Sound the alarm about famine in Sudan and roll out a robust famine mitigation plan.** Such a plan should include pressing the warring parties for humanitarian access, negotiating access based on local zones of control rather than through SAF approval, scaled up cross-border delivery of aid, and the appointment of a UN Special Humanitarian Coordinator on Sudan and the region to coordinate negotiations and the broader response.
- **Establish a major cross-border aid delivery effort commensurate with the scale of the emergency, including from Chad and South Sudan.** UN agencies must scale up aid through the recently reapproved Adre crossing into Darfur and push the SAF to allow expanded and sustained cross-border and cross-line access. Should the SAF continue to arbitrarily deny consent for aid delivery, donors should not await a UN Security Council resolution, but rather move ahead with an NGO-centered effort with UN logistical support up to the point of cross-border delivery – as was done early in the Syria crisis.
- **Pursue innovative ways to increase direct support for local groups through the Sudan Humanitarian Pooled Fund.** Ukraine’s pooled fund – which has seen some success in prioritizing national and local NGOs, developing a capacity assessment tool for small organizations, and in encouraging fair cost-sharing – provides potential lessons.
- **Substantially scale up humanitarian support to displaced people in the Nuba mountains,** as one of the few areas of the country where displaced people can be reached with relative safety.

The United States and other donor countries should:

- **Increase support for local groups** operating in the Nuba mountains and across Sudan, including Emergency Response Rooms and other local mutual aid groups. Such aid should include a “no regrets” programming approach that removes overly bureaucratic reporting impediments and fast-tracks more flexible and consistent funding. It should also include training and capacity building, inclusion in international donor conferences, and public recognition of local groups as humanitarian organizations protected under international humanitarian law.

- **Pursue alternative direct funding models for local groups** that reduce overhead pass through and vetting costs typical of UN and INGO intermediaries in favor of more forward-leaning, direct, and immediate funding that trusts and empowers local groups as the entities with the most access and knowledge of local needs.
- **Pursue a multi-year approach with humanitarian and development assistance to enhance resiliency in the Nuba Mountains**, including through both immediate lifesaving aid and the provision of cash, seeds, and agricultural equipment to local groups.
- **Push to end telecommunications blackouts** and work to ensure alternatives to maintain connectivity. Local groups depend on such connectivity to access cash, coordinate their efforts, and share potentially life-saving information. The SAF and RSF should be pressured to stop disruptions, and the United States and other countries should engage SpaceX's Starlink and other providers to maintain connectivity across Sudan.
- **Support documentation and collection of evidence of atrocities** by local groups and international investigations including the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, as people arrive to safer areas like the Nuba mountains.

The U.S. government should:

- **President Biden should speak out personally on the Sudan crisis**, declaring that famine and possible genocide are taking place and supporting robust diplomatic and famine response efforts.
- **The President and Secretary of State should make the Sudan ceasefire negotiations a first-tier priority in regional diplomacy** by prioritizing Sudan in U.S. bilateral relationships with key states in the region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, and taking concrete steps to dissuade them from enabling the warring parties.
- **Publicly pressure the UAE to stop arming the RSF and its allied militias** responsible for atrocities and displacement that has led to famine conditions in Darfur. This can be done by publicly calling out the UAE's violation of the Darfur arms embargo and marshaling wider global diplomatic condemnation; and by expanding sanctions on UAE entities involved in violating the embargo and those involved with the conflict gold trade.
- **Push the SAF to allow expanded cross-border aid and UN agencies to deliver cross-border aid if the SAF continues to arbitrarily deny aid delivery.** Support international NGOs to lead on cross-border aid delivery as an interim measure until the UN is able to scale up its leadership.

Research Methodology

In late June 2024, Refugees International visited the Nuba mountains in Sudan to assess the human rights and humanitarian challenges facing internally displaced people. The team interviewed dozens of IDPs, independent experts, and local NGOs and authorities involved in the humanitarian response. Refugees International visited Kadugli and three IDP sites housing tens of thousands of IDPs. The report was further informed by a visit to Kampala, Uganda to speak with ERR representatives. This research trip and report builds on earlier reports based on trips to Sudan's borders with [Egypt](#), [South Sudan](#), and [Chad](#) since the crisis began in April 2023.

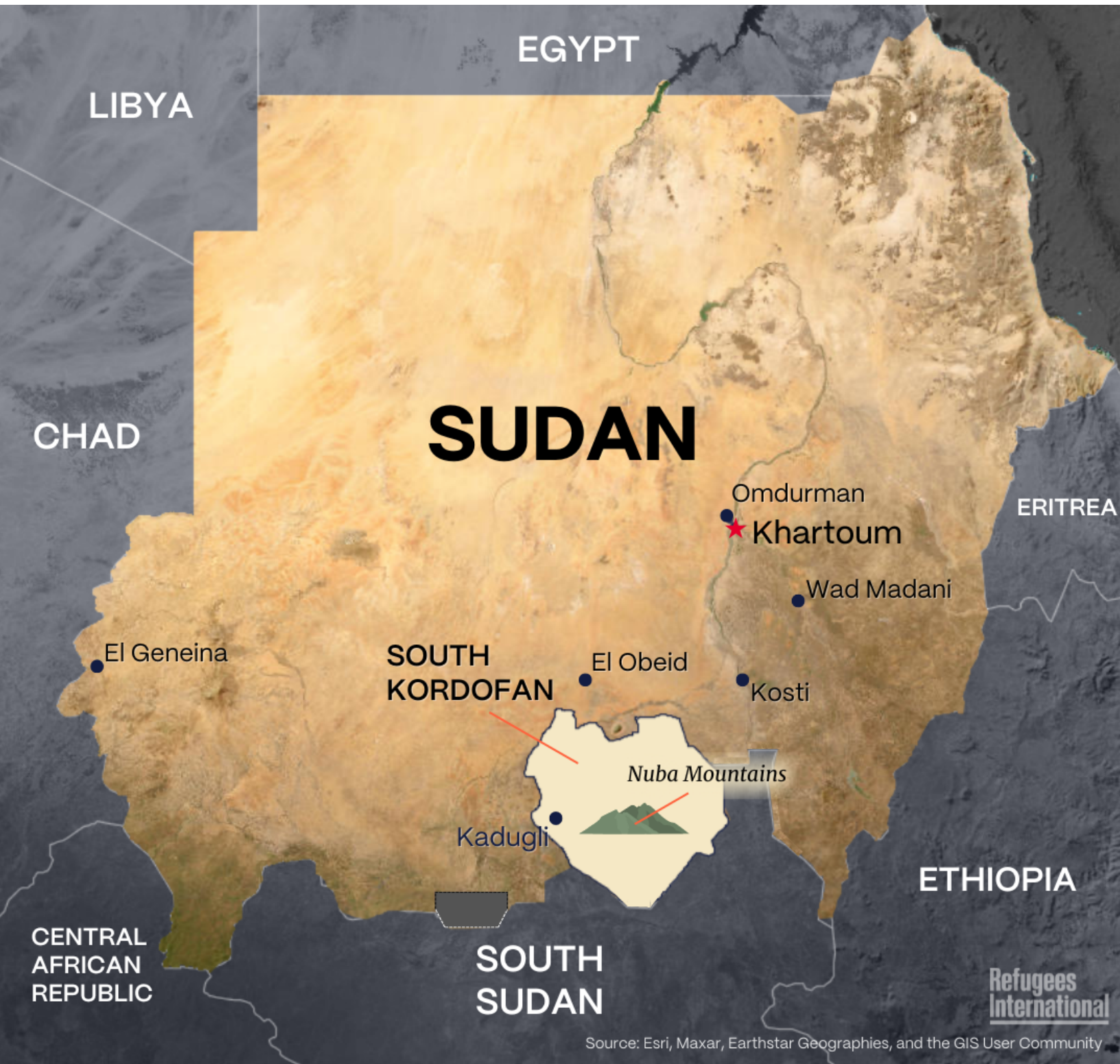
The Nuba Mountains: From Warzone to Refuge

The Nuba mountains in Sudan's South Kordofan state has long been controlled by a non-state armed group known as the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Until recent years, the region had been among the most dangerous places in Sudan, heavily [bombarded](#) by the Sudanese military. In the decade following the outbreak of war between the SPLM-N and former dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2011, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese refugees fled the Nuba mountains for South Sudan. Many remain there today.

However, a series of changes have occurred in recent years. In 2019, a popular revolution unseated Bashir. By 2021, a brief experiment with civilian governance was overtaken by a coup led by the now opposing generals heading the SAF and RSF – Burhan and Hemedti. Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, the Nuba mountains has become one of the safest parts of the country. Despite some [limited battles](#) between the SPLM-N and both the SAF and RSF on the edges of its territory, the two main belligerents have largely focused on each other, avoiding engaging the SPLM-N. This has transformed the Nuba mountains into a destination of refuge for people across Sudan.

Despite being spared the worst of the fighting between the SAF and RSF, the Nuba mountains have been greatly affected by the war. A poor rainy season in 2023 and destruction of crops by locusts had already increased food insecurity in the area. The cutoff of trade routes due to the conflict and a sharp increase in people arriving there to seek safety have exacerbated the challenges.

Local authorities and international NGOs familiar with the region estimate that at least 700,000, and possibly as many as 1 million, IDPs have sought refuge in the Nuba mountains since April 2023. They are arriving from several areas across the country including cities and towns like Khartoum, Omdurman, Wad Madani, Kosti, El Obeid, Talodi, Dilling, and Kadugli. Many started their journeys fleeing violence in Khartoum at the start of the war. More recent arrivals have come from the west, where SAF is holding onto control of the town of Kadugli, the largest in South Kordofan. RSF and allied Arab militias operate on the edges, creating a gauntlet through which IDPs must escape as food in the area becomes increasingly scarce.



Profiles of Abuse

IDPs who have sought refuge in the Nuba mountains recounted a long list of serious human rights abuses at the hands of the RSF, SAF, and their allied militias. These include beatings, detentions, arbitrary and indiscriminate killings, and widespread sexual violence.

Tahani, a 38-year-old woman who lived in Khartoum at the start of the war, detailed how the RSF occupation of her neighborhood brought hunger and insecurity, followed by SAF bombardment. She and many others who fled the capital in the first months of the war described navigating numerous check points as they made their way to the Nuba mountains. Soldiers and militia at checkpoints often harassed women, detained men, and stole anything of value. Amira, a 36-year-old mother, who similarly fled Khartoum early on, told Refugees International, “even just leaving your house to get water, you risked being killed or raped by RSF soldiers.” She fled after her son was detained and beaten. One man who arrived after several weeks of travel by bus, hitchhiking, and foot teared up when recounting that “many died along the way.”

Hamdul, a 25-year-old man, arrived with his 49-year-old father from Kosti, northeast of the Nuba mountains, saying that he had seen his younger brother killed in front of him by SAF soldiers who were going from house to house, looting, and shooting people indiscriminately. He said he saw women raped. His father has been losing weight in recent weeks and looked frail. Hamdul said it is a result of their journey. Despite facing limited food and shelter in the IDP camp, he says, “Here, at least, I can sleep and feel secure.”

More recently, many IDPs are arriving from west of the Nuba mountains where the SAF clings to the town of Kadugli amid RSF and RSF-allied militia controlled areas. Abdulbagi, a 40-year-old man fled Kadugli where he saw his brother killed in front of him. Hamid, a 45-year-old man fled attacks by the RSF near Lagawa – to the west of Kadugli – describing RSF soldiers shooting men, women, and children and burning homes.

Across Sudan, at least 18,000 people have been killed since the start of fighting in April 2023. This is according to the most frequently cited [statistics](#) from ACLED, but is almost certainly a gross underestimate. The UN Panel of Experts on Sudan separately [estimated](#) the death toll due to one occurrence of violence in El Geneina, Darfur in 2023 at more than 15,000 alone.

In Darfur, as detailed in a Refugees International [report](#) earlier this year, much of the violence at the hands of the RSF and allied militias has been ethnically targeted, echoing the genocide of 20 years ago. Refugees International interviewed people who recounted door to door attacks, burning of homes, and widespread sexual violence. This has been further documented in several other independent reports. The RSF has also attacked civilians and committed acts of [sexual violence](#) in other parts of Sudan and [raided warehouses](#) holding thousands of tons of food aid.

The SAF, for its part, has been responsible for similar abuses in various parts of the country. It has also bombed civilian areas and infrastructure, including schools and hospitals. More broadly, the RSF and SAF have hindered the delivery of life-saving aid. This has been both in subtle ways – drawing from a long history of slow-rolled visas for aid workers and other bureaucratic barriers – and more blatant ways. SAF has prevented UN agencies and aid groups from delivering aid across lines and across borders to RSF-controlled areas.

Profiles of Hunger

The physical condition of newly arriving IDPs, as well as their own accounts of hunger, attest to the dire food insecurity spreading across the country. Several displaced people Refugees International interviewed were barely able to walk. Two older men and an elderly woman who had just arrived said that what would normally take two days to walk had taken them 15 days. One man said he had gone three days without food before reaching the camp, describing people dying along the way. Another man, newly arrived from Kadugli, recounted that an eight-year-old boy traveling with him died of hunger, stating, “hunger is the number one reason we came.”



A man shows one of the plants that IDPs survive on in an IDP camp in the Nuba Mountains. Photo by Refugees International.

Three women who had just arrived from Kadugli described needing to hide or risk being harassed when out looking for food. They spent an entire week looking for food without finding anything significant. They went three days without food before reaching the camp.

The manager of one of the IDP camps described how some of those who had arrived the day before would likely have died if they had not received some porridge from local aid workers. He told Refugees International that three children had died due to hunger in the previous week alone. He added that, “these people came here to escape indiscriminate killing and hunger. When they arrive, they find no indiscriminate killing, but still face hunger.”

This point was echoed by several local officials and aid workers. One local official cited hunger as the greatest challenge saying, “there is death everyday here.” The head of a national NGO long active in the Nuba mountains, referring to food insecurity levels, said, “we’ve never seen it this bad before.” A high-level local government official said, “We are now raising the alarm. This is a very bad situation that we are in.”

Another local NGO worker stated that, “People are at the verge of starvation in most areas.” As one NGO told Refugees International, this was borne out by a recent non-public survey carried out in the western part of the Nuba mountains near Kadugli, which found that 90 percent of the population was facing crisis levels of food insecurity. Local groups warned that the Western Jebel area, in particular, is facing a dire situation. Many people have fled there from near Kadugli recently and remain cut off from aid due to proximity to front lines and the rough terrain made worse by the rainy season set to last through September. One of the camps Refugees International visited was particularly dire given the number of recent arrivals, their physical conditions, and the lack of resources. In August, the SPLM-N [declared](#) that famine is now present in the Nuba mountains.

This also reflects the situation in many other parts of Sudan. The most recent alert by the Integrated Food Insecurity Phase Classification (IPC), the main global monitor of food insecurity, [warned](#) that half the population (25.6 million people) is facing crisis levels of food insecurity, with at least 750,000 people in 10 states already facing famine levels. At the end of July, the IPC’s [Famine Review Committee](#) for Sudan found that famine conditions are already present in parts of North Darfur, including the Zam Zam IDP camp. Independent [analysis](#) by the Clingendael Institute finds that excess mortality due to hunger could reach 2.5 million people by September 2024. Local groups in Sudan told Refugees International that famine has already arrived and is spreading.



Rania, 26 – IDP from Khartoum, then Kadugli, and now in an IDP camp in the Nuba Mountains. Photo by Refugees International.

Profiles of Displacement

Once IDPs reach the Nuba mountains they find refuge, but continue to face a range of problems from inadequate food and shelter to the trauma they carry with them. A comprehensive [IDP assessment](#) in April 2024 found widespread malnutrition, severe food insecurity, and serious limitations on sanitation, health, and shelter. These conditions remained and appeared to have further deteriorated at the time of Refugees International's visit.

Most IDPs arrive with few possessions. Rania, a 26-year-old woman, described leaving Kadugli at night with nothing but water and clothes for her children. Another woman told Refugees International, "The way you see us is the way we left. No shoes. No food."

As described earlier, many IDPs arrive not having eaten for days or surviving on wild plants. Upon arrival, they receive modest amounts of food but continue to struggle to get enough. As one mother described, she and her children survived by eating leaves as they fled, and in the camp, "even now we're just eating leaves from the trees."

The lack of food remains the most urgent challenge. As one local NGO worker told Refugees International, "food is the number one priority, most children are very malnourished."

Beyond hunger, the most frequently cited challenges IDPs face in the Nuba mountains are a lack of sufficient shelter, water, sanitation infrastructure, medicine, and trauma-healing services. Also cited are the lack of access to education and development support.

None of the IDP camps Refugees International visited had adequate shelter. While people were able to construct makeshift straw structures, not enough had tarps or had tarps that were already shredded from the elements. In one camp, officials estimated that only about a third of the shelters had tarps. This raises serious concerns during the rainy season when intense and prolonged rainfall occurs in the Nuba mountains, leading to conditions ripe for the spread of diseases. As one local official told Refugees International, his office, in one of the few concrete buildings near the camps, was inundated by IDPs any time it rained.

Access to safe drinking water is also a big challenge. One camp official said that the closest bore holes were between 30 minutes and an hour away by foot, leading many women to spend all day carrying jerry cans to fill and waiting their turn. A lack of latrines adds further challenges with sanitary conditions. The IDP assessment survey from April [found](#) that 84.5 percent of respondents used no sanitation facilities and that 95.2 percent had no access to handwashing facilities.

Several local officials and humanitarian workers also raised the need for psycho-social support services or activities, and this was apparent in several of the interviews that Refugees International conducted. As one local official told the team, "people are very traumatized by the fighting between Hemedti and Burhan. Many have seen people killed

and raped.” As one camp coordinator told Refugees International, “IDPs put on a strong face, but when you ask their kids how they are doing, they say my mom is always crying. She wants to go back.”

Many IDPs also had to leave loved ones behind, often unable to communicate with them and having no knowledge of where they were. Amira, a 36-year-old mother, had tears in her eyes as she described fleeing Khartoum and being unable to bring all of her children with her. They stayed behind with her husband. Awadia, a 42-year-old mother from Kadugli, arrived with four of her children but had to leave two behind with a relative. Similarly, local officials recounted numerous cases of unaccompanied minors arriving and the need for assistance in reuniting families or supporting orphans.

Others carry both emotional and physical trauma. Hani, a 33-year-old mother, lost a daughter and son as well as one of her legs in a bombing in Khartoum. She appealed for trauma assistance and aid for disabled IDPs.



Hani, 33 – IDP from Khartoum now in an IDP camp in the Nuba Mountains. Photo by Refugees International.

The conditions in the camps can be attributed to both the sharp increase in the number of arriving IDPs since April 2023 and to a lack of resources. Some humanitarian assistance has been arriving in the Nuba mountains, but nowhere near enough. Food distributions in the camps have been infrequent and insufficient. In one camp, officials said that the last distribution had been carried out a month before but with only enough rations for 10,000 people in a camp that was holding more than 50,000. It was unclear why the mismatch had occurred but growing numbers of new arrivals and logistical challenges likely contributed. The rainy season has now arrived and will last into the fall, making delivery of aid on muddy roads near impossible and cutting off some parts of the Nuba mountains completely. Still, efforts should be made to deliver what aid can be delivered by tractor or quad bikes and preparations made to scale up once the rainy season ends. Cash transfers can also allow farmers to purchase seeds locally and plant late season crops.

Many of these challenges extend to the host community in the Nuba mountains. More broadly, millions of people across Sudan and across borders face similar challenges, though in differing contexts. Some 10 million people have been [displaced](#) across Sudan, including 2 million who have fled to neighboring countries including the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Sudan.

Addressing the Crisis in Sudan

Growing needs and limited resources are the unfortunate reality in the Nuba mountains, across Sudan, and among those fleeing Sudan to other countries. The ultimate solution must be a political one, one in which the warring parties agree to a ceasefire and allow for unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid. As a local aid worker told Refugees International, “the influx of IDPs will not stop until there is peace.” The United States and like minded countries must engage countries like Egypt and the UAE – those supporting the warring parties and with leverage over them – in pursuit of robust diplomatic efforts at the highest levels.

In mid-August, the United States began leading a new round of talks in Switzerland over a ceasefire and humanitarian access that included Egypt, the UAE, and other key countries as observers. But at the time of writing, the SAF had not joined. These talks follow multilateral engagements by the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan and are seeking to build off of earlier efforts co-hosted by the United States and Saudi Arabia that had secured written (but never actualized) [commitments](#) to humanitarian access and steps towards a ceasefire by the RSF and SAF. The Switzerland talks notably included several countries with leverage over the warring parties and led to a SAF [announcement](#) that it would once again allow cross border aid delivery from Adre, Chad into Darfur. But the failure of the RSF or SAF to engage in direct talks or make progress toward a ceasefire mean that further diplomatic efforts will be needed.

To bolster such efforts, the United States should prioritize Sudan in its bilateral engagements with key countries like Egypt and the UAE. This should include ramping up diplomatic pressure on these countries to use their leverage to restrain the warring parties or risk sanctions for continued diplomatic and military support to them. The UAE, in particular, must be publicly called out and [pressured to stop arming](#) the RSF and its allied militias responsible for atrocities and displacement that has led to famine conditions in Darfur. The U.S. Treasury Department has [blocked access](#) to the U.S. financial system for seven Emirati-based companies based on the suspicion that they have violated U.S. sanctions on Sudan. These sanctions should be expanded, including in coordination with EU allies, and condemnation of the UAE’s role should be more explicit if it continues enabling atrocities by the RSF.

Diplomatic efforts should also be enhanced through the direct involvement of the Secretary of State and President Biden, who is yet to speak out meaningfully on Sudan’s war, and has been publicly silent on the crisis [since May of last year](#). President Biden should declare publicly that worsening famine and atrocities in Sudan are unacceptable, and should mobilize robust diplomatic and humanitarian efforts as he has personally done on Ukraine.

UN agencies and international NGOs should similarly sound the alarm on the determination by the Famine Review Committee and others that famine is present in parts of Darfur and likely spreading. Such a declaration should be coupled with a commensurately robust famine mitigation plan that includes continuing to press the belligerents for humanitarian access, negotiating access based on local zones of control, scaled up cross-border delivery of aid, and coordinated negotiations and response through the appointment of a UN Special Humanitarian Coordinator on Sudan and the region – as further attention and high-level coordination are needed to address humanitarian crises in South Sudan and Ethiopia.

Supporting Local Efforts

The most effective way to assist those in need will be to support local aid efforts. Within the Nuba mountains, [local groups](#) have long been working to meet local needs, formed partially by necessity during the many years that the region was largely cut off from outside access. Peace Committees and other local groups were formed initially to negotiate humanitarian access across lines, to share information about nutrition and use of herbal medicines, and to teach people how to get low and dig ditches to survive the constant bombardment by the Sudanese military during the years of war. Local and national NGOs have worked with these peace committees to ensure social cohesion and efficient delivery of aid.

Today, these groups are supporting safe corridors for civilians, exchanges of crossline aid on a local level, and social cohesion at a time when newly arriving IDPs add strain to already limited resources. Traditional chiefs are identifying land for IDPs to grow their own crops to increase their own resiliency. As one local NGO leader told Refugees International, “we don’t know how long or how much aid [we’ll receive] in [the] future.”

Local groups with whom Refugees International spoke appealed for cash assistance to buy and distribute seeds, particularly local sorghum crops that are hardier and can be planted late into the rainy season. They further appealed for development aid in the form of small farming tools, tractors, spare parts, fuel, and animal health assistance to prepare for an anticipated long stretch of need and recovery. Local groups and newly arriving IDPs alike anticipate an ongoing war and more arrivals in the months ahead.

Beyond the Nuba mountains, local aid efforts have been a bright spot amidst the crisis in Sudan. ERRs and other mutual aid groups have been formed within neighborhoods and linked with others across the country. These groups have facilitated evacuations of civilians, set up communal kitchens, provided medical support, formed women’s cooperatives, and acted as frontline providers of aid in areas unreachable to UN agencies and international NGOs. But, as with local groups in the Nuba mountains, these groups feel under-recognized and supported and continue to appeal to international donors to be further empowered. As the head of one local Nuba mountains group stated, “We feel forgotten by the world.”

Through much of the first year of conflict, ERRs and other local groups depended on donations from neighbors and diaspora. More recently, the United States and other donors have begun to provide limited amounts of aid, especially through international NGOs. But concerns about capacity and accountability have prevented further scaling up of these efforts. ERRs are [calling](#) for increased and sustained flexible cash funding, training and capacity building, and recognition as humanitarian aid workers protected by international humanitarian law. For their part, ERRs have developed robust, standardized monitoring and evaluation systems and have organized under a Localization Coordination Council. But, in conversations with Refugees International, ERR representatives said that overly bureaucratic reporting requirements and unpredictable funding continue to hamper

their efforts. They have received some level of recognition as legitimate humanitarian actors, but this should be backed by their inclusion in international aid conferences on Sudan, funding to support emergency evacuations, and more robust denouncements of harassment and attacks on ERRs by the UN and international donor countries.

International donors must get serious about supporting these local groups, including through increased training and capacity building. It also requires a bolder “no regrets” programming approach that fast-tracks more flexible and consistent funding while removing overly bureaucratic reporting impediments. These alternative direct funding models that reduce overhead pass through and vetting costs typical of UN and INGO intermediaries in favor of more forward-leaning, direct, and immediate funding that trusts and empowers local groups as the entities with the most access and knowledge of local needs. Such efforts are already underway in Sudan through the [Mutual Aid Coalition](#), but should be expanded. The Sudan Humanitarian Pooled Fund run by the UN’s Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA) should also look to the model of Ukraine’s pooled fund to find innovative ways to more directly fund local groups. The Ukraine fund has seen some success in shifting resources and leadership toward Ukrainian groups, including by developing a scorecard with criteria that recognizes the added value of local partners (helping to prioritize submissions from national and local NGOs), encouraging fair cost-sharing from international partners, and developing a capacity assessment tool aimed at smaller organizations. These efforts have also been shown to be more [cost efficient](#). Donors should, likewise, support international NGOs through more flexible monitoring and accountability requirements so that they can continue to provide capacity and know-how for these nascent groups, with the aim of increasing direct funding of local groups over time.

International actors can also support ERRs and other local groups by pushing for an end to [telecommunications blackouts](#) and work to ensure alternatives to maintain connectivity. The United States and other actors should press the RSF and SAF to desist from disrupting communication networks, while simultaneously engaging Starlink and other alternative internet providers to maintain their services across Sudan. Local groups depend on such connectivity to access cash, coordinate their efforts, and share potentially life-saving information.

Finally, the United States and other global donors should support efforts to document atrocities and collect evidence, including both through international investigations including the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan and through local groups in areas like the Nuba mountains where people fleeing recent atrocities are seeking refuge.

Cross-Border Aid Delivery

An effective famine response will also require scaled up cross-border delivery of aid. To date, UN agencies continue to treat the SAF as the legitimate authority in Sudan and to hold back on aid to the large areas of the country controlled by the RSF, even where aid delivery has been negotiated with the RSF. This has played out most prominently through denial of cross-line deliveries from the UN hub in SAF-controlled Port Sudan and cross-border aid from eastern Chad into Darfur. The SAF, after allowing some aid delivery into Darfur last year, closed the main border crossing at Adre and [heavily restricted aid](#) delivery into areas now facing famine conditions. SAF [announced](#) during the Switzerland talks in August that it would again allow use of Adre for aid delivery into Darfur, but details remain uncertain at the time of writing, and SAF continues to restrict aid delivery in other areas. This dynamic has also played out in the Nuba mountains, where [talks](#) have been held between the SAF and the SPLM-N about facilitating delivery of aid from South Sudan and cross-lines to areas bordering the Nuba mountains. These talks failed in June 2024, when the SAF insisted that no aid should be delivered to RSF-controlled areas and the SPLM-N insisted that it should go to all areas.

UN leadership should scale up aid through Adre and press the SAF to allow expanded cross-line and cross-border aid delivery. It should also prepare alternative options to scale up cross-border delivery of aid should the SAF continue to arbitrarily deny delivery of lifesaving aid. One alternative would be to seek a UN Security Council resolution to authorize cross-border aid, but Council politics and the [Syria precedent](#), where fights over renewals negatively affected the response, make this a fraught option. Further, there is a strong [legal argument](#) that authorities like the SAF that arbitrarily deny aid violate state obligations under international law and therefore have no legal standing to deny cross-border delivery of aid.

If internal UN legal concerns prevent the UN from engaging in cross-border operations without SAF consent, donors should pivot to establish an effort led by international NGOs, with UN logistical support up to the borders. The NGO-led effort early in the Syria response provides a model from which to learn. In the face of growing famine, creative alternatives for delivering food are urgently needed.



Amira, 36 – IDP from Khartoum now in an IDP camp in the Nuba Mountains. Photo by Refugees International.

Conclusion

The experiences of abuse and hunger shared by IDPs arriving in the Nuba mountains provide a window into the broader challenges faced across a country at risk of growing famine and mass atrocities. They speak to the urgency of the situation and the need for robust diplomatic efforts to stop the war and, more immediately, to negotiate access for humanitarian aid. But with deteriorating conditions, assisting those who can be reached in the interim cannot wait. International donors and NGOs should support cross-border aid and the efforts of local groups. Donor countries should also seek to provide seeds and farming equipment to enhance the resiliency of communities facing increased food insecurity. In places of relative stability, like the Nuba mountains, successful crops will be essential as more IDPs seek shelter there. As one man, recently arrived with a group of fifty others, shared, “more people are coming.”

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