

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	898
Land:	Sudan
Kilde:	Human Rights Watch (HRW)
Titel:	Sudan: Armed Forces Airstrikes in South Darfur
Udgivet:	4. juni 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	29. august 2025



Document #2125970

HRW – Human Rights Watch (Author)

Sudan: Armed Forces Airstrikes in South Darfur

June 4, 2025 12:00AM EDT | Report

Indiscriminate Strikes Add to Record of War Crimes

- The Sudanese Armed Forces killed scores of civilians in attacks that used unguided air-dropped bombs on residential and commercial neighborhoods in Nyala, South Darfur in early February.
- These attacks were indiscriminate because the bombs used have wide-area effects with limited accuracy and cannot, under most conditions, be directed at a specific military target in populated areas. Deliberately or recklessly conducting indiscriminate attacks is a war crime.
- The Sudanese Armed Forces should immediately end all indiscriminate attacks. Other countries should sanction Sudan's air force leadership for such attacks.

(Nairobi, June 4, 2025) – The Sudanese Armed Forces used unguided air-dropped bombs to carry out attacks in residential and commercial neighborhoods in Nyala, South Darfur in early February 2025, Human Rights Watch said today. The indiscriminate attacks, apparent war crimes, killed and injured scores of civilians.

The Sudanese military has repeatedly conducted attacks on Nyala, the capital of South Darfur, since the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the military's adversary in the conflict, [took control](#) of the city in late October 2023. The city, home to over [800,000 inhabitants](#) before the current conflict, is the largest city in Darfur and one of the largest in [Sudan](#).

“The Sudanese military has hit densely populated residential and commercial neighborhoods in Nyala using inaccurate bombs,” said [Jean-Baptiste Gallopin](#), senior crisis, conflict and arms researcher at Human Rights Watch. “These attacks have killed scores of men, women, and children, destroyed families, and caused fear and displacement.”

Human Rights Watch received credible reports of numerous strikes between November 2024 and February 2025, and researchers conducted detailed investigations into five airstrikes on February 3, which was particularly deadly for civilians. Researchers interviewed 11 victims and witnesses and 3 medical staff who treated victims, and analyzed satellite imagery, photographs and videos from social media and witnesses, including of munition remnants from three of the strikes.

The February 3 strikes hit busy residential and commercial areas in the central Al-Jumhuriya and Al-Cinema neighborhoods in quick succession, as well as Congo Road, a major road in the city, witnesses said. Doctors Without Borders (MSF) [reported](#) that 32 people were killed and dozens were injured. A strike that hit a grocery store near the Mecca Eye Hospital on a street teeming with people and vehicles, was particularly deadly, witnesses said.

“[The] place was completely destroyed and damaged by the airstrike,” said a man who arrived at the scene shortly afterward. “Many people were killed. One [among the dead] was an [older] lady... And the passengers in a Toyota vehicle, and people passing by.” He said that more than 35 people were killed there.

ACLED, which collects data on conflicts around the world, estimates that 51 to 74 civilians were killed and scores more injured between February 2-4. MSF [reported](#) that at least 25 people were killed in strikes on February 4 and that 21 people injured in a strike on a peanut oil factory were brought to the Nyala Teaching Hospital, which it operates.

Human Rights Watch reviewed photographs of munition remnants to determine which weapons were used in three strikes on February 3 and was able to do so for two. Human Rights Watch determined that the strike just outside the Mecca Eye Hospital used an OFAB-250 air-dropped bomb, an unguided high-explosive and fragmentation bomb. In another strike that hit a road about 140 meters northwest of the hospital, Human Rights Watch identified an FAB-series general purpose, unguided air-dropped bomb.

Five witnesses described a single aircraft, not consistent with a jet fighter, overhead at the time of the strikes. “I saw the airplane circling around the city,” one man said. This was a big airplane, like a cargo plane... It struck on its second circle around the city.”

"It was flying very, very high," said a daily laborer who survived a strike that killed his sister and nephew on February 3. "The time between the two strikes wasn't long, maybe one or two minutes—the plane hits, takes a turn, and then hits again, after a very short interval."

Because OFAB-250 and other unguided bombs in the OFAB or FAB series have wide-area effects and limited accuracy, they cannot, under most conditions, be directed at a specific military target. So when used in a populated area, such as the dense residential neighborhoods of Nyala, they are likely to hit military targets and civilians or civilian objects without distinction, making the attack indiscriminate. The February 3 strikes were apparently indiscriminate and in violation of international humanitarian law, Human Rights Watch said. Deliberately or recklessly conducting indiscriminate attacks is a war crime.

When forces are deployed in populated areas, such as the RSF in Nyala, they must avoid locating military objectives near densely populated areas and endeavor to remove civilians from the vicinity of military activities. The RSF severely restricts access for civilians to parts of eastern Nyala.

However, the airstrikes on residential areas of Nyala have exacted a heavy toll on civilians. "The airstrikes are the worst, because they destroy everything," said the daily laborer, "When it comes to bullets, people can avoid them and take cover from them, but we cannot take cover from airstrikes. They are too powerful."

Access to and availability of medical care for victims is minimal. Four witnesses interviewed said they were unable to get treatment to remove fragments of the munitions, because they could not afford it or because of the shortage of qualified doctors in Nyala.

The Sudanese Armed Forces should immediately end all indiscriminate attacks, including those involving the use of unguided air-dropped bombs on populated areas, Human Rights Watch said.

Other countries should follow the EU in sanctioning Sudan's air force leadership for such attacks. Sudan should guarantee access for monitors, including the International Criminal Court and the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan, to investigate violations by all warring parties. Governments should ensure the necessary political and financial support for ongoing investigations.

"Despite international expressions of concern, civilians continue to bear the brunt of Sudan's devastating two-year-old war," Gallopin said. "Other countries need to take concerted action to protect civilians and prevent further indiscriminate attacks by investigating and sanctioning those responsible on all sides."

Human Rights Watch and others have for decades documented indiscriminate aerial attacks on populated areas by Sudan's military using unguided bombs dropped from cargo airplanes flying at high altitude. In the current war, which started in April 2023, [numerous airstrikes](#) by Sudan's armed forces across RSF-controlled parts of Sudan have killed and injured countless civilians.

The early February strikes were part of a broader surge of aerial bombings of Nyala by the military. Over a three-month period between December 2024 and February 2025, ACLED recorded 41 days with airstrikes, including days with multiple airstrikes. Many have hit Nyala's eastern neighborhoods, which host a heavy concentration of RSF fighters across many locations, including at and around the Nyala airport, a key RSF hub.

The Sudanese military's intensified campaign of airstrikes on Nyala coincided with reports that the RSF had started to use the Nyala airport as a [drone base](#) and that large cargo planes were landing at airport. The RSF's use of the airport for military purpose makes it a military objective, and a legitimate target. Local media reported that the RSF in Nyala carried out waves of arrests of people it suspected of providing coordinates for airstrikes to the SAF [in early December](#) and again [in late January](#).

Attacks directed at RSF fighters and at military targets such as the airport, so long as they do not cause indiscriminate or disproportionate civilian harm, are compatible with the laws of war.

International humanitarian law does not prohibit attacks on urban areas if there are military targets but attacks directed at civilians or civilian objects, or that cause indiscriminate or disproportionate civilian harm are always prohibited, and may constitute war crimes if carried out with the requisite criminal intent. The presence of many civilians in urban areas places greater responsibilities on warring parties to take steps to minimize harm to civilians and attacking parties should seek to cancel or suspend an attack if they determine the target is not a military objective or would cause indiscriminate or disproportionate civilian harm.

February 2-4 Strikes on Nyala

There were daily strikes on Nyala between January 31, 2025, and February 5. Airstrikes hit the city center for three consecutive days on February 2, 3, and 4, a health care worker at the Nyala Teaching Hospital said.

On February 3, there were at least five strikes within a 40-minute interval. The first strike hit Congo Road, a major avenue in the city, near the Nyala Teaching Hospital. Two then hit houses in Al-Jumhuriya neighborhood. A fourth hit a road just north of the Cinema and a fifth hit a grocery store near the Mecca Eye Hospital, on the edge of the Cinema neighborhood.

Within 10 minutes of the first strike on February 3, patients began to arrive at the emergency room of the Nyala Teaching Hospital, a health care worker said. "While we were dealing with the patients, another bomb dropped. We were treating patients, and at the same time we were afraid." The health care worker said:

Some had severe injuries. Some had amputated limbs, others had severe injuries to the head or abdomen. Some had fractured upper or lower limbs. ... Two died in our facility. One, about 18, had head trauma. The other was about 30 and had polytrauma – an amputated foot and right arm fracture.

Fifteen or sixteen injured people were taken to the hospital that day, the worker said, and nearly 50 victims over these three days. Nine injured adults, including two women, were taken to the hospital the afternoon of February 2, with burns, fractures, and one with an amputated foot. On February 4, 21 injured victims were taken to the hospital: two died there, and two women died after being transferred out of the hospital, workers said.

All the victims taken to the hospital were civilians, two health care workers said. Both said the RSF use other locations to treat their injured fighters.

Strike on Congo Road, February 3

The first bomb to hit Nyala on February 3 struck Congo road, near Al Nur Al Khairi Eye Hospital and the cell phone company Zain, about 200 meters from the Nyala Teaching Hospital, three witnesses said. The explosion killed an unidentified number of civilians.

A day laborer from the neighborhood had just left his house with his 40-year-old sister and his nephew, in his 20s, when they noticed an airplane overhead. He said he did not notice any RSF presence before the strike:

I was only 10 meters away from my house when I saw the airplane, and people started to run around scared, and they said there is a plane, a plane is coming! ... It was a white plane... flying very, very high and the sound was so big... There was a crowd of people [on the street], people going to work, just being on the street, or going somewhere... There was some panic and people didn't know whether to stay outside or try to hide... Everybody started to run around. And then I said to my sister that we had to hide. I was a little bit ahead of [my sister and nephew] when the strike happened and killed them.

His sister and nephew were "literally cut into pieces," the laborer said. His leg was injured.

Human Rights Watch verified and geolocated a video, published to social media on February 3, showing a large dust and smoke plume from the strike location. Human Rights Watch also verified and geolocated 6 photographs from a Nyala resident that show two damaged buildings at the corner of the road. Satellite imagery from March 5 shows damage to both buildings.

Strike Near Mecca Eye Hospital, February 3

A bomb hit a grocery store less than 30 meters east of the Mecca Eye Hospital on the afternoon of February 3. Human Rights Watch spoke with six witnesses and survivors, who confirmed that at least 13 civilians had been killed and 16 injured. Three uniformed RSF fighters who were drinking tea on the street were also killed, one witness said. The strike took place after the strike on Congo road, witnesses said.

“Before the first explosion, there was the sound of an airplane,” said a medical professional who was working inside the hospital at the time. “When we heard the [first] explosion, we asked people to go out. Then the second explosion happened... minutes after the first one.”

The plane they had heard and seen was white, a woman who survived the strike said.

Before the strike there were “a lot of travelers coming and going” on the street near the hospital, said a shop employee who was finishing his workday when the munition hit, “people were moving. Others were coming in and out of ... the hospital.” Another witness said there were many people drinking coffee at a café in the vicinity of the hospital and that the street was particularly busy with civilian vehicles.

After the first airstrike hit on Congo Road, a woman who worked as a casual laborer said, “People were terrified. They started to go out into the street to see what was happening. Some of them were running on the street to try to take cover from the attack. There were a lot of people outside... people were taking rickshaws and running around.”

The strike hit a grocery store, destroying it, and damaged other buildings and at least one vehicle. Human Rights Watch verified and geolocated a video published to social media on February 3 at the location of the strike showing a building largely destroyed. A white Toyota Landcruiser is stopped in the road, severely damaged. The facade of the Mecca Eye Hospital is also visibly damaged, as are buildings on both sides of the road. Similar damage can be seen on satellite imagery from March 5.

A man who arrived after the strike described the scene:

[The] place was completely destroyed and damaged by the airstrike. Many people were killed... One was an [older] lady... And the passengers in a Toyota vehicle, and people passing by. [T]here were over 35 people injured or killed... all of them... civilians... Bodies were scattered... I asked the people who were there, "Is there any RSF presence, or people in uniform?" They said no.

The shop employee was with three relatives at the time. The strike killed his 32-year-old cousin, who was "torn apart," and severely injured the other two. He said he saw six other civilians killed as well as six injured people at the local supermarket. He was injured in the head, chest, and arm. At the time of the interview, metal fragments remained lodged in his chest because he had been unable to afford surgery.

The woman who worked as a casual laborer said the strike killed her 39-year-old mother on the spot, with catastrophic injuries to her left arm and abdomen, and injured her 14-year-old brother in the knee and her uncle, in his late 30s, in the head, back, and ankle. She said a colleague of her mother, who worked as a cleaner, was also killed on the spot, her arms severed.

Three men who worked at a juice store were killed on the spot, as was a woman in her early 20s known as Mushtaha, who worked as a tea seller.

Another woman who was on the street saw the body of the tea seller, alongside those of two men who had been killed in a car, and the bodies of three uniformed RSF fighters who were drinking tea at the time of the strike. She said she had been injured in her right breast and could not afford surgery. "I'm still bleeding, and the injury is not healing," she said in early April. "It affects my life severely."

A doctor said he saw four people who had been killed on the spot, and helped move three people who had been injured. A worker for a nongovernmental organization said he was in his office in the neighborhood when the strike hit and injured his colleague in the leg. Human Rights Watch also spoke with a middle-age worker who said he was injured in the jaw during the strike.

One woman who survived said that after the strike, RSF forces came to the site to collect the bodies of all the victims and give first aid to the injured.

Human Rights Watch reviewed photographs of remnants from the bomb received from a Nyala resident on February 20 and identified the tail fin assembly of an air-dropped OFAB-250 bomb.

Two Strikes on Al-Jumhuriya neighborhood, February 3

At least two explosive munitions fell in a predominantly residential area in the middle of Al-Jumhuriya neighborhood on February 3, killing at least 13 people, including 6 adults and 7 children, four witnesses said. Photographs shared on social media on February 3, and geolocated by Human Rights Watch show extensive damage to two residential compounds. Satellite imagery from March 5 also confirms the destruction.

One explosive munition fell on homes, killing an 8-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl and injuring at least two other civilians, said one man, who was a neighbor of the children who died. His own house was severely damaged, and his relatives injured in the strike.

At least 12 people were killed in another strike near houses in Al-Jumhuriya neighborhood, three witnesses said. One man said:

[After] the first strike [near] the [Nyala Teaching] hospital, we saw a lot of dust in the air. So we knew... I was running toward our house... I was outside in the street. I saw children fetching water. At that point, the airplane was heading north. At the same time [I was] looking at the airplane... The plane turned around and hit [near] the house... in the middle of the street... The shrapnel hit the children strongly... When I checked on the children, I saw their limbs.

The man's sister, who was in her mid-20s, and his 20-year-old son, were both killed in the attack.

The owner of a neighborhood restaurant, who survived the same strike but whose her 8-year-old daughter was killed, said the plane had been circling for a while when, concerned, she decided to close her shop for the day and prepared to leave. Then the munition hit:

When the strike happened, I was on the ground, I was very scared. I pronounced the declaration of faith. Then I felt something burn in my skin and started to see bleeding. I looked to my shop [and] I saw it was destroyed. A boy called Mohammed, son of my neighbor... was screaming. The shop was collapsed and there were people inside. I started to scream to get people to help me.

No one came. No one answered my screams...

Mohammed was killed... [He was] around 14 years old. His sibling Mohammed... was also killed... [He was] around 8 years old. Those two children were killed along with my daughter... She was 8 years old... My four [other] children were injured.

Her neighbor was in the market when the strike happened and when he returned, he found that his wife and three children had been killed. "When we came back, we found my family on the ground with their limbs severed," he said. "There were 10 people around the house, also killed."

Two witnesses said the RSF fighters would occasionally go to a facility in close proximity to the site of the strike. After the strike, he said RSF fighters came in a vehicle and together with civilians collected the bodies and took them to the hospital.

Strike north of the Cinema roundabout, February 3

A bomb hit the road north of the Cinema roundabout and northwest of the Mecca Eye Hospital, in the afternoon of February 3. One witness who passed by the site shortly after the strike said he heard that four people had been killed in a rickshaw and two in a car. A video published on social media on February 3 and geolocated by Human Rights Watch shows the immediate aftermath of the strike. Three bodies, including at least one woman, are visible, lying on the street as well as a destroyed, still burning rickshaw. Two men wearing military clothing are showing the bodies of the victims to the person filming.

Human Rights Watch reviewed photographs from a Nyala resident on March 25, and measurements of the remnants of the munition recovered at the site and concluded that the remnants were from an FAB-series general purpose air-dropped bomb.

Photographs provided by the Nyala resident show an impact crater on the road, two destroyed vehicles – a car and a smaller vehicle – and damaged buildings on the side of the road. The destroyed buildings can also be seen on satellite imagery from March 5.

Human Rights Watch geolocated a video published on social media on February 3 that shows a large smoke and dust plume rising from the location of the strike. The video is recorded from a building 120 meters west of the strike. A man wearing an RSF uniform is visible at the entrance of the building from where the video was recorded.

Associated documents

Document ID 2125970 Translation / language version

4 June 2025 | [HRW – Human Rights Watch](#) (Author)

Sudan

South Darfur: Article on airstrikes by Sudanese armed forces on residential and commercial neighborhoods in Nyala; numerous civilians killed

ecoi.net description:

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Country:

Sudan

Source:

[HRW – Human Rights Watch](#) (Author)

Published:

4 June 2025

Original link:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/04/sudan-armed-forces-airstrikes-south-darfur>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

18 June 2025

Document ID:

2125970

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(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

