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Sudan: Heightened Violence in Kordofan Region as More Militia Groups Step Into the Conflict

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Sudan at a Glance: 15 July-4 August 2023

VITAL TRENDS

- From 15 July to 4 August 2023, ACLED records over 350 political violence events and more than 1,090 reported fatalities in Sudan. As the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) exceeds 100 days, both sides have launched intense recruitment campaigns to boost their forces. Meanwhile, the RSF and the Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) continue to expand their control over territories in Darfur and South Kordofan, respectively. A worrying trend emerged during the reporting period, as more militia groups are getting involved in the fighting.
- Since the start of the conflict, Khartoum state has been the epicenter of violence in the country, with over 260 events and more than 520 fatalities recorded during the reporting period. South Kordofan state follows with more than 20 events and at least 55 reported fatalities. Fighting between the SAF and the al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N intensified in South Kordofan during the reporting period, as ACLED records a two-fold increase compared to the three weeks prior.
- The most common event type was battles (254 events recorded), followed by violence against civilians (69 events recorded). Over two-thirds of violence against civilian events were perpetrated by the RSF, with the majority in Khartoum state. The RSF reportedly has been forcibly expelling civilians in the south of Khartoum to occupy their homes.



Note: Political violence falling under the Protest event type is limited to the sub-event type Excessive force against protesters.

Sudan: Heightened Violence in Kordofan Region as More Militia Groups Step Into the Conflict

The conflict in Sudan [started](#) as a military confrontation between the RSF and SAF. However, fighting has since expanded far beyond Khartoum and drawn in additional actors, including rebel groups and ethnic militias supported by either party or pursuing independent agendas. Among other regions across Sudan, Kordofan has turned into a hotspot of this competition, with multiple actors joining the conflict. In the past month, the al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N has intensified its attacks against the SAF in South Kordofan, while the nomadic Kababish militias have started fighting against the RSF in North Kordofan.

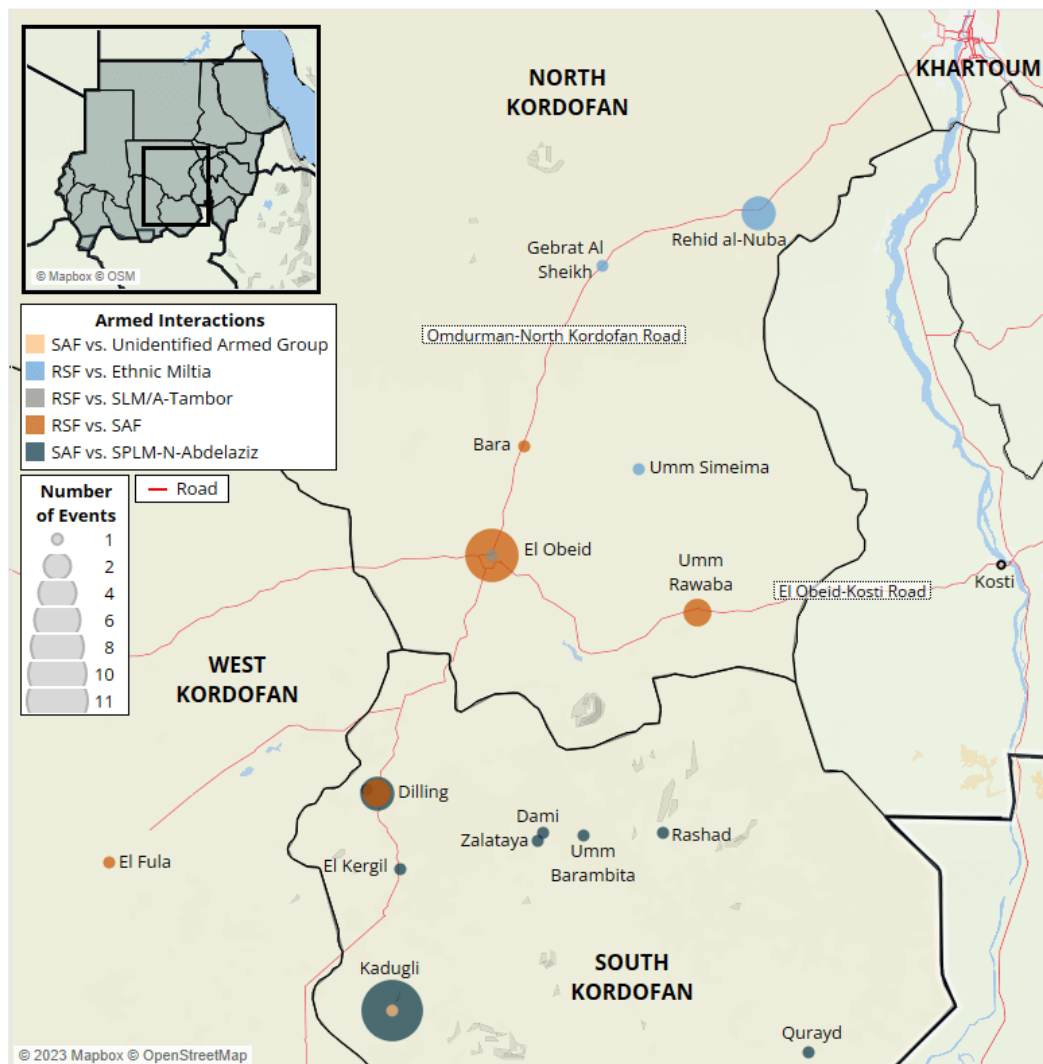
Yet the conflict continues unabated in other regions. Both the SAF and RSF started a nationwide mobilization campaign to recruit new troops, amid reports of regular army soldiers defecting to the RSF in Darfur region, and vice versa. Several communities across the country announced support for either side, committing to send fighters to join the battle. As violence expands and additional actors are getting involved in the fighting, the risk of a full-fledged protracted war further rises, with devastating consequences for the Sudanese population. This report discusses the recent developments in the conflict over the past three weeks, showing how violence has evolved in the capital and beyond.

Kordofan Experiences an Escalation of Violence

Violence has significantly increased in Kordofan since June, when the al-Hilu faction began [taking over](#) SAF camps in South Kordofan. In July alone, ACLED records 33 and 23 events of political violence in South and North Kordofan states, respectively, compared to only 15 and 14 in June. Recent clashes have mainly centered in the towns of Kadugli and Dilling in South Kordofan, while El Obeid and Rehid al-Nuba were the epicenters of fighting in North Kordofan (*see map below*).

Fighting in Kordofan

1 July - 4 August 2023



South Kordofan state is facing a complex conflict dynamic involving three main actors – the SAF, RSF, and the al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N, with each group controlling different areas within the state. The [al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N](#) claimed it got involved in the conflict due to insecurity caused by it and to protect civilians. It controls substantial territories in South Kordofan and Blue Nile, and in July, it managed to take over a dozen more positions in South Kordofan. Specifically, it took control of al-Rosieris area in the southeast of Kadugli, as well as other areas in Karkaraiah, el-Kergil, Abri, and Qurayd, while on 18 July, the SAF overtook Daloka area, south of Kadugli. Elsewhere, the RSF attempted to expand its control of Dibebat, as it clashed with SAF soldiers in al-Farshaia, north of Dilling, over two days, and subsequently overtook the area. It later withdrew, however, and the al-Hilu faction took control of the area. While the SAF – aided by the People Defense Forces and pro-government militias – had successfully thwarted SPLM-N assaults within SAF-held territories in South Kordofan before this conflict started, the current scenario casts doubt on SAF’s capacity to sustain simultaneous confrontations against both the RSF and the al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N.

In North Kordofan, fighting between the RSF and SAF continued, in the vicinity of the capital, El Obeid. Much like its neighboring state, other armed groups have mobilized in North Kordofan. One such group is that of the Kababish people, a nomadic Arab camel pastoralist group inhabiting North Kordofan who have taken up arms – particularly in response to RSF’s increasing attacks against civilians near areas situated along the road between Omdurman and Bara. ¹[Radio Dabanga, ‘RSF and Kababish clash in North Kordofan,’ 24 July 2023](#) The RSF reportedly uses the road to smuggle looted goods out of Khartoum and transport reinforcements from Darfur and Kordofan to the

capital.²[Sudan Tribune, 'Army threatens to destroy vehicles on Khartoum-Bara road,' 24 July 2023](#)
On 22 July, RSF soldiers and Kababish militiamen clashed in Rehid al-Nuba town after the RSF attempted to loot a civilian pickup truck. Other clashes broke out on the same day at an RSF checkpoint on the Bara-Omdurman road near Rehid al-Nuba. After the clashes, the Kababish militias, along with two other nomadic Arab pastoralist militias, the Dar Hamid and Jawmaa, closed the Bara-Omdurman road in Rehid al-Nuba. This move sparked fresh fighting with the RSF, which reportedly lost 10 military vehicles to the Kababish.

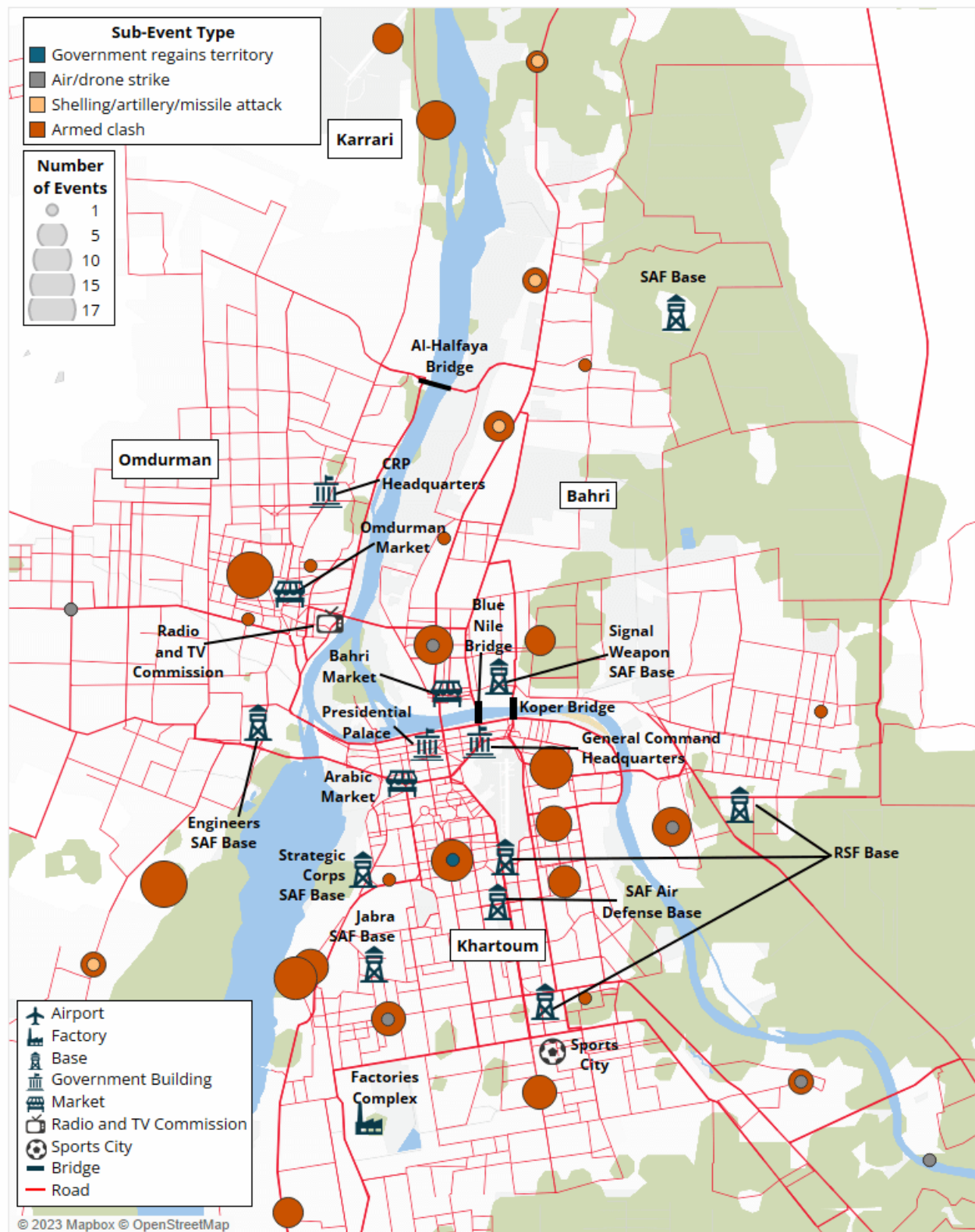
In order to cut the RSF's main supply route, the Sudanese prime minister-designate announced the closure of the Bara-Omdurman road on 24 July. The measure aims to prevent the RSF from using the road, as the SAF announced that any vehicles on the road would be considered military targets. In return, the RSF closed another road linking North Kordofan to Khartoum between El Obeid and Kosti, where clashes erupted between the SAF and RSF in Umm Rawaba on 1 August. Violence has largely subsided in the area for now as a result of these measures, but these incidents raise concerns about potential retaliatory attacks by the RSF and a possible escalation to include other local militias.

Fighting Rages on Multiple Fronts as the SAF and RSF Launch Recruitment Campaigns

The Khartoum metropolitan area has been the site of fierce fighting since the beginning of the conflict. In July, [after facing several setbacks in June](#), the SAF managed to regain control over Jebel Aulia and the area around the military General Command Headquarters in Khartoum, including the Blue Nile Bridge and Nile Street (*see map below*). It also overtook the al-Shahid Hamoda RSF base near Wadi Seidna, seizing dozens of tanks and armored vehicles as well as weapons and communication devices.

Fighting Between the SAF and RSF in Khartoum

15 July - 4 August 2023



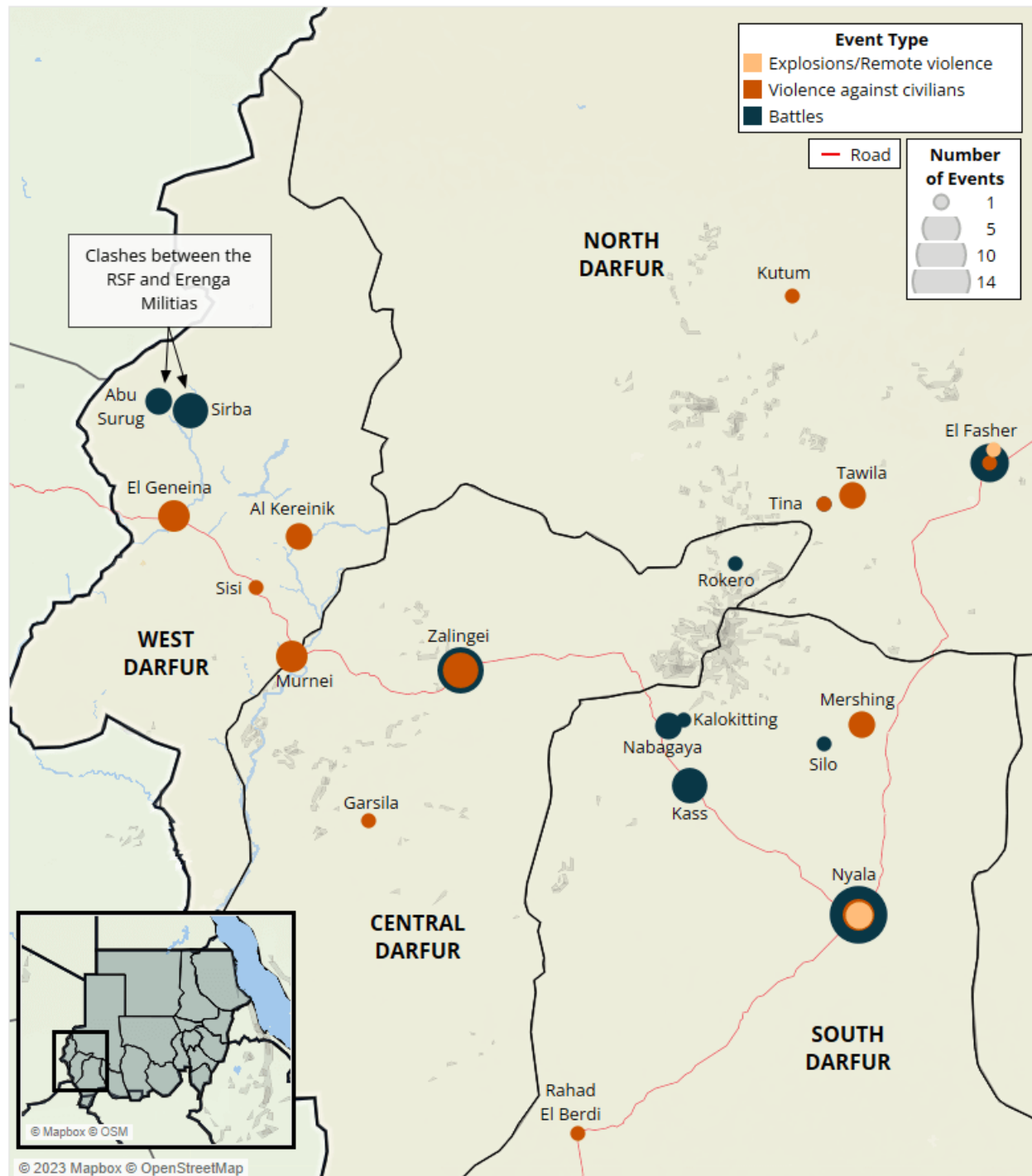
The ongoing fighting between the two sides over the control of the capital has resulted in devastating consequences for civilians, with both forces showing little regard for civilian lives and properties. Civilian targeting has risen sharply in Khartoum, as ACLED records a nearly 35% increase in July relative to the month prior. The majority of these incidents were perpetrated by the RSF, resulting in dozens of reported fatalities. In a concerning turn of events, the RSF has reportedly forced hundreds of civilians to evacuate their homes in the south of Khartoum. Reports indicate that the RSF has been removing residents from the area to fulfill its strategic intention of

transforming the area into a fully militarized operational zone, established as a launching point for targeted assaults on the SAF's Armored Corps base in south Khartoum.³[Al Arabiya, 'Khartoum residents asked to leave their homes as clashes continue in Sudan,' 30 July 2023](#)

In Darfur, the RSF took over additional territory in the past month, further strengthening its foothold in the region. There are also reports of escalating violence along ethnic lines, especially in West Darfur, where the RSF and allied Arab militias clashed with Erenga militias in Sirba and Abu Surug (*see map below*).

Political Violence in Darfur

1 July - 4 August 2023



In South Darfur, fighting between the SAF and RSF continued unabated in the capital, Nyala, during the reporting period, leaving more than 45 reported fatalities. Outside Nyala, the RSF took control of Kass city on 16 July after two consecutive days of heavy clashes with the SAF. The RSF

reportedly overtook the SAF 61st Brigade base, capturing dozens of SAF soldiers, including the commander, as well as military vehicles, cannons, and ammunition warehouses. Yet, there were also multiple reports of the RSF looting the market, three health facilities, and the headquarters of a Swiss non-governmental organization. An estimated 10 people, including civilians, were reportedly killed as a result of the fighting in Kass. Additionally, at least two women and another civilian were abducted, and thousands of families were displaced.

In West Darfur, the RSF and allied Arab militias fought against the SAF, backed by local militias, in Sirba. The SAF subsequently withdrew from the area. Following its withdrawal, the RSF and Arab militias clashed with Erenga militias in Abu Surug and Sirba over several days during the last week of July, with the former overtaking Sirba on 26 July. The assailants reportedly killed at least 200 people, looted homes, and then set them on fire. Over 5,000 people were displaced to Chad following the violence.⁴[Radio Dabanga, 'Tragic stories from Sirba as violence in West Darfur spreads,' 1 August 2023](#) According to Human Rights Watch, Sirba is the seventh location the RSF and allies have burned and destroyed since the start of the conflict.⁵[Human Right Watch, 'Sudan: New Attacks in Darfur,' 4 August 2023](#)

The RSF also claimed to have full control of Central Darfur, after seizing the regional capital, Zalingei, on 4 August. A few days earlier, the Mustafa Tambor faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) – which defected from the SLM/A Abdel Wahid Muhammad Nour faction in 2018, and signed the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement – announced its participation in the war alongside the SAF in Central Darfur.⁶[Sudan Tribune, 'SLM faction joins Sudanese army against RSF in Darfur,' 31 July 2023](#)

Meanwhile, the SAF and RSF have embarked on recruitment campaigns targeting civilians, following an extended period of fighting and significant casualties on both sides. The RSF undertook an initiative to recruit youth from Mayo and Soba neighborhoods in Khartoum, giving monetary rewards to the prospective recruits. Moreover, several native administrations – traditional institutions regulating governance among communities – including the Rizeigat, Salamat, and al-Falata, announced their support for the RSF in Central Darfur. Other community leaders from South Darfur likewise pledged allegiance to the RSF in July and asked their members to join the fight against the SAF.⁷[The New Arab, 'Sudan: Darfur tribes 'pledge allegiance' to RSF in move that could tip scales in war-torn Sudan,' 6 July 2023](#) For its part, the SAF rallied support from the Ansar al-Suna al-Mohamedia Muslim group, and both the Rashaida community and Hadendawa clan (from the Beja ethnic group) declared their support for the SAF, announcing they would be sending thousands of volunteers to join the army. Finally, General al-Burhan's call on citizens to join the army's ranks on 27 June reportedly elicited a substantial response from thousands of volunteers in various states, including al-Jazirah, Gedaref, River Nile, and Northern states.⁸[Mohammed Amin, 'Sudan war: Bashir-era figures regain influence as battle for control rages,' Middle East Eye, 7 August 2023](#)

Peace efforts remain at a standstill after numerous attempts at a ceasefire in the past four months were ineffective in putting the conflict on a path towards peace. Now, the warring factions are deliberating the implementation of international monitoring forces in Jeddah – although the Sudanese government rejected the plan last month.⁹[Al Taghyeer, 'FFC: The warring parties agree on Saudi – led international monitors,' 6 August 2023](#); [Sudans Post, 'East African force commander says deployment to Sudan 'out of question',' 13 July 2023](#) The recent developments described in this report highlight the grave risks posed by the conflict's continuation, particularly to the civilian population. As the hostilities intensify and more armed groups get involved, they exacerbate the profound divisions within Sudanese society between those who support or oppose the different factions involved in the war, as well as the youth recruitment by both the SAF and RSF. These factors combined indicate that the existing political and humanitarian crisis will continue to deepen. With heavy rains damaging hundreds of houses and adding yet another additional layer of instability to the crisis,¹⁰[Voice of America, 'State Media: Sudan Rains Wreck Hundreds of Homes,' 7 August 2023](#) it is clear that Sudan has been put on a path that might be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.



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