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Sudan: New Wave of Attacks in Darfur

UN Should Deploy Monitors, Strengthen Public Reporting



The aftermath of an attack on the village of Masteri in west Darfur, Sudan Saturday, July 25, 2020. © 2020 Mustafa Younes via AP

(Nairobi, December 15, 2021) – A new wave of attacks on civilians in Darfur since mid-November 2021 highlights the urgent need for the United Nations to enhance its scrutiny of the restive region of [Sudan](#), Human Rights Watch said today.

A year after the withdrawal of the United Nations/African Union Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), violence between armed groups, in some cases implicating state security forces, has been on the rise, with a devastating impact on civilians. The UN should deploy a robust human rights monitoring presence to the area, including expertise in gender-based crimes.

“The resurgence of violence in Darfur over the last year has left a trail of devastation, with scores killed and injured, massive displacement, and thousands of homes destroyed,” said [Mohamed Osman](#), Sudan researcher at Human Rights Watch. “International monitors need to refocus their attention on Darfur.”

While various factors, often localized ones, played a role in the recent uptick in violence, the failure of the authorities over the last two years to provide meaningful civilian protection and justice for past and ongoing abuses have contributed to the escalation in violence and civilian harm.

In December 2020, the United Nations Security Council terminated the mandate of the joint United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force (UNAMID) and [called on](#) the government to assume full responsibility for civilian security. A new political mission, the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), was [mandated](#) to “support the strengthening of the protection of human rights, in particular in conflict affected areas.”

But the peacekeepers’ direct mandate to protect civilians in Darfur was dropped and in practice UNITAMS has focused more on institution-building than human rights monitoring. This is despite clear [evidence](#) of mounting violence and despite concerns raised by internally displaced communities that the peacekeepers’ departure would leave them more vulnerable to attacks.

West Darfur in particular has [experienced](#) several serious bouts of violence since the beginning of 2021, with hundreds of people killed. Speaking to the Security Council, the UNITAMS chief, Volker Perthes, [noted](#) on December 10, an eightfold increase in displacement of civilians in 2021 compared with 2020. The UN refugee agency has expressed alarm at [reports](#) of sexual violence, the destruction of villages, and thousands fleeing across the border into Chad. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) projects that in 2022, 6.2 million people, [half](#) of Darfur’s population, will need humanitarian assistance.

Human Rights Watch investigations into violence in the West Darfur capital, al-Genaina, in January and April have found that government forces, most notably the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), sat idle, letting attacks go on undeterred. Human Rights Watch documented large scale attacks against civilians during those two bouts of violence, including killings, looting, and massive destruction of property, including in two camps for displaced people in the area. Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that members of Sudan government’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF) had participated in the April attacks.

Since the October 25, 2021 military coup, as attention focused on events in Sudan’s capital, Khartoum, West Darfur has experienced yet another uptick in violence in the Jebel Mun and Kereneik localities including targeted attacks on internally displaced people. Across five incidents in West Darfur, medical sources have recorded at least 450 deaths since UNAMID peacekeepers withdrew from their base in the area in [mid-2019](#). To avoid these abuses going undocumented, UNITAMS should deploy monitors with gender expertise to the region immediately, Human Rights Watch said.

Between December 5 and 7, armed members from Arab tribes [attacked](#) the Kereneik locality in West Darfur, including a displaced persons' camp in the area. A camp leader who was there at the beginning of the attack told Human Rights Watch that assailants arrived in land cruisers and on horses and motorbikes at 6 a.m. He estimated that in the camp 44 people were killed, including 3 women, and 35 were injured. Parts of the camp were also burned and [15,000 people have fled](#) since, according to OCHA. According to a [statement](#) by the West Darfur doctors' association, 88 people were killed and 84 injured in one attack on December 5, with other attacks on the outskirts of Kereneik on December 6 and 7.

Four days of fighting between Arab militias and residents of the Missirya Jebel tribe between November 17 and 21 in Jebel Mun locality, in West Darfur, left at least 50 people dead according to the UN. It also reported that the violence had left 594 houses burned and plundered and displaced 6,655 people internally while 2,261 people fled into Chad. Darfur's [legacy of conflict](#) includes decades of [government scorched-earth tactics](#), pushing millions of people out of their villages, burning large swathes of land, and killing hundreds of thousands of civilians.

A doctor from al-Genaina told Human Rights Watch that between November 17 and 18, 17 men killed in the Jebel Mun from both groups were brought to the hospital, all with gunshot wounds. He added that not all those killed or wounded were transferred to hospitals so the real number of casualties may be higher. Verification of destruction and killings remains difficult due lack of cellphone coverage in the area, local monitors told Human Rights Watch.

On December 9, the Norwegian Refugee Council [reported](#) that there had been attacks on civilians causing death and mass displacement over five localities of West and also North Darfur over the previous three weeks.

Sudan's authorities failed to seize opportunities to strengthen protection and ensure accountability following previous bouts of violence in West Darfur. In response to the latest violence, the Joint High Council for Security Arrangements committed to [establishing](#) a "joint deterrent force" to focus on curbing further violence in Darfur. The new task force is a belated bandage on the situation, Human Rights Watch said. The central authorities' weak efforts, including a previous joint force created in June, have left a vacuum that armed groups have filled, wreaking havoc on communities that have faced years of abuse and neglect, Human Rights Watch research over the last year has shown.

In May 2020, Sudan's transitional government [pledged](#) to protect civilians in Darfur, under a new [national plan](#) for civilian protection that would include the deployment of joint security forces as well as strengthen accountability.

The Security Council's mandate for UNITAMS asks that it "support the Government of Sudan in implementing" the plan "and developing measurable benchmarks, and through deploying mobile monitoring teams." UNITAMS should prioritize this monitoring before the situation in Darfur deteriorates further, Human Rights Watch said.

The former government concluded a peace agreement with Darfur rebel groups in 2020, which was criticized by several groups of displaced people for failing to address their concerns. The security arrangements promised under the peace agreement, including disarmament and reintegration of forces, have been seriously delayed, which, according to UNITAMS September 2021 [report](#), “left civilians vulnerable to the deteriorating security situation.”

Impunity for atrocious crimes in Darfur has been a major concern, fueling further abuses, Human Rights Watch said. International Criminal Court’s (ICC) [arrest warrants](#), including for former President Omar al-Bashir and two other officials who are in Sudanese custody, are outstanding. Domestic efforts to ensure accountability for past or recent crimes in Darfur have been largely absent.

In August, the former cabinet [approved](#) handing over the suspects to the ICC, but it needed approval from the Sovereign Council, a collective presidency body that includes military and civilian leaders, which was not obtained before the October 25 coup.

The departure of UNAMID not only left vulnerable communities in Darfur unprotected but also led to a gap in monitoring of the abuses. UNITAMS’s head on December 10 already flagged the need for the mission to redouble human rights and civilian protection efforts. The joint human rights office in Sudan of both UNITAMS and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) should prioritize regular access to Darfur to investigate and publicly report on abuses there, Human Rights Watch said.

On November 12, the High Commissioner for Human Rights [designated an expert](#) on human rights in Sudan, in line with a Human Rights Council resolution following the coup. The designated expert, while discharging his mandate, should integrate recent events in Darfur in his investigations into abuses committed in Sudan. The Security Council [Panel of Experts on Darfur](#) is expected to produce its own annual report [by January 2022](#), and should be invited to brief members of the Council’s 1591 Committee, which concerns Sudan, on the dynamics underpinning violence against civilians in West Darfur.

“Recent events should be a stark wake-up call for the international community that it is failing the people of Darfur,” Osman said. “The UN’s priority should now be to ramp up human rights monitoring and ensure rigorous scrutiny of Sudan’s efforts to protect millions of Darfuris, a population that has already suffered years of abuse and violence.”

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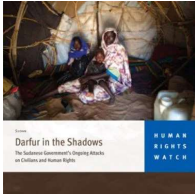
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