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Sudan: Deadly Reciprocal Offensives for Strategic Locations in Khartoum and Darfur

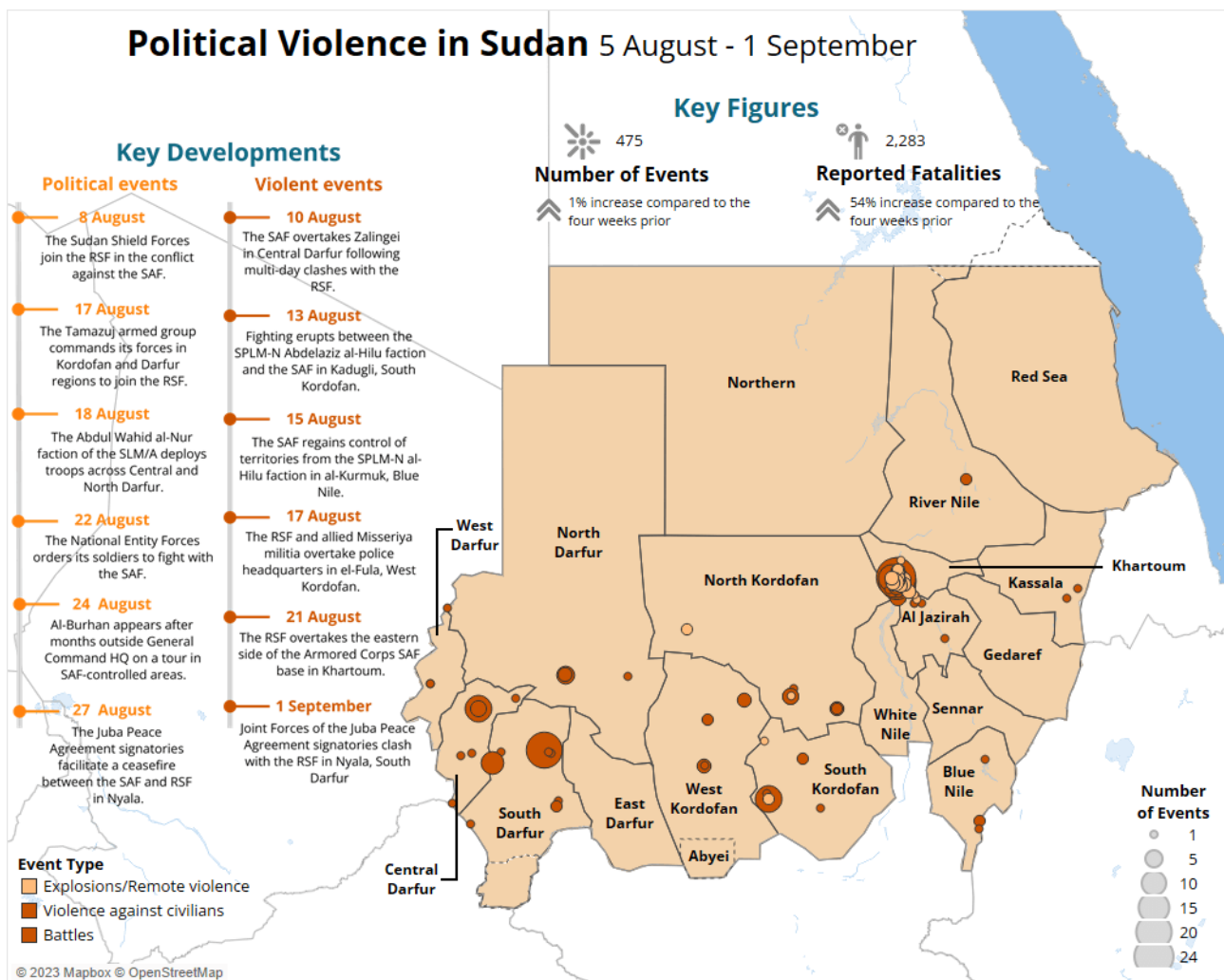
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VITAL TRENDS

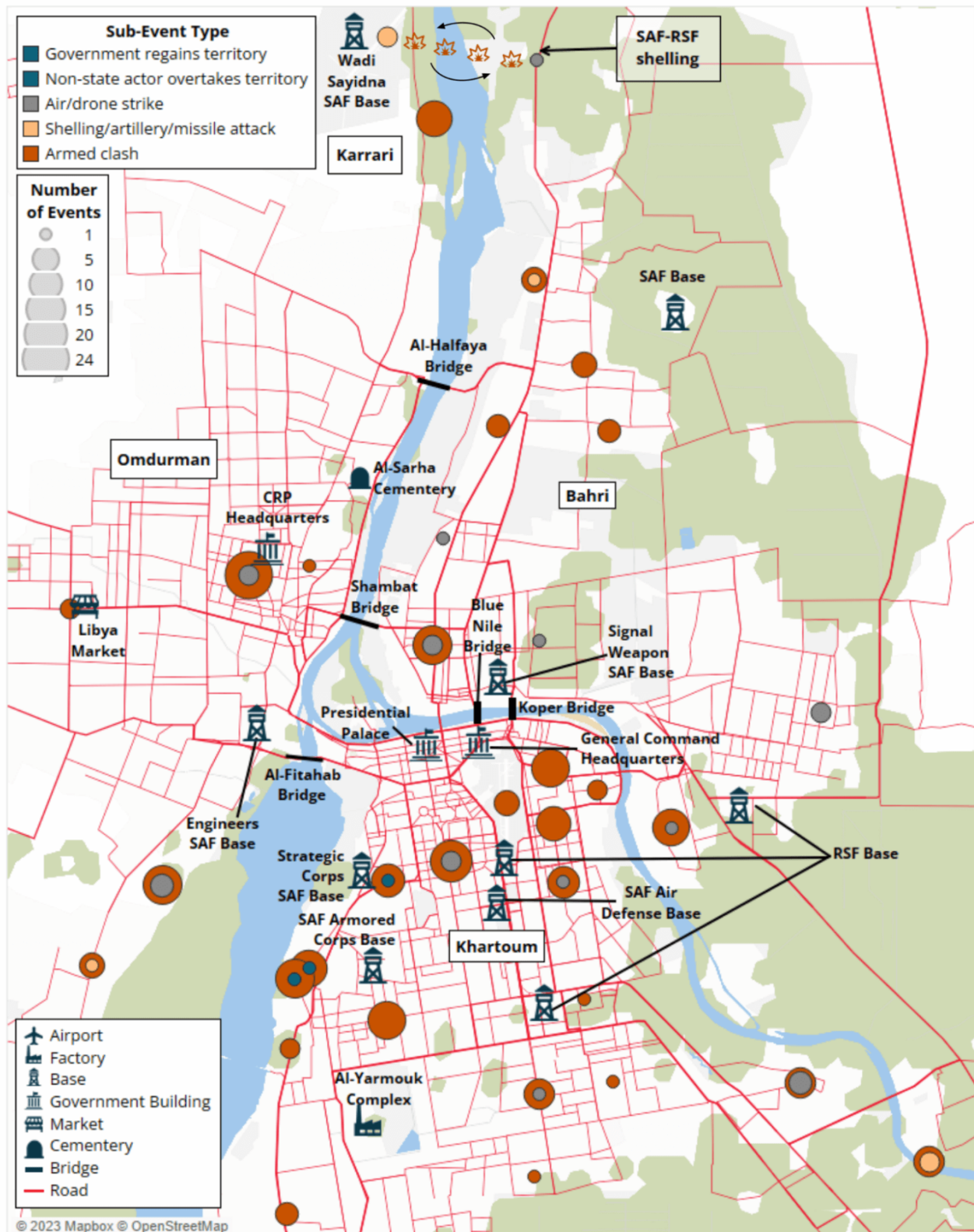
- Four months into the conflict, ACLED records nearly 7,500 fatalities¹ This number is a conservative estimate due to methodological limitations of real-time reporting in a fast-moving conflict context such as Sudan. For more, see the [Fatalities FAQ](#) in ACLED's Knowledge Base in Sudan since fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April.
- In the last month, from 5 August to 1 September 2023, over 470 political violence events were reported, with more than 2,280 fatalities. Khartoum state was the site of intense fighting as the SAF and RSF fought for control of the Armored Corps base and Shambat bridge. Meanwhile, inter-ethnic violence escalated in South Darfur, which has witnessed increasing levels of violence since July.
- Khartoum state continues to have the highest number of recorded political violence events and fatalities, with over 300 and 1,400, respectively, during the reporting period. South Darfur state follows, with nearly 40 political violence events and over 380 fatalities. Fighting between different ethnic militias in multiple locations in South Darfur, due to looting and disagreements about allegiance to the RSF, resulted in hundreds of deaths.
- The most common event type was battles, with nearly 360 events recorded, followed by violence against civilians and explosions/remote violence, with almost 60 events recorded for each. The SAF conducted nearly 80% of the recorded bombings across Sudan, particularly targeting RSF positions in the Khartoum tri-city metropolitan area.



Khartoum via Bahri.²[Sudan War Monitor, 'Control Map of the Bridges of Khartoum: SAF and RSF each control different bridges in Sudan's capital,' 11 August 2023](#) The RSF controls both ends of the Shambat bridge, thus maintaining control over this critical position. Reinforcements for the RSF are predominantly channeled from Darfur and Kordofan regions to Omdurman through the Bara road, given that the alternative route linking Kosti and Jebel Awlia is presently under SAF control.³[Reuters, 'Fighting rages in Sudan's capital as army tries to cut off supply routes,' 4 July 2023](#)

Fighting Between the SAF and RSF in Khartoum

5 August - 1 September 2023



If the SAF seized control of Shambat bridge, RSF forces in Omdurman would be isolated from their fellow soldiers in Khartoum and Bahri, losing the ability to bring reinforcements from Darfur and remaining vulnerable to the SAF. The loss of the Shambat bridge could eventually mean that the RSF is doomed to lose the battle for Khartoum. Conversely, if the RSF overtakes the Armored Corps base, SAF forces would likely be unable to advance in Khartoum and their forces would be trapped in their last stronghold, the General Command Headquarters. The relentless pursuit of these regions, seen as potential paradigm-shifting elements by both warring factions, has driven them into heavy conflict, inflicting a dire toll upon civilians.

In Khartoum city, the clashes centered in the neighborhoods around the SAF's Armored Corps base. Armored Corps cadres are notorious for their involvement in many military coups in Sudan. Major General Nasr al-Din Abd al-Fattah – the current commander who resumed duty shortly before the conflict broke out in April – is an associate of former President Omar al-Bashir and was involved in the coup attempt of September 2021.⁴[Reuters, 'Sudan says coup thwarted, accuses Bashir loyalists,' 21 September 2023](#). Moreover, most of Sudan's military coups either included or were spearheaded by officers from the Armored Corps.⁵[The National News, 'Sudan's army and rival paramilitary locked in intense battle over key military base,' 21 August 2023](#) From the beginning of August, the SAF took measures to break the siege on the base, which fell under RSF control at the beginning of the conflict.⁶[International Crisis Group, 'Time to Try Again to End Sudan's War,' 21 July 2023](#) The SAF targeted RSF positions around the base, reportedly succeeding in thwarting RSF attacks. South of the Armored Corps base, the RSF managed to repel SAF's attacks to breach the siege on the al-Yarmouk Complex – a military weapons factory that the RSF [overtook](#) on 8 June – claiming the capturing of dozens of SAF soldiers and destroying tanks and military vehicles.

The fighting intensified on 20 August when the RSF effectively broke through SAF defenses around the Armored Corps base. This marked the first instance of breaching the base since the start of the war. The RSF launched simultaneous multi-front attacks on the SAF from neighborhoods in southwestern Khartoum. However, the SAF managed to repulse RSF forces from the base the same day. The SAF claimed that hundreds of RSF soldiers were killed, and a large number of combat vehicles were destroyed or captured. After the RSF forces broke down the wall on the eastern side of the base, they were able to seize control of that eastern portion the following day. The Armored Corps base, a critical infrastructure for the SAF's infantry, holds high strategic importance for both sides.⁷[The National News, 'Sudan's army and rival paramilitary locked in intense battle over key military base,' 21 August 2023](#) Its capture would grant the RSF control over the base, as well as a vital Khartoum-Omdurman al-Fitahab bridge, thus bolstering its military power and transport routes and significantly shaping the conflict's dynamics.

In Omdurman, fighting reached a peak on 8 August, with ACLED recording an estimated 160 fatalities that day – nearly as high as during the entire month of July. In fact, August records the most reported fatalities per event in Omdurman, making it the most lethal month for the region since the war began, and was characterized by reports of widespread airstrikes and intense artillery shelling across all contested areas. On 5 August, the RSF forcefully occupied numerous civilian residences in several neighborhoods in Omdurman to fortify its defense positions. Two days later, both the SAF and RSF issued evacuation orders to the residents of Abu Rouf, a neighborhood near the Shambat bridge – thus designating it as a fully operational military zone.⁸[Al Arabiya News, 'Residents near Sudanese capital ordered to evacuate over fighting,' 8 August 2023](#) The next day, on 8 August, the SAF undertook an offensive operation against RSF troops in Old Omdurman neighborhoods to gain control of the Shambat bridge, attacking from both the southern and northern adjacent areas. SAF units stationed at the Karrari SAF bases attempted a southward advance, culminating in confrontations with RSF forces at key locations in northern Old Omdurman, including the Central Reserve Police Headquarters. Other SAF forces moved northward from the Engineers Corps base towards southern Old Omdurman, where they encountered RSF defenses. The clashes also extended to the western areas of Omdurman, with reported SAF airstrikes in the Libya market. The operation aimed to hinder the RSF's capacity to effectively fortify its forces using the Shambat bridge.

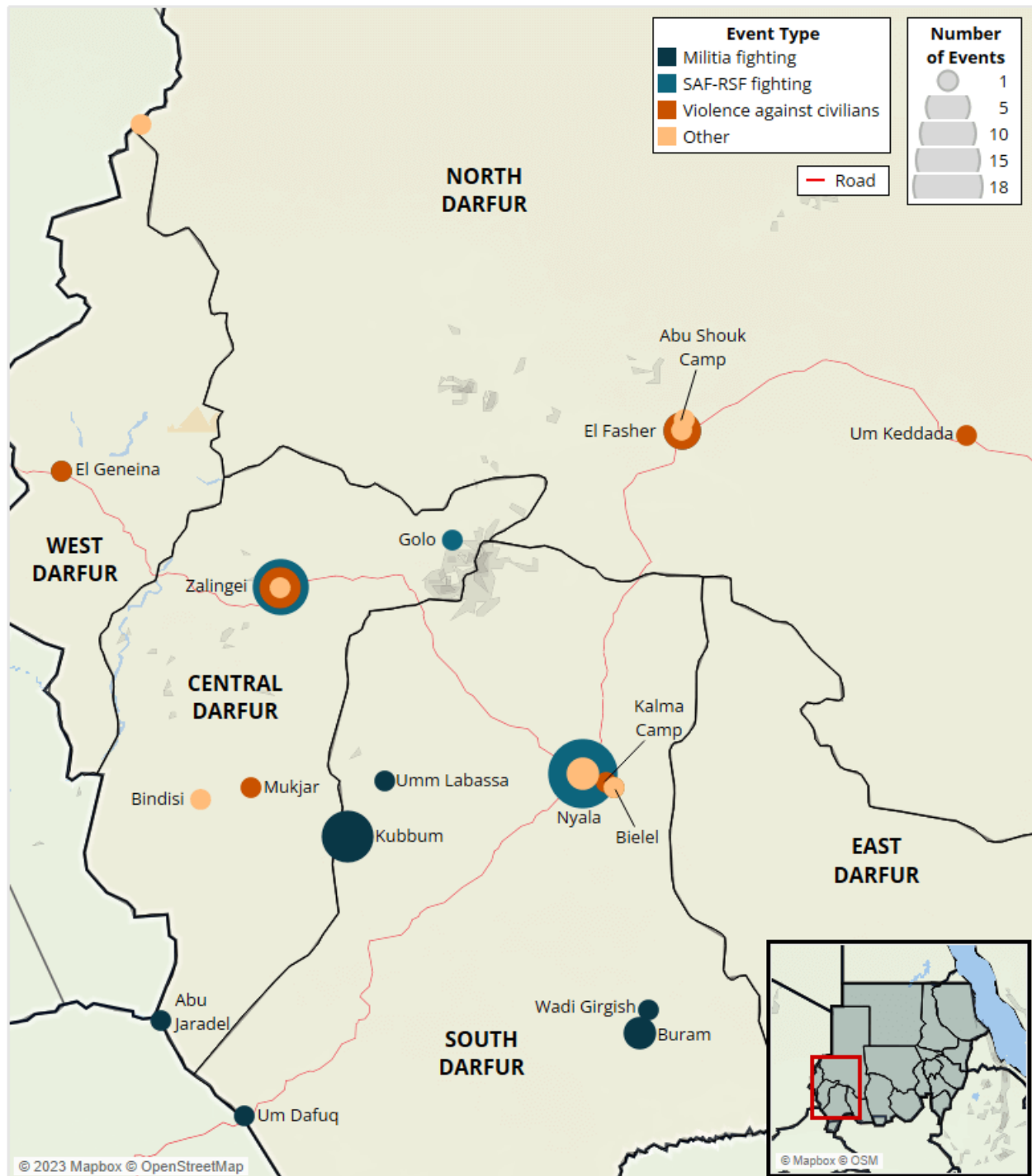
The consequences of these confrontations have been dire, resulting in over 300 deaths, including at least 20 civilians caught in the crossfire.⁹[Al Jazeera, 'Fighting in Sudan's Omdurman intensifies as displaced tops 4 million,' 8 August 2023](#) Dozens of people killed during the clashes were reportedly buried in a mass grave located in al-Sarha in Omdurman.¹⁰[BBC, 'Sudan conflict: Call for gravediggers in Omdurman as fighting intensifies', 9 August 2023](#) The fighting continued in the locality during the month of August without any significant territorial shifts. SAF airstrikes remained concentrated on RSF forces stationed in southern and western Omdurman. In response, the RSF has instituted measures like obstructing medical supplies, closing markets, and imposing blockades on civilians residing in these neighborhoods to cut SAF's access to food and medical supplies.¹¹[Al Taghyeer, 'Sudan: RSF blocks food and life-saving medicines reaching Omdurman,' 17 August 2023](#) The intense clashes within the Khartoum metropolitan area in August underscores the escalating dynamics of the conflict, with both sides fiercely contesting control over critical strategic military bases and routes.

The SAF and RSF Clash Amid Escalating Inter-Ethnic Disputes in Darfur

In the Darfur region, the SAF and RSF continued to clash over the control of key towns, such as Nyala and Zalingei where the SAF retains its bases. The region, and South Darfur in particular, experienced escalating tensions and heightened inter-ethnic violence due to disputes over alleged support to the RSF (*see map below*). This ongoing struggle for dominance coupled with the inter-ethnic dispute, has had a profound and devastating impact on civilians. Clashes between Arab militias were rarely reported before the conflict between the SAF and RSF; however, these militia groups have since been clashing over inter-ethnic disputes. Some indications suggest that implicit allegiance with either side of the conflict has also impacted the violence.

Political Violence in Darfur

5 August - 1 September 2023



In South Darfur, the city of Nyala experienced almost daily clashes between the SAF and RSF around the SAF's 16th Infantry base. On 18 August, the RSF launched a multi-front offensive from four directions on the SAF base, using airstrikes and artillery shelling. The SAF, however, managed to ambush RSF forces around the base and captured many RSF soldiers, as well as over a dozen military vehicles. A few days later, the commander of the SAF's 16th Infantry Division was assassinated by one of his soldiers inside the base, as he refused to surrender to the RSF.¹²[TRTAfrika, 'Sudan's top army commander killed,' 21 August 2023](#) Additionally, between 11 to 17 August, the RSF successfully took control of strategic locations in the city, including the Mekkah bridge, the Radio Station, and the Guest House Buildings. Hundreds of civilian casualties were reported, while over 50,000 were displaced from their houses.¹³[United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'Sudan: Humanitarian Update, 23 August 2023,' 23 August 2023](#)

Outside Nyala, a series of clashes between Arab militias in South Darfur drove [another round of escalation of violence](#) during the second week of August. Clashes involving the Salamat, Beni Halba, and Habbaniya communities reignited again after a spate of fighting in June, when tensions rose due to [a looting incident between the militias in May](#). Clashes broke out in Kubbum on 7 August and continued for multiple days, expanding to other locations south of the region. Fighting originally began over a looting incident in Kubbum, where a Salamat militia reportedly looted a Beni Halba leader; as of writing this report, the reasons for this attack are still unclear.¹⁴[The Canberra Time, 'Tribal clashes in Darfur kill at least 120,' 12 August 2023](#) Separately, the Salamat tribe refused to announce its support for the RSF¹⁵[Xinhua, 'Roundup: Clashes renew between Sudanese army, paramilitary forces in western state,' 14 August 2023](#) amid pledges of allegiance to the RSF from the Beni Halba and other South Darfur communities in July.¹⁶[Radio Dabanga, 'Public support for the RSF from seven tribal leaders in South Darfur,' 4 July 2023](#) An estimated 120 people were killed in multiple locations during the clashes, while dozens of people were reportedly wounded, and hundreds were displaced.¹⁷[The Canberra Times, 'Tribal clashes in Darfur kill at least 120,' 12 August 2023](#) Militias also looted the Markondi market and obstructed the road between Nyala and Buram. Notably, both Salamat and Beni Halba militias deployed reinforcements from Khartoum, as many of their members are RSF soldiers. The tensions remained high in the area on 18 August as hundreds of Habbaniyah militiamen mobilized in Buram, while large numbers of Salamat forces mobilized in Nadif. Additionally, a considerable number of Masalist militia elements mobilized in the Greida region, indicating the potential for a renewal of clashes and heightened violence.

Meanwhile, in Central Darfur, the SAF successfully regained control of the capital, Zalingei – which was [overtaken by the RSF](#) on 4 August – following a series of strategic advancements. The initial progress of the SAF days earlier allowed it to establish checkpoints in the western part of the city, thereby gaining control over several areas where reports mentioned that the RSF was backed by affiliated militias. The SAF reportedly inflicted significant casualties on the RSF in Zalingei, as it remains the highly contested location of the SAF's 21st Infantry Division.

Finally, in North Darfur, clashes erupted between the SAF and RSF in multiple locations, including in the vicinity of the Abu Shouk camp and al-Takamul neighborhood in El Fasher, with both sides using artillery shelling and light weaponry. Notably, the Joint Forces of the Juba Peace Agreement signatories, which include the Minni Minnawi faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A), Justice and Equality Movement, and others, intervened on 18 August and clashed with RSF units who broke the ceasefire agreement in the city.¹⁸[Twitter @sudanreeves, 18 August 2023](#)

In the ongoing conflict, Darfur region remains a fiercely contested battleground. The RSF has built a strong support base in Darfur, recruiting fighters among ethnic Arab communities who make a higher income than the average Sudanese soldier.¹⁹[The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 'Money Is Power: Hemedti and the RSF's Paramilitary Industrial Complex in Sudan,' 26 July 2023](#) Yet, the SAF retains its infantry divisions in Darfur, making the region a high prize for all conflict parties. The struggle for control over this region poses a decisive goal that can determine the nationwide war landscape, underscoring the complex and enduring nature of the conflict's trajectory.

The intensification of hostilities around critical strategic locations in Khartoum and South and Central Darfur has inflicted severe and enduring suffering upon the local civilian populations. The protracted conflict has revealed the vulnerabilities of both the SAF and RSF, raising questions about their ability to secure a decisive victory. Meanwhile, civilians continue to be caught in the crossfire, trapped within the volatile battlegrounds of urban warfare and inter-ethnic violence. As the war continues, various actors are compelled to forge alliances with the warring parties or undertake measures to safeguard their presence in Sudan, illustrating the persistent complexity and instability of the situation.

