

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	870
Land:	Sudan
Kilde:	International Crisis Group (ICG)
Titel:	Battle for Darfur Reaches Fever Pitch as Sudan's War Enters Third Year
Udgivet:	16. april 2025
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	27. august 2025



Document #2124589

International Crisis Group

(Author)

Battle for Darfur Reaches Fever Pitch as Sudan's War Enters Third Year

Crisis Group's Shewit Woldemichael on the battle for El Fasher in North Darfur and what's at stake

As officials from across the Western, African and Arab worlds gathered in London on 15 April to discuss Sudan's civil war as it enters its third year, the battle for Darfur neared a bloody possible endgame.

The latest phase of fighting began on 11 April, when the insurgent Rapid Support Forces (RSF) launched a new push to fully capture North Darfur's capital El Fasher. It is hoping to chase the rival Sudanese army from its last major stronghold in the Darfur region, in the country's west. The army recently recaptured Khartoum, Sudan's capital in the country's riverine centre, while the RSF appears focused on Sudan's western regions.

The RSF's [push](#) to fully capture the city has put hundreds of thousands of civilians in the crosshairs, including displaced persons living in the Zamzam and Abu Shouk camps on the outskirts of the city. Despite housing hundreds of thousands of vulnerable civilians, the RSF asserts that it sees Zamzam, to El Fasher's south, as a legitimate military target, claiming it has been used as a launchpad for attacks on its forces and as a training hub for army-aligned Darfuri militias. The RSF has made similar claims about the Abu Shouk camp to the city's north. Army-aligned Darfuri groups in turn accuse the RSF of shelling civilian areas, killing civilians (including aid workers) in the camps based on their ethnicity, and blocking aid from reaching the camps – particularly Zamzam, which the [UN declared a famine zone](#) in August 2024.

It is difficult to calculate the exact death toll in El Fasher, Zamzam and Abu Shouk since the RSF began its latest push, as communication channels

into the camps are few. The [UN reports](#) more than 100 were killed in recent days. Many residents have now fled again, to Tawila in eastern Jebel Marra, while others remain hunkered down in cramped quarters with nowhere else to go.

To date, fighting has largely been concentrated on El Fasher's south-eastern and north-eastern outskirts, but it will likely now move into town where the army has a division headquarters. The RSF appears to have momentum and holds most areas surrounding El Fasher – and indeed most of North Darfur, aside from El Tina and a few towns controlled by army-aligned Darfuri militias. For both the RSF (whose fighters hail mostly from Darfur's Arab groups) and the Darfuri groups (whose members hail mostly from the Zaghawa ethnic group), this battle is now seen as existential. Both sides fear that losing the war could expose their communities to large-scale atrocities and prolonged displacement.

If the RSF succeeds in capturing El Fasher, it will control nearly all of Darfur, setting the stage for what many fear could prove a de facto partition of Sudan. Even if that happens, there is little sign it would end the war, as both sides continue to receive ample outside support that will allow them to launch new offensives against each other on new fronts.

ecoi.net description:

North Darfur: Article on the attack on the city of al-Fashirr launched by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 11 April 2025

Country:

Sudan

Source:

[International Crisis Group](#) (Author)

Published:

16 April 2025

Original link:

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/sudan/battle-darfur-reaches-fever-pitch-sudans-war-enters-third-year>

Document type:

Appeal or News Release

Language:

English

Available on ecoi.net since:

12 May 2025

Document ID:

2124589

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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.

