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How El Fasher went from Darfur's safe haven to all-out war

'I have never seen anything worse.'



Artillery shells are tearing through displacement camps and crashing through residential homes. Food and medical supplies are rapidly running out. People are fleeing communities without even being able to bury the bodies of their loved ones.

This is the current situation in El Fasher, one of Darfur's largest cities and the latest epicentre of the year-long war between Sudan's army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces – a war that has already displaced some nine million people and left vast numbers on the brink of famine.

UN officials [have called](#) the situation in El Fasher “Hell on Earth” and [are warning](#) that genocide crimes may be committed. Daily interviews that I am doing with friends and human rights monitors in El Fasher suggest that neither claim is an understatement.

“I have never seen anything worse than the condition of mothers and orphaned children crying inside the hospitals, in pain and agony,” Jamal*, a friend from El Fasher told me last week, after dozens of people were killed by shelling in his neighbourhood.

The battle for El Fasher – home to [as many as](#) two million people – started last month but had long been telegraphed. The city is the army's final foothold in Darfur, the only place in the western region that the RSF has not captured over the past year.

Seizing the town will require the RSF – whose troops are mainly from Darfuri Arab communities – to defeat not just the army but various rebel groups whose fighters are mostly non-Arab Zaghawa, one of the main population groups in El Fasher.

As the fighting intensifies, human rights groups fear it could lead to mass targeting along ethnic lines. For now, most civilians are being harmed in crossfire shelling and because the RSF has encircled the city and imposed a brutal siege.

With few international aid groups present in El Fasher, and relief convoys unable to get inside, the only hope on the ground rests with a network of youth groups and emergency response rooms that are risking – and in some cases losing – their lives to help people in need.

Local volunteers from the Shaqra Emergency Response Room prepare food for displaced people camped just outside of El Fasher. (Shaqra Emergency Response Room/Facebook)

Over the past few weeks, these mutual aid groups – [which have emerged across Sudan](#) – have been constructing a medical clinic for children after the main one in the city was hit by a shell, and have set up kitchens to feed people who fled RSF attacks.

“If you were not here, we would not only die from bullets but we would die from hunger,” an elderly displaced woman camped in a village just outside of El Fasher told a volunteer friend of mine called Mohammed, who relayed the conversation to me last week.

Continuous shelling

El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur state, had been a haven before the recent fighting. Hundreds of thousands of people had fled there as RSF fighters committed [atrocities in other parts of Darfur](#), as well as in cities like Khartoum.

That calm has been shattered, with over 100 people [killed](#) and nearly 1,000 injured in recent fighting. The city’s only working hospital has just a few days of supplies left, according to the UN, and its water network has been compromised too.

Thousands have been displaced by the clashes, but escaping El Fasher requires passing through the RSF checkpoints that surround the city. Its fighters are charging those who want to flee, confiscating cars and possessions, and grilling people on their affiliations to the army and rebel groups.

In recent days, RSF shells have landed on civilian houses, killing dozens of people and causing massive blazes.

The situation is perhaps most critical in Abu Shouk. This displacement camp houses [victims of the 2000s Darfur conflict](#), which saw the state arm local Arab militias known as ‘Janjaweed’ (they later morphed into the RSF) to crush a revolt by mostly non-Arab armed groups.

The camp is on the outskirts of El Fasher and is located close to conflict front lines. In recent days, RSF shells have landed on civilian houses, killing dozens of people and causing massive blazes, according to Jamal, who is from Abu Shouk.

Jamal said he has seen body parts strewn on the ground and injured people walking around, their tears mixed with blood. He said people are dying because the camp clinic has no surgical capacity, and because it has no ambulance to take people to hospital.

“We do not know why the Rapid Support Forces target civilians and attack them with such heavy artillery,” Jamal told me. He said the continuous shelling is “robbing people of their dignity” and creating a sense of powerlessness and resignation.

Siege warfare and mutual aid

Abu Shouk is not the only affected place in El Fasher. The intensity of the fighting means there are [few safe spaces](#) left in the city, which conflict monitors at Yale's Humanitarian Research Lab have referred to as a "kill box".

Last week, a local journalist shared a story on social media of an unaccompanied boy who turned up to a mosque for afternoon prayers in a southern neighbourhood. He was hit by a shell after worship, and died with no family to identify him.

Everybody is meanwhile affected by the siege. Though there are still food stocks in the city – and it is possible for some traders to smuggle in supplies – the prices of basic goods like meat, flour, sugar, pasta, and soap are soaring beyond people's means.

If the siege continues, there is no question that many civilians are going to die, either through food shortages or because of a lack of medicine. People on the ground keep telling me they need the blockade and fighting to end now, not tomorrow and not the day after.

Despite the critical situation, the only real humanitarian responders are the local mutual aid groups, some of whose members have been killed or injured over the past few weeks.

Mohammed, the volunteer helping displaced people, said he wished members of the warring parties could see and hear the painful stories of affected people. If they saw what he saw, perhaps they would drop their guns and stop fighting, he told me.

How a ceasefire fell apart

Other community leaders and public figures in El Fasher have also played an important role in trying to counter the war. Though the battle for the city long felt like an inevitability, there are many individuals who struggled for months to prevent it.

Working alongside a dovish local governor, community leaders lobbied RSF and army leaders inside the city to stay in designated areas and not to fight. Darfur had suffered enough in recent years, they pleaded.

Yet the ceasefire broke down as military authorities replaced the governor with somebody more closely aligned with the army, and as community leaders were pushed to support military efforts in the face of mounting RSF crimes across the country.

Those crimes also challenged the neutrality of the various rebel groups in El Fasher. Having initially tried to distance themselves from the army and RSF – both loathed by many Sudanese – they eventually felt their political future required picking sides.

Tensions mounted as the army and the armed groups began large-scale recruitment efforts inside El Fasher, and as they welcomed in soldiers who had been ousted by the RSF from other parts of Darfur.

RSF leaders I spoke with said the army was using the ceasefire as an opportunity to reorganise. And they felt that capturing El Fasher was necessary for the legitimacy of the group, given that Darfur is their home base and stronghold.

One-sided narratives

There are now fears that if the RSF seizes El Fasher, it will launch deadly reprisals against civilians that it perceives as aligned with the army and armed groups. Those from the Zaghawa community are especially at risk.

These fears are clearly warranted: During its campaign to control West Darfur state last year, RSF forces killed [thousands of non-Arab Masalit civilians](#), who they accused of supporting the army. The killings [may have amounted to](#) genocide.

That said, it is important that we do not see the RSF as the sole actor committing human rights violations, as most international media reports and analyses tend to do, leaning heavily on historical narratives of Janjaweed violence in the 2000s.

The RSF and its allied militias may well turn El Fasher into hell, but so might the army and the aligned rebel groups, who are armed to the teeth and spreading threatening hate speech on social media against Arab communities.

Before the battle for El Fasher commenced, myself and others documented many cases of Arabs in the city being arrested and even killed in areas controlled by the army and the armed groups. Many Arabs left their homes out of fear.

Meanwhile, in recent weeks, Zaghawa militias executed Arab civilians alongside RSF fighters in Shangil Tobaya, to the south of El Fasher. And Zaghawa militias also stole cattle belonging to Arab civilians in Baraka, a village to the west of El Fasher.

That small incident in Baraka soon spiralled and resulted in RSF fighters attacking and burning nine predominantly Zaghawa villages around El Fasher. It was the trigger for the wider battle we are now seeing for control of the city.

What can be done?

Going forward, it is important that Sudanese civil society groups show concern for all atrocities committed in El Fasher and beyond. It doesn't matter if it is the RSF, the army, or the other armed groups. There is no single perpetrator and no single victim.

Civil society must also keep trying to resist the polarising forces of this conflict and refuse to take sides. My message to community leaders in El Fasher and elsewhere is that they must stay neutral – not just for a day or a month, but forever.

We must work to empower the voices and actions of the frontline volunteers who are taking matters into their own hands. What they stand for is the precise opposite to those who are responsible for this war.

Finally, we must realise that the international community cannot protect civilians, and that nobody is going to ensure our safety. The UN and foreign states can make statements all they like, but their words have no meaning for civilians being killed.

Instead, we must work to empower the voices and actions of the frontline volunteers who are taking matters into their own hands. What they stand for is the precise opposite to those who are responsible for this war.

These volunteers represent our best chance of getting through this conflict and our best chance of building a just future. Those who depend on them right now in El Fasher know this all too well.

“You are the only ones feeding us every day,” the displaced woman camped just outside of El Fasher told my friend Mohammed, who has been handing out food amid gunfire and bombings. “I will pray for you forever.”

**For security reasons, only the first names of sources are being used.*

Edited by Philip Kleinfeld.

