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Protection of Civilians' Note
SAF/RSF Conflict in Darfur: Key Protection Impacts in March 2024
15 April 2024

This brief by the Darfur Protection Sector is based on inputs from partners, community networks and other sources. It has not been possible to verify all the information included in it due to access constraints and telecommunications breakdowns.

Key Points:

- Direct impacts of the conflict were most severe in North Darfur, driving displacement towards the already overcrowded southern neighbourhoods of the city.
- Generalized insecurity and perceived impunity for engagement in criminality created significant protection risks for civilians across the Darfur region, and the prevalence of kidnapping for ransom appears to be increasing.
- Parties to the conflict, de facto authorities and armed groups continued to levy so-called 'protection fees' and arbitrary 'taxes' on the civilian population in multiple locations, most typically targeting those engaged in commercial activities on the basis that the 'fees' or 'taxes' are payment for security that enables those activities.
- Imposition of checkpoints both constrained freedom of movement of the civilian population and appeared to increase risks of arbitrary arrest and detention especially for youth.
- Growing food insecurity across Darfur is both driven by protection threats inhibiting agricultural activities and is itself a driver of increased exposure to protection risks linked to harmful coping mechanisms.
- Women and girls engaged in collection of firewood, grass and water are at particularly high risk of gender-based violence, especially in areas with significant presence of armed groups.

Overview:

A total of 47 protection incidents were reported by Darfur Protection Sector members in March 2024. It is understood that more incidents have occurred but communication challenges, constraints on access and generalized insecurity continue to affect reporting. Armed conflict was once again the most frequently reported protection incident, with a disproportionate concentration of these incidents remaining in North Darfur. Armed robbery, theft and looting also continued to be reported on a relatively frequent basis, underscoring the insecurity that remains pervasive in areas of Darfur that have been less affected by the direct impacts of conflict in recent months.

The descriptions of the incidents reported during March indicate that they resulted in the deaths of at least 50 civilians, and injuries to at least 63 others. While only one incident of gender-based violence was captured in the incident tracker, broader protection monitoring and feedback from communities indicate that gender-based violence incidents take place much more frequently than is feasible to capture in systematic reporting. Other incidents reported at a smaller scale included: fire; carjacking; abduction/kidnapping; and, military ground operations.

Reported Protection Incidents: March 2024



Key Conflict Impacts on Civilians:

Direct impacts of the ongoing conflict continued to be most frequent and severe in **North Darfur** during March, with ongoing clashes between parties to the conflict as well as aerial bombardments. The impacts of these clashes disproportionately affected the already vulnerable IDP populations in Abu Shouk and Al Salam camps, due to their proximity to key positions held by parties to the conflict. Prior to the outbreak of the conflict in 2023, these two IDP camps provided shelter for close to 30,000 IDPs. The populations of both camps have reduced as IDPs have sought safer shelter in other locations; the thousands who remain skew heavily towards women and children. On 7 March, a shell hit the market in Abu Shouk IDP camp killed five IDPs, including three children, and caused injuries to 15 civilians. Shelling on 8 and 10 March also impacted the camp, burning down two shelters and injuring three children. Additional aerial bombardments of El Fasher took place over 18 and 19 March, driving further significant displacement from Al Salam IDP camp towards Abu Shouk camp, the southern neighbourhoods of El Fasher and Shagra village in the rural part of El Fasher locality on 20 March. Exchanges of artillery fire and aerial bombardments continued over the

remainder of the month, with clashes reported on 21 March, 25 March and 28 March that cumulatively resulted in the deaths of at least 15 civilians, injury to at least 18 more, and further displacement. The significant and ongoing population movement from the northern and eastern parts of El Fasher towards safer southern neighbourhoods has resulted in increasing overcrowding in ad hoc shelters taking up every available space between houses and roads. Lack of humanitarian capacity to address the burgeoning needs in the southern neighbourhoods of El Fasher renders the displacement situation there increasingly untenable, potentially leaving civilians fleeing the ongoing clashes no safe shelter within the city and no safe routes to locations outside the city.

Tensions once again escalated across the northern corridor of **West Darfur** during March, with reports that the presence of JPA forces in Kulbus and Sirba localities had prompted RSF to threaten attacks on key population centers unless the JPA forces withdrew. Native Administration leaders intervened with RSF to negotiate for time to mediate a solution that would avert conflict; however, those efforts did not appear to have yielded a resolution of the tensions by the end of March. The continued presence of JPA forces across both localities was reported to have prompted additional mobilization measures by de facto authorities in West Darfur. Failure to resolve the tensions reportedly drove displacement from Abu Surouj in Sirba locality towards the end of March, towards both El Geneina and onwards to Chad, as RSF announced its intention to attack the town. Reports indicate those fleeing experienced harassment from RSF elements during flight due to suspicions that they were affiliated with or supportive of JPA forces.

In February, there was optimism that the tensions between RSF and SLA/AW in Gharb Jebel Marra locality of **Central Darfur** had been successfully defused by the signing of a peaceful coexistence declaration. Importantly, the agreement enabled the reopening of the Nertiti-Zalengei road; however, the road was closed once again on 6 March by armed Arab militia groups. The closure was reportedly triggered by clashes between militia groups and SLA/AW elements on 5 March. On 13 March, an exchange of prisoners between SLA/AW and armed militia groups took place pursuant to the peaceful coexistence declaration agreed in February but use of the Nertiti-Zalengei road continued to be restricted, including for humanitarian actors attempting to transport vital aid supplies from Zalengei into the Jebel Marra region. In **East Darfur**, on 30 March, tensions between community members related to the recently declared support of SLM/MM for SAF escalated into clashes between Zaghawa tribesmen and armed elements described as RSF personnel in Labado area of Yassin locality. The clashes resulted in the reported deaths of two civilians and injuries to 10 others, as well as driving displacement from the area. Notwithstanding these developments, the broader security context in Central Darfur, East Darfur and **South Darfur** was relatively stable in March. This enabled returns to areas including Boldong, Golol, Kond, Kurgei, Kutrum and Dargei in Gharb Jebel Marra and Tibon, Ausa-Jaing, Ilogo, Targi and Dongola in Shmal Jebel Marra, both in Central Darfur, as well as, approximately 50 households per day returning to Nyala town in South Darfur. Returnees faced difficulties due to the destruction and looting of their shelters and belongings, and due to the proliferation of unexploded ordnance in residential areas.

In parallel to the fighting between parties to the conflict, **intercommunal tensions** were also an ongoing cause for concern. In Um Kaddada locality of North Darfur, tensions remained high following clashes between Berti and Arab tribesmen during February, in which each side drew in some support from RSF and SAF elements. The town was under the control of predominately Berti armed tribal groups by March, and reports indicated that looting of the property of displaced households occurred in a targeted manner as other tribes in the area sought protection from Zayadiya Arab tribe. On 19 March, the predominately Berti village of Lawbid hosting Berti households displaced from Um Kaddada was attacked and looted in retaliation for the Um Kaddada clashes. In West Darfur, a personal dispute resulted in the shooting of an Arab tribesman by a Zaghawa tribesman in Kosa market in Kulbus locality on 12 March. The Peaceful Coexistence Committee shut down the market to mitigate risks of a broader escalation. In parallel, in Habila locality, the targeting of Massalit community members in a beating incident on 8 March and an attempted armed robbery on 9 March highlighted the continued heightened protection risks faced by those with specific tribal backgrounds. Finally, tensions were also high in both Ed El Fursan locality of South Darfur and Mukjar locality of Central Darfur due to the longstanding dispute between the Arab Salamat and Bani Halba tribes. The Native Administrations of Mukjar, Wadi Salih and Um Dukhun held meetings in Wastani village over 24 and 25 March to defuse the tensions but fears of escalation drove small scale displacement from the affected areas towards Chad.

Priority Protection Concerns:

As in previous months, **generalized insecurity and perceived impunity for engagement in criminality** created significant protection risks for civilians across the Darfur region. In North Darfur, the residents of Kutum town experienced a wave of physical assaults, robberies and other criminal activity in first half of March in a continuation of a trend that emerged in February. Specific incidents included the armed robbery of a group of travellers that resulted in an IDP woman being shot in the leg on 4 March, the shooting of a trader on 5 March, and the robbery and beating of a woman being carried to hospital by rickshaw on 6 March. The incidents were attributed to armed men on motorcycles believed to be from Arab damras adjacent to the town. In Nyala town of South Darfur, robbery and looting from shops in the markets

continued to take place during the night, while in Malwi village of Yassin locality in East Darfur an unspecified number of solar panels were looted by armed elements from the primary health center and the water yard. In Gharb Jebel Marra locality of Central Darfur on 8 March, an armed robbery of local traders travelling on the Gurni-Nertiti road resulted in the looting and beating of all 11 passengers. The following day, a commercial truck was carjacked while travelling from Nertiti to Zalengei. Abductions for ransom were also reported in North Darfur, including one civilian man abducted from Janjona village on 5 March and two civilian men abducted from Um Hajalij village on 9 March. The ransom requested for their release was reportedly framed as compensation for livestock that the perpetrators alleged had been stolen. In a troubling incident in Nyala town on 23 March, a dispute over non-payment for fuel led to the killing of a fuel seller and injury of his three sisters by two customers. In Beida locality of West Darfur, the Security Committee, together with RSF and Native Administration leaders, attempted to address criminality through a campaign to combat 'negative phenomena' in early March. As a result, it was reported that five shops allegedly engaged in weapons dealing were burnt down. Some tea sellers' shops were also reportedly burnt down on suspicion of dealing in drugs and alcohol. While efforts to address criminality typically have the support of community members, in this case the targeting of small vendors and tea shop owners raised concerns that the campaign may deprive already vulnerable women headed households of the opportunity to engage in legitimate livelihood activities.

Parties to the conflict, de facto authorities and armed groups continued to levy **so-called 'protection fees' and arbitrary 'taxes'** on the civilian population. In early March, a group of armed men reportedly established two checkpoints on the road between Nyala and Ed El Fursan in South Darfur, at which they began collecting fees for passage from commercial trucks. Also in early March, traders and vendors in Wast Jebel Marra raised concerns about the high taxes imposed on them by de facto authorities, ranging from SDG 50,000 for small shops to SDG 100,000 for bigger shops, and including SDG 10,000 per tricycle and SDG 5,000 per wheelbarrow. This is in addition to the weekly payments that traders are also required to meet. Traders explained that the taxes are forcing them to raise prices for commodities, with knock on impacts on the population's ability to meet their basic needs. Similarly, in North Darfur, armed personnel of a party to the conflict reportedly demanded payment of SDG 7,000,000 from traders and the locality administration in Al Lait locality. When payment of the amount was not made promptly, an armed element reportedly physically assaulted a member of the Traders' Committee and the son of a Native Administration leader, after which the payment was made. In Kutum locality of North Darfur, the party to the conflict controlling the area reported imposed new taxes on civilian traders participating in Kutum market at the end of March. The required payment reportedly ranges between SDG 3,000 and SDG 5,000 and has been framed as a necessary contribution to supporting the armed personnel who maintain security in the town. Coerced payment of 'protection fees' has been a longstanding issue in Azum locality of Central Darfur, and in March a number of villages in Um Shalaya Administrative Unit reportedly refused to continue paying the fees, despite fears that they may face retaliatory attacks by armed groups engaged in fee collection. Refugees from Um Shalaya refugee camp reported that they also attempted to disengage from payment of the fees, which have immiserated the camp community; however, reportedly local leaders sought to push back against refugees' non-payment of the protection fees by inciting criminals to enter the camp and open fire into the air at random. After two successive nights of shooting incidents causing panic among camp residents, refugees agreed to resume the payments.

Freedom of movement continued to be constrained by fears of violence or insecurity, as well as checkpoints and other formal controls. Generalized insecurity remains a key barrier to freedom of movement, particularly for those populations in the vicinity of active conflict. For example, IDPs at Al Salam camp in El Fasher locality of North Darfur explained that they avoid moving around at night due to risks of robbery, physical assault and abduction. In other cases, barriers to freedom of movement were created by checkpoints. For example, in mid-March, IDPs at Alshargiya School gathering site in El Fasher noted that many of the IDPs wished to visit their houses to check on their property but could not do so safely due to risks of intimidation, harassment, extortion or assault at checkpoints they would face on the way. IDPs emphasized that risks at checkpoints also include sexual harassment and other types of gender-based violence. A number of incidents were also reported in which young men appeared to be subject to **arbitrary arrest and detention** while engaged in livelihood activities. For example, in West Darfur, three young men were arrested at a checkpoint while travelling from El Geneina to Adre on 3 March. The previous day, on 2 March, 12 young men reportedly engaged in trading activities across the Sudan-Chad border were arrested by RSF in Adekong and later released upon payment of a fine. On 12 March, three IDP men from Um Hajalij in a rural area of El Fasher locality were detained by armed elements whilst collecting firewood. The detainees were transferred to an Arab damra named Golgi, and the Native Administration entered into negotiations for their release. In each of those incidents, the basis for the arrests was unclear. A different type of formal, and systematic, barrier to freedom of movement was reportedly imposed in Habila locality of West Darfur on 10 March when the RSF Commander instructed the Fursha of Massalit to inform people visiting or returning to Habila town from Chad or other localities of West Darfur that they must report to the RSF office for registration and screening. The directive is likely to negatively impact access markets and livelihood opportunities in Chad and has raised concern about exposing young men to risks of arbitrary arrest and detention.

Growing food insecurity across Darfur is exacerbated by **protection threats related to engagement in agricultural activities**. For example, two people from Um Shalaya town in Central Darfur were killed at their farms on 1 March after unidentified individuals entered their farms around midnight with their livestock. The farmers tried to prevent the livestock from entering and were shot by the herders in retaliation. In West Darfur, camels reportedly destroyed crops at four farms on 3 March in the vicinity of Habila town as well as destroying a watermelon farm in Wadi Kaja village of Azernei area in El Geneina locality. In both cases, the incidents were reported to the relevant local committees, which previously would have taken action to corral the offending livestock and assess compensation; however, no follow up action was reported to have taken place in relation to either incident. Following the incident in Habila, four empty houses in Al Maderis neighbourhood of the town were set on fire in an act attributed to camel herders that ultimately resulted in the destruction of ten shelters. Insecurity inhibiting agricultural activities also reduces the likelihood that farmers will invest in preparation for future harvests, undermining the potential for displaced populations to return to land on which they previously engaged in agricultural activities. Those impacts are demonstrated by the movement of recent returnees to Sirba back to Chad over the first quarter of 2024. Reports indicated that at least 2,400 households returned to Sirba from Chad at the beginning of the year pursuant to de facto authorities' promotion of return. However, an estimated 1,000 households had moved back to Chad by early March, due to the increasingly dire conditions at the return locations. In particular, they note the lack of available food as a key driver of movement. The disruption of previous harvest seasons due to the impacts of the conflict underpins the growing food insecurity across Darfur, which forces community members to have recourse to a range of **coping mechanisms that increase their exposure to protection risks**. In Shagra village in the rural area of El Fasher locality in North Darfur, food insecurity has reportedly resulted in increased incidents of food theft. In parallel, it is also driving women and girls to travel to nearby villages to seek work in the fields, heightening their exposure to exploitation and abuse. Rising rates of divorce and single headed households are also anecdotally attributed to the continuing deterioration of living conditions. Refugees in Al Lait locality and IDPs in Alshargiya School gathering site in El Fasher both report that food insecurity has resulted in increased recourse to begging, child labor and fatalities, especially amongst children, due to malnutrition. In a particularly tragic case, three young IDP girls from El Neem IDP camp in East Darfur reportedly died in mid-March after resorting to eating rubbish when they could find no food.

The **gendered impacts of conflict and pervasive insecurity** continue to be reflected in reports of gender-based violence. Reports indicate that women and girls engaged in collection of firewood, grass and water are at particularly high risk of violence, especially in areas with significant presence of armed groups. This was reflected in multiple reports of gender-based violence in Kabkabiya locality of North Darfur in March. On 6 March, three IDP women were abducted, subjected to physical assault and attempted rape while on their way to collect firewood in outlying areas of Kabkabiya town. They were released after being held for two days. On 9 March, another IDP woman was raped while conducting livelihood activities on farmland in Kabkabiya and feared reporting the incident would trigger retaliation. Three further incidents of gender-based violence affecting IDP women engaged in collection of firewood and grass were reported in the second half of March. Similarly, on 19 March, an IDP woman from Al Salam IDP camp in El Fasher locality of North Darfur was raped by armed elements while on farmland in Gadid Alsail area. These incidents are prevalent across the Darfur region. In the first week of March alone, 13 incidents of gender-based violence were reported across Al Neem IDP camp, Adila, and Assalaya in East Darfur and 29 incidents of gender-based violence were reported across Mershing town, Otash and Kalma IDP camps in South Darfur. In West Darfur, a girl was threatened by an armed rickshaw rider while on her way to Al Riyadh IDP camp on 3 March and managed to escape unharmed. On 8 March, a 15 year old girl was reportedly abducted from Donkey 13 area of El Geneina by two men and raped. The girl's family is unwilling to report the incident due to fears of community stigma. These examples represent only the cases in which survivors reached service providers and disclosed their experiences, and are likely far short of the actual numbers of people affected.

Conclusions and Key Messages:

- Parties to the conflict are urged to ensure the commitment of all persons acting under their instructions, direction or control to core IHL obligations, to avoid locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas and to guarantee safe passage to civilians attempting to flee conflict affected areas.
- Parties to the conflict are called upon to address increased criminality in territory under their control by facilitating the re-operationalization of formal justice mechanisms where feasible to do so.
- Growing food insecurity highlights the need to address protection risks inhibiting agricultural activities, including through revitalization of Crop Protection Committees, demarcation of migratory routes and marking and safe disposal of unexploded ordnance on agricultural land.
- Humanitarian actors are encouraged to bolster efforts to address community stigma faced by survivors of gender-based violence to increase the confidence of survivors to access services in support of their recovery.
- Parties to the conflict, political and civil society leaders and regional stakeholders are strongly urged to prioritize the protection of civilians, unfettered humanitarian access, and a return to an inclusive political process to enable progress towards a democratic transition.