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Darfur: Rapid Support Forces, Allied Militias Rape Dozens

Governments Should Prioritize Care Services, Independent Investigations



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Three women and a teenaged girl from El Geneina, West Darfur, who survived rape committed by the Rapid Support Forces and allied militias between April and June 2023. © 2023 Belkis Wille/Human Rights Watch

- The Rapid Support Forces, an independent military force, and allied militias in [Sudan](#) raped several dozen women and girls in West Darfur's capital and those fleeing fighting in recent weeks.
- Sexual violence committed in the context of an armed conflict is a war crime, and if part of a widespread or systematic attack can amount to crimes against humanity.
- The UN Human Rights Council should initiate an investigation and a way to preserve evidence of the abuses, and concerned governments should provide more resources for rape survivors.

(Nairobi, August 17, 2023) – The Rapid Support Forces (RSF), an independent military force, and allied militias in [Sudan](#) raped several dozen women and girls in West Darfur's capital, El Geneina, and those fleeing to [Chad](#) between late April and late June 2023, Human Rights Watch said today. The assailants appear to have targeted people because of their Massalit ethnicity and, in some cases, because they were known activists.

Since the start of armed conflict in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces and the RSF on April 15, the RSF and predominantly Arab allied militias have carried out repeated attacks on towns and villages in the West Darfur state. These attacks have mainly targeted areas inhabited by one of the main non-Arab communities, the Massalit.

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[Attacks](#) in the city of El Geneina began on April 24 and continued through late June, causing numerous civilian deaths and injuries, and forcing over [366,000](#) people to flee to nearby Chad. The United Nations Security Council should urgently hold a briefing by the special representative of the secretary-general on sexual violence in conflict.

“The Rapid Support Forces and allied militias appear responsible for a staggering number of rapes and other war crimes during their attack on El Geneina,” said [Belkis Wille](#), associate [crisis and conflict](#) director at Human Rights Watch. “The UN Security Council should show those responsible for abuses that the world is watching by taking urgent steps to bring an end to these atrocities.”

In late July, Human Rights Watch interviewed in person in Chad nine women and a 15-year-old girl from El Geneina who are survivors of rape and other forms of sexual violence. Four, including the girl, were raped by multiple men. Human Rights Watch also interviewed four women who witnessed sexual violence or the immediate aftermath, along with five service providers, including medical workers who had supported sexual violence victims in El Geneina. Based on survivors’ personal experiences and incidents they also witnessed, as well as information shared with service providers, including locations where the incidents occurred, Human Rights Watch documented 78 victims, or survivors, of rape between April 24 and June 26.

Survivors who spoke to Human Rights Watch said that between one and six armed assailants carried out the sexual violence. Most groups of assailants included men wearing full or partial RSF uniforms and some in civilian clothes. In many instances, they arrived in RSF-marked vehicles. One woman recognized her assailant as an Arab resident of El Geneina.

In almost all instances reported to Human Rights Watch, those responsible for the rapes also committed other grave abuses including beatings, killings, looting, or burning homes, businesses or government buildings.

The survivors all said that the attackers explicitly mentioned their ethnic identity and used ethnic slurs about the Massalit or non-Arabs more generally.

Since 2019, the RSF and allied militias have recurrently fought Massalit armed groups in West Darfur. Historical grievances based on ethnicity, including the Sudanese government’s failure to address land access and ownership, have also fueled tensions. A lack of justice for [past](#) violations of rights and the proliferation of weapons, along with the absence of any security sector reform, have added to the strained climate. During then-president Omar al-Bashir’s ethnic cleansing campaign in Darfur that began in 2003, government forces and so-called Janjaweed militias, the precursor to the Rapid Support Forces, frequently [attacked](#) non-Arab communities, including the Massalit.

On the first day of attacks in El Geneina on April 24, five armed Arab men in civilian attire entered the home of a 20-year-old university student and four other women in the Jabal neighborhood. They demanded to know the women’s tribe. “We lied and said Bargu,” she said. “But they said, ‘No, you are Massalit, you are Nuba [a term used in Sudan to mean either “rebels” or non-Arabs].’ ... One raped me while the others waited outside. Then another came in and raped me.”

She said that over two months later, she remained haunted by the attack: “I cry often, and when I cry, my throat hurts. I can’t sleep, I can’t feel normal. When I am walking outside, I keep getting lost. I can’t find my way when I try to go anywhere.”

In four cases the assailants explicitly mentioned the women’s human rights work and in one case the work of her husband, suggesting they knew who they were assaulting.

Only one of the survivors interviewed received some emergency post-rape care in El Geneina. During the peak of the violence, the RSF and allied militias looted and burned medical facilities and offices of nongovernmental organizations that provided emotional and psychological care to sexual violence survivors.

The Women's Future Organisation, a Darfuri organization, reported that only 24 of 103 victims in incidents of rape that it had [recorded](#) had received subsequent medical services. Seventy-three of the incidents had occurred in West Darfur.

International humanitarian law, called the laws of war, prohibits parties to an armed conflict from deliberately harming civilians. Common article 3 to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and customary international humanitarian law, both of which apply to all warring parties in Sudan, prohibit rape and other forms of sexual violence. Rape committed by combatants can constitute a form of torture. Rape and other sexual violence committed in the context of an armed conflict is a war crime, and if part of a widespread or systematic attack by a government or armed group on a civilian population, can amount to crimes against humanity.

[International standards](#) call for the government to provide risk mitigation for [gender-based violence](#) from the onset of crisis response, including [clinical management of rape](#) and other comprehensive services for survivors of violence.

Human Rights Watch on August 11 emailed a summary of findings for comment to Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the RSF commander, but at the time of publication has not received a [response](#).

Following an August 1 [call](#) from the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict Pramila Patten to prevent and address sexual violence, Maj. Gen. Abdul-Rahim Dagalo, the RSF deputy commander, acknowledged the gravity of sexual violence in the context of the armed conflict. The RSF issued a [statement](#) following the meeting that "assured the RSF's full cooperation with the UN in investigating any allegations of human rights violations."

At the UN Human Rights Council in September, all countries should support the establishment of an international inquiry to independently investigate and preserve evidence of serious abuses in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan that will help ensure that those responsible will be held to account.

"Concerned governments need to be committing more resources for sexual violence survivors in Darfur," [Wille](#) said. "Brutal accounts of rape and the terrible consequences of those crimes should mobilize donors to meet survivors' needs, and to back steps to facilitate the delivery of justice."

For more details on sexual violence against women and girls in El Geneina, please see below.

Rape During the Conflict in El Geneina Since April

El Geneina had a pre-war population of about [538,000](#). From April 24 to June 15, there were repeated deliberate attacks on civilians in El Geneina, mostly by RSF forces and allied Arab militia primarily targeting the ethnic Massalit population.

The extent of rape and other sexual violence committed by the Rapid Support Forces and allied militias during their attacks on El Geneina since late April is unknown. The names of interviewees have been omitted to protect their identities.

A woman whose Darfuri organization provides services for sexual violence survivors, including emotional and psychological care, said that from late April until mid-May, the group identified 13 rape survivors. After that, the woman and her colleagues researched in El Geneina and identified 51 more cases through mid-June, plus an additional four on June 15 near Shukri, a village where people fleeing passed through en route to Chad.

Most incidents reported to Human Rights Watch occurred in or near the person's home or temporary shelter. Survivors said that attackers explicitly sought or mentioned their ethnicity and used ethnic slurs about their Massalit or non-Arab identity. One woman said she convinced a group of armed men who wanted to rape her 15-year-old cousin that the cousin was from a prominent Arab family in the neighborhood and that they would be punished if they carried out the act. They left without attacking her.

Some sexual violence occurred while civilians were trying to flee to Chad. A 27-year-old woman said that as she was fleeing the city, she came across an 18-year-old former colleague near death with a bullet wound in her left shoulder lying on the side of the road. The colleague said that she had been raped and then shot and asked the woman to tell her family not to search for her. The woman quickly fled the area, fearing she would also be attacked. She joined a group of civilians fleeing to Chad and said that on the way, RSF members tried to forcibly take three teenage girls from the group, and when the girls refused, they shot and killed them.

A 28-year-old economics student said eight armed men, two in RSF uniform and six in civilian clothes, entered her family's home in the Tadamun neighborhood of El Geneina on June 8 at about 4 p.m., saying they were looking for men and weapons. About 20 people, relatives and neighbors, were sheltering in the house at the time. The attackers beat the six men in the house with sticks and plastic pipes. She said one assailant demanded that everyone hand over their cell phones. They said they had none, but one of the attackers found the woman's phone in her bedroom, and ordered her to come into the room and show him where she was hiding another phone. She said:

"He searched my breasts and down there, but I did not have another phone. He said, 'You have to sacrifice yourself, or we will shoot your brothers.' I said, 'No, kill me and let my brothers and family live, let them go.' I said I would sacrifice my life, but he said, 'We don't kill women.' Then he said I would have to lie down."

She screamed to get her mother's attention and as her mother came running, one of the men shot and wounded her mother in the leg. Another shot narrowly missed the woman's aunt who was also trying to protect her. "The bullet was so loud," she said. "I felt there was no hope. They would just kill them in front of me. He put the gun to my head and raped me."

The attacker injured her, and she bled profusely from her genital area. Her family took her to the hospital where a doctor treated her with sutures and prescribed emergency contraception and medication to prevent sexually transmitted infections.

As of late July, she had an infection in the wound and was in considerable pain. Her menstruation was late, and she was afraid she was pregnant, despite the medication. "After the attack I told my mom I do not want to stay here," she said. "'My heart rejects this place.' My mom said, 'How can we leave? We do not have any money.'"

Only the woman was able to leave. Her mother remained, lacking money for passage to Chad. The young woman has had no news of her mother since.

Early in the morning on June 26, a 24-year-old woman returned with her mother to her house in the Tadamun neighborhood that RSF fighters and militias looted weeks earlier, hoping to retrieve some of her three children's clothing. Two armed men in civilian attire and a third in a RSF uniform approached the women. The younger woman said she recognized all three men, who lived in the Jabal neighborhood. They first demanded that the women hand over any weapons they were hiding in the house. Then one of the men ordered the younger woman to sleep with him and threatened that if she didn't, he would shoot her mother. He fired his gun and narrowly missed her mother. The man then grabbed the young woman, dragged her into the damaged home, and raped her. After he finished, she said, another man from the group of three men came in wanting to do the same, but the third man stopped him, saying, "We want weapons and men, not women, so leave them."

Rapes by Multiple Fighters

Four of the survivors said they had been raped by up to five men.

A 15-year-old girl said that she and her family were sheltering with four other families in a home in the Madaris neighborhood of El Geneina when on June 7 or 8 at about noon a group of about 20 uniformed RSF members stormed the house and started beating the people inside with metal rods.

She showed researchers a large scar on her upper left arm and another on her ear where she said she had been hit. She said five of the men told everyone in the house to leave, and then took her into another room where they each raped her over the course of six hours. “When they finally left, I tried to leave but fell down on the side of the road,” she said. “A man eventually found me and carried me to the Central Reserve Police Station by donkey. I stayed there for 10 days before I was able to flee.”

A 29-year-old English teacher was at home with her three young children in the Jabal neighborhood early in the conflict, when two Arab armed men in civilian dress entered her room in the middle of the night. She said: “I woke up as one of them asked me, ‘Are you Nuba or Arab?’ I said I was Arab. ... He said, ‘If you are Nuba, I will rape you to death, if you are Arab, it is not a problem, but you should marry me.’ I told him I would not marry him because I didn’t know him. Then he said, ‘If you don’t sleep with me, I will rape your children and I will kill you.’”

He then called the second man who came and pinned her down with a boot on her neck while the first man raped her. She said the first man returned three more times over the coming days, each time bringing a different man with him. In one of the instances, she said both men raped her. She said the man who kept returning said several times, “I want you to be pregnant and deliver our baby.” She said she was terrified and couldn’t sleep, fearing they would return, and so eventually fled.

On June 13, a 20-year-old student said she went alone to her home in the Jamariq neighborhood to retrieve some items she had left behind after she fled to another neighborhood earlier in the conflict. As she arrived at her partially burned house, three uniformed RSF members saw her, followed her inside and began searching the house for any men hiding there, as well as weapons or uniforms from the police or armed forces. She said:

“They didn’t find anything but then asked which tribe I was from. I said Massalit. Then, the three of them raped me. After they left, I just lay there. I didn’t think I could walk. They came back four hours later and picked me up and left me out on the road, saying, ‘If you don’t leave this area, we will kill you.’ I fled.”

Apparent Targeted Rapes

The Rapid Support Forces and allied militias appear to have targeted some women because of their or their family member’s role as activists in the Massalit community.

A 28-year-old journalist and human rights activist who posted videos about abuses against the Massalit population in El Geneina said on May 12 at about noon, four men, one of them wearing an RSF uniform jacket, abducted her as she was leaving her home. She said that the men blindfolded her and drove her “somewhere outside the city,” where she believed she was held inside a walled compound. Other people were held there too, but she could not tell how many because she was blindfolded. A woman with a baby told her the armed men had raped her. The activist said that it became clear they knew who she was:

“[One man] was saying, ‘Who paid you to be active to say those things online? You are Massalit, you know nothing, you shouldn’t stay in El Geneina.’ Others were telling me to leave the city and said, ‘You are a slave.’ Then one said, ‘We should rape the Nuba women until they give birth to our babies.’ And then two of them raped me. I lost consciousness and woke up again to find myself outside my house at 5 a.m. the next day.”

She fled the city later that day.

A 25-year-old social worker and human rights activist said that on April 27 about 15 uniformed RSF members forcibly entered her family home and opened fire, killing her brother, 16, and wounding her father. At the time she was next door, in her aunt’s house. She said the RSF took her

sister from the house into the street, yelling out that they were looking for her and would hold her sister until she came out. She went outside, and two of the men then dragged her into a neighbor's house and raped her.

"While they did it, they were saying, 'You activists and your leaders need to stop reporting on us,'" she said. "After that they let me go."

The 27-year-old woman who found a colleague on the street said she had been raped by several RSF members in 2019 and has continued to suffer long-term medical consequences, including infertility. On June 15, 2023, she and family members were sheltering in the home of relatives in the Madaris neighborhood when a group of 16 uniformed RSF members forced their way into the house looking for her husband, an outspoken Massalit human rights activist. She said that four men started beating her, demanding she tell them where he was.

One kicked her in the stomach and when she fell to the ground, two pinned her down, each holding one of her arms, and a third stuffed something into her mouth to silence her. Three of them took turns raping her. She lost consciousness but came to several hours later, to find she was the only one still alive in the house. The bodies of four men, three women, and two children were on the ground, each with multiple gunshot wounds. She said: "When I tried to walk, I couldn't, I started vomiting. Finally at night, I was able to get the strength to walk. I didn't know where I was walking but I was just walking and walking. I spent two days trying to find my family but couldn't. And I couldn't find any food or water." She said she had been bleeding since the attack but had been unable to obtain medical care.

A 26-year-old woman said that even before the recent violence in El Geneina, she had received a threat on social media from an unknown source for her work. On June 15, as the RSF and militia attack was underway, she and other civilians sought refuge in a house in the Madaris neighborhood. She said seven uniformed RSF members stormed into the house searching for men and weapons. One man, who said he recognized her from her workplace, forced her to go into another room with him. Once she was in the room, he fired his gun in the air. She said:

"Then he started touching my breasts, asking, 'Are you married?' I said 'Yes,' and begged him not to attack me. I said, 'I am like your sister.' I started crying but he started slapping me and said, 'Today you will sit here.' I tried to turn away from him, but he threatened to shoot me. He pushed me to the ground with his gun pointing at me and made me lie down. I tried to fight back but couldn't."

She said the man raped her three times. After he and the other armed men left, an older woman came in and consoled her. "We cried together," she said. "She brought me water and took me to the bathroom to clean myself. I couldn't stop crying. ... I hope I can get justice one day. I want safety, that's all I want. I can't sleep, I can't relax, I have nightmares that I am going to be raped again and again. I am just looking for a safe place."

Access to Urgent Post-Rape Care

One survivor Human Rights Watch interviewed received immediate post-rape care in El Geneina. Medical workers from two other clinics in El Geneina said five women had come to facilities after they were raped but did not receive emergency post-rape care either because it was unavailable or because they did not initially disclose the sexual violence to staff. The woman whose organization provides services said that because of the stigma around sexual violence, the number of survivors is most likely far greater than the number of women who have sought medical and other services.

A shutdown of communication networks in El Geneina in mid-May of this year also hampered the ability of survivors to access services.

While abortion is legal in Chad in cases of rape, incest, or threat to the health or life of the pregnant woman or fetal viability, medical workers report that it is extremely difficult to access safe abortion care in practice. The ministry of health must authorize abortion based on a doctor's certification that the case falls within the legal restrictions. Creating significant barriers and poor health infrastructure leaves providers often with limited capacity to address gender-based violence or provide specialized sexual and reproductive health care.

One survivor Human Rights Watch interviewed confirmed that she was pregnant after being raped. Two others said they suspected that they were pregnant because they had missed their periods and were experiencing nausea.

The Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan, which seeks to support refugees, returnees and host communities in the [Central African Republic](#), [Chad](#), [Egypt](#), [Ethiopia](#) and [South Sudan](#), was only 15 percent [funded](#) by late June 2023. Governments, the UN, and humanitarian agencies should prioritize ensuring that all survivors of sexual violence can access time-sensitive, life-saving, and confidential services in Sudan and in displacement and refugee sites, in [line](#) with [international standards](#).

Post-rape case management should [address](#) the full range of physical health needs (post exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, treatment for wounds or injuries and sexually transmitted infections, emergency contraception, access to abortion, and other gynecological care) and both immediate and longer-term emotional or mental health support.

The UN secretary-general's 2022 [report](#) on conflict related sexual violence found that "access to services is challenging across [Sudan], with the clinical management of rape, legal assistance and psychosocial support available in only 39 per cent of localities."

Longstanding Impunity for Sexual Violence in Darfur

Sexual violence has been a central [feature](#) of the conflict since 2003, with Sudanese armed forces carrying out large-scale rape and other sexual violence in Darfur. Despite the Sudanese government's numerous publicized investigations into alleged security force abuses in Darfur, Human Rights Watch is unaware of any investigations making significant progress toward accountability.

In 2008 the International Criminal Court prosecutor [noted](#) that "rape is an integral part of the pattern of destruction that the Government of the Sudan is inflicting upon the target groups in Darfur" and the office has already brought charges for rape in its existing [Darfur cases](#).

In 2022 Patten's office had [reported](#) on 96 cases of conflict-related sexual violence by Sudan's security forces and called on both the Sudan Armed Forces and the RSF, which was then part of the government's security forces, to commit to a policy of zero tolerance and revitalize cooperation with the office. Yet, Human Rights Watch is not aware of any measures the RSF has taken to address and end sexual violence by its members.

Recommendations

The Rapid Support Forces and allied militias should fully abide by international humanitarian law, including by adopting measures to end rape and other sexual violence by their forces. Those responsible for serious abuses, including senior commanders, should be appropriately punished. Governments and others with influence over the warring parties should act to promote adherence to international law.

UN Security Council member countries should publicly identify and condemn governments not respecting the existing [arms embargo](#) on Darfur, and impose [targeted sanctions](#) against commanders and officials responsible for serious abuses, including sexual violence. The council

should also invite members of war-affected communities in Darfur, including survivors of sexual violence, to brief the council.

Security Council members and other countries should actively support the International Criminal Court's [investigations in Darfur](#), particularly in light of the prosecutor's announcement that his office is investigating recent atrocities. Past obstruction of the court's investigations by the Sudanese government and the UN Security Council's passivity in the face of that obstruction has facilitated impunity and new crimes.

The UN Security Council should instruct the UN Secretariat to prepare a paper within 45 days with options for additional action to protect civilians in Sudan with a focus on Darfur that examines alternate configurations to the UN Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) mandate, including support for an African regional force.

The African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development should support a coordinated response to the crisis by the UN Security Council and Human Rights Council.

The UN Human Rights Council should at the September session create an independent mechanism with a mandate to investigate, collect, and preserve evidence of grave violations and abuses being committed in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan to identify those responsible and make recommendations for accountability.

Such a mechanism should have the resources and expertise to ensure robust investigations of conflict-related sexual violence in line with international standards by trained, experienced professionals using an approach that puts survivors' needs first and obtains forensic and other evidence while mitigating risks of adding to the trauma they have experienced. This includes not subjecting survivors to unnecessary repetition of physical examinations or interviews about the incidents or to exams by those who may not be experienced in responding to sexual violence and collecting evidence. It also includes ensuring access to medical, psychosocial, legal, and socioeconomic services for survivors.

The European Union and other concerned governments including the United States should urgently impose targeted sanctions on leaders of the RSF, the Sudan Armed Forces, and armed groups responsible for serious abuses against civilians.