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Sudan: The SAF Faces Setbacks as Armed Groups Overtake Territory Across the Country

Situation Update | July 2023

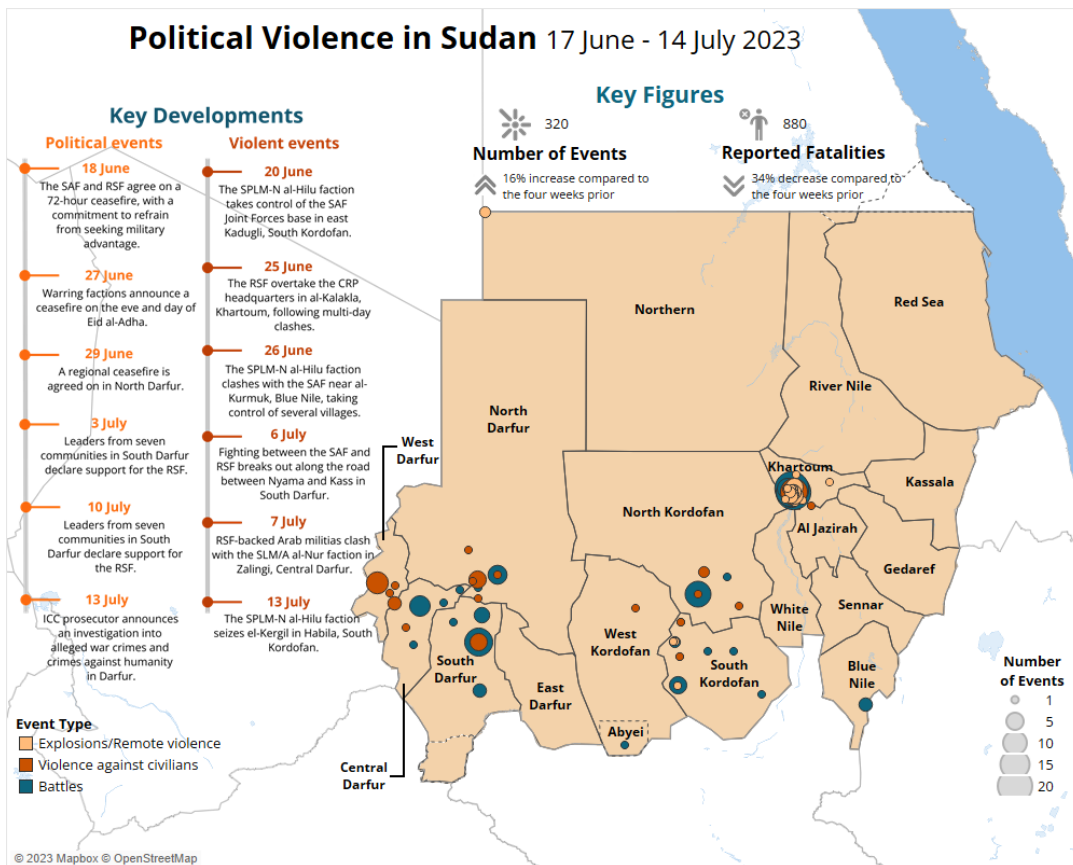
21 July 2023

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Sudan at a Glance: 17 June-14 July 2023

VITAL TRENDS

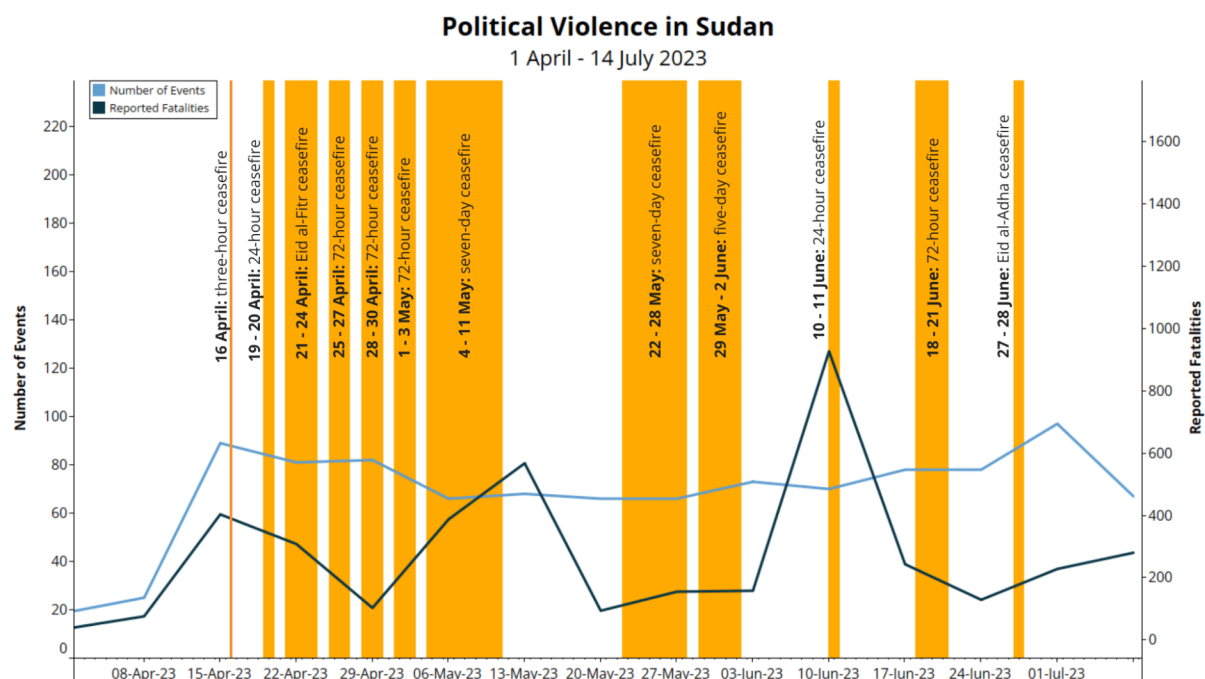
- From 17 June to 14 July 2023, ACLED records 320 political violence events and approximately 880 reported fatalities in Sudan. Of these events, almost 80 were incidents of violence targeting civilians, resulting in over 220 reported fatalities. The ongoing war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has now reached its fourth month, resulting in a devastating loss of life – with thousands killed and over three million displaced. The SAF has suffered significant setbacks over the past month, losing control of territories in Khartoum, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur region.
- Khartoum state continues to see the highest number of political violence events and reported fatalities, with over 200 incidents and more than 500 fatalities recorded during the reporting period. South Darfur state follows with almost 30 events and at least 115 fatalities. Fighting in South Darfur has intensified, with conflict incidents between the two sides more than doubling compared with the previous four weeks.
- The most common event type was battles, followed by violence against civilians. ACLED also records over 40 bombing events during the reporting period, with the SAF involved in nearly two-thirds. Notably, the SAF and RSF have reportedly both initiated a new trend of using fighter drones.



The SAF Faces Setbacks as Armed Groups Overtake Territory Across Sudan

As the armed conflict between the SAF and RSF in Sudan enters its fourth month, the country faces a dangerous mix of complex inter-communal tensions, political interests, and ethnic alliances among numerous armed groups in Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile. This precarious scenario poses a significant risk of escalating the conflict into a full-fledged civil war that could engulf all of Sudan.

Since the start of the conflict, ACLED has recorded almost 1,000 political violence events and over 3,900 fatalities across the country. The conflict has continued unabated despite multiple ceasefire agreements (*see graph below*). The SAF currently finds itself grappling with a series of setbacks, losing control over significant territories both within and outside the capital city of Khartoum. The RSF has reportedly overtaken several locations in the past month, including the Headquarters of the Central Reserve Police (CRP), commonly known as ‘Abu Tira,’ in al-Kalakla in the southern part of Khartoum. The Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction of the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) has also managed to take control of multiple SAF bases in South Kordofan in June and July. Additionally, it has opened a new frontline in Blue Nile state, where it gained control of several villages in al-Kurmuk locality in June. To counter these setbacks, the SAF has called for a general mobilization of young civilians as well as for reservists and SAF retirees to join the army.¹ Radio Dabanga, ‘El Burhan calls for Sudan’s ‘young and capable’ civilians to fight against RSF,’ 29 June 2023; Radio Dabanga, ‘Sudan army starts to mobilise reservists, RSF denounces the move,’ 27 May 2023



Additional armed groups have joined the conflict in the past month, either by actively participating in clashes or declaring support for one of the warring factions. In South Darfur, the Abdul Wahid al-Nur faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) has reportedly clashed with the RSF in Jebbel Marrah. During the first week of July, leaders from seven communities in South Darfur announced their allegiance to the RSF and called on their members to leave the army and join the RSF – a move that will likely tip the balance of power in favor of the RSF.²[The New Arab, 'Sudan: Darfur tribes 'pledge allegiance' to RSF in move that could tip scales in war-torn Sudan,' 6 July 2023](#) These developments have further complicated the already complex dynamics on the ground as the new alliances might shift the ongoing conflict to a full-scale civil war across Sudan.

The War in the Capital

The conflict in Sudan has witnessed a significant development within the capital city of Khartoum, as the RSF launched a targeted offensive against the CRP headquarters at the end of June. After three days of intense clashes in al-Kalakla – with casualty estimates ranging from dozens to hundreds – the RSF overtook the CRP headquarters on 25 June. The paramilitary group captured over 260 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and Land Cruisers, along with a substantial arsenal of ammunition, military gear, and engineering equipment. This development holds particular significance due to the initial deployment of Abu Tira forces to support the SAF at the frontline units. Moreover, the call for the general mobilization of young civilians, in addition to reservists and SAF retirees, to join the army indicates the lack of manpower within the SAF.³[Radio Dabanga, 'El Burhan calls for Sudan's 'young and capable' civilians to fight against RSF,' 29 June 2023](#); [Radio Dabanga, 'RSF take control of Central Reserve Police HQ in Khartoum, 'hundreds of soldiers killed', 27 June 2023](#)

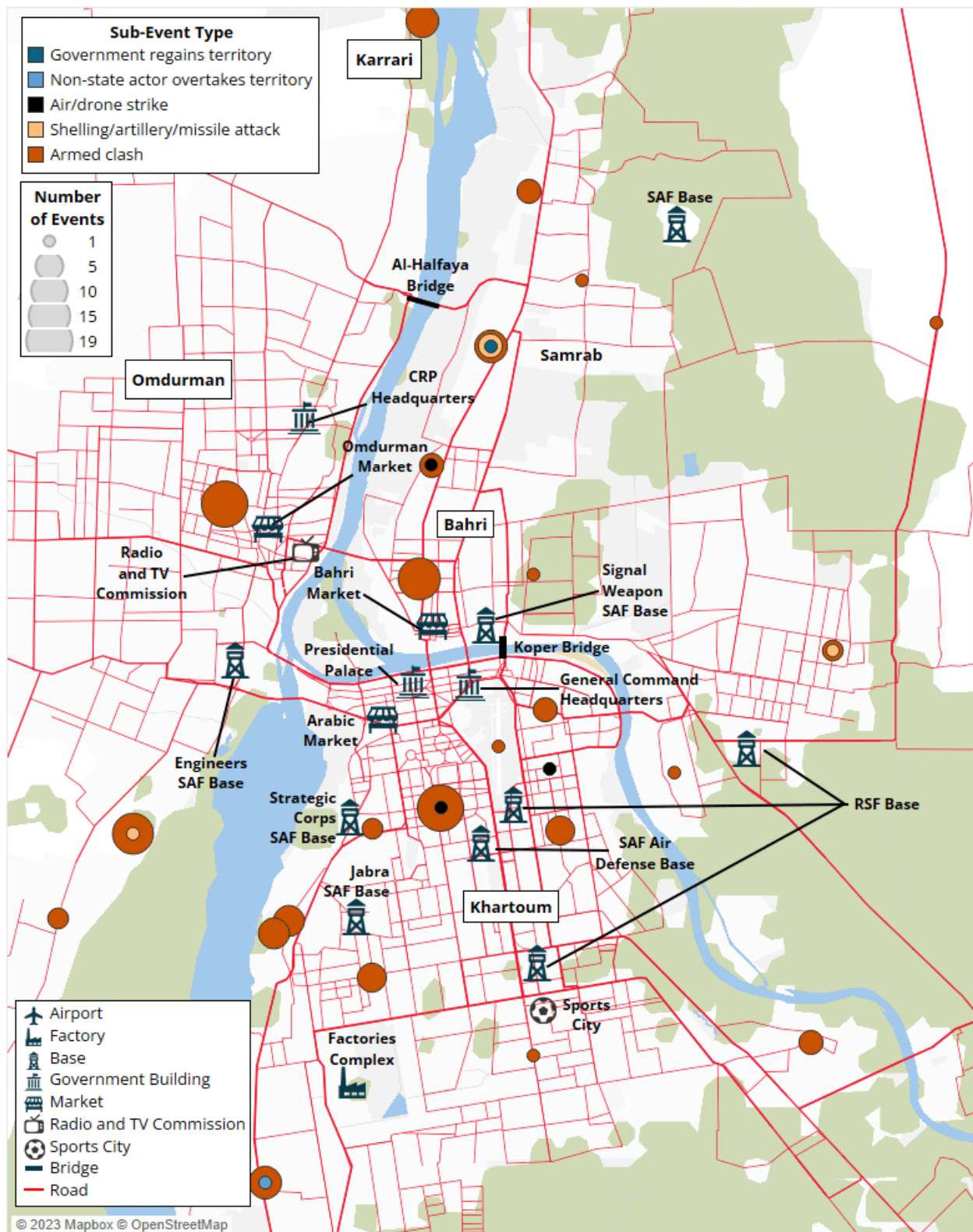
Abu Tira forces played a significant role during former President Omar al-Bashir's rule in supporting counter-insurgency operations in Darfur and South Kordofan, as well as general security operations.⁴[Redress, 'Briefing Paper: Sudan's Central Reserve Police,' March 2022](#) They have also been accused of serious human rights abuses due to their role in suppressing anti-coup demonstrations.⁵[Voice of America, 'US Sanctions Sudan's Central Reserve Police Over Human Rights Violations,' 21 March 2022](#) Their deployment in the capital was aimed at maintaining security and securing public and private property in Khartoum.⁶[Sudan Tribune, 'Sudanese police](#)

[deploy Central Reserve units in Khartoum,' 29 April 2023](#) Since their deployment in late April, they have largely shied away from active fighting. Nonetheless, the RSF's seizure of the headquarters of Abu Tira forces is a major blow to the SAF, whose ability to effectively control the situation in the capital and take the upper hand is now seriously undermined.

The fighting has continued unabated in the Khartoum tri-city metropolitan area since 15 April. In Khartoum, armed clashes have clustered in the vicinity of the Armored Corps and General Command Headquarters during the reporting period (*see map below*). Across the Nile river, in Omdurman, the SAF deployed its Special Forces, launching attacks on the areas where the RSF is stationed, especially around the Engineers Corps Base and the CRP headquarters in Omdurman and its surrounding neighborhoods. The area became the focal point of intense fighting between the conflicting parties at the beginning of July. The heightened tensions surrounding the CRP headquarters underscore the strategic importance of Abu Tira forces for both sides. Clashes in Bahri were less intense and concentrated in its northern area and Shambat and al-Halfaya bridges. On 14 July, the SAF initiated a multifront offensive against the RSF, targeting the al-Halfaya bridge in Omdurman. In this operation, the SAF successfully regained control of the bridge's eastern side in al-Halfaya. However, the RSF effectively ambushed SAF forces on other fronts, specifically in el-Ingaz Street in Khartoum North and Hattab in Sharg An Neel. These confrontations resulted in heavy casualties, with hundreds of soldiers from the SAF losing their lives, according to the RSF. The RSF also claimed to have destroyed and seized numerous military vehicles belonging to the SAF during the clashes.

Fighting Between the SAF and RSF in Khartoum

17 June - 14 July 2023



Numerous incidents of airstrikes and artillery shelling were also recorded in Khartoum state (*see map above*). Notably, the SAF and RSF have reportedly both initiated a new trend of employing fighter drones, indicating the possibility of foreign states supporting the warring factions.⁷ [Abdolgader Mohamed Ali, 'Will RSF drones tip the balance of Sudan's war?,' The New Arab, 26 June 2023](#) Throughout the reporting period, the RSF successfully shot down nine SAF fighter drones or jets, while the SAF managed to bring down two RSF fighter drones. These

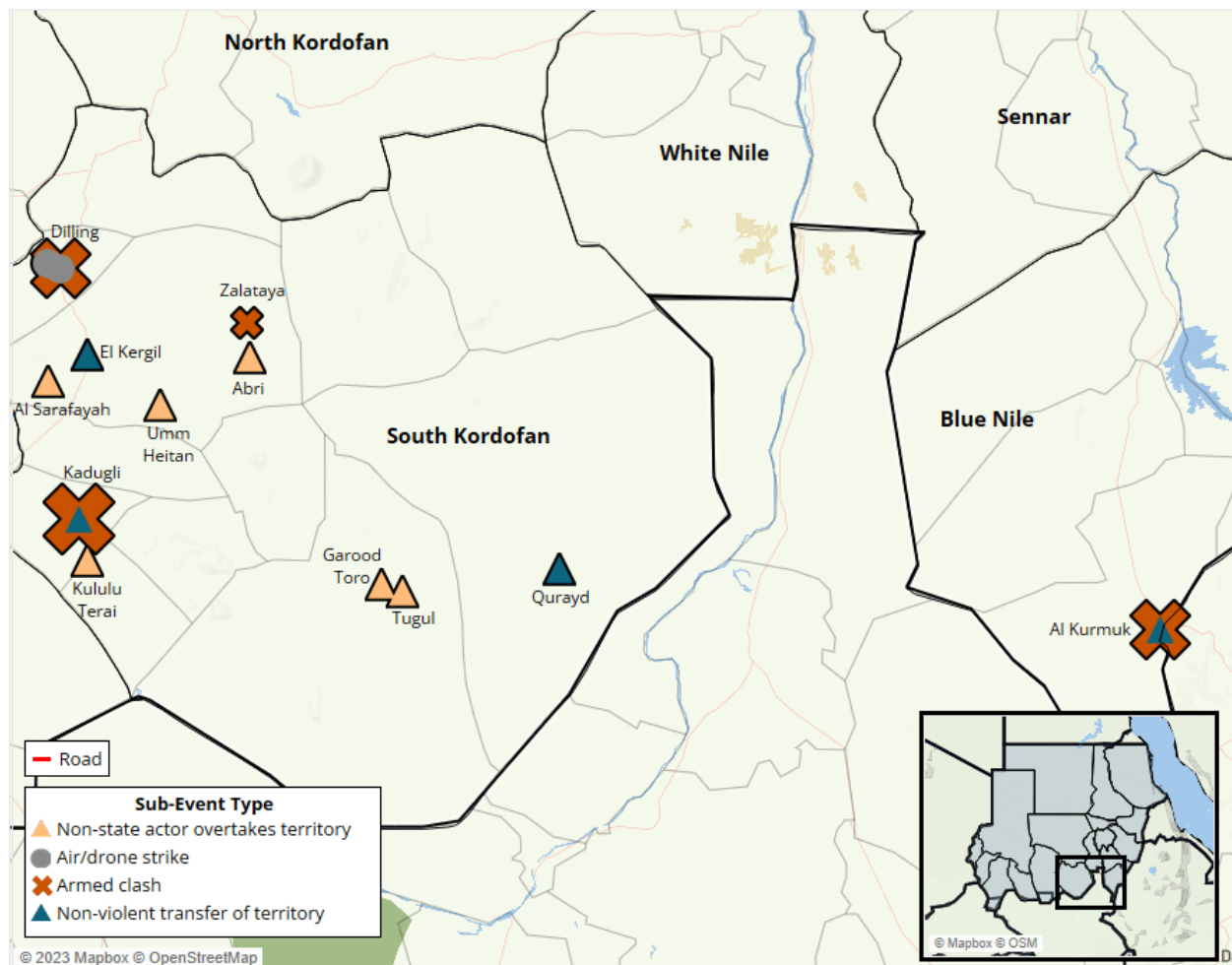
developments attest to the evolving nature of the conflict, with technological advancements and external influences shaping the dynamics on the ground.

SPLM-N al-Hilu Faction: Territorial Gains and New Frontline

Since the Abdelaziz al-Hilu faction of the SPLM-N declared a unilateral cessation of hostilities in July 2019 after the ouster of al-Bashir, it remained relatively inactive in the country's political violence scene. From August 2019 until May 2023, ACLED records only eight political violence incidents involving the group. However, at the beginning of June, reports began emerging of the al-Hilu faction [overtaking several SAF bases](#) in South Kordofan state. The group claimed they got involved in the conflict due to insecurity caused by it, and to protect civilians.⁸[Sudan Tribune, 'UNITAMS confirms new attacks by SPLA-N Hilu in Blue Nile area,' 26 June 2023](#) Continuing its strategic gains in the state during the reporting period, the al-Hilu faction overtook territory and SAF bases in at least 10 locations, including SAF bases in Qurayd, Abri, el-Kergil, al-Sarafayah, Tugul, and Umm Heitan (*see map below*). In response, the SAF conducted airstrikes in Dilling and Kadugli localities, presumably targeting al-Hilu faction forces.

SPLM-N Activity and Changes in Territory in Sudan

17 June - 14 July 2023



Notably, a new frontline emerged in Blue Nile state, where the al-Hilu faction successfully took over villages in al-Kurmuk locality on 26 June, following two days of clashes with the SAF. The two sides clashed again in al-Kurmuk two weeks later. Between 16 April, when the SAF captured RSF bases in Ed Damazin, and 26 June, ACLED records only one violent incident in Blue Nile state. These armed clashes highlight the risk of escalation in Blue Nile state, which had long remained sidelined in this conflict. Both South Kordofan and Blue Nile states are highly militarized and have complex communal divisions. [SPLM-N rebels](#) mainly come from these two states along

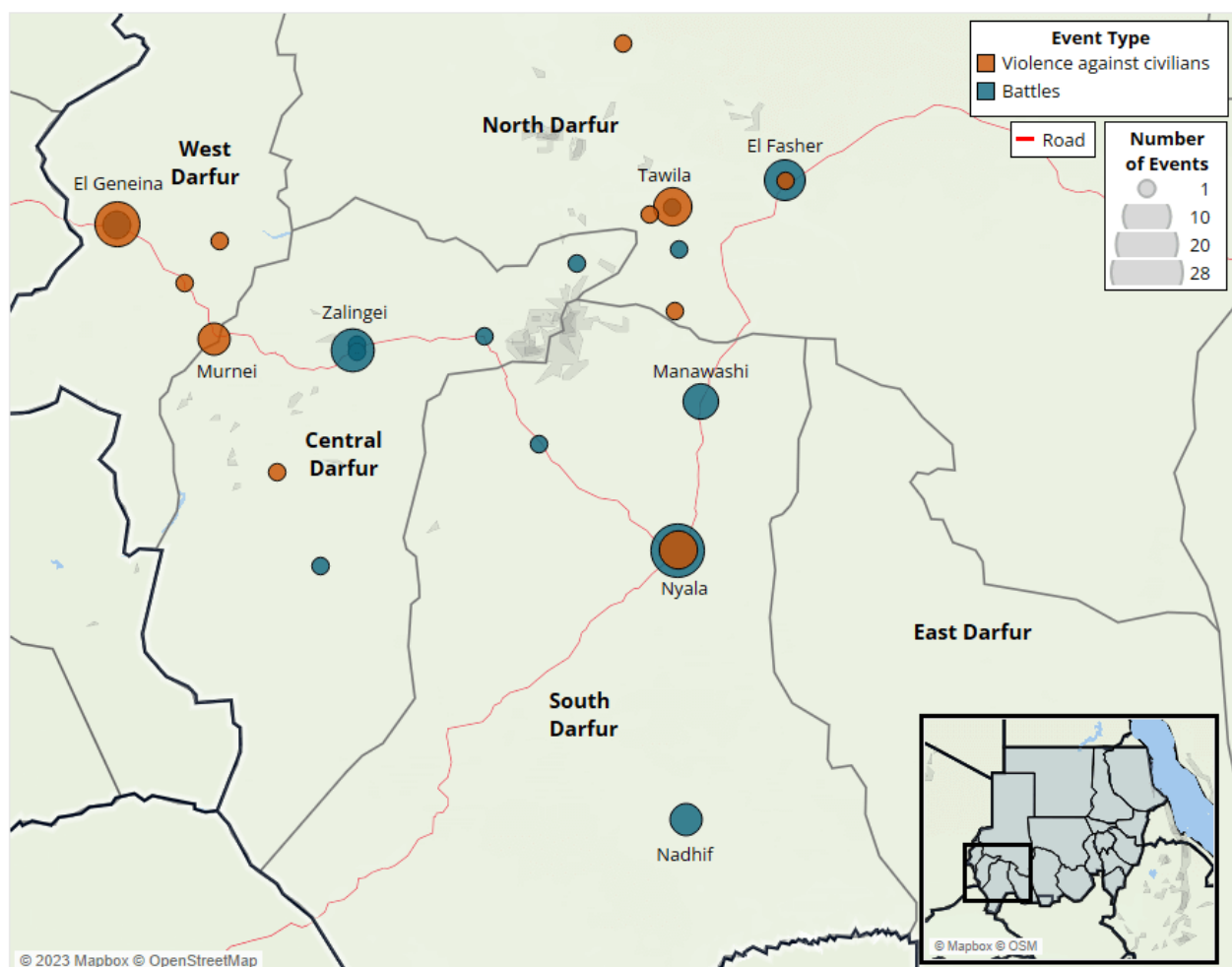
the border with South Sudan. As the militarily dominant bloc of the group, the al-Hilu faction controls a substantial territory. In South Kordofan, the Popular Defense Forces (PDF) have mobilized and recruited Arab pastoralist groups such as Misseriya and Hawazma to combat the SPLM-N since 2011. In Blue Nile, the PDF have recruited the Hausa and Falata ethnic groups for the same reason.⁹ Jérôme Tubiana, 'Remote-control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-government militias (HSBA Issue Brief 27),' *Small Arms Survey*, April 2017 These measures have further heightened inter-communal grievances in these states.

The RSF Gains a Strong Foot-Hold Across Darfur

Violence in Darfur has risen over the past four weeks, expanding and intensifying in new areas outside the hotspots recorded in the first two months of the conflict. South and Central Darfur states both turned into new epicenters of conflict in Darfur (*see map below*), with violence increasing in both states. During this time, new actors became increasingly involved in violence in Darfur, as the SLM/A al-Nur faction clashed with the RSF in Central Darfur, and leaders from communities in South Darfur called on their members to join the fight against the SAF.¹⁰ The New Arab, 'Sudan: Darfur tribes 'pledge allegiance' to RSF in move that could tip scales in war-torn Sudan,' 6 July 2023

Political Violence in Darfur

17 June - 14 July 2023



Violence peaked in South Darfur during the reporting period, with Nyala city becoming a battleground of intense clashes since 20 June as the SAF attempted to expand northward in the Airport neighborhood. Armed clashes and artillery shelling were reported almost daily, resulting in dozens of casualties. The RSF overtook the control of several locations in Nyala, including the police and CRP headquarters and the Drug and Traffic Control Office, as well as neighborhoods in

northern Nyala. Outside Nyala, violence escalated in Mershing locality. On 24 June, the RSF attacked the SAF garrison headquarters of the 63rd Brigade in Manawashi; fighting continued for three days until the RSF overtook the SAF garrison on 27 June. In Kas locality, the RSF clashed with the SAF after the latter moved from Torntina area in Jebel Marrah to Kas. Dozens were reportedly killed and wounded, and a large number of SAF soldiers surrendered to the RSF. Furthermore, the RSF overtook the SAF base in Rahad el-Berdi. As violence escalated in South Darfur, leaders of the Beni Halba, Tarjam, Habaniya, Fallata, Misseriya, Taaysha, and Rizeigat communities in the state declared their support for the RSF on 3 July – a move that could tip the balance of power in the conflict.¹¹[Radio Dabanga, ‘Public support for the RSF from seven tribal leaders in South Darfur, 4 July 2023](#) There is also a concern that this development may reinforce communal divisions in South Darfur and lead to patterns of violence, including clashes and targeted attacks, similar to those seen in West Darfur. Based on the [ACLED Conflict Alert System \(CAST\)](#) tool’s predictions, the increase in violence in South Darfur is likely to continue over the coming months.

Violence also escalated in Central Darfur, increasing nearly three-fold during the reporting period compared with the four weeks prior. The RSF, supported by allied Arab militias, overtook Zalingei, Umm Dukhun, and Garsila, looting and setting fire to key government institutions in Zalingei. A new actor got involved in the conflict in July, as clashes erupted between the RSF-backed Arab militias and the al-Nur faction of the SLM/A in Hamidiya internally displaced people (IDP) Camp and Khamsa Digaig IDP Camp on 7 July. The clashes were triggered by militias’ attempts to loot civilians in the camps.

In North Darfur, violence concentrated in El Fasher and Tawila, with an increase in activity by RSF-linked armed groups. The city of Tawila was overtaken by the RSF and targeted by Arab militants who looted and burned property in the city. Further violence occurred in the nearby village of Dabaneira, where militants attacked civilians, and several cases of sexual violence were reported. A few days later, an armed group affiliated with the RSF attacked areas south of Tawila. These incidents led to the displacement of thousands of people to El Fasher.

In West Darfur, ACLED records over a dozen civilian targeting incidents during the reporting period. El Geneina witnessed a series of targeted killings of prominent individuals by RSF-backed Arab militias, including a prince in Dar Masalit, a lawyer member of the Darfur Bar Association, the Humanitarian Aid Commissioner, and the father of the West Darfur governor who was killed by RSF-backed Arab militia on 14 June.¹²[Sudan Tribune, ‘Governor of West Darfur state assassinated after calling for international protection,’ 14 June 2023](#) In Murnei city in Kereneik locality, Arab militias targeted civilians at the beginning of July, resulting in reported casualties, looting, burning of houses, and the displacement of hundreds of people to Chad. Further, the establishment of checkpoints by Arab militias along the road between the Chad border and Murnei has restricted the movement of civilians. The RSF has also been implicated in abductions, preventing civilians from fleeing, and committing acts of sexual violence. On 13 July, the United Nations announced the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of at least 87 ethnic Masalit people and others in El Geneina. The victims were reportedly killed by the RSF and allied militias during the violence in the area from 13 to 21 June.¹³[Emma Farge and Khalid Abdelaziz, ‘At least 87 buried in Sudan mass grave, including women, children, UN says,’ Reuters, 13 July 2023](#)

Finally, in a dangerous development impacting security beyond Sudan’s borders, clashes between Arab militia and the Sudanese Alliance Movement in Shukri area in west El Geneina led to artillery shelling by Chadian military forces on 30 June. This incident occurred during the exodus of civilians to Chad. On the same day, unidentified gunmen clashed with Chadian soldiers near the border town Adikon, after a Chadian soldier was wounded by gunmen’s bullets.

The ongoing war between the SAF and RSF in Sudan has now reached its fourth month, resulting in a devastating loss of life – with thousands of people killed and over 3 million displaced.¹⁴[International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix, ‘DTM Sudan – Situation Report \(13\),’ 18 July 2023](#) The SAF has suffered significant setbacks, losing control over territories in Khartoum, South Kordofan, Blue Nile, and Darfur region.

Recognizing the challenges it faces, the SAF has sent its representatives back to Jeddah to continue the negotiations that were suspended a month ago.¹⁵[Al Jazeera, 'Sudan army returns for talks in Jeddah as war enters fourth month,' 15 July 2023](#) The complex web of inter-communal tensions, political interests, and ethnic alliances among various armed groups in Darfur, Kordofan, and Blue Nile is deeply concerning and raises the risk of the conflict escalating into a full-scale civil war across Sudan.

