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Sudan: Turk decries “disastrous” impact of war, urges accountability



GENEVA (15 August 2023) – The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk said today the “disastrous, senseless” war in Sudan – borne out of a wanton drive for power – has resulted in thousands of deaths, the destruction of family homes, schools, hospitals and other essential services, massive displacement, as well as sexual violence, in acts which may amount to war crimes.

The UN Human Rights Office has reasonable grounds to believe that the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have committed serious violations of international law during the ongoing conflict, now entering its fifth month, including violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law, and perpetrators must be held accountable, he said.

Türk expressed grave concerns that the chaotic situation, mired in impunity, is ripe for exploitation by other opportunistic armed actors and militia groups – and the violence may escalate further as a result.

Areas worst affected by fighting include Khartoum and nearby cities, El Obeid in North Kordofan and areas of the Darfur region, in particular West Darfur, where the conflict has been characterized by attacks against civilians based on their ethnicity.

While it is difficult to establish an exact number of casualties due to the intensity of the fighting and the fact that the remains of many of those killed have not been collected, identified or buried, tentative figures indicate that more than 4,000 people have so far been killed, including hundreds of civilians. These include 28 humanitarian and health workers and 435 children. The actual number of casualties is believed to be much higher.

“Many civilians were reportedly killed in the Khartoum area as they resisted attempts by the RSF to loot their houses or rape female family members,” Türk said, adding many others have been killed in crossfire or as a result of shells hitting their homes. “In West Darfur’s El Geneina, people were killed in their homes as well as while they were trying to reach safety elsewhere in El Geneina or on the road to Chad.

“My Office has also received credible reports of 32 incidents of sexual violence against 73 victims as of 2 August. This includes at least 28 incidents of rape. Men in RSF uniform were implicated in at least 19 incidents as perpetrators. The actual number of cases is likely much higher. I have urged senior officials in Sudan – during my visit there and repeatedly since then – to issue clear

instructions to all those under their command that there is zero tolerance for sexual violence. Perpetrators must be held accountable and such violence must be clearly and unequivocally condemned.”

Hundreds of individuals, including political activists and human rights defenders, have been detained arbitrarily and held incommunicado by both parties to the conflict. In Khartoum alone, at least 500 people, including 24 women, were reported to be missing as of the end of July. Many of those detained have been ill-treated, and in some cases tortured.

Since May, food insecurity has nearly doubled, affecting more than 20.3 million people, and at least 700,000 children are now at risk of acute malnutrition and mortality. The economy is in freefall, and the health system in crisis. In early August, the Sudanese Ministry of Health announced that 100 out of 130 hospitals in Khartoum were out of service.

As of 8 August, more than 4 million people have been displaced due to the fighting. Most are reported to be living in dire humanitarian conditions, making women and girls in the refugee camps and IDP sites more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Witnesses interviewed by the UN Human Rights Office have also accused the two parties of denying civilians safe passage to flee the fighting, or to evacuate the injured, particularly in the south of Khartoum, in East Nile, and in Omdurman. In El Geneina, the RSF and its allied militia have prevented injured people from being taken to medical facilities.

The UN Human Rights Office has also received testimonies of unlawful killing, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, among other violations.

“The parties to the conflict must immediately stop the fighting, resume political talks, comply with their legal obligations under international humanitarian law, in particular the principles of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack, and allow an uninterrupted delivery of humanitarian assistance,” the UN Human Rights Chief said.

“They must investigate all the violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law that have occurred during the conflict, in accordance with relevant international standards and hold those responsible accountable.

“I also urge the international community to increase political and economic pressure on the parties to the conflict to stop immediately the fighting, and increase financial support for humanitarian agencies responding to the humanitarian crisis caused by the conflict, including displacement and refugee crises.”