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Drone Attacks on Port Sudan Mark Dramatic Escalation

Crisis Group expert Shewit Woldemichael on the recent escalatory attacks on Port Sudan and their implications for the country's civil war

[Shewit Woldemichael](#)

Senior Analyst, Sudan

For three consecutive days, from 4-6 May, drone attacks [shook](#) Port Sudan. The Red Sea coastal city became Sudan's de facto administrative capital, army headquarters and international hub after war broke out in Khartoum in April 2023.

The attacks expand the war to Sudan's far east for the first time, risk sucking in regional powers deeper into the conflict and are guaranteed to deepen the population's immiseration. Following the strikes, the UN [suspended](#) humanitarian flights to the city, temporarily halting lifesaving food supplies to Sudanese enduring the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The first strike, on 4 May, targeted the Osman Digna air base near Port Sudan International Airport, damaging a warehouse and an ammunition depot, destroying parts of the nearby international airport. On 5 May, attacks targeted a fuel storage facility near the port, igniting a large fire. The third wave on 6 May targeted Port Sudan International Airport and the city centre, including the army headquarters and several hotels that often house foreign officials and reportedly are also near General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's residence.

Burhan leads the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the government based in Port Sudan. The SAF has accused its rival, the paramilitary Rapid

Support Forces (RSF), of carrying out the attacks and said the drones came from the east over the sea, raising questions about their point of origin. The RSF has not responded to the accusations but has shown the capacity to launch long-distance strikes from its positions inside the country. Port Sudan is hundreds of kilometres away from any known RSF positions, as is Kassala – a town near Sudan's border with Eritrea that has also been hit by recent strikes.

The strikes mark an expansion of Sudan's brutal civil war as well as a major strategic development. The RSF captured most of Khartoum in the early days of Sudan's war but lost control of the capital to the army in March, a major defeat. The paramilitaries nevertheless remain in control of much of western Sudan, including most of Darfur and parts of Kordofan. Since being driven from Khartoum, the RSF has pummelled areas of the city with drone attacks and began targeting areas in northern and eastern Sudan deep in army territory. For its part, the SAF have long attacked targets within RSF territory from the air, including regularly striking the airport in Nyala, Darfur. Over the course of the conflict, both sides have deployed newer drone and counter-drone technologies.

The attacks will deepen regional tensions over the war. Sudanese authorities announced on 6 May they were cutting diplomatic ties with the UAE, which they accuse of backing the RSF. The UAE also maintains friendly relations with a number of Sudan's neighbours. On the other side of the ledger, the attacks could draw Red Sea littoral countries like Egypt, Eritrea and Saudi Arabia – which align with the SAF – into offering more direct assistance, given their concerns the war is now spreading toward their borders.

ecoi.net description:

Port Sudan: Paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) launch series of drone attacks on the city; the port city has so far been excluded from the ongoing armed conflict

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Austrian Red Cross	Wiedner Hauptstraße	Contact
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Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
Asylum Research and	F +43 1 589 00 589	Data Protection Notice
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