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Kordofan Protection of Civilians Flash Update West Kordofan: Escalation of Conflict in El Fula

24 June 2024

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

Situation overview: Fighting broke out between parties to the conflict in El Fula city in As Salam locality of West Kordofan on the morning of 20 June. Reportedly, clashes concentrated in the eastern and south-western neighborhoods of the city, including Al Ferdous, Al Wahda, Al Aman, Al Salam and Al Nile neighborhoods. Communication networks ceased to operate in the area shortly after the outbreak of the fighting, making reports about the situation on the ground challenging to gather and verify. However, there are some initial reports indicating that the fighting resulted in civilian casualties including among IDP and refugee populations. At least 14 civilians were reported to have been killed, including four IDPs and one South Sudanese refugee man. The four IDPs and refugee were reportedly killed after a shell fell on the Civil Registry building, which had been utilized as an ad hoc gathering site for displaced people. In addition, at least two civilians injured in the fighting sought medical treatment at health facilities on the road between El Fula and El Nuhud. The use of heavy weaponry was reported throughout affected neighborhoods, as well as aerial bombardments, driving significant displacement of the civilian population. Those on the ground have described observing what they estimate to be thousands of people fleeing their homes on foot or donkey carts to more stable nearby localities including Al Odaya, El Nuhud and Muglad, as well as towards other villages in As Salam locality. Over 300 people have also fled to El Tubun district in Babanusa locality, despite the volatility that locality has experienced. Those forced to flee included a number of households who had earlier fled from other conflict affected areas to El Fula seeking safety there, with over 27,000 IDPs estimated to have been present in As Salam locality prior to this escalation of fighting and many of those understood to be sheltering in El Fula. Reportedly, due to the loss of resources resulting from their first displacement, many households earlier displaced from Babanusa, in particular, found that they lacked sufficient capacity to transport vulnerable children and older people and so were forced to leave them behind when they fled for a second time. In the aftermath of the fighting, reports indicate that some public sector offices were looted and that small-scale opportunistic looting was also observed in the main market.

Protection implications: The outbreak of fighting in the midst of a densely populated urban area already hosting a significant number of displaced people exacerbates protection risks for already vulnerable civilian population. The use of heavy weaponry and aerial bombardments in these clashes indicates negligible regard for the obligations of parties to the conflict under international humanitarian law (IHL) to distinguish between military and civilian objects and take due precaution to protect civilian objects and infrastructure. The proliferation of unexploded ordnance that results from heavy clashes in urban areas further threatens civilians fleeing or seeking aid. The difficulties that previously displaced civilians faced when forced to engage in secondary displacement out of El Fula, and the reported incidence of family separation as less mobile family members were left behind or lost, points to heightened need for protection services and assistance to contribute to the protection of separated family members (including unaccompanied and separated children) and their reunification with their households. These services and assistance are, however, likely to remain constrained while humanitarian access to the region continues to be limited and unpredictable. While reports indicate relatively less widespread breakdown of law and order in the aftermath of the fighting in El Fula compared to what has occurred in other locations, there is concern that this round of fighting is likely to exacerbate pre-existing tensions between different factions of the Massarya tribe. Against the backdrop of widespread food insecurity, compounded by constraints on humanitarian access, any increase in those tensions may be reflected in localized clashes linked to competition for access to land and water.

Parties to the conflict are urged to ensure the commitment of all persons acting under their instructions, direction or control to core IHL obligations. These include the obligations to distinguish between civilian objects and military targets, to avoid locating military objectives within or near densely populated areas to the extent feasible, and to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid to those in need. This includes support to reunite particularly vulnerable civilians separated from their households.