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Sudan: New Attacks in Darfur

US Should Press for Concrete Actions During UN Security Council Presidency



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A Sudanese woman, who fled the conflict in Murnei in Sudan's Darfur region, walks beside carts carrying her family belongings upon crossing the border between Sudan and Chad in Adre, Chad, August 2, 2023. © 2023 REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

(Nairobi) – Satellite data shows massive fire destruction in the town of Sirba in [Sudan's](#) West Darfur state, in late July 2023, Human Rights Watch said today. It is the seventh village or town that has been nearly destroyed or burned completely to the ground in West Darfur since April.

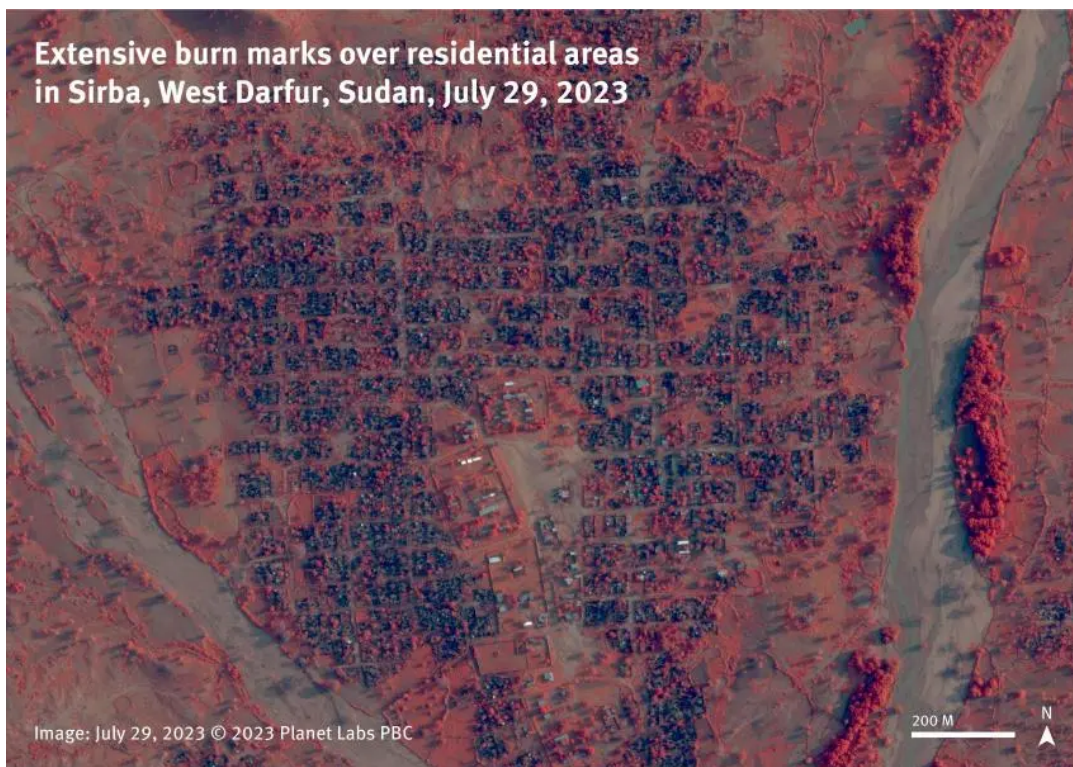
As the United States takes over the presidency of the UN Security Council for August, it should ensure that the council takes robust measures to stem ongoing atrocities in Darfur, including by imposing targeted sanctions against those responsible for ongoing abuses. The Security Council presidency is an opportunity to initiate action and to make clear that the world's body on peace and security has a vital role to play in curbing attacks on civilians in Darfur and throughout Sudan.

“The world should not stand by as town after town in West Darfur is burned to the ground, sending tens of thousands of civilians fleeing for their lives,” said [Tirana Hassan](#), executive director at Human Rights Watch. “The United States government needs to put words into action and ensure that the UN Security Council finally acts to protect civilians and to hold those responsible for the atrocities to account.”

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on April 15, the conflict has also spread to West Darfur state. There have been repeated deliberate attacks on civilians, most by RSF forces and allied Arab militia targeting the ethnic Massalit population.

Following large-scale attacks on the town of [Misterei](#) in late May and on the regional capital, El Geneina, from late April until mid-June, violence in these towns subsided as the Massalit population was largely driven out. Yet attacks on other towns and villages in the state have continued unabated.

Fire detection data provided by NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management System showed active fires over Sirba on July 27 and 28. Every residential area of the town has been affected, as can be seen in high resolution satellite imagery from July 29 that Human Rights Watch reviewed.



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Infrared satellite image from July 29, 2023, shows residential areas of the town of Sirba, West Darfur, Sudan affected by burning. On infrared images, the vegetation appears in red and the burned areas more clearly in a darker color. © Image © 2023 Planet Labs PBC



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Infrared satellite image from July 29, 2023, shows a burned residential area in the town of Sirba, West Darfur, Sudan. On infrared images, the vegetation appears in red and the burned areas more clearly in a darker color. Image © 2023 Planet Labs PBC

The Darfur Bar Association reported that the attacks in Sirba started on July 24 and lasted for several days, with assailants killing [at least 200 people](#), including local leaders, and looting homes,

then setting them on fire.

Human Rights Watch analysis indicates that this brings the total number of towns and villages burned in West Darfur state since April to seven: Habilla Kanari, Mejmere, Misterei, Molle, Murnei, Gokor, and Sirba. This is in addition to setting fire to several dozen sites with internally displaced people and some neighborhoods in the state capital, El Geneina. Yale University's Humanitarian Research Lab [reported](#) on August 2 that at least 27 towns across the five states of Darfur had been [destroyed](#).

Human Rights Watch interviewed six survivors of attacks in mid-June by the RSF and allied militia on [Murnei](#), in West Darfur's Kereinik locality, following pressure on the community to hand over arms the RSF believed were kept there. The RSF and allied militia attacked Murnei, killing residents as they fled and carrying out widespread looting. The attackers then burned down the town on June 27.

West Darfur has been the [epicenter](#) of cycles of violence against non-Arab communities since 2019. Human Rights Watch has previously documented serious abuses against civilians in Sirba town [and in the Murnei area](#) in the context of Sudan's former President Omar Al-Bashir's counterinsurgency operations in Darfur from the early 2000s.

Active fires were visible in Murnei for five consecutive days, from June 27 through July 1. High resolution satellite imagery from June 30 shows burned residential areas and smoke plumes rising from the town.



June 25, 2023



July 6, 2023
JuxtaposeJS

June 25, 2023: Image: June 25, 2023 © 2023 Planet Labs PBC **July 6, 2023:** Image: July 6, 2023 © 2023 Planet Labs PBC

Infrared satellite image comparison between June 25 and July 6, 2023, shows the extent of the burning in the town of Murnei, West Darfur, Sudan. On infrared images the vegetation appears in red and the burned areas more clearly in dark.

A 27-year-old woman returned to Murnei three days after the attack to look for her missing father: “I saw that most of the houses were burned. All the residents had left. Some Arabs were squatting next to houses or inside the houses, and some were searching through the ruins to loot. I saw them kill seven people on that first day.”

She kept returning for 17 days to look for her father’s body, checking the corpses littering the street: “Over that time, I saw more Arabs coming. They were occupying the government buildings. Each time I went, I would get beaten [by armed Arab forces] and they would say, ‘don’t come back.’”

The looting and destruction that accompanied attacks in West Darfur not only forced residents to flee but also left them with few resources to survive. The UN [reported](#) on July 23, that over 17,000 people were displaced from Murnei. On August 2, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) reported that over 60% of people in West Darfur are facing crisis or emergency levels of food insecurity.

Human Rights Watch also spoke to four residents of the village of Sisi, in Kereinik locality, who said they faced increasing harassment and threats by the RSF in the wake of the attacks in El Geneina in mid-June.

“They said, ‘give us money to protect you,’ but then they came back demanding more,” said a 37-year-old man whose home was also looted. “They came at any time, sometimes during the night, sometimes during the day, asking for more money, animals, furniture. They looted everything.”

Eventually, villagers felt they had no choice but to flee.

Since April, [over 300,000](#) people have arrived in Chad, many from West Darfur. As of late July, the UN was recording a significant drop in the numbers of displaced people still in West Darfur, “reportedly attributed to an increase in the level of IDPs [internally displaced people] who have crossed into Chad.”

While Darfur is already on the Security Council agenda, the Council has not actively addressed the issue, in part due to pushbacks by some of its members, preferring regional and bilateral ceasefire efforts to take precedence, an approach that has done nothing to stem the devastation and abuse.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield [said in a recent media interview](#): “The Security Council has a responsibility to deal with peace and security across the globe. What is happening in Sudan should be on the agenda.”

Security Council members should start by publicly identifying and condemning those not respecting the existing arms embargo on Darfur, and by rolling out targeted sanctions against those responsible for ongoing serious abuses, including sexual violence, and those hampering safe and unhindered humanitarian access throughout Darfur. Security Council members should actively support the International Criminal Court’s Darfur work following the prosecutor’s announcement that his office is investigating recent atrocities in [Darfur](#).

Given the council’s responsibility for the premature withdrawal of peacekeeping forces from Darfur in late 2020, the council should consider ramping up civilian protection there. It should start by asking the UN secretary-general to report within 45 days about options on what the existing UN mission in Sudan, UNITAMS, could do to protect civilians and what other options the UN could roll out.

Finally, the council should invite Darfur survivors and community members who have been left out of decisions central to their existence, to take part in its discussions.

“The destruction of yet another town in West Darfur is a stark reminder that the RSF and its allied militia there have no qualms about attacking the civilian population,” Hassan said. “The Security Council should not remain a mere onlooker. The US should work with other council members, including African members, to hamper warring parties’ ability to commit more harm and to hold those responsible for serious violations to account.”

