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Sudan: Armed Group Allied to the Military Attacks Village

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Hold Forces Accountable for Gezira Attacks; Protect Civilians

- The Sudan Shield Forces, an armed group that fights alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces, intentionally targeted civilians and their property in an attack on January 10.
- Armed groups fighting alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces have carried out violent abuses against civilians in their latest offensive in Gezira state.
- The Sudanese authorities should urgently investigate all reported abuses and hold to account those responsible, including the commanders of the Sudan Shield Forces.

(Brussels, February 25, 2025) – The Sudan Shield Forces, an armed group that fights alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), intentionally targeted civilians in an attack on January 10, 2025, Human Rights Watch said today.

The attack on the village of Tayba in Gezira state in central [Sudan](#) killed at least 26 people, including a child, and injured more. The group also systematically looted civilian property, including food supplies, and set fire to houses. These acts constitute war crimes and some, such as the deliberate killings of civilians, may also constitute potential crimes against humanity.

“Armed groups fighting alongside the Sudanese Armed Forces have carried out violent abuses against civilians in their latest offensive in Gezira state,” said [Jean-Baptiste Gallopin](#), senior crisis, conflict and arms

researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The Sudanese authorities should urgently investigate all reported abuses and hold to account those responsible, including the commanders of the Sudan Shield Forces."

The January 10 attack was part of a deadly [surge](#) in attacks by SAF-aligned groups and militias against communities in Gezira and other areas the army recaptured from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since January 2025. Armed attackers, including the Sudan Shield Forces, the Islamist al-Baraa Ibn Malik battalion, and local militias, targeted communities they apparently perceived to be supporters of the RSF, an autonomous military force in conflict with the SAF since April 2023. The SAF recaptured the capital of Gezira state, Wad Madani, on January 11.

Human Rights Watch researchers interviewed eight survivors of the attack on Tayba who also witnessed key events surrounding that attack. Researchers also analyzed satellite imagery and photographs and videos shared by survivors that showed the bodies of some of those who had been killed, fire damage caused by the assailants, and graves of victims, and a list of 13 of those killed. A committee of Tayba residents established to count the dead confirmed that 26 were killed.

Tayba, 30 kilometers east of Wad Madani in the Um al-Qura district, is home to people primarily from the Tama, Bergo, and Mararit ethnic groups, originally from western Sudan. Such communities of farm workers from mostly non-Arab ethnic groups in western and southern Sudan who settled in the area decades ago are known as "Kanabi." Other Kanabi communities have come under attack in recent weeks.

On the morning of January 10, dozens of Sudan Shield fighters, whom residents described as Arab, entered Tayba riding Toyota Land Cruisers mounted with heavy machine guns. Witnesses said they shot indiscriminately at men and boys and set buildings on fire. They attacked the village again in the afternoon as residents were burying the victims, going from house to house looking for men and boys, and again killing, looting, and burning, witnesses said.

A 60-year-old man said gunmen wearing green camouflage and riding in Toyota Land Cruisers attacked him at close range. "They said, 'Stop!' and then shot me near my kidney with a Kalashnikov [rifle]," he said. A man who witnessed the scene said he heard the assailants shout racial slurs such as "You slave!" as they were shooting.

One woman said that "They... came in the house where we were and asked where all our husbands were. And they started to threaten everyone, that they were going to harm us and our husbands. 'Do you not know who Keikel's troops are? Do you not know who we are?'" she recalled the men saying, referring to Abu Aqla Keikel, the leader of the Sudan Shield Forces.

Keikel formed the Sudan Shield Forces in 2022, recruiting mainly from Arab communities of Gezira state. The group fought on the side of the SAF from [April 2023](#) to August 2023, but then [defected](#) to the RSF. In October 2024, Keikel and the Sudan Shield went back to fighting for the SAF. In response, the RSF [carried out](#) a wave of attacks against communities it presumed were loyal to Keikel, committing atrocities including [widespread sexual violence against women and girls](#). With Sudan's military recapturing Gezira and other areas of Sudan since January, civilians are bearing the brunt of retaliatory violence, this time by SAF-aligned forces who accuse them of collaborating with the RSF when it held the areas.

Witnesses said the military vehicles bore the words "Sudan Shield" and described an emblem consistent with that of the Sudan Shield. They described widespread looting of money, food, and livestock, including 2,000 cattle. All witnesses said the people in the village had no guns and could not and did not resist the January 10 attack.

Videos received and verified by Human Rights Watch corroborate the attack on Tayba and contain evidence of crimes in other locations in Gezira state around the same time. Video clips [geolocated](#) to [Wad Madani](#) that [appeared](#) on social media show SAF-aligned fighters carrying out torture and extrajudicial killings against unarmed people. Reports of killings of South Sudanese by SAF-aligned forces in Wad Madani sparked retaliatory violence against Sudanese civilians in South Sudan, which prompted a diplomatic [crisis](#) between Sudan and South Sudan.

Killing and maiming civilians, looting, and the deliberate targeting and destruction of civilian property are war crimes. Under the doctrine of command responsibility, military commanders may be responsible for war crimes committed by subordinate members of the armed forces or other fighters subject to their control.

The SAF has [condemned](#) the abuses in eastern Gezira but described them as "individual transgressions" and said it would hold those responsible accountable. In the aftermath of the attack on Tayba, residents said government investigators visited the site and interviewed key witnesses. Alongside this, witnesses said that vehicles from the Joint Force of the Armed Movements, a SAF-aligned coalition of largely Darfuri armed groups, were deployed to Tayba to protect the population. Yet, SAF generals including General [Yasir al-Atta](#), who sits on the ruling Sovereignty Council, have [publicly appeared](#) with Keikel since then and praised his contribution to the war effort.

The SAF should investigate the attack on Tayba and other abuses carried out by affiliated armed groups and militias, publish the outcomes of its investigations, and take steps to hold all those responsible, including commanders, to account, Human Rights watch said. The SAF should

suspend Keikel and other key Sudan Shield commanders pending the outcome of the investigation.

“There is clear evidence that SAF-aligned forces are responsible for gruesome killings and atrocities against civilians,” Gallopin said. “International actors, including the United States, the European Union, and the United Kingdom, should actively support robust initiatives to protect civilians in Sudan and swiftly impose targeted sanctions on those responsible, including Abu Aqla Keikel.”

For more information on the abuses in Tayba and the Sudan Shield Forces, please see below.

The Attack on Tayba

Tayba first came under attack on January 9. Sudan Shield forces had entered the nearby village of Al-Mugharba and one witness said that on that day there was fighting near Tayba. Tayba was attacked in the afternoon using explosive weapons, causing some people to flee and spend the night out in the fields. There were no casualties. Two witnesses said they saw drones flying over Tayba in the late afternoon.

Residents returned the next morning. At around 9 or 10 a.m., motorcycles and Toyota Land Cruisers equipped with DShK 12.7mm heavy machine guns entered the village. “People were coming and going from the market,” said a young woman who survived the attack. “Children were playing outside.... All of a sudden ... [fighters on] vehicles attacked the village and people started to scream and run ... The children were so scared.”

Witnesses said the men in the vehicles shot wantonly at people and set fire to houses as men from the village fled to the fields. The assailants stayed in the village for about an hour and then retreated, witnesses said. No one in the village carried a gun or resisted.

People came out of their hiding places and were preparing to bury the bodies of victims when, around 2 p.m., forces in military uniform riding Land Cruisers and motorcycles attacked the village again. “Everyone started to run away,” a survivor said. The forces were “shooting at homes,” one survivor said. “There was a lot of killing.” Once again, no one resisted.

One witness said he counted 11 military vehicles entering the village from the east and that more vehicles entered from other directions. In total, he said, there were 25 military vehicles, supported by a handful of civilian cars and trucks. From his hiding place, he saw forces shoot and kill a man on the street near a general store.

Another witness said he saw men in military uniform shoot at people about 200 meters away from them who were fleeing to the fields. "All these military vehicles were moving around ... in the village, shooting ... men randomly," he said.

A young woman said she saw the body of a man, a herder in his 30s or 40s named Adam, nicknamed "Gelenki." She said, "[The assailants] didn't kill women but stopped and searched them and asked them to hand over whatever they had. But if they met a man or a young man ... they got killed immediately."

The forces entered homes, looking for men and boys. One woman said her adult son locked himself inside his house, but that forces shot at the door using a DShK machine gun, injuring him in the buttocks.

Two witnesses said they saw the forces set houses and property on fire using lighters. A young woman said: "I saw three men going inside a house with lighters in their hands. They go inside, and they come out. If they don't find anything to steal, they go outside and before they leave, they use a lighter to set fire to the house ... [In] houses made of straw, it's very easy for the fire to spread." One man said his cousin's son, a boy of about 15 named Ahmed Suleiman, was killed, and that Ahmed's younger brother, age 8 or 9, was badly injured when forces set fire to the house where the boys had found refuge. Buildings were still burning when the assailants left on the evening of January 10, a third resident said.

High-resolution satellite imagery from January 22 analyzed by Human Rights Watch shows a dozen burned buildings in the western part of the village. Low-resolution satellite imagery confirms they were burned on January 10 or 11.

During the attack, the Sudan Shield Forces and gunmen wearing civilian clothes looted the village systematically. One woman said she saw people in civilian clothes, whom she described as Arabs, steal livestock using a large truck from her neighborhood in the southern part of the village. One man who hid in a house that morning said he saw gunmen wearing traditional robes, who he believed were Arabs from a neighboring settlement, loot cattle while the attack was going on. Two witnesses said they saw gunmen moving livestock out of the village and that the gunmen fired at them.

Sudan Shield forces also detained residents that day, two witnesses said. After fleeing the village in his vehicle, one of the witnesses came across a man he recognized, whom he described as "one of Keikel's men," riding a vehicle alongside three other men. All four were armed. The witness said the men accused him of working with the RSF and detained him, binding his hands and blindfolding him. He said a local herder who was nearby told the men, "Why do you even bother to arrest him, why don't you just

kill him?" The assailants then took him to a Sudan Shield Forces camp, where there were vehicles bearing the group's emblem, but released him the next morning.

Identifying the Attackers

Residents said they saw the Sudan Shield Forces' name and emblem on the vehicles.

Witnesses described the uniforms of the assailants as the same or similar to army uniforms, namely, green camouflage. Two witnesses also identified local Arab residents who had joined the Sudan Shield Forces as among the attackers.

Content the Sudan Shield Forces posted on social media on the day of the attack shows the group was in the area. Human Rights Watch verified [two videos](#) posted to the Sudan Shield Forces Facebook group on January 10, showing Commander Keikel inside Umm al-Qura, seven kilometers southwest of Tayba.

Aftermath

Death Toll

On the evening of January 10, bodies of men and boys lay strewn about the village. A man said he found 12 bodies of people he knew. The first one was a man in his late 70s known as Komar, who had a mental health condition, with a bullet wound to the heart. Then in one place he found a group of five bodies, and in another the bodies of a Quranic teacher known as Sheikh Malik and one of his students, their throats slit.

He then found two other young men, one with a bullet to the heart, the other to the head, and a man in his 40s named Mohammed nicknamed Abu Zair, shot in the chest and the arm. Finally, the man found the charred remains of Ahmed, the boy who had burned to death in a house.

On the evening of January 10, Tayba residents established a committee to count the dead. Those who counted and collected bodies and took photos of the bodies together verified a death toll of 26. Most of the victims were farmers.

Residents buried the victims on the evening of January 10 and on January 11 in at least three graves. Human Rights Watch geolocated the photos and video of two graves in the cemetery in the center of the village. They were not visible on satellite imagery from December 28, 2024, but are visible on imagery from January 22. Another witness said he took part in the burial of three people on the edges of the village.

On January 11, gunmen in civilian clothes arrived and plundered the area extensively. One resident said that about 2,000 head of cattle were looted,

as well as money and the village supplies of bread and fava beans.

SAF Response

On the evening of January 12, a delegation of the SAF and the Joint Forces of the Armed Groups – a coalition of SAF-aligned armed groups, primarily from Darfur – arrived in Tayba after residents called for help. They brought meat to feed the village, a resident said. They repeatedly chased some looters. One officer reportedly promised to punish the “criminals ... legally.”

The Joint Forces then provided an armed escort to a civilian vehicle carrying the injured and sick to the hospital in the town of Al-Fao, 52 kilometers southeast in neighboring Gedaref state. A 13-year-old girl, who was ill, died on the way. An additional 23 injured people reportedly remained in Tayba as there was no more space in the civilian vehicle.

On January 21, government investigators came to the village to interview residents, two witnesses said. At least two suspects were later arrested, one resident said. However, authorities have not announced any follow up and high-ranking generals have continued to appear with Keikel.

Residents said the Joint Forces, still deployed in Tayba, told residents they would protect them. “They’re saying they’ll stay for three months, and we hope they do, because if they leave, things can get ugly,” one resident said.

The attack, extensive looting, and destruction have deepened the already dire humanitarian situation in the village, residents said.

The Village of Tayba

Tayba was founded in 1973 to host workers who came to farm on the newly established Rahad Agricultural Project. Today approximately 1,000 families live there, said one resident. It is one of many communities known as “Kanabi,” of agricultural workers, often from non-Arab communities, who came from other regions for such agricultural projects.

Until the January attack, Tayba was near the front line between the RSF and the military. The closest RSF position was in the town of Umm al Qura, while the SAF controlled Village 39, roughly eight kilometers southeast. Data from ACLED, an organization collecting data on conflicts around the world, shows the area surrounding Umm al Qura has been the site of episodic fighting since the war broke out in 2023 and that the town has changed hands on several occasions.

Fighting increased from November 2024, with the SAF capturing it on January 10. ACLED data also shows that in October 2024, following Keikel’s

defection to the SAF, the RSF targeted many villages in the area perceived as supportive of the Sudan Shield Forces.

Tayba residents faced increasing harassment from neighboring Arab communities in the months before the January attack. Residents said the “mobilized ones,” resistance groups trained and armed by the SAF, harassed the villagers, blocked them from reaching the town of Al Fao, disrupted their livelihoods, and stole livestock.

In one case in late December, a car carrying sick people to Al Fao hospital had to delay its departure, a witness said, and one sick child had died upon arrival at the hospital. The threats also contributed to a severe shortage of food in the village, one witness said.

Two residents said that two weeks before the January 10 attack, they were threatened by a man they described as a local “leader” of the Sudan Shield in Village 39. “You have to go back and stay in Tayba!” a witness quoted him as saying. “He threatened ... to burn Tayba and attack Tayba.” “He said, ‘I joined [Sudan] Shield specifically for the purpose of getting rid of Tayba altogether,’” the other witness said.

Two residents said Sudan Shield forces came through Tayba in December during their first offensive on Umm al-Qura, and that they beat and abducted some residents, reportedly accusing them of collaborating with the RSF. Some of them remain missing. One of the witnesses said the forces had been led by Keikel’s brother, Azzam.

The Sudan Shield Forces

In 2022, Abu Aqla Keikel, then a former military officer, [created](#) the Sudan Shield Forces. Keikel [aligned](#) his forces with the SAF in April 2023, then defected to the RSF in August. In December, the RSF commander Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, [appointed](#) Keikel the RSF’s top commander in Gezira state.

Since then, Keikel has maintained a strong presence in eastern Gezira state, facilitated by recruitment from local communities. Three Tayba residents said that Sudan Shield forces in the area have recruited from local Arab communities who they say claim a historical right to the land.

Keikel rejoined the SAF in October 2024, donning the SAF uniform and retaining his rank of Major General. He [appeared in public](#) alongside General Abdelfattah al-Burhan, the SAF leader, during Burhan’s visit to the front line on December 15. In January 2025, Radio Dabanga reported that the Sudan Shield Forces had played a “major role” in the fighting in Gezira state and in the city of East Nile, in the Khartoum area.

The Sudan Shield Forces on January 14 [denied](#) accusations it had been involved in abuses against Kanabi communities and expressed support for the SAF-led investigations.

Since the attack on Tayba, top SAF generals, including [al-Atta](#) and [Major General Awad Al-Karim](#), the commander of the first division, have appeared alongside Keikel on several occasions.

Recommendations:

- The SAF should investigate the attack on Tayba and other abuses by the armed groups and militias aligned with it, publish the outcomes, and hold those responsible to account. The SAF should suspend Abu Aqla Keikel and other key Sudan Shield commanders pending the outcome of the investigation.
- The SAF should publicly clarify its ties to, and chain of command over, the Sudan Shield Forces and other aligned armed groups and militia.
- The United Nations, the African Union, and other regional organizations, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, should urgently support the deployment a mission to protect civilians in Sudan.
- All UN member states should fully support and cooperate with the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, including ensuring it has the necessary resources to carry out its mandate, facilitating full and unfettered access for investigations, and carrying out its recommendations.
- The United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and other countries should actively support robust initiatives to protect the physical security of civilians in Sudan and impose targeted sanctions, including travel bans and asset freezes, on commanders, officials, and militia leaders responsible for serious crimes in Sudan.

Associated documents

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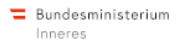
Sudan

Gezira state: Article on attack by Sudan Shield Forces, an armed group allied to military, on village of Tayba; at least 26 people killed

[Soudan : Un groupe armé allié aux militaires a attaqué un village](#)
(Appeal or News Release, French)

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