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Halting the Catastrophic Battle for Sudan's El Fasher

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What's new? A showdown is unfolding in Sudan's North Darfur region, where the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has besieged and attacked the town of El Fasher. More than a year into Sudan's civil war, many thousands are on the brink of famine. Expanded hostilities in El Fasher would bring greater misery.

Why did it happen? An all-out struggle between the army and the RSF, Sudan's two most powerful military forces, broke out in April 2023 in the capital Khartoum. Fighting has since shattered the state, creating further instability in a region already wracked by it. Darfur is now a focal point of the civil war.

Why does it matter? The El Fasher area hosts over a million civilians, many of whom are already displaced by the conflict and teetering on the edge of survival. Even a prolonged siege threatens their lives, but an escalating battle for the city could lead to mass slaughter and other atrocities.

What should be done? The UN and U.S. should try mediating a de-escalation and local truce. In conjunction, influential Arab and African leaders should press the sides to stand down. All should insist on safe corridors for fleeing civilians, immediate aid access to Darfur's starving people and a return to national talks.

I. Overview

A multi-sided battle is raging in Sudan's long-stricken Darfur region. Hostilities centre on El Fasher, capital of North Darfur and home to the Sudanese army's last stronghold in the region. Thousands of fighters from the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which is embroiled in a vicious year-long war with the army, control the town's northern and eastern districts and have encircled the rest. Other local armed groups that used to profess neutrality now openly side with the army and vow to defend the town. All these actors are now locked in all-out combat. Perhaps over a million displaced Darfuris, who had previously come to El Fasher looking for a haven, are caught in the crossfire, and both sides are perpetrating atrocities. The U.S. and UN can lead in trying to broker a de-escalation and local truce. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates should press the RSF to stand down, while Egypt and Saudi Arabia do the same with the army. All should demand that the parties allow civilians to flee to safety, open Darfur to aid delivery and restart national peace talks.

A power struggle between the army and the RSF erupted into full-blown war in April 2023, destroying Khartoum and all but shattering the Sudanese state. While the war quickly spread to Darfur, local efforts succeeded for a time in keeping the conflict at bay in most of the region, including El Fasher, a place of refuge for hundreds of thousands of displaced Darfuris. The town is also a stronghold of ex-rebel groups with a history of fighting both the RSF and the army. Along with local authorities and dignitaries, the ex-rebels brokered a truce between the belligerents. They also formed a neutral joint force to monitor the ceasefire and patrol the city centre. The truce was imperilled in October, however, when the RSF launched a major operation to conquer those parts of Darfur not under its control. Army outposts fell in rapid succession, leaving only the large garrison in El Fasher as the army's last major redoubt.

The security arrangements in El Fasher began to break down a month later, when the most powerful ex-rebel leaders, including Darfur governor Minni Minawi, cast their lot with the army and joined the war with the RSF in Sudan's east. Soon, few neutral forces were left to police El Fasher, and the truce frayed amid escalatory actions from all sides. The RSF mobilised thousands of fighters to surround the city, as clashes heated up in villages outside El Fasher even as the army continued to strike RSF positions from the air.

In April 2024, the situation boiled over. The paramilitaries and the once-neutral Darfuri armed groups declared war on each other. With the RSF laying siege to the city and launching sorties inside it, Darfuri armed groups attacking the RSF and the army keeping up its bombardment, fighting has continued to grow more intense. Civilians are trapped in terrible conditions, with nowhere to go for safety or food. If the conflict continues to escalate, and particularly if the RSF overruns the city, many fear large-scale massacres along ethnic lines. Battles are also spreading across North Darfur. The U.S. has levied sanctions on RSF commanders, and threatened stronger penalties to prevent an all-out RSF assault, but thus far these measures have proven insufficient to halt the spiral.

Conditions in Darfur outside El Fasher are hardly better. Humanitarian experts report that pockets of Sudan – especially in Darfur – are slipping into famine-like conditions. While both the army and the RSF have egregiously violated international humanitarian law, the Sudanese who are starving are concentrated in RSF-held territory, and the army-led government has refused for months to allow aid shipments to pass directly into these areas. In February, General Abdelfattah al-Burhan's government – operating from Port Sudan after being forced to relocate from Khartoum – rescinded permission for the UN to deliver assistance from Chad into RSF-held territory. After further negotiation, Burhan's administration offered an aid corridor via a lone frontier crossing at El Tina, which is still under its control, but senior humanitarian officials say this route may prove unviable for a large-scale relief effort. It is subject to constant renegotiation, and it could soon be closed by seasonal rains.

What is needed now is a full-court press to get all sides to de-escalate. The RSF should lift the siege, the army cease its aerial bombardment and the army-aligned groups led by Minawi halt their attacks on the RSF in North Darfur. While the U.S. and UN look best placed to lead such an effort, it would also likely require heavy pressure on the RSF and the army from their main backers, ie, the United Arab Emirates, in the first case, and Egypt, in the second. Saudia Arabia also has significant influence

over the army, as well some with the RSF. Meanwhile, all should support a UN-led initiative to negotiate evacuation corridors for the suffering population in El Fasher and the surrounding camps for the displaced – and insist on immediate cross-border access for UN aid agencies into all areas of Sudan to stave off famine.

The only way to create a durable local truce or to begin stabilising the fracturing country is a national ceasefire. Yet the two sides have not sat for direct talks in many months, with the army in particular refusing to return to the table. Thus, even while working to avert the worst scenarios in El Fasher and Darfur, all must also insist that the army and RSF restart negotiations to end the war. Given that resistance is now coming disproportionately from the army, it will be up to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. to convince the most powerful generals, including Burhan, to turn their attention to forging a difficult peace rather than continue an unwinnable war that is pushing Sudan toward collapse. African leaders should also support the new AU initiative to bring together heads of state from across the continent to mediate between Burhan and Hemedti.

These goals will all be difficult to achieve, but yielding to fatalism would be inexcusable. Bad as things are in El Fasher, and throughout North Darfur and the rest of the country, they can still get much worse – for Sudan, its troubled neighbours that must absorb the shock waves of this crisis and the vulnerable civilians stuck in the middle. Rather than testing this proposition, all concerned, and especially those in a position to apply high-level pressure to the parties and their enablers, must give new energy and urgency to their efforts to end this senseless war.

II. Old Enemies and a Turbulent Transition

Darfur is no stranger to extreme violence. War broke out in Sudan's western region in 2003, when rebels, predominantly from Darfur's majority non-Arab populations, took up arms against Khartoum, citing decades of neglect and underdevelopment, which they blamed on governing elites from the country's riverine centre. Under President Omar al-Bashir, the Sudanese army and security services countered the rebellion by arming the region's Arab communities, exploiting longstanding inter-ethnic tensions over land, water and other resources, as well as political grievances. What started as a counter-insurgency centred in North Darfur then splintered into a series of communal conflicts largely pitting the Khartoum-backed Arab militias, known pejoratively as the Janjaweed, against insurgent groups from Darfur's main non-Arab communities, namely the Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit.¹

The atrocities committed by the Bashir government's forces and the Janjaweed in Darfur drew international condemnation and earned Bashir indictments for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes at the International Criminal Court. The court has issued two warrants for his arrest.

¹ The term Janjaweed, roughly translating as "devils on horseback", refers primarily to Arab militias in Darfur. They gained notoriety for their ruthless tactics, including mass killings, rape and destruction of villages. In 2006, many Janjaweed members integrated into the Sudanese army, as well as the Popular Defence Forces and Border Guards. Later, many fighters also joined the RSF's ranks when it formed in 2013.

The Darfur war petered out in succeeding years as the rebels broke up into numerous factions and fortune turned against them on the battlefield. Some reached a deal with the government and took official positions; others sought refuge in Libya, where they fought as mercenaries; still others crossed the border into South Sudan. Meanwhile, millions from Darfur's non-Arab populations remained displaced from their homes due to continued insecurity, while some of their lands, particularly areas sitting astride pastoral routes historically used by Arab herders to cross from North to South Darfur, were either seized by feuding Darfuri Arab militias or reallocated to Arab tribes from the region that had allied themselves with Bashir's government.

Khartoum nevertheless struggled in the war's aftermath to control the splinters of the Janjaweed, some of which later morphed into the RSF, led by Mohammed Hammad Dagalo "Hemedti".² Hemedti built a gold export empire in Darfur and, starting in 2015, sent numerous fighters (with Bashir's blessing and along with regular army soldiers) to aid the Saudi and Emirati-led coalition battling to restore the internationally recognised government in Yemen.³ The RSF remains tightly controlled by Hemedti's family and dominated by Darfuri Arabs, particularly from Hemedti's tribe, the Rizeigat, which has some roots in northern Darfur and makes up the majority in southern Darfur.⁴

In the twilight of his government, from 2013 to 2019, Bashir grew increasingly reliant on the RSF, toward the end deploying them in large numbers in Khartoum as a sort of praetorian guard, despite warnings from the top brass and others that these troops could at some stage turn on the state.⁵ As popular frustration with the Bashir regime grew, fuelled by a struggling economy, the RSF continued to gain influence. In 2019, when Sudanese civilians rose up against Bashir in 2019, angered by rising bread prices, their protests triggered Bashir's ouster by his own generals and security henchmen – meaning both the regular army and Hemedti's powerful paramilitary force.⁶ As the country entered a transitional period, Hemedti emerged as a key power broker in Khartoum. Though formally deputy to the army's new chief, Burhan, on the transitional military council, Hemedti was widely seen as at least his equal in authority.

The forces driving the transition struggled to maintain a united front. In the run-up to Bashir's overthrow, the leaders of Sudan's various rebellions joined hands with the protesters and opposition parties with the aim of deposing their common foe. But this coalition, known as the Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC), came under huge strain after Bashir fell. The rebel leaders, including prominent Darfuris, accused Khartoum-based politicians and activists of squeezing them out of the FFC's 2019

² Crisis Group interviews, former senior Sudanese security official, 2023. See also Jerome Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias", Small Arms Survey, April 2017.

³ "Sudan denies troop withdrawal from Yemen", *Sudan Tribune*, 22 December 2022.

⁴ The original Janjaweed fighters, by contrast, were drawn primarily from the Abbala Arabs of North Darfur and were largely led by Musa Hilal, who later fell out with Hemedti and has sided with the army in the current war.

⁵ See Tubiana, "Remote-Control Breakdown: Sudanese Paramilitary Forces and Pro-Government Militias", op. cit.

⁶ Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 21 October 2021.

transition period negotiations with the military, which led to a power-sharing deal and a civilian government headed by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, an economist.

In a bid to compensate for their perceived exclusion from the new political arrangements, these rebel outfits proceeded to negotiate their own deal with Burhan and Hemedti, which eventually took the form of the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA).⁷ (Darfur's main rebel leader, Abdulwahid al-Nur of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army or SLM/A, the only one who still held vast territory in the region, refused to sign.) Under the Juba deal, some of Darfur's most prominent rebel leaders took big jobs in the state apparatus. Jibril Ibrahim, an ethnic Zaghawa from North Darfur and leader of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), became Sudan's finance minister; Minawi, also an ethnic Zaghawa from North Darfur who leads another SLM/A faction, was installed as overall governor of Darfur; and El-Hadi Idriss, an ethnic Fur who heads still another SLM/A faction, and Taher Hajar, an ethnic Zaghawa who leads the Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces took seats on Sudan's Sovereign Council.

The JPA proved consequential, both for national politics and for Darfur's fate. At the national level, many of the former Darfuri rebel groups found themselves in an awkward alliance with the military and Hemedti, their old enemies. The deal also deepened the rift between these established armed groups and the FFC civilian leaders who dominated Hamdok's government; some of the FFC figures accused Minawi, Ibrahim and others of bolstering the military to the civilian government's detriment, thus undercutting the promised democratic transition.

These tensions between the ex-rebel forces from Sudan's peripheries and Khartoum-based opposition politicians in the FFC coalition became manifest in October 2021, when a coup led by Burhan and Hemedti unseated Prime Minister Hamdok with support from several Juba agreement signatories, who broke with their former political allies to back the junta. Yet, even as they aligned against Hamdok's civilian government, the former Darfuri rebel groups remained wary of both Burhan and Hemedti.⁸

Meanwhile, in Darfur, grievances along ethnic and factional lines remained largely unresolved, and the potential for further violence appeared to grow ever more real. Even as the 2020 peace deal excluded Darfur's main active rebel group (al-Nur's), it did allow long-time rebel groups that had been largely defeated to return to Sudan and North Darfur (mainly from Libya, where many were serving as mercenaries) as their leaders took up powerful posts in Khartoum alongside their old foe, Hemedti.⁹

⁷ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°168, *The Rebels Come to Khartoum: How to Implement Sudan's New Peace Agreement*, 23 February 2021.

⁸ They held both responsible for delays in integrating their forces into the army and RSF, as stipulated by the 2020 peace deal. They also felt excluded from the 2022 U.S.-led back-channel negotiations between FFC politicians and Burhan to restore civilian rule, which reinforced their belief that non-Arab Darfuris would remain sidelined in Khartoum. Crisis Group interviews, JEM and SLM/A-Minni Minawi officials, May 2023.

⁹ Prior to the JPA, most of the Darfuri rebel groups were primarily based outside Sudan, with many in Libya and South Sudan. According to estimates by UN experts, the SLA-Minni Minawi was the largest group in Libya, with 800-1,000 fighters and up to 300 vehicles, concentrated in the Jufra region. The Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces (GSLF), led by Tahir Hajar, was the second largest, with around 500 men and 100 vehicles, primarily located in the Jufra region, Waw al-Kabir and Ras Lanuf. The JEM had 100-200 fighters and 20-30 vehicles in Libya. It also had a smaller force of

The complicated political dynamics both inflamed longstanding intra-Arab disputes and created an atmosphere in which land and communal conflicts between Arabs and non-Arabs festered or reignited.

In parallel, Sudan was slipping closer to civil war. A U.S.-led push to restore civilian rule following the October 2021 coup led to the signing of a framework agreement between civilians and the junta in December 2022. But it also heightened the tensions between Burhan and Hemedti, with the two disagreeing in particular over how the RSF would integrate into the army and whether Hemedti would fall under the army's chain of command or report directly to a civilian government.¹⁰ As outside actors clamoured in the first part of 2023 for the military to hand over power to civilians as promised, the standoff between the army and the RSF turned Khartoum into a pressure cooker, with the RSF in particular moving to reinforce its positions in the capital in a show of strength.

In March and early April 2023, several of the ex-rebel leaders sought to intercede with Burhan and Hemedti, hoping to steer them away from conflict. Over the course of March, Minawi and Ibrahim (along with Malik Agar, a former rebel leader from Blue Nile state who also signed the Juba agreement) conducted shuttle diplomacy between Burhan and Hemedti in a doomed effort to fend off hostilities. Full-scale fighting broke out in Khartoum on 15 April 2023; it remains unclear who fired the first shot.

III. A Tenuous Truce amid the Fighting

Once fighting started, Darfuri ex-rebel groups denounced the war as a destructive power struggle centred in Khartoum, proclaimed their neutrality and tried to prevent hostilities from spilling over into Darfur.¹¹ Clashes between RSF and army forces nevertheless broke out in numerous spots, sometimes turning into grisly local conflicts, none worse than in West Darfur, where hostilities erupted between Arab and Masalit militias, with the Arabs backing the RSF and the Masalit supporting the army. The RSF and aligned Arab militias largely won this contest – in the process massacring Masalit civilians and pushing many thousands of Masalit off their land and into Chad.¹²

Still, those trying to stem the fighting did have some success in North Darfur and its capital El Fasher, which had become the hub for the ex-rebel groups that signed

100 fighters and 20 vehicles in South Sudan, around Kata (Lol state). Following the signing of the JPA, these groups began heading back to North Darfur, where they recruited new members to swell their ranks. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", UNSC S/2019/34, 10 January 2019. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", UNSC S/2020/36, 14 January 2020. "Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan", UNSC S/2021/40, 13 January 2021.

¹⁰ Crisis Group Statement, "A Critical Window to Bolster Sudan's Next Government", 23 January 2023.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, officials from the SLM/A-Minni Minawi, JEM, Sudan Liberation Movement-Transitional Council (SLM-TC), led by El Hadi Idris, and GSLF, April and May 2023.

¹² "The Massalit Will Not Come Home": Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes against Humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan", Human Rights Watch, May 2024. "Final report of UN Panel of Experts on Sudan", S/2024/65, 15 January 2024. See also Enrica Picco, "The Fallout in Chad from the Fighting in Darfur", Crisis Group Commentary, 10 August 2023.

the 2020 peace deal, including those led by Darfur's overall governor, Minawi. Maintaining their neutrality, these groups, together with the five governors of Darfur (marshalled by the North Darfur governor) and community leaders, helped conclude a ceasefire between the army and RSF in El Fasher on 20 April 2023.¹³ To help enforce the ceasefire, and to protect Darfuris, they also established what became known as the Joint Darfur Force, composed of ex-rebel groups led by ethnic Zaghawa from North Darfur.¹⁴ According to the ceasefire terms, the army would maintain positions in the west of the city and the RSF in the east, separated by the centre, which would be patrolled solely by the neutral Force. Despite skirmishes, this arrangement largely held for roughly six months, preserving a semblance of normal daily life in El Fasher.

The first major test of this arrangement came in October 2023, when the RSF embarked on a campaign of conquest across Darfur, leaving El Fasher, where the army's 6th division is based, as its sole remaining stronghold in the region.¹⁵ As the paramilitaries captured the capitals of West, South and Central Darfur with the help of allied Arab militias, the ex-rebel Darfuri groups originating from North Darfur came under huge pressure from both the army and their own constituencies to stand up to the RSF.¹⁶ Many of those raising their voices feared that the RSF would extend its campaign to El Fasher.

These fears were well grounded. The RSF attacked the army headquarters in El Fasher in late October, even as ex-rebel leaders were working to restore the fragile local truce.¹⁷ By early November, fighting between the army and RSF across North Darfur, together with widespread atrocities including rape of women and girls, had flooded El Fasher with those displaced from the rest of the state, including from Tawila, Kutum and the Kassab camps.¹⁸ By mid-November, the RSF had massed troops outside the city and looked poised for a full-scale assault to take it over.¹⁹

Neither the Darfur-based armed groups nor community leaders wanted to see the RSF in total control of the city. The former worried that they would lose their last bastion and perhaps fall under RSF dominion. The latter saw what the RSF had wrought elsewhere in the region. Non-Arab communities in RSF-held territory, particularly West Darfur, had seen massacres, sexual violence, looting and, some say, subjugation. These were fates that the Zaghawa and other non-Arabs in North Darfur feared as well.

¹³ The five states in Darfur each have a governor, while Minawi was appointed overall regional governor for Darfur in August 2021. At the start of the conflict in April 2023, the five state governors were: Nimr Abdul Rahman, North Darfur; Khamis Abdullah Abakar, West Darfur; Musa Mahdi Ishaq, South Darfur; Adeeb Abdul Rahman Yousif, Central Darfur; and Abdul-Hamid Musa Kasha, East Darfur. North Darfur Governor Abdul Rahman was dismissed from his post in early 2024. He said he was fired for refusing to renounce neutrality and support Burhan's war effort. "Dismissed North Darfur governor unveils reasons for his ouster", *Sudan Tribune*, 10 January 2024.

¹⁴ The Joint Darfur Force consisted mainly of troops from the SLM/A-Minni Minawi and the JEM, along with elements of smaller groups including the SLM-TC and GSLF. A splinter of al-Nur's SLM/A faction was also involved.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Statement, "Sudan's Calamitous Civil War: A Chance to Draw Back from the Abyss", 9 January 2024.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, JEM and SLM-Minni Minawi officials, April 2024.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian experts and IDPs, December 2023-January 2024.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, April 2024.

For some time, the Joint Darfur Force managed to stave off an RSF assault, but at the cost of exposing cracks in its ostensibly united neutral front. As it prepared to move on the army's last major garrison in Darfur, the RSF presented the Force with a series of options for avoiding a direct military confrontation. It offered to leave El Fasher under the Force's control if the latter either convinced the army to withdraw entirely or if the Force teamed up with the RSF to boot the army out. Alternatively, it invited the Force to pull out of El Fasher and let the RSF attack the army positions.²⁰

The Joint Darfur Force chose none of these options, and the RSF backed down by mid-November. RSF commander Abdelrahim Dagalo, Hemedti's brother and deputy, and Juma Hagar, who doubled as the Force's head and Minawi's top ground commander, agreed to a deal by which the Force would remain neutral and in control of the city, and the RSF would withdraw its troops, essentially restoring the initial truce. The RSF may have agreed to this deal in hopes of wooing the Joint Darfur Force to its side over time.²¹

The settlement immediately began to fray as unity among the ex-rebel groups collapsed. Even as his commander on the ground was negotiating with the RSF in El Fasher, Minawi (together with Ibrahim and two other leaders of the Darfuri ex-rebel groups that contributed to the Joint Darfur Force) made a surprise announcement in Port Sudan that he was renouncing his neutrality, apparently persuaded, for one reason or another, that he needed to pick a side.²² These leaders declared themselves ready to fight the RSF "on all fronts", citing its atrocities during its blitzkrieg in Darfur and calling it a threat to Sudan's unity.²³ Other groups continued to proclaim their neutrality; yet others were suspected of cutting deals with the RSF.²⁴ Those who refused to ally with SAF lost their government positions under Burhan. As its key component groups shed their neutrality, the Joint Darfur Force crumbled, marking the beginning of the end of the truce in El Fasher.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, officials of the RSF and a JEM splinter party led by Suleiman Sandal, May-June 2024.

²¹ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, May 2024. It was widely assumed that a rift had emerged between Minawi and Hagar, although they appear to have reconciled since then.

²² The reasons for Minawi's U-turn in Port Sudan are the subject of much speculation. Most suspect that a combination of incentives and ultimatums from the army authorities in Port Sudan authorities were at least part of his decision. Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese analysts and officials, 2023-2024. What is clear is that after Minawi's decision, Burhan fired those who did not renounce neutrality and armed those who did.

²³ "Darfur movements: 'We renounce our neutrality'", Sudan War Monitor, 16 November 2023. "Darfur armed movements renounce neutrality in Sudan war", Dabanga, 17 November 2023. They also called for an immediate ceasefire. At the time, some interpreted Minawi's statement as an attempt to deter the RSF from attacking El Fasher.

²⁴ Factions such as those led by Al-Taher Hajar and El Hadi Edris maintained their neutrality; these two leaders were dismissed from their positions in Burhan's Port Sudan government soon thereafter. Crisis Group interviews, SLM-TC and GSLF officials; Hafez Abdelnabi, former minister of animal resources and fisheries, November 2023. The main body of al-Nur's SLM/A faction, which never joined the Joint Darfur Force (though a splinter did), also declared it would continue to protect civilians and civilian installations without siding with the army.

IV. War Comes to El Fasher

As Sudan plunged deeper into all-out civil war by the end of 2023, the number of neutral parties among the country's many political and armed factions dwindled. In Darfur, the decision taken by Minawi and other leaders in mid-November to join forces with the army fatally weakened the Joint Darfur Force, but fighting did not instantly intensify there. Instead, the RSF surprised observers by turning its attention elsewhere. In December, with most of Darfur conquered and a round of national ceasefire talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia having collapsed the previous month, the RSF launched its first major offensive east of Khartoum. In a matter of days, it captured Sudan's breadbasket, Gezira state, and its capital Wad Medani, a major place of refuge for displaced Khartoum residents and an army stronghold.

Although this new offensive seemed to open a new front far from Darfur, it had huge repercussions for Sudan's western region, too. Facing the threat of further RSF advances, either in the north or the east, the army redoubled mobilisation efforts, urging civilians to take up arms and pressing aligned militias into action. Among those who joined the war effort in the east were the Darfuri ex-rebel leaders who had allied themselves with Burhan, namely Minawi, Ibrahim and Mustafa Tambour, an ethnic Fur heading still another SLM/A faction. They began training thousands of new recruits in Gedaref and Kassala, two eastern states under army control, to join the counteroffensive against the RSF in Gezira. They apparently received materiel from Burhan's government, if not also other sources, making them more powerful, including back home in Darfur, where the RSF began accusing them of smuggling arms into North Darfur and El Fasher under the cover of humanitarian aid convoys arriving from Port Sudan.²⁵

As Darfuri armed groups operating outside Darfur increasingly aligned with the army in the fighting the RSF in the east, the fragile truce that these same groups were maintaining in El Fasher began to fall apart.²⁶ By the end of March 2024, the RSF and Darfuri groups aligned with the army were engaging in frequent skirmishes in North Darfur. Meanwhile, in and around El Fasher and elsewhere across Darfur, the army intensified its bombardment of RSF positions, killing Darfuri Arabs and destroying their neighbourhoods and livestock.²⁷ RSF and allied militias ratcheted up attacks on non-Arab communities near El Fasher, including displacement camps, razing villages they accused of harbouring the enemy.²⁸

By the beginning of April, both sides were girding for the long-feared battle for El Fasher. Already, the RSF controlled the city's northern, eastern and south-eastern districts as well as its western outskirts. It also held vast areas outside the city, including key transit routes from Libya, Chad and Khartoum. Meanwhile, the army and allied Darfuri armed groups were predominant in the western, southern and central

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, May 2024.

²⁶ According to JEM and SLM/A-Minni Minawi representatives, the RSF tried to form a civilian administration in Darfur without consulting them, another trigger for escalation. Crisis Group interviews, April 2024. RSF representatives do not deny trying to form a civilian administration. They say the heads of Darfur armed groups have not been part of these discussions because local community leaders do not recognise the groups as their representatives. Crisis Group interviews, May 2024.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials and Arab IDPs, April 2024.

²⁸ "Sudan: The RSF sets its eyes on North Darfur", ACLED, 17 May 2024.

neighbourhoods of El Fasher, with the latter also controlling parts of the countryside. Against this backdrop, the RSF accused the army and its affiliates of launching sorties from inside El Fasher to attack its troops stationed in the outskirts. The army did indeed carry out intense airstrikes on RSF positions.²⁹ Thousands of RSF fighters began arriving from across Darfur to besiege the city, making it impossible for the army and allied forces to leave or resupply by land.³⁰

On 10 April, the RSF declared war on the army and affiliated Darfuri armed groups in El Fasher.³¹ The next day, members of the Joint Darfur Force that aligned with the army made a reciprocal declaration.³² On 14 April, the armed groups mounted a surprise attack on RSF positions in eastern parts of El Fasher. The same day, the RSF captured Melit, north of El Fasher, a critical customs point for goods coming from Libya as well as a junction for aid and commercial convoys arriving from Chad to the west and Port Sudan to the east. With this victory, the RSF cut El Fasher's remaining main supply route and fully blockaded the city.³³

These events marked the final collapse of the local truce negotiated in November, and the start of the battle for El Fasher. Clashes have intensified since, with all sides mobilising all their troops and weaponry. The army has used its airpower to strike RSF positions and Arab encampments. Hit-and-run clashes continue to escalate, with the RSF targeting army-held checkpoints and the army and its allies attacking RSF positions in northern and eastern neighbourhoods. The RSF has also stepped up assaults on parts of the city controlled by Darfuri armed groups. A week of continuous clashes in May left much of El Fasher destroyed, according to satellite images.³⁴ Meanwhile, all sides continue to mobilise and arm, with the army succeeding in rearming its soldiers with air drops. In late April, Minawi helped organise a wider alliance of Darfuri armed groups that vowed to retake all of Darfur from the RSF.³⁵

As has been the case throughout the war, all sides appear to be either targeting civilians they deem supportive of the enemy or showing scant regard for these people.³⁶ Fighting between the RSF and anti-RSF militias is raging in residential neighbourhoods and IDP camps, already leading to the destruction of Abu Shouk camp to the north of the city. Both the RSF and the army are shelling civilian areas with heavy ar-

²⁹ "Sudanese army launches airstrikes on RSF in El Fasher", *Sudan Tribune*, 15 March 2024.

³⁰ "Sudan: The RSF sets its eyes on North Darfur", op. cit.

³¹ "The Rapid Support Forces broadcast a video announcing the fight against the forces of the armed movements", Al Jazeera Sudan, 11 April 2024.

³² "Darfur joint force reiterates support for Sudanese army, vows to defend El Fasher", *Sudan Tribune*, 11 April 2024.

³³ "RSF seizes control of strategic North Darfur town, Mellit", *Sudan Tribune*, 14 April 2024.

³⁴ "Fighting in Abu Shouk IDP Camp, El-Fasher", Yale School of Public Health, Humanitarian Research Lab, 23 May 2024.

³⁵ Formed at a 25-27 April meeting in Barkal, Northern State, the Barkal Forum of the Darfur Protection Alliance includes anti-RSF armed groups and community militias from North, West, Central and South Darfur, though some appear small and their vow to fight the RSF across Darfur looks aspirational for now. The founders include the SLM/A-Minni Minawi, the JEM, a splinter of the GSLF under Abdalla Yahya, a Zaghawa, the Sudanese Alliance, composed mostly of Masalit, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Transitional Council K under Salah Rassas, a Fur, another SLM-TC sub-faction under Mahyiddin Sharaf, a Fur, and the SLM/A-Mustafa Tambour. Other groups have joined since.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Arab and non-Arab residents of North Darfur, May 2024.

tillery, causing constant casualties.³⁷ All sides are trying to deny essential services to areas held by their opponents. The RSF ransacked one of the two remaining hospitals operating in El Fasher, forcing its closure.³⁸ The army, meanwhile, bombed the city's only power station. The RSF's brutal strangulation of the city has blocked most trade into El Fasher, worsening the already dire conditions for those stuck inside. The RSF has even tried to cut off the arid city's water supply, leading to running battles for the reservoir outside town.³⁹ Those residents who have not left El Fasher are clustering to the south of the city in search of refuge from the gunfire and bombardment.

The trapped civilians, a mix of predominantly non-Arab town dwellers and already displaced persons from elsewhere, appear caught between competing interests. The RSF claims it has opened two corridors for civilians to leave the city.⁴⁰ Indeed, the RSF may be hoping to depopulate El Fasher in advance of a full-scale assault. Fearing precisely that scenario, some anti-RSF armed group leaders oppose a civilian exodus.⁴¹ Meanwhile, other armed group leaders (both ethnic Zaghawa and Fur), which continue to proclaim their neutrality, are offering to help secure evacuation corridors from the city, but they are accused by anti-RSF groups of cutting deals with the RSF.⁴²

For many, this dispute is largely academic. Even if they want to flee, most civilians lack the means to do so safely, or a safe destination, and they rightly fear never being able to return. El Fasher is surrounded by harsh desert hard to traverse on foot. The Chadian and other borders are hundreds of kilometres away across terrain mostly controlled by RSF forces or allied Arab militias. Some who have tried to flee have been robbed by Arab militias on roads passing through these vast stretches.⁴³ Many people, moreover, prefer to stay: El Fasher has great historical and symbolic significance as the seat of the Fur sultanate and a Zaghawa stronghold. Fur and Zaghawa worry that a mass exodus could erase their legacy. But the bottom line is that with El Fasher having already become a catchment for surrounding displaced

³⁷ "Sudan: Conflict in Al Fasher, North Darfur – Flash Update No. 01 (as of 12 May 2024) [EN/AR]", UN OCHA, 12 May 2024.

³⁸ "One by one, hospitals are damaged and closed in El Fasher as fighting rages", Médecins Sans Frontières, 14 June 2024. The group said it was relocating its maternal and newborn care services to its field hospital in Zamzam camp, 15km outside the city. The Saudi Obstetrics and Gynaecology Hospital, the only facility providing reproductive health services to hundreds of women and girls in El Fasher, is also considering suspending operations due to damage to one of its buildings by RSF shelling. "El Fasher in flames: Women strive for survival amid dire conflict and rights abuses", Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, 24 May 2024. Hospital closures add to the extreme burdens on health services nationwide. UN agencies have highlighted that more than 7,000 new mothers throughout Sudan could soon die without access to adequate food and medical attention. "A year of suffering for Sudanese women and girls", UN Women, 14 April 2024. Damage to hospitals also robs survivors of sexual violence of proper health care. "Sudan INGO Forum calls for end to bloodshed in El Fasher", Relief Web, 18 June 2024.

³⁹ "Darfur joint forces recapture crucial water reservoir from RSF in El-Fasher", *Sudan Tribune*, 27 May 2024.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, May 2024.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, May 2024.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, Abdulwahid al-Nur, May 2023; officials from the JEM splinter group led by Sandak and the Sudan Alliance led by Hafiz Abdulnebi, May 2024.

⁴³ Crisis Group interview, senior UN official, May 2024.

camps that are being destroyed and disbanded in the war, perhaps upward of a million civilians have nowhere else to run.⁴⁴

War is raging outside El Fasher, too. Clashes between RSF and SAF-aligned groups are spreading across North Darfur and deeper into the hinterland. Tribal clashes over land, cattle rustling and looting, previously pitting Abbala Arabs against non-Arab Zaghawa, Tanhur and Burti, are escalating in the city's vicinity, often involving the RSF and the non-Arab armed groups, alongside a rise in crime. For instance, the RSF and aligned Arab militias have fought with local Darfuri non-Arab groups and the army in Kebkabiya and Kutum, to the city's west and north west, respectively. The RSF or allied militias also appear to have burned down a number of villages east and west of El Fasher, including Darma, Azbani, Karo, Baraka and Sarfaya in mid-April, forcing civilians to flee.⁴⁵ The army, meanwhile, is conducting airstrikes in predominantly Arab neighbourhoods in Kabkabia, El Zurug, Kutum and Melit, killing civilians and scores of livestock as famine looms.⁴⁶ Alongside this frightening violence, fratricidal intra-ethnic confrontations are another looming threat, given the various schisms within the armed groups.⁴⁷

Hunger may be the biggest threat of all to Darfuris, whether they are stuck in El Fasher or not. Experts predict a massive famine in 2024, centred in Darfur.⁴⁸ The conflict has disrupted agriculture, displaced farmers and destroyed food stores. But if thousands of Sudanese starve to death, it will be because the belligerents have blocked food and supplies from reaching them. The RSF, as noted, has put El Fasher and other major towns under siege. Another example – though not in Darfur – is El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan. The army is using similar tactics, stopping goods from reaching pockets of RSF control, most notably affecting millions in Khartoum and Wad Medani.

To make matters worse, Burhan's government in Port Sudan has prevented large-scale humanitarian relief from reaching Darfur by barring the cross-border routes into RSF-held territory that aid agencies say are necessary to prevent mass starvation. In February, it rescinded permission for the UN to deliver aid from Chad.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁴ "Sudan: Conflict in Al Fasher, North Darfur – Flash Update No. 02", UN OCHA, 23 May 2024.

⁴⁵ The RSF denies these claims, attributing the violence to communal disputes involving stolen camels taken to these villages. Crisis Group interviews, RSF commander in El Fasher, May 2024.

⁴⁶ The army asserts that it targeted a caravan transporting armaments for the RSF. Crisis Group interviews, army intelligence officers, May 2024.

⁴⁷ Tensions are escalating between Darfuri factions aligned with the army and groups that have remained neutral or are perceived as close to the RSF, such as the main SLM-TC faction led by Idriss, the JEM splinter led by Sandak; the main GSLF faction led by Hajar; and the Sudan Alliance led by Abdulnebi, the former minister of fisheries and animal resources. On 17 April, Hajar's group withdrew from the Joint Darfur Force, further fracturing the landscape. Although these factions may wield little power compared to those aligned with the army, they hail predominantly from the same Fur, Zaghawa and other non-Arab communities in Darfur as the pro-army groups, heightening the risk of intra-communal fissures. Musa Hilal, leader of the Mahamid Rizeigat Arab tribe in North Darfur, has declared his support for the army, arousing similar concerns about the potential for conflict among Arabs.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, humanitarian officials and famine experts, 2024. "Statement by Principals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee: No time to lose as famine stalks millions in Sudan amid intense fighting and access denials", Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 31 May 2024.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN and aid agency officials, 2024.

cross-border aid into Darfur was primarily going through Adre, Chad, into West Darfur and beyond, a frontier controlled by the RSF. The army cited the widespread reports that the United Arab Emirates is arming the RSF through Chad under the guise of supplying aid.⁵⁰ Ever since, life-saving supplies have piled up along Chad's border with Sudan, with the largest aid agencies such as World Food Programme saying that for international law purposes they require the permission of the government in Port Sudan to bring it across the border – even though those authorities have lost control of the border and almost all of Darfur to the RSF.⁵¹

Indeed, aid officials say most of the starving people in Sudan are in RSF-held territory, where little aid reaches.⁵² While aid is now trickling through a new remote border opening into Darfur and then into RSF-controlled lands, it looks far from sufficient to stave off wider calamity, in part because of onerous clearance procedures demanded by the Port Sudan authorities that some say appear designed to make a scaled-up relief effort impossible.⁵³ Humanitarian workers also worry that even this narrow corridor will be slammed shut once the spotlight shifts away. A UN Security Council Resolution adopted on 13 June urged further cooperation from the Port Sudan government but also specified that aid be delivered with the “prior agreement and coordination” of “Sudanese authorities”.⁵⁴ Aid agencies widely admit that they have no strategy for preventing the predicted famine in Darfur if Burhan's government in Port Sudan does not give UN agencies the green light for a large-scale cross-border relief effort.⁵⁵

V. Staving Off the Worst

As hunger tightens its grip on North Darfur, an already grim panorama looks sure to get grimmer. The RSF have besieged El Fasher with the clear intention of asphyxiating and eventually seizing it. But while it is far from certain whether the RSF can prevail, how long the battle may rage or what might unfold in the interim, some things are clear. One is that a prolonged siege will only worsen conditions in the city and its surrounds. While pockets of catastrophic hunger are scattered across Darfur, some

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Sudanese intelligence official, February 2024. Crisis Group interviews, UN and aid officials, 2024. Some senior aid officials speculate that the trigger for rescinding permission was Hemedti's call in February for a new Operation Lifeline Sudan, a reference to the relief program launched in 1989 primarily for southern Sudan (now South Sudan), as well as RSF moves to set up a formal humanitarian coordination wing. That operation is credited with saving many lives but also blamed for enabling the emergence of a parallel administration run by the rebel Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, which is now South Sudan's ruling party. Many Sudanese, aid officials and experts argue that it unintentionally helped pave the way for South Sudan's eventual secession.

⁵¹ Crisis Group interviews, UN and aid officials, diplomats, May-June 2024.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, senior aid official, June 2024.

⁵⁴ “Adopting Resolution 2736 (2024) with 14 Votes in Favour, Russian Federation Abstaining, Security Council Demands Rapid Support Forces Halt Siege of El Fasher, Sudan”, UN Press, 14 June 2024. Some humanitarian officials consider the resolution a major setback, as it seemingly gets rid of wiggle room for UN agencies to make their own determination about the legality of cross-border aid.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, 2024.

of the worst-off people appear to be in the north, due to the aid cutoff and the active conflict. In February, the medical group Médecins Sans Frontières estimated that a child was dying every two hours in Zamzam, a displacement camp on El Fasher's south-western outskirts that has swelled to hundreds of thousands of inhabitants due to the fighting elsewhere in town.⁵⁶ Further, as medical care has largely collapsed in El Fasher, the city – like other war-torn urban areas in Sudan – risks becoming a mass grave due to deplorable humanitarian conditions.

There is also, of course, the risk of RSF overrunning El Fasher entirely. For now, street-level clashes and aerial assaults are expected to escalate, following the pattern of other fighting in the civil war over the past year. Atrocities and rampant looting, akin to what followed the RSF's capture of other major towns, could ensue if the paramilitaries take the city, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. The losing side, particularly the ethnic Zaghawa who make up most of the armed groups fighting the RSF, could be exposed to retribution. Such attacks may evoke the mass killings of Masalit at the hands of the RSF and Arab militias in El Geneina, West Darfur, in May. Sexual violence could likewise be a severe problem, as it has been elsewhere, with survivors lacking access to appropriate care.⁵⁷ Fleeing is not an easy option for many – given the destruction of nearby camps, the presence of RSF troops throughout the region and the distance of international frontiers. Hundreds of thousands of civilians may thus choose to take their chances where they are.

There are risks for Arab civilians (in the minority in North Darfur) as well. They may also face escalating reprisals, particularly if the tide of war turns against the RSF.

Yet, for all these risks, all sides appear governed by the logic of deepening hostilities, at least at present. For weeks, RSF officials have said the battle for El Fasher is at a point of no return, absent a national ceasefire.⁵⁸ The RSF may believe it can strengthen its hand at the negotiating table, or in a prolonged war, if it manages to complete its conquest of Darfur by capturing the city. As RSF officials see it, they would also rid themselves of exposure along a hostile flank by locking down a locale used to plan and launch attacks on RSF positions.⁵⁹ Hemedti's forces may also be hoping to wrap up the campaign before the rainy season, which peaks in August and September, leading to floods that could slow down the RSF's supply chains and movement. Furthermore, RSF leaders are under intense pressure from Arab communities that support the group to deliver a decisive defeat to the army and its allies in Darfur.⁶⁰

The army's top brass far away in Port Sudan appear to be itching for the war's front line in central Sudan to shift to Darfur. The army is using all the tools at its disposal to this end, including continuing aerial bombardment and pressuring the Darfuri groups it is arming to fight. Many suspect that the army, with little left to lose in Darfur, hopes to bog the RSF down in battle with its allied groups while the

⁵⁶ The group noted that it predicts conditions will only worsen. "Urgent response needed amid high death rates and malnutrition crisis in North Darfur", Médecins Sans Frontières, 5 February 2024.

⁵⁷ "Sudan INGO Forum calls for end to bloodshed in El Fasher", *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, senior UN officials and senior diplomats, April-May 2024.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, April-May 2024.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, RSF officials, April-May 2024.

army focuses on regaining the centre of the country, namely the Khartoum area and Gezira state.⁶¹

The groups with perhaps the most to lose, meanwhile, are the once-neutral Darfuri armed movements that have declared war on the RSF and whose constituencies look most vulnerable should the conflict continue to escalate. After throwing in their lot with Burhan, these groups' leaders may fear crossing their new patron by negotiating directly with the RSF. Plus, they may harbour both the hope and ambition that they can win, or at least fight the RSF to a draw, if they manage to widen the war across North Darfur and possibly beyond.

But the problem is not just that the parties seem prepared to keep fighting – it is also that mediation efforts have been wanting. Efforts to broker a de-escalation among the parties – primarily the RSF, the army and Minawi (as leader of the strongest of the army-aligned armed groups) – have been slow and scant. The two most engaged outside parties thus far, the UN and U.S., have been focused on other priorities. The UN is primarily engaged at the humanitarian level, including in pushing for safe corridors for civilians wishing to flee. Washington's diplomacy has concentrated on heaping pressure on the RSF to back down in El Fasher with sanctions and threats of sanctions, while also pressuring the UAE, the RSF's main backer, to rein in Hemedti. This approach may have bought time by forestalling a more intensive RSF assault on the city, but it has not otherwise eased the situation, perhaps because all sides are caught in an escalatory cycle that would require the RSF, the army and army-aligned groups such as Minawi's to de-escalate together.

A more serious effort will almost surely be required. To alleviate El Fasher's distress, the U.S., the UN and anyone else in a position to do so should work on a new local truce, ideally in conjunction with community leaders who can likewise try to pressure the belligerents. Under the terms of a new arrangement, the RSF might agree to end its siege, the army to stay inside its garrison and halt its aerial bombardment, and pro-army Darfuri groups to cease their attacks. The mediation could focus first on the RSF and Minawi, since these are the opposing forces doing the bulk of the fighting at present. Meanwhile, to aid those negotiations, the U.S. could work to coordinate multi-sided pressure, entreating Abu Dhabi and African capitals with ties to Hemedti to urge him to stand down; enjoining Cairo and Riyadh to do the same with the army; and leaning on Minawi and others with influence over him and his allies to accept a de-escalation plan.

While success appears unlikely, the situation is not hopeless. Though all sides right now see a strategic logic to intensifying their military operations, there could be an alternative logic for each of them to return to a truce. This logic is most evident when it comes to the Darfuri armed groups; their vulnerability at least notionally should create an opening to encourage direct talks with the RSF to restore a ceasefire. Efforts in this direction would likely be most effective if community leaders, aid officials and diplomats throw their combined weight behind pressing Minawi and his local commanders, such as Juma Hager, to stand down, should the RSF agree.⁶²

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, officials of the RSF, Sudanese political parties, SLM-TC-Idriss and GSLF-Hajar, May 2024.

⁶² Hager is commander-in-chief of SLA-Minni Minawi and the leader of the forces fighting the RSF in El Fasher.

Moreover, the biggest players – the RSF and the army – also have reason to avoid further escalation, even if neither seems to recognise it. As concerns the paramilitary, it is far from clear that the RSF can achieve a quick victory in El Fasher. The army has diverted major resources, including airpower, toward shoring up its position in El Fasher, and the Darfuri armed groups in town are seasoned, motivated fighters defending their home turf, supported by local people. They employ similar guerrilla tactics to the RSF and have ample experience fighting those forces. Indeed, in June, the pro-army armed groups ambushed an RSF unit in southern El Fasher, killing Ali Yagoub, a top RSF commander sanctioned by the U.S. for leading the siege.⁶³ Simultaneous confrontations in locations like Babanussa in West Kordofan and El Obeid in North Kordofan have already demonstrated that the RSF is far from indomitable.

Moreover, even if the RSF's campaign in El Fasher were successful, the group has something to lose in continuing to press forward in the city. For one thing, should it capture El Fasher, it could spark a wider war in Darfur largely along communal lines, leaving it overstretched in the west. For another, the RSF are facing widespread condemnation for their advances on the city, with new U.S. sanctions on their commanders and the threat of even more punitive action should the attack proceed. A bloody conflagration in El Fasher would further stigmatise the paramilitary group, increasing the reputational costs to the UAE for backing it and to other Sudanese for countenancing it.

Turning to the army, it, too, has reasons to negotiate a truce for El Fasher if it possibly can, perhaps first and foremost because its conflict strategy could easily backfire. The RSF could capture El Fasher and defeat the Darfuri armed groups allied with the army, leaving Burhan without a foothold in the country's west and further undermining his claim to sovereign authority. A major defeat at El Fasher could also further weaken the army's hand in peace negotiations.

Still, even if they ultimately succeed, efforts to reach a truce could drag on, and in the meantime El Fasher needs relief. UN, U.S. and African officials should insist that the parties establish evacuation corridors and humanitarian pauses to allow civilians to flee and agencies to deliver aid to keep them alive. How to go about this task is another question. Officials at the AU and UN have pondered the possibility of deploying an external protection force to oversee these processes, but the political obstacles and logistical and security risks involved are very high, and a rapid deployment is almost out of the question.⁶⁴ That means outside officials will need to work from afar with the warring parties on the ground to press for safe corridors out of the city.

One possibility could be safe passage into the neutral areas of nearby Central Darfur controlled by Abdel Wahid al-Nur, an ethnic Fur who leads Darfur's largest rebel group and refused to sign the 2020 Juba peace deal. His areas remain outside the control of the warring parties. His forces have so far remained ostensibly neutral in the conflict, and he has expressed willingness to provide security for an evacuation corridor from El Fasher, should the warring parties allow it.⁶⁵ Even if they do not, the

⁶³ Yagoub led the RSF campaign in Central Darfur in November 2023 and the capture of Melit, the commercial hub north of El Fasher, the following April.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, UN Security Council members and AU experts, June 2024.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Abdulwahid al-Nur, May 2024.

parties could be pressed to allow civilians to pass there safely, as some are already doing. This plan has its limitations. It would appeal mainly to ethnic Fur; and it would work only if there is a way to get aid to the areas al-Nur's forces hold, where hunger is rampant and many have already fled. Other corridors are thus also needed. Some hope a small number of internationals, most likely drawn from humanitarian agencies, could help monitor them.⁶⁶

Whether or not this or any other specific scheme pans out, certain realities abide. One is that, even if corridors can be created, the battle and especially an RSF conquest of the city will result in the chaotic flight of many thousands, during which many could die, either from violence, hunger, thirst or various maladies. Aid agencies should prepare emergency relief plans to find and reach people in far-flung locales, should this scenario come to pass.

Another is that more aid needs to get into Darfur, more broadly. With millions of Darfuris edging toward starvation, world powers must act soon and decisively by giving generously to a severely under-funded aid operation and insisting that all parties facilitate food relief into Darfur.⁶⁷ After pressure, the Port Sudan authorities gave the UN permission to use a remote North Darfur route through El Tina, a Chad-Sudan border town controlled by army-aligned forces loyal to Minawi and Ibrahim. Following months of negotiations, in May and June, the World Food Programme was able to deliver dozens of truckloads of food in a series of convoys by that route and then through RSF-held territory into hunger-stricken areas in South, Central and East Darfur.

But it is not enough. Aid officials say this route is costly and impractical for the large-scale operation that would be required to stave off mass starvation, while also subject to renegotiations and onerous clearances for each truck in every convoy.⁶⁸ The route may also become impassable during rainy season, which is imminent. Given the obstacles and obstruction, it is clear the status quo is not working. International pressure and flexible thinking is needed to ensure food gets to the Sudanese at scale before it is too late.

Finally, the plight of El Fasher underlines the need for national ceasefire talks to resume – still the best way to pull apart the RSF and the army in Darfur and elsewhere and prevent Sudan's further fragmentation. While the U.S. has pushed for resumption of talks in Jeddah involving army and RSF representatives, the Saudis have yet to reconvene the parties, seemingly due to resistance from Burhan, who continues to publicly reject negotiations. It does not help that Burhan sits above a factious officer corps, which includes powerful hardliners who vehemently reject dialogue. Some question whether Burhan could indeed sign a peace deal without inviting a coup attempt or a split in the army. Given the country's rapid deterioration, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE should continue to push the parties back

⁶⁶ UN Security Council members have asked the Secretary-General for options on civilian protection, and some have floated the possibility of monitors. See "Sudan: Vote on a draft resolution", *What's in Blue*, 13 June 2024.

⁶⁷ According to OCHA, the 2024 Sudan Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan requires \$2.7 billion to provide life-saving multi-cluster and protection assistance to 14.7 million people across Sudan. As of 12 June, the appeal is 16 per cent funded, with \$440.6 million received. "Sudan Situation Report", UN OCHA, 12 June 2024.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, senior UN and World Food Programme officials, May-June 2024.

to the table, with Cairo, Riyadh and Washington in particular needing to apply pressure on Burhan and the wider army leadership to return. In combination, concerted dialogue with Burhan and key generals to assuage army concerns will also likely be needed.

All should also support a 21 June decision by African leaders to hold an extraordinary summit to discuss Sudan and form a committee of heads of state from across the continent to mediate between Burhan and Hemedti. Such high-level interventions towards the two belligerents have thus far been sorely wanting from all corners, despite Sudan's grim plight.

VI. Conclusion

At several points in Sudan's recent history, disputes at the country's centre have generated extreme violence in its western peripheries, where decades of meddling and neglect have entrenched deep divisions between Darfur's Arab and non-Arab communities. That is true again today, as a war that started as a power struggle in Khartoum has rippled through Darfur, bringing violence, displacement, atrocities and starvation. Backed by international actors, and driven by narrow self-interest and self-preservation, all sides seem to believe that they gain more by continuing to fight than by reaching a settlement.

That is a rolling tragedy for Sudanese civilians caught in the crossfire in El Fasher and too many other towns and cities across the country, and it may also be a strategic error on the part of the parties. As Crisis Group has argued, the longer the war drags on, the weaker Burhan's and Hemedti's powers appear to become, as they rely on increasingly sprawling coalitions to wage their war.⁶⁹ The array of different armed groups now fighting in El Fasher is reflective of a fragmenting conflict arena across Sudan, with the state sinking deeper into failure.

More war can only bring greater devastation. For this reason, as Crisis Group has consistently urged, every actor with influence over the warring parties must press them toward a truce in El Fasher and a nationwide settlement. In the meantime, they must also prevail upon the government in Port Sudan, and other parties as applicable, to lift the restrictions that have prevented aid workers from delivering adequate food to starving people in Darfur and pushed El Fasher and other locales toward humanitarian catastrophe.

Nairobi/Brussels, 24 June 2024

⁶⁹ Crisis Group Statement, "Sudan: A Year of War", 11 April 2024.

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 235, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

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