



“What is happening in Sudan is not a civil war, it is a war against civilians”

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Summary report

The civil war in Sudan has taken a brutal turn after the fall of the city of Al Fasher. The siege of the city by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) lasted for more than 500 days, forcing a population of an estimated 260.000 civilians to starve. When the RSF pushed out the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) it launched a genocidal campaign of brutal violence in the takeover of the city. UN and INGOs have no access, nor is reporting available from the events within Al Fasher.

This is the report about the expert meeting **‘Sudan: humanitarian access and action after the fall of Al Fasher’**, organised by the Sudan Platform and KUNO. Four speakers presented the current situation: Arjan Hehenkamp from the International Rescue Committee, Anette Hoffmann from Clingendael, a Sudanese NGO representative, Waldo Serno and Floris te Velde from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Afterwards, the floor was opened for reflection and discussion under Chatham House Rule. The session was moderated by Jan van ‘t Land from Clingendael.

Please note that this report was written based on the discussion taking place at the time of the meeting and has not been updated to include developments and events that have occurred since then.

Humanitarian situation

The RSF took control of the whole of the city on 26 October. Since then, extreme human rights violations have been unfolding, likely amounting to war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide. Although the number of casualties remains unclear, the evidence is mounting from footage made by soldiers, commanders, satellite footage, and reports from survivors. The numbers published on casualties are limited but are also not always representative. The Journal of Tropical Health stated that the number of people killed in Khartoum in the 2023 was higher than the numbers reported for the entirety of Sudan. The stories of people being abducted, sold for ransom, abused, detained, sent back to El Fasher, or killed are unfortunately far from rare. The fact that many are being detained by the RSF or sold for ransom is an underexposed and critical situation. This also counts for the gender-based violence that has been taking place for the past years, which continues and is even on the rise now in El Fasher. The rise of gender-based violence is a huge concern and needs urgent attention.

Since the RSF besieged El Fasher, many people became trapped in the city. There is a lack of clarity on how many people were in El Fasher when it fell, and the uncertainty of where they are

now remains. Numbers circulating indicate that 260,000 people were in El Fasher, but this number will likely be much higher. 80,000 people have fled the city since it fell, but only 10,000 arrived at Tawila. How many people were in El Fasher, and where are they now? This was a recurring question that was raised by the participants in the meeting. Due to a communication blackout in El Fasher, very limited information is available and sustains the question of where people are.

The approximately 10,000 people that did arrive in Tawila are in very bad shape. They are malnourished, wounded, and women are often sexually abused. People arriving in Tawila are elderly, women and children, but very few men. There are reports of unaccompanied minors arriving in Tawila without any information about where their parents and siblings are. Children are also especially in acute danger of having to flee alone, violence, trafficking and recruitment. NGOs on the ground experience a lack of coordination because the displaced people are widespread and dispersed. Many people have been displaced several times, so when developing long-term programmes this needs to be taken into account.

The situation in Sudan in its entirety is dire; the attention is currently on El Fasher and the situation there needs urgent attention. However, the violence is not limited to that context. Sudanese partners are flagging the rise of violence in northern Darfur, White Nile, Kassala. From El Fasher the violence is spreading to the Kordofans where cities such as Diling and Kadugli risk facing a similar future as El Fasher. The city of Bara, North Kordofan, was already taken over by RSF a week earlier, but it did not get the same media attention. The lack of fuel complicates reaching people in more rural areas, in addition to the precarious security situation. The health system in Sudan was already pressured, but since the fall of El Fasher has largely collapsed. Health facilities have been blocked, destroyed and systematically attacked. It is functioning on less than 10% of its supposed capacity in Darfur, which has also led to the emergence of diseases such as cholera. This also applies to water facilities and the transport of food, the blockage of which causes the famine.

The United Nations (UN) has been largely absent in Darfur for most of the war; its presence needs to be scaled up. Responders aim to do an entry in El Fasher, which has to be done most carefully and collectively across the UN, national and local organisations. It is not clear who is in control in the area between El Fasher and Tawila. The international community should be pushing for more UN presence that is more consistent, senior and stronger in Darfur. Alternatively, if the UN cannot be present, the suggestion is to push for the funds to be shared with partners on the ground.

Despite the circumstances, the population of Sudan continues to carry out vital work. Civil society is the first to step in and the last to step out, and the Sudanese diaspora is also directly engaged in Sudan and has to be incorporated in decision-making. Despite the intense situation on the ground, mutual aid groups and solidarity networks keep helping communities through soup kitchens, but also pharmacies. Therefore, the support for Emergency Response Rooms needs to be critically sustained.

Political situation

The war in Sudan is a war against civilians, not a civil war, as stated by one of the participants. The systematic attacks on civilians in El Fasher are demonstrated by the footage made by the

army and through satellites. The piles of bodies and blood stains are clearly visible. The likelihood of a genocide taking place is significant, as experts (e.g. Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights) had warned before. The ethnic intent was shown, for instance, through a recording of the RSF's second in command instructing his troops not to take any people captive when taking El Fasher. Evidence is being erased by the RSF, they are disposing of bodies and digging mass graves.

There is no point in talking about the humanitarian situation without taking the politics into account. The geopolitics, conflict economy and conflict dynamics need to be understood; this determines who lives and who dies. The war runs on the export of gold, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are the principal destination. In turn, the UAE is the major financier of RSF in terms of weapons and funding. There is evidence from the UK that there are investments of the UAE in weapons used in El Fasher. Other countries are also involved in this trade¹. On the other end, Egypt, Qatar and Turkey are supporting the SAF financially and militarily. The current situation calls for political pressure on countries involved in the war.

Bordering countries have a big stake in the war. Many convoys are in the hands of the RSF, which results in them being able to continue their supply chain. Weapons, fuel, gold and intelligence are all transported through cross-border transportations to, for instance Libya and Chad. This also gives the RSF a big window of opportunity to kidnap people for ransom.

The fall of El Fasher was widely anticipated. Humanitarian organisations had long warned of the danger, and the RSF itself openly announced and promoted its plans, including the violence that would accompany them. Despite this knowledge, the international community decided not to act. This has left the RSF operating outside the law, as demonstrated by the videos that are circulating. The level of impunity is deeply troubling, fuelling the RSF's confidence (and that of its main sponsor, the UAE) as reflected in the videos now circulating (and disseminated by social media accounts operated from the UAE). The moderate pace with which they move from house to house for executions is a signal of their awareness of the impunity.

RSF's capture of El Fasher reinforces the country's de facto partition but does not alter the ultimate aim of supremacy over the entire country. The current attention to El Fasher and Sudan offers momentum to bring more visibility and put more pressure on this war. Attention also needs to be put on the SAF, who also finance their war effort through the gold trade. Not to mention the atrocities they continue to commit, including the targeting of civilian volunteers and activists in the areas of their control.

The economic relations of the Netherlands with UAE have recently been intensified: since 2020 rules have been loosened and the Netherlands is strengthening the economic ties: a trade mission is prepared for 2026, the UAE has been removed from the tax haven list, etc. This needs to be reconsidered.

¹ Townsend, M. (2025, 31 oktober). UK military equipment used by militia accused of genocide found in Sudan, UN told. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/oct/28/uk-military-equipment-rapid-support-forces-rsf-militia-accused-genocide-found-sudan-united-nations>

Recommended actions

There is a need to work simultaneously on the humanitarian and the political side.

Political action

- Perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide must be held accountable for their crimes. And atrocities must be documented and independently investigated. for. The impunity that RSF experiences is unprecedented, and accountability needs to be pursued to bring the perpetrators to court.
- Pressure needs to be exerted, also by the Dutch government, on both RSF and SAF. This means pressure on the foreign donors: on the UAE primarily for financing RSF; Egypt's role, as well as Qatar and Turkey are also central.
- The experts in the meeting called for a long-term and holistic solution to end the war, bringing both sides to the negotiating table is key.
- The Netherlands needs to reconsider the strengthening of economic ties with UAE.

Humanitarian action

- Protection of civilians is the number one priority: 1) Humanitarian corridors must be enforced to allow survivors in El Fasher to seek safety elsewhere. 2) Urgent measure must be taken to protect the 700.000 people in Tawila from a similar attack by the RSF. 3) Pressure must be maximised on both warring parties to stop committing atrocities across the country and chiefly in Darfur and Kordofan.
- Access to El Fasher needs to be a priority in the ongoing humanitarian negotiations in Darfur and diplomatic engagements. However, it is vital that instrumentalisation / politicisation of aid by the RSF is avoided. A collective and coordinated approach among NGOs is key. There is a risk that NGOs are asked to enter under conditions that are unacceptable, therefore independent principled aid needs to be guaranteed and with full freedom of movement for people going in and out of El Fasher.
- The UN needs to have a meaningful presence on the ground and facilitate humanitarian aid by all humanitarian actors. The UN now has some limited presence but without 'permission' of SAF, which has been the biggest barrier to be present in Darfur - making it a fragile presence. Their presence needs to be sustained and scaled up, as well as their role in coordination and negotiations, but also supply-chain management.
- Humanitarian aid urgently needs to be brought to scale: Tawila needs 10-20 trucks every single day. To date 15 trucks made it to Tawila. Only 1/3 of the 2025 UN humanitarian response plan is funded. This must change. The route to Tawila and other parts of Darfur from Chad is long and challenging; it takes trucks with supplies eight days on average in the dry season, the rainy season is worse. Preposition ahead of the next rainy season or ahead of additional arrivals in the event that El Fasher does open up is needed.
- In the current situation, lifesaving interventions are needed while maintaining the do-no-harm principle. In the long term, peacebuilding efforts should be pursued.
- It is important to strengthen the coordination in the IDP camps. The overview of who is coming in needs to be improved to be able to provide humanitarian aid effectively.
- Gender-based violence is a big concern and needs direct attention.
- Sustaining the support for emergency response rooms is key; the work they are doing is lifesaving and has continued despite the circumstances. This calls for flexible funding.