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The War and Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan

The conflict in Sudan that began in 2023 between rival elements of the security forces has fueled the world's largest displacement crisis and largest hunger crisis. The war has pushed over 11 million people from their homes. More than half the population, over 25 million people, reportedly face acute food insecurity, including 1.5 million at risk of or facing famine. The warring parties have been implicated in atrocity crimes and other gross human rights abuses. Fatality figures are not reliable, given access constraints, but by some estimates as many as 150,000 people may have died in the first year of the conflict alone.

The war that began as a fight for power between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF, the military) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has roots in how Sudan has been ruled, primarily by military regimes and central elites, since independence. Islamist military leader Omar al Bashir, who took power in a 1989 coup, faced multiple rebellions in the marginalized peripheries. He armed Sudanese Arab militias known as the Janjaweed to help the SAF counter rebels in the western Darfur region in the early 2000s, and the United States, among others, labeled their atrocities against non-Arab communities genocide. Bashir formed the RSF from the Janjaweed to counter other insurgencies, allowing it to seize gold mines and other assets, and deployed it to Yemen as part of the Gulf-led coalition fighting the Houthi rebels, which provided revenue that bolstered the RSF's autonomy.

Sudan's security chiefs used pro-democracy protests in 2019 as justification to oust Bashir, with reported support from some Arab countries. The junta, led by the SAF's Abdel Fattah al Burhan and RSF's Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemedti, resisted handing power to civilians, but later conceded under pressure to share power with a "civilian-led" transitional government (CLTG). It led reforms and secured U.S. sanctions relief and international debt relief. The SAF and RSF generals usurped power from the CLTG in 2021 (Sudan's sixth coup since independence) and violently suppressed ensuing mass protests. Under growing pressure to restore civilian authority and merge their forces in security sector reforms, a long-simmering rivalry between the SAF and RSF erupted in April 2023.

Over 18 months later, the SAF and RSF continue to fight over the war-torn capital, Khartoum, and its adjacent cities, once home to 10 million people. SAF-held Port Sudan now serves as the de facto capital. As the conflict has spread, rebels, former rebels, and communities are being drawn into an increasingly complex civil war. The RSF took control of much of Darfur in late 2023 and has besieged El Fasher, the North Darfur capital where the SAF fights to hold its last garrison in the region. Fighters from non-Arab groups like the Zaghawa, once targeted by the Janjaweed, have aligned with the SAF to defend the area. The RSF has also advanced southeast in 2024, disrupting farming in Sudan's agricultural heartland and fueling further displacement.

Figure 1. Map of Sudan



Source: CRS graphic, with approximate areas of control based on mapping by Sudan War Monitor, Thomas Van Linge, and others.

Famine and Aid Access Constraints

Despite denials by the junta, experts confirm that famine—possibly the worst in decades—is unfolding in Sudan. Some humanitarians have described the aid response as “deeply inadequate.” UN officials cite funding shortfalls and access restrictions, including attacks on aid workers and health facilities, bureaucratic impediments, and operational interference. Experts have accused both warring parties of using starvation as a weapon. The SAF has restricted access to RSF-occupied areas, and, in early 2024, ordered aid agencies to stop cross-border operations into Darfur. Under diplomatic pressure, the junta authorized a temporary opening in August, but only a fraction of the aid needed has since been allowed in. The RSF has also limited access, looted aid supplies, and laid siege to SAF-held urban areas.

Atrocity Crimes and Other Abuses

Grave abuses have been reported during the war, including attacks by the RSF and allied militia in West Darfur that experts say have systematically targeted ethnic Masalit and other non-Arabs. The State Department has determined that the RSF and SAF have committed war crimes and members of the RSF and allied militia have committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. The UN-authorized Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan made similar findings, and documented ethnic-based attacks, killings, torture, the use of child soldiers, airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling on civilians, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. The Mission has also highlighted “large-scale” sexual violence by the RSF, noting similar patterns in RSF attacks in Darfur and southeast Gezira state, where the RSF has been implicated in mass killings.

Some experts have labeled RSF attacks against non-Arab communities in Darfur as acts of genocide, as have some Members of Congress, in legislation. “We see all the risks and indicators for the crime of genocide, with serious allegations that this crime has already been committed,” the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide reported in September 2024. The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating the situation in Darfur under a 2005 UN Security Council referral of jurisdiction. The UN Fact-Finding Mission has recommended that the Security Council expand the jurisdiction of the ICC and the existing UN arms embargo, both of which are specific to Darfur, to cover the entire country. The Fact-Finding Mission, among others, has also called for an independent multinational force to be deployed to protect civilians.

The Fight for El Fasher

The UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide has warned of a risk of genocide in and around El Fasher. El Fasher hosts, among others, over half a million internally displaced people (IDPs), many of whom have lived in camps around the city since the ethnically-targeted violence of the early 2000s. Food security experts verified famine conditions in the largest camp, Zamzam, in mid-2024, but the ongoing battle over El Fasher and RSF siege severely constrain the aid response. The RSF has escalated its efforts to take the strategic city since August, and reportedly burned scores of nearby villages. The fighting has cut trade routes and restricted population movements and farming. Shelling has led most health facilities to close.

External Support for the War

Some foreign powers have reportedly taken sides in the war, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which UN sanctions monitors have identified as backing the RSF, as well as Iran and Egypt, which have reportedly supported the SAF. U.S. officials have reportedly confirmed the UAE’s use of an airport in Chad to support RSF drone operations and smuggle weapons into Darfur, purportedly using humanitarian aid as cover. The UAE denies the allegations.

Press reports suggest the RSF and SAF have also received support from Russia and Ukraine. Russia, which reportedly benefited from gold smuggled from Sudan to help finance its invasion of Ukraine and circumvent sanctions, has been linked to both parties. Early in the war, the U.S. Treasury Department identified Russia’s Wagner Group as supplying surface-to-air missiles to the RSF. Ukrainian forces, meanwhile, have reportedly provided some support to the SAF. Moscow has since reportedly offered support to the SAF-led government as part of a deal that could enable Russia to build a naval outpost on Sudan’s Red Sea coast.

International Responses

Some observers have described the situation in Sudan as a “forgotten” crisis, and, in an already fragile region, some warn that Africa’s third largest country risks becoming a failed state. Peace initiatives have proliferated, but have not stopped the fighting. UN Security Council action since the war began has been limited; the African Union (AU) similarly has struggled to respond. As of November, the UN’s \$2.7 billion Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan for 2024 was just over half-funded. The United States, Sudan’s largest humanitarian donor, committed over \$1 billion in FY2024 humanitarian assistance to support the response.

U.S. Peace Efforts

The United States has been involved in peacemaking in Sudan for over 25 years, and Congress has been active in shaping U.S. policy toward the country. U.S. relations with Bashir’s Islamist regime were poor, and his exit spurred optimism and warming ties. Members of Congress expressed broad support for a transition to democracy in Sudan, including after the 2021 coup. U.S. diplomats pushed a deal to resolve the post-coup crisis; some critics say the plan became a “pressure cooker” that escalated tensions among the generals. After the fighting started in 2023, the U.S. embassy in Khartoum suspended operations and evacuated personnel; some have relocated to Ethiopia.

The United States partnered with Saudi Arabia to cohost several rounds of ceasefire talks in 2023 between the SAF and RSF in Jeddah. Early in the conflict, the parties signed a declaration committing to maintain Sudan’s unity and territorial integrity, respect international humanitarian law, and protect civilians; they have not adhered to it. Some observers criticized the Jeddah process, which collapsed in late 2023, for excluding civilians and key external actors like the UAE and Egypt. Others have noted the lack of a mechanism to bridge the ceasefire and prospective political processes, which U.S. officials say should be civilian-led.

President Joe Biden appointed former congressman Tom Perriello as Special Envoy for Sudan in early 2024, and the United States launched a new platform for talks in August. The U.S. initiative, cohosted by Switzerland and Saudi Arabia with the UN, AU, Egypt, and UAE as observers, sought to reach a cessation of hostilities, enable aid access, and develop a mechanism to confirm compliance with any deal. The RSF attended; the SAF did not. Some observers attributed the SAF boycott to divisions in the military-led government, while others question whether either side is ready to stop fighting. Diplomatic pressure from what is now called the ALPS Group led to commitments from both parties to open aid routes, but impediments persist.

A new administration and Congress will face decisions on whether and how to pursue peace in Sudan. The United States has played a leading role among international actors in Sudan, but U.S. engagement has drawn some critiques, including from Members of Congress, and some contend it has lacked high-level attention. Some experts recommend a greater focus on civilian protection and humanitarian access; some urge more support for local aid efforts. Some have called for a review of U.S. sanctions strategy. To date, the Biden Administration has sanctioned 10 persons and 9 entities under Executive Order 14098, issued after the war began. Congress and the next administration may debate options for increasing pressure on the warring parties and their external facilitators. As officials weigh proposals for stabilizing the country and pursuing accountability, some diplomats have argued against accommodating the generals with another power-sharing deal, and some advocate for more focus on civilian initiatives to chart Sudan’s future.

Legislation on Sudan in the 118th Congress has included S. 5327, S.Res. 831, H.Res. 1328, S. 4475, S.Res. 559, H.Res. 982, S.Con.Res. 24, H.Res. 585, among other measures.

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