



The War and Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan

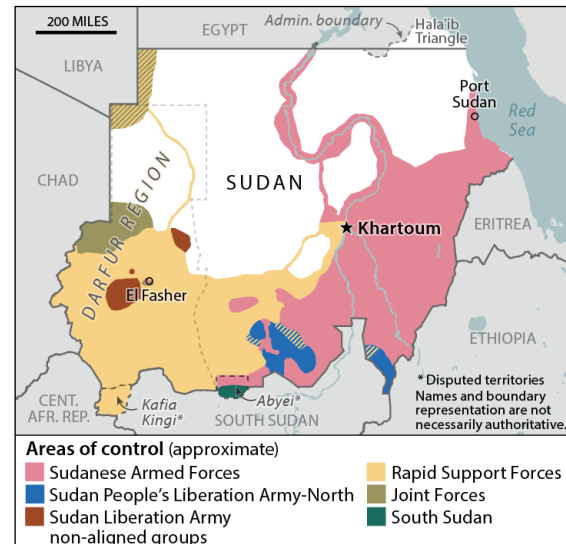
The conflict in Sudan that began in 2023 between rival elements of its security forces has fueled the world's largest humanitarian crisis. More than 15 million people are displaced, including over 11 million internally, and 17 million children are out of school. More than half the population, roughly 25 million people, are acutely food insecure; some face famine. The warring parties have been implicated in atrocity crimes and other gross human rights abuses. Mortality figures are not reliable, given access constraints, but by some estimates as many as 150,000 people died in the first year of the conflict alone.

The war began as a fight for power between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF, the military) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), but 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 the 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.

As the war spread, rebels, former rebels, and communities have been drawn into an increasingly complex civil war. The RSF seized the capital and much of Darfur in 2023 and advanced into the southeast in 2024, disrupting farming in Sudan's agricultural heartland. Early 2025 was a turning point: the SAF recaptured the southeast and reclaimed war-torn Khartoum in March. The fight for Kordofan continues. The RSF intensified its efforts to take the besieged North Darfur capital of El Fasher, which hosts the last SAF base in Darfur, in April. Fighters from non-Arab Darfur groups like the Zaghawa, once targeted by the Janjaweed and SAF, have aligned with the SAF to defend the area. In May, the RSF launched a complex drone assault on Port Sudan, the country's interim capital and main gateway for aid supplies.

Figure 1. Map of Sudan



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

Famine, Aid Gaps & Access Constraints

Despite the military government's denials, experts confirm that famine, possibly the worst in decades, is spreading. Some aid groups have called the crisis a "global failure" and the humanitarian response "too slow, too timid, and dangerously inadequate." UN officials cite funding gaps, which have worsened in 2025; access restrictions; attacks on aid workers and health facilities; bureaucratic impediments; and operational interference. Experts accuse both warring parties of using starvation as a weapon. The SAF has restricted access to RSF-occupied areas and sought to control cross-border operations into Darfur. Under diplomatic pressure, the military government authorized cross-border and some crossline access in the latter half of 2024, but constraints persist. The RSF has also limited access, looted aid supplies, and laid siege to 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. In late 2023, the State Department issued a determination that the RSF and SAF had committed war crimes and members of the RSF and allied militia had committed crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. The UN-authorized Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan reached similar findings, documenting on ethnic-based attacks, killings, torture, child soldiers, airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling on civilians, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. The Mission highlighted "large-scale" sexual violence by the RSF, noting patterns in RSF attacks of rape used as a tactic to terrorize families in both Darfur and southeast Gezira state.

On January 7, 2025, the State Department declared that members of the RSF and allied militias had committed acts of genocide, an assessment some experts and Members of Congress made in 2024. In line with the determination, the Biden Administration sanctioned RSF leader Hemedti for his role in systemic atrocities and the RSF's mass rape of civilians in Darfur. The Administration sanctioned SAF leader Burhan, the de facto head of state since 2019, a week later, citing the SAF's atrocities and aid obstruction, as well as Burhan's refusal to participate in ceasefire talks and obstruction of a transition to civilian government.

The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) is investigating the situation in Darfur under a 2005 UN Security Council referral of jurisdiction. A UN Fact-Finding Mission has recommended that the Security Council expand the jurisdiction of the ICC and the existing UN arms embargo, both specific to Darfur, to cover the entire country. The Mission, among others, has also called for a multinational force to be deployed to protect civilians.

The Fight for El Fasher

In 2024, UN and independent experts raised alarm about the risk of genocide in and around the strategic Darfur city of El Fasher, where over half a million internally displaced people (IDPs) have lived in camps since the ethnically targeted violence of the early 2000s. The RSF has laid siege to the city for over a year. The fighting has cut trade routes, destroyed markets and health facilities, and restricted farming and aid access. In April 2025, the RSF launched a full-scale assault on the largest IDP camp, Zamzam, where famine was first confirmed in 2024. The death toll from the attack, which has displaced over 400,000 people, remains unclear. The RSF's efforts to seize El Fasher continue.

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 named in 2024 as involved in aiding the RSF, as well as Iran, Qatar, Egypt, and Turkey, which have reportedly supported the SAF. U.S. officials reportedly confirmed the UAE's use of an airport in Chad to support RSF drone operations and smuggle weapons into Darfur in 2024, using aid as cover. The UAE denies the allegations.

Press reports suggest the RSF and SAF have both received support from Russia, which has reportedly benefited from gold smuggled from Sudan to help finance its invasion of Ukraine and circumvent sanctions. In 2023, the Treasury Department identified Russia's Wagner Group as supplying surface-to-air missiles to the RSF. Ukrainian forces, meanwhile, purportedly 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 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. The humanitarian response for 2025, estimated at \$4.2 billion, is 13% funded. The United States, Sudan's largest humanitarian donor, provided over \$1 billion in FY2024 humanitarian aid for the crisis; to date, no new U.S. aid pledges have been announced in 2025.

U.S. Peace Efforts

The United States has been involved in peacemaking in Sudan for over 25 years, and Congress has actively shaped U.S. policy toward the country. U.S. relations with Bashir's Islamist regime were poor, despite counterterrorism cooperation. Bashir's exit, during the first Trump Administration, spurred optimism and warming ties. Members of Congress have expressed broad support for a transition to democracy in Sudan and opposed military rule. After the war began in 2023, the U.S. Embassy in Sudan suspended operations and evacuated personnel; an Office of Sudan Affairs was subsequently established in Ethiopia.

The United States partnered with Saudi Arabia in 2023 to cohost ceasefire talks between the SAF and RSF in Jeddah. Early on, 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.

President Biden appointed former Representative Tom Perriello as U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan in 2024, and the United States launched a new platform for talks, dubbed the ALPS Group. Cohosted by Switzerland and Saudi Arabia, with the African Union, UN, Egypt, and UAE as observers, U.S. officials 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 SAF-led government; others questioned whether either side was ready to stop fighting. ALPS Group pressure led to commitments from both parties to open aid routes, but the war intensified, with drones increasingly prominent.

The Trump Administration and Congress face decisions on whether and how to pursue peace in Sudan. The Biden Administration's approach drew some critiques, including from some in Congress. Some argued Sudan lacked high-level attention; some viewed U.S. efforts to hold those fueling the conflict accountable as insufficient. U.S.-Middle East ties add complications for U.S. Sudan policy. Congress and the Trump Administration may debate how to approach the warring parties and their external facilitators. Some Members, for example, have sought to block U.S. arms sales to the UAE over its reported role in fueling the war. As U.S. officials weigh proposals to stabilize Sudan, some advocates argue for more focus on civilian initiatives to chart Sudan's future, while some regional actors may push for a new power-sharing deal with Sudan's generals.

Since President Trump's return to office, U.S. officials have condemned the violence in Sudan, called for unfettered aid access and accountability, reaffirmed the genocide finding, and rejected the RSF effort to form a parallel government. President Trump has yet to indicate if he will appoint a new special envoy, as mandated in P.L. 118-159. Congress may seek to review how the Administration's aid cuts are affecting the humanitarian response and peacemaking and conflict mitigation efforts. Legislation on Sudan in the 119th Congress includes, to date, H.R. 1939 and S.Res. 126.

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