

Strategic Initiative
for Women in the
Horn of Africa



SIHA Network

SILENT WEAPONS, LOUDEST WOUNDS:

Addressing the Crisis of Sexual
Violence in Sudan

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Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of war in Sudan on April 15, 2023, civilians in Sudan, particularly women and girls, have experienced mass suffering and violence due to the conflict and have faced a spectrum of violations of their rights. These violations are a direct product of the conduct of all parties to the conflict, particularly the two largest—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), both representatives of the state, whose political break and assumption of hostilities drove the country into a civil war. The bulk of the combat is currently conducted in Khartoum and Darfur, with further fighting in Kordofan.

Over the course of the war, the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA) has documented violations of the rights of civilians, particularly those of women and girls, through its existing networks and mechanisms. These networks and information gathering efforts have been severely strained by the conflict. In areas of Darfur, where communication systems have been limited or non-existent at times and movement is particularly dangerous and

restricted, investigation and verification of reports has been challenging. The cases noted below point to critical trends and highlight the dangerous worsening of living conditions, lack of access to critical healthcare, and exposure to extreme violence that civilians across Sudan are facing, particularly in Khartoum and Darfur.

The scale of atrocities that have been committed in Darfur and Khartoum is difficult to overstate. This war is being waged against the people of Sudan first and foremost—their livelihoods, their homes and their public institutions. A war, ostensibly between the RSF



and the SAF, has been conducted in a manner that is both ethnicized and gendered, with women, particularly those from certain 'non-Arabized' ethnic groups, constituting a major target. Our reports from Darfur and accounts by activists speak to ethnic targeting, particularly targeting the Masalit tribe. Many survivor accounts describe women being raped with their families forced to watch. Many parents have lost their lives defending their daughters, and women have also been killed for resisting rape. Young men, human rights defenders, and Sudanese civilians in all their diversity are also core targets of this conflict.

Our records show that as of early October the prevalence of sexual violence committed by the RSF continues to escalate significantly. This indicates that soldiers on the ground are becoming emboldened in committing sexual violence crimes, and this is a clear reflection that women's bodies are being used as a tool of war. These circumstances are the direct result of policies and the behaviour of agents of the state – represented by both the SAF and the RSF. These crimes represent critical violations of the rights of people of Sudan and highlight the urgent need for mechanisms to enforce and demand better for civilians.

CIVILIANS CAUGHT IN COMBAT, INSECURITY, AND DESTRUCTION OF HOMES

The war and ongoing combat in Khartoum, Darfur, and Kordofan have created circumstances of ongoing and extreme violence in which civilians have been caught in the middle, forced to contend with danger to themselves, those around them, and their property and livelihoods. In Khartoum, bases for both the RSF and SAF are distributed across the city, and combat has been ongoing in residential neighbourhoods. This has exposed civilians to the danger of injury and death, either from weapons shot from the ground during firefights or from bombs dropped from the air, which have hit civilian residences and public institutions, including hospitals. In Darfur and Kordofan, efforts by both forces have focused on controlling cities, meaning that civilians have been caught in the midst of the fighting, often unable to flee. This has had disastrous consequences for civilians. Since the conflict began, roughly 4.2 million people have been newly displaced within Sudan with another 1 million displaced to neighbouring countries.¹ Moreover, at least 7,500 civilians have been killed, with actual numbers likely larger due to the impediments to reporting.²

¹ <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/dtm-sudan-weekly-displacement-snapshot-4>

² <https://acleddata.com/2023/09/08/sudan-situation-update-september-2023-deadly-reciprocal-offensives-for-strategic-locations-in-khartoum-and-darfur/>

In the midst of combat, civilians have been subjected to insecurity in their homes and as they attempted to flee. This has been exacerbated in the context of large-scale looting campaigns begun by the RSF and continued by opportunists taking advantage of the insecurity. Civilians have been ousted from their homes by the RSF, intending to loot neighbourhoods. In neighbourhoods where civilians have gathered together to resist such looting and oust the RSF from the area, including in al Halfaya and Omdurman in the Khartoum metropolitan area and Nyala in South Darfur, SIHA has received reports of the RSF opening fire with live ammunition targeting homes and public facilities in retaliation. This looting has left civilians with extremely limited resources, many are now displaced, making them vulnerable to exploitation and ongoing violence.

DESTRUCTION OF CRITICAL MEDICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The conflict has caused massive disruptions to access to healthcare and damage to the healthcare infrastructure of Sudan. These disruptions have taken many forms, including the displacement of medical professionals and insecurity during travel, preventing patients from reaching medical care. In Khartoum, the RSF has occupied hospitals, displacing patients and medical staff and disrupting patient access. Both the RSF and SAF have targeted hospitals aerially. While it has not been possible to confirm the responsible party for many of the airstrikes against hospitals, one bombardment just outside of the East Nile Hospital was confirmed to be perpetrated by the SAF,³ and it has also been confirmed that al Nau hospital in Omdurman was recently shelled by the RSF.⁴ These tactics have led to significant destruction of medical and healthcare infrastructure, effectively eliminating large swathes of the hospitals and clinics across Sudan.

Khartoum, which provided over 60% of the country's medical services, has had most of its hospitals and clinics closed indefinitely. Across the country, 70-80% of all hospitals are out of service.⁵ Those that remain open face critical shortages in medical devices and supplies, making treatment extremely difficult or impossible. This has been particularly challenging for time-sensitive medical specialties, including oncology, kidney treatment, and gastrointestinal disease treatment, the bulk of whose treatment facilities were located in Khartoum.

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65718968>

⁴ <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/sudan-shelling-hits-hospital/7302666.html>

⁵ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/other/un-raises-alarm-over-child-deaths-in-sudan-as-health-crisis-deepens/ar-AA1gX2XZ>

According to a statement by the emergency room of the Preparatory Committee of the Sudanese Biomedical Engineers' Union, patients with kidney failure across Sudan have faced unnecessary deaths due to the unavailability and lack of access to dialysis and standard medical treatments. In North Kordofan state, out of 224 Dialysis patients, 13 passed away in July because of the rationing of dialysis sessions, moving from twice weekly sessions to once a week.

As the war has continued, this destruction of medical infrastructure has affected the ability of civilians to seek healthcare in the face of increased disease. Over the past month, incidents of cholera and dengue fever have risen rapidly as state mechanisms to prevent their spread, particularly through water treatment and waste management, have weakened.⁶ The spread of these diseases, without adequate healthcare facilities will mean an increase in preventable deaths.

Interruptions to health services have also destroyed maternal and postnatal healthcare across the country. Due to the closure of medical facilities, and insecurity and violence on the roads and in neighbourhoods, pregnant women and those who recently gave birth have been unable to access medical support for childbirth or receive treatment after birth. This has meant that most have had to give birth at home or in insecure circumstances, without oversight by medical professionals and access to essential medical equipment, or in many cases, even items to maintain hygiene. This is an ongoing crisis, since there are an expected 333,000 women due to give birth by the end of the year in Sudan, many of them located in dangerous areas without adequate medical care.⁷

ETHNICALLY TARGETED VIOLENCE

Ethnically targeted violence has been undertaken by a number of armed groups over the course of the war. It has become increasingly normalized in Darfur, where the RSF, RSF-aligned Arabized armed groups, and non-Arabized armed groups have all undertaken violence against civilian populations. SIHA has received reports of women abducted by Masalit armed groups in al Geneina who described being separated and targeted by the colour of their skin, with lighter-skinned women subjected to more torture while the soldiers remarked that “we want to free the country from Arabs.”

⁶ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/other/sudan-medics-warn-that-cholera-and-dengue-fever-are-spreading/ar-AA1hkSFw>

⁷ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/health/other/un-raises-alarm-over-child-deaths-in-sudan-as-health-crisis-deepens/ar-AA1gX2XZ>

Meanwhile, the RSF has undertaken what has been termed by Reuters as “a rolling ethnic killing campaign” against Masalit civilians as soldiers went door to door over the course of May through June, systematically targeting Masalit civilians as it secured dominance in West Darfur and its capital al Geneina. This campaign included the targeting of the family of the Masalit Sultan, the killing of his brother, and culminated in the killing of the Governor of West Darfur, Khamis Abbakar under RSF custody. In the middle of this campaign, SIHA received reports that on the 11th of June, 39 civilian vehicles, mainly occupied by women and children, fleeing al Geneina city were intercepted and sent back by the RSF as the Hakamat (traditional women singers) chanted that “civilians should be left to die with the RSF when the Sudanese Military bombs the city.” Following the governor’s death, even more civilians left al Geneina, attempting to seek protection from a SAF base north of the city; however, they were intercepted by the RSF and massacred in large numbers.⁸

RAPE AND GANG RAPE

In the midst of the conflict, rape and gang rape have been highly prevalent, used by all armed parties as weapons against the civilian population. SIHA has received confirmed reports of 96 cases of rape and gang rape since the outbreak of the war. These reports are a vast undercounting of the level of sexual violence facing civilians, since sexual violence is stigmatized, and survivors are extremely reluctant to come forward and report for fear that information about the assaults would become widely known. The recurrence of reports of assaults conducted in the same manner indicates a clear pattern in which sexual assault is normalized and regularized across all combat areas.

The vast majority of rape and gang rape cases documented by SIHA were undertaken by the RSF, though in some cases, no clear perpetrator could be identified. Identifying perpetrators has been difficult for survivors since RSF soldiers are inconsistent in their use of uniforms, changing them periodically or carrying out military action in plain clothes. Nonetheless, survivors often identify them through their dialect, their interactions with other soldiers, and other markers of identification, with 73% of all survivors that SIHA has reached pointing to the RSF.

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-politics-darfur/>; Amnesty International, “Death Came to Our Home,” War Crimes and Civilian Suffering in Sudan,

While in May the vast majority of cases encountered were of individual rapes, as the war has progressed, reports of gang rapes have increased markedly and seem to have become more prevalent, making up a significant portion of reported sexual assaults. SIHA has noted the use of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) by parties to the conflict most frequently in Darfur and Khartoum. There have likely been fewer reports from Kordofan, as combat spread to the area later. Many of these cases occurred when armed parties, usually the RSF, came to homes or shelters for looting purposes or as part of neighbourhood raids, and raped the women and girls in their homes. Other cases came when civilians fled, with women separated from men in public and taken elsewhere to be raped.

TARGETING OF WOMEN AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Over the course of the war, security forces, particularly the RSF, have targeted human rights defenders and subjected them to violence. Early in the conflict, one defender reported that from the 19th of April until the 24th of April, she was being followed. Later, a armed militia members, presumed to be the RSF, broke into her family home and killed three male relatives, including her brother. She managed to escape before the perpetrators were able to get to her. Another reported weeks later that she had to flee her home in Nyala alongside her husband after the RSF forcefully entered their house and attacked them.

Over the past months, two human rights defenders, Khidir Suliman Abdelmajeed and Abdelkhalig Ibrahim Matar were killed; two others, Jad Elrub Abdelgadir and Hatim Abdullag Elfadel, were attacked, and another, Inaam Elnoor, was abducted and tortured. Others report receiving regular threats from the RSF. The targeting of women and human rights defenders extends to those doing work for civilian support outside of security oversight; this month, the RSF killed Jebra Emergency Room member Siham Hassan Mustafa in her home.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND FORCED MARRIAGES

While rape and gang rape have been the most prevalent SGBV crimes documented by SIHA, SIHA has been able to confirm at least one case of sexual exploitation and has heard multiple accounts of other incidents, both in peripheral areas of Khartoum state, including in al Izba and Gamayir in Omdurman, and in Darfur. Many women made financially vulnerable due to the conflict are being taken advantage of by RSF forces and

are forced to exchange sex for basic needs. This phenomenon is underreported, both due to the social stigma as well as the omnipresence of other forms of sexual violence, but as the humanitarian crisis in Sudan increases in scale, sexual exploitation will likely expand.

There are also reports of young girls being forced into marriages with RSF soldiers in Khartoum. These forced marriages may be a result of parents accepting the proposals for the dowry after the RSF has choked off families' means to access basic necessities and income, leaving the families dependent on dowry as the only way for them to survive. It may also be a result of families being too scared of violent reprisals from the RSF should they try to refuse the marriage. Three cases of forced marriage were reported to SIHA from Northern Khartoum in July. An eyewitness reported that a photographer was kidnapped from his home and marched at gunpoint to his studio to take wedding photos for the forced marriage of an RSF member and a young girl.

ABDUCTIONS

By early September, an initiative that works on social media platforms to circulate information about missing persons had confirmed the disappearance of at least 637 people. Thus far, 44 people have been found alive and 16 were found already dead. This leaves 577 individuals still missing in Sudan, 40 of which are women and girls. SIHA believes that these figures undercount women and girls since many families of abductees do not report or publicize these abductions out of fear of stigmatization of the missing person and her family – women and girls who go missing are generally assumed to have been raped and are stigmatized for this. SIHA has received a number of reports indicating a pattern of abduction of women and girls and their detention in circumstances in which they are at high risk of sexual and domestic slavery.

On the 2nd of July, an armed group raided a house in Halfaya in Khartoum, assaulted a family, and abducted two girls at gunpoint. The Imam at the mosque announced the crime and the community was able to mobilize immediately to bring the girls back. The civilians gathered at the missing girls' home, and within five hours an RSF personnel brought the girls back. It is a large and unusual success that the community was able to take action and start this campaign immediately on social media that ultimately resulted in the girls being returned. On the morning of July 7th, the Halfaya resistance committee reported that another woman had been kidnapped from the neighbourhood. These incidents are illustrative of a pattern of abductions that go beyond the official numbers and point to how regular abduction of women and girls has become.

A survivor who was released after being kidnapped and held by the RSF in the al Riyadh neighbourhood of Khartoum, was able to provide SIHA with a testimony. He confirmed

that women and children were held in the same place he was held. He reported that there were numerous cases of rape of women and girls held there and that some died while being held in captivity. He stated that many of the girls and women who were abducted were kidnapped from the al Riyadh, Arkawet, and al Manshiya neighbourhoods of Khartoum and some were kidnapped from hospitals.

SLAVERY

In many cases, women abducted by the RSF are kept in conditions that amount to slavery, expected to perform domestic labour for RSF soldiers and have sex against their will without the ability to leave. This has occurred in both Khartoum and Darfur. In a recent video shared by Sudanese activists, a woman states that women and girls are subjected to human rights violations in Um Al Qura and Shakwai in al Geneina in West Darfur, including sexual violence, torture and are being offered for sale by RSF members to other RSF members. SIHA received reports from eyewitnesses in Serf Umra and Kerdeig in North Darfur who observed girls bound and held in RSF vehicles.

At times, these women are not only taken into slavery but also sold as slaves. This has been reported multiple times, with most cases of women being sold taking place in Darfur. One eyewitness recounted an incident where women were bound and being held by the RSF and offered for sale in North Darfur. Another reported that he saw women bound in pick-up trucks in North Darfur. He said that it is known that these women are being sold in public spaces in al Fashir for 200,000 Sudanese Pounds. He mentioned that one of the locations where this occurs is a specific area near the Al Mina Al-Bari bus station.

CONCLUSIONS

It is critical to recognize that the African Union, under its Constitutive Act, has one of the most developed early-warning mechanisms to prevent conflict, with a legal framework that allows states to intervene if they fear the possibility of genocide or war crimes. It is time this mechanism was activated for the benefit of the Sudanese people.

The abhorrent acts undertaken during this war, including the conduct of war in areas populated by civilians and the targeting of civilian infrastructure, flagrantly contravenes the principles and provisions outlined in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). The destruction of critical medical infrastructure violates Article 16 of the ACHPR, while ethnically targeted violence contravenes Article 4. The conduct of war in civilian areas and the targeting of civilian infrastructure and property are violations of the Geneva Conventions and constitute war crimes. Furthermore, ethnically targeted

violence, as well as the use of mass rape and the other crimes outlined in this report, may well represent crimes against humanity.

The widespread occurrence of rape and gang rape during the conflict constitutes a grave violation of human rights and international law. These acts represent a clear breach of Article 4 of the ACHPR, which enshrines the inviolability of the entitlement of all human beings to respect for their lives and integrity. These acts violate Articles 2 and 3 of the Maputo Protocol. The perpetrators of these crimes must be held accountable for their actions, and justice must be served for the survivors.

Moreover, sexual exploitation, forced marriages, abductions, and slavery perpetuated against women and girls during this conflict also represent flagrant violations of fundamental human rights and international legal standards. Such actions not only undermine the dignity and autonomy of individuals but also contravene the principles outlined in the ACHPR and the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. Specifically, these acts violate Articles 2, 4, 5, and 6 of the ACHPR. They also run counter to the principles enshrined in the Maputo Protocol, including Articles 2, 4, 5, and 6.

The international community and Sudanese authorities must take immediate action to address these grave violations, hold the responsible parties accountable, and provide support and protection for survivors. These actions must be guided by the principles of gender equality, human rights, and justice to ensure a just and lasting peace for the people of Sudan, particularly women and girls who have borne the brunt of these atrocities. Moreover, Sudan must ratify the Maputo Protocol and be held accountable through this mechanism to assure the rights of civilians, especially during this bloody war.

Turning a blind eye to this harrowing conflict would cast a dark shadow on the credibility of the African Union. The AU must urgently intervene to uphold its values, fulfil its mandate, and satisfy the expectations of the African people.

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