



Crisis in Sudan: Impact on Civilians and Global Security Implications

Introduction

On 26 October, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) captured the city of El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur and the last major stronghold in Darfur, which had held out for over 500 days. Reports of mass atrocities in and around the newly captured city highlight once again the brutality of Sudan's civil war. During the United Nations Security Council emergency session on Thursday, 30 October 2025, the Sudanese representative described El Fasher as "**a new symbol of human tragedy**," where thousands of civilians are being killed, hospitals are destroyed, and women are subjected to horrific violence.

Since the conflict began on 15 April 2023, estimates indicate that **more than 150,000 people have been killed** and over 14 million displaced, representing one of the worst displacement crises in the world. Within NATO's 360-degree approach, it is urgent to consider the humanitarian situation in Sudan and its broader security implications for the region and NATO, as instability and conflict in fragile areas could generate new security threats, including increased migration flows, terrorism, and shifts in geopolitical influence.

This CIMIC Spotlight publication aims to shed light on the direct implications of Sudan's civil conflict on Human Security, Humanitarian Aid delivery, and possible effects on NATO's core tasks of Deterrence and Defence, Crisis Prevention and Management, and Cooperative Security. The analysis is based on open-source information and publicly available reports. It incorporates multiple perspectives and interpretations regarding the changes in Sudan and global security. As such, the views presented may reflect different opinions and evolving developments in international policy. The publication does not reflect the Alliance's opinion.

The origins of the conflict

Sudan's conflict began after Omar al-Bashir, who ruled as a dictator for nearly 30 years, was ousted. To shield himself from a coup, Bashir developed the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), transforming a Darfur-based Arab militia (the Janjaweed) into a formidable paramilitary capable of confronting the regular army. When mass protests led to the fall of Bashir's regime in early 2019, the army and RSF jointly took control of the state and formed a junta. They initially agreed to transfer power to civilians but later reversed their stance, retaking control in 2021. Under increasing pressure to restore civilian rule, the two forces then turned against each other, fighting over how and how quickly to integrate the RSF into the national army under a 2022 agreement. In April 2023, Sudan's fragile transition collapsed as fighting broke out in Khartoum between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Since 2003, the government has used Janjaweed militias during the Darfur conflict, who carried out mass killings and ethnic cleansing. These militias later evolved into the RSF, a formal paramilitary force with its own command and finances. This has created a divided security system and a culture of **impunity that continues to fuel violence**. Furthermore, external interventions and the support of international actors for Sudan's warring parties, each with its own strategic interests, have worsened the conflict.

Implications for civilians

The fall of El Fasher is likely to have significant impacts on the local civil environment. From the start of the conflict on 15 April 2023 until 24 October 2025, ACLED records nearly 400 incidents of violence targeting civilians in El Fasher and surrounding areas, resulting in over **1,400 reported deaths**. More than 55% of these incidents occurred in 2025.

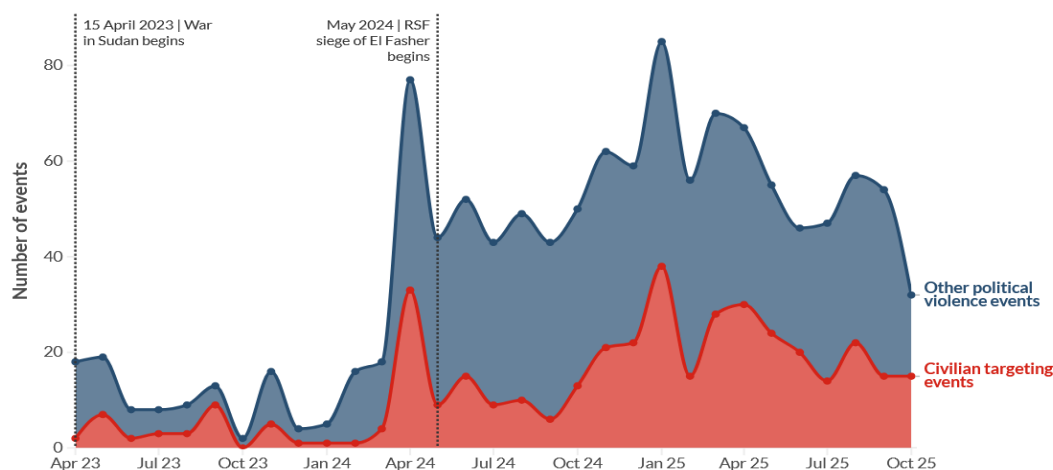
During the siege, the RSF encircled the city with sand berms that trapped civilians, and people attempting to flee were targeted and killed. Drawing on prior patterns, including RSF retaliatory attacks in al-Jazirah following the defection of senior RSF commander Abu Aqla Keikel to the SAF, there is a high likelihood of ethnic-based attacks in El Fasher, particularly against non-Arab groups such as the Zaghawa, whom the RSF accuses of backing the SAF and Darfur Joint Forces. "The risk of mass atrocities, ethnically targeted violence and further violations of international humanitarian law, including sexual violence, remains alarmingly high," Assistant Secretary-General for Africa Ms Pobee told the UN Security Council. "Despite commitments to protect civilians, the reality is that no one is safe in El Fasher. There is no safe passage for civilians to leave the city."

Since April 2024, over **3,922 security incidents** involving the use of artillery, airstrikes, and drone attacks were recorded, leading to the death and injury of 5,965 civilians. Additionally, more than 11.8 million people were forcibly displaced since the beginning of the conflict, including around **9.3 million IDPs** and returnees and around **2.5 million refugees and asylum seekers** outside Sudan, mainly in Chad, Egypt, and South Sudan. By November, Sudan was hosting more than 250,000 refugees, mainly from South Sudan and Ethiopia. The conflict has exacerbated existing poverty, hunger, and economic instability. Severe weather events, including floods and droughts, have further deteriorated the humanitarian situation. As a result, Sudan faces high levels of acute food insecurity, with some pockets of Famine (IPC Phase 5) emerging since August 2024.

Figure 1. Political Violence and Civilian targeting events in El Fasher, Darfur

Political violence in El Fasher

15 April 2023 - 23 October 2025*



*April 2023 events cover only the 15 - 30 April period. October 2025 events cover only the 1 - 23 October period.

Source: ACLED

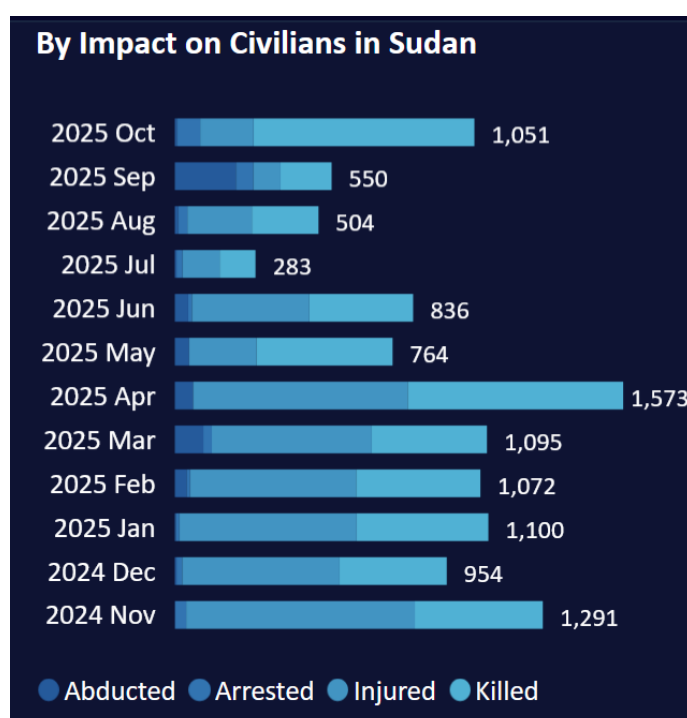
Implications for Humanitarian Aid

While humanitarian needs keep growing, humanitarian response has been continuously impeded by systemic obstructions, insecurity, harassment, attacks and now funding cuts. Despite this, aid workers, including local community responders, have continued to attempt to reach those in need, often at significant risk.

Since June 2024, 240 incidents impacting aid workers have been recorded. Alongside bureaucratic and administrative challenges, including continued delays in issuing necessary visas and travel permissions, these incidents severely impede humanitarian access. Aid workers, including local community responders, have been attacked, harassed, and even detained whilst trying to deliver aid to communities.

On top of this, both parties to the conflict continue to block or delay the entry of humanitarian assistance. In addition to targeted attacks, the continued use of explosive weaponry in populated areas continues to be a key source of risk to civilians and aid workers. During March, artillery fire was one of the most prominent risks humanitarians faced, particularly in Khartoum, Al-Fasher, and El-Obeid. The cumulative result is a patchwork of lifesaving but insufficient coverage that stabilizes some communities in the short term yet cannot substitute for sustained access, security guarantees, and a political resolution to enable recovery and resilience.

Figure 2. Impact on Civilian between November 2024 and October 2025



Source: INSO

Implications for Human Security and NATO

Despite shifting humanitarian priorities following the U.S. elections and heightened security concerns across Europe, NATO's 360-degree approach requires sustained, rigorous analysis of Sudan's conflict and its cascading effects.

The humanitarian toll remains severe: civilians are systematically targeted, including through siege tactics, ethnically motivated violence, sexual and gender-based violence, and the use of explosive weapons in populated areas, resulting in mass casualties, displacement, and the collapse of essential services. Humanitarian aid delivery is simultaneously constrained by bureaucratic obstruction, deliberate access denials, insecurity, and direct attacks on aid workers, resulting in critical coverage gaps amid escalating needs.

Funding shortfalls and **limited international attention** have deepened perceptions of neglect among Sudanese communities. As WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus observed, global attention has been “really low,” a dynamic some attribute in part to race; experts, including Michelle Gavin, further underline a perceived lack of geopolitical interest from Western states.

However, these dynamics have direct implications for NATO's comprehensive security posture. As stated in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept, the Alliance commits to: “Human security, including the protection of civilians and civilian harm mitigation” as “a central tenet of our approach to crisis prevention and management.” In Sudan, **civilians are both the primary targets and the primary victims**, and the erosion of humanitarian space undermines stability across the Red Sea–Sahel–North Africa. Regional instability is already translating into mass displacement toward Chad, Egypt, South Sudan, and onward routes to North Africa and the Mediterranean, heightening pressures on border management, reception systems, and social cohesion in partner and Allied-adjacent states.

Absent increased diplomatic support for humanitarian access, accountability efforts, and cross-border aid arrangements, the humanitarian catastrophe will deepen, proxy competition will harden, illicit markets (gold, arms, human smuggling) will expand. This is not only a profound human tragedy for the Sudanese people, but also a **driver of regional instability** with growing spillover effects that risk pressuring Allied partners and, ultimately, NATO's own territory through intensified migration flows, terrorism, and geopolitical shifts in influence.

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