

SNAPSHOT: CIVILIAN PROTECTION NEEDS
AND RESPONSES IN

SUDAN

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Background



Civilian protection needs are escalating rapidly across Sudan. The recent escalation of fighting between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) across Khartoum, Merowe, Darfur and other areas of the country has introduced new and rapidly exacerbated existing civilian protection concerns. Civilians are being exposed not only to the impacts of active fighting including gunfire, shelling, and unexploded ordnance (UXO), but also increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), displacement, child recruitment, and intercommunal mistrust and violence. The security gap caused by the ongoing fighting has also led to a spike in criminality and looting, with hospitals and other services raided of essential medicines and other life-saving resources. The escalating violence has also meant that pre-existing protection needs are becoming less localized – where there were hotspots of concern prior to April, these are rapidly generalizing across the country and impacting ever-greater numbers of civilians.

This is all occurring at a time when many had turned their attention from the need to provide a comprehensive, robust, and sustainable protection response. For example, despite efforts to solidify civilian leadership and the provision of safety and security by state duty-bearers in the wake of the drawdown of the United Nations-African Hybrid Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), Darfur was already seeing a steady decline in the safety and security civilians prior to April 2023. Dedicated mandates and resourcing for protection-focused actions had fast declined, despite ongoing and escalating needs.

The lack of external support has meant that much of the humanitarian and safety support for civilians is being coordinated and led by civilians themselves, who often lack the resources to meet escalating needs. Civilians are also stepping in to mediate ceasefires: “Community leaders and University lecturers in [location redacted] have mediated and the two parties agreed to extend ceasefire,” reported a local protection leader to our team amidst the ongoing escalation. A major gap between the protection

protection needs of civilians in Sudan, and the willingness and capacity of local and international actors (both donors and implementing agencies and organisations) to understand and respond to these concerns, was already present and is now rapidly growing.

This snapshot highlights ongoing protection needs and risks facing civilians in Sudan, as well as highlights the need for urgent responses to these needs. These responses must include dedicated resourcing for protection activities and programmes; they must go beyond monitoring to ensure action, including direct protection work by community and unarmed civilian actors; investment in community-based protection mechanisms; and recognition that to be sustainable, these protection responses must encompass all parts of the conflict cycle.

Methodology



This research draws on ongoing analysis of Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) protection teams in Khartoum and Darfur. In addition to 30 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) amid ongoing violence in April 2023, it builds on over 1000 KIIs conducted in 2022 and early 2023 with a range of stakeholders in Khartoum and Darfur, including political leaders, women, youth, and men in IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps and nomadic groups, across the course of NP program implementation. NP Sudan has a static presence in Khartoum, El Fashir, Kereinik, and Geneina, and has been working with communities to implement unarmed civilian protection strategies since 2021.



Funded by
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Geographic scope



Geneina

El Fashir

Khartoum

Kereinik

Civilian protection risks and needs in Sudan



The escalating violence in Sudan is exacerbating civilian protection needs across the country, particularly in areas directly impacted by active fighting including Khartoum and Darfur. Over 15 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance prior to the escalation in April 2023, and just 40% of funds were secured to meet those needs, including specifically related to protection.

These needs are escalating at a time when the capacity of local and international actors to respond has been reduced. The United Nations Integrated Transitional Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) lacks the dedicated Protection of Civilians (PoC) mandate and associated resourcing of its predecessor UNAMID. Meanwhile, UNITAMS' proposed Office of Civilian Protection and Rule of Law has fewer than 50 staff to cover human rights, child protection, Woman Peace and Security, and protection of civilians for the entire country. Major child and women's protection partners have had their funding reduced, resulting in closures of infrastructure such as Child Safe Spaces (CSS), particularly across Darfur. Though the centrality of protection to humanitarian programming in general is essential in every context, there is a continuing need for a dedicated protection response. It is in this context – this gap – that civilian protection risks and needs across the country continue to escalate.

Active violence and impacts on civilians

Since the April 2023 escalation, open violence has increased dramatically and civilians face significant and escalating risks to safety. There has been widespread and indiscriminate use of heavy weaponry including artillery, tanks, and aircraft in populated areas, causing widespread civilian death, injury and destruction of property. Civilian homes, businesses, and organisations have been targeted, with armed actors moving door-to-door and looting fuel and other resources. Civilians and humanitarians

have been directly attacked during these raids, with kidnapping and sexual assault reported. Hospitals have seen a marked increase in injuries and deaths to civilians, including children, and are rapidly running out of essential resources including medicine and blood stores to meet these needs. With airspace closed, opportunities and capacity to bring in additional supplies are severely limited. In addition, medical facilities have reported looting of warehouses of essential items. Access for humanitarian teams responding to immediate and life-threatening needs is [severely constrained](#), with teams prevented from moving through checkpoints to access patients and to retrieve bodies of those who have died. Civilians themselves are unable to move freely to access medical facilities and other essential life-saving services. Parties have also demonstrated an unwillingness to maintain agreed ceasefires which is also preventing civilians and humanitarians from responding to civilian harms. This kind of active fighting, particularly at times when civilians believe they are safer to move, places civilians at high risk of harm.

Essential goods access disruption and protection

With the deterioration of the political situation in Sudan and the escalation of conflict, economic pressures and disruption to essential infrastructure such as electricity are also having flow on protection impacts. Communication is essential for the dissemination of safety and humanitarian information, and intermittent access to electricity and network connection has disrupted the flow of information. In addition, amid staggering increases to the price of food [in 2022](#), many already struggled to meet their basic needs. Reports from IDP camps in Darfur suggest that as a result of the April escalation, prices have again doubled since the start of the month. In the aftermath of the death of three staff members in April clashes, World Food Programme has also temporarily suspended operations in North Darfur, placing further pressure on civilians already struggling. Even before April, this was resulting in increased looting and other attacks to warehouses, a situation now further exacerbated. This exacerbates risks present prior to the April escalation, when the effects of climate change on seasonal patterns was already placing pressure on farming and migration patterns and

agreements, restricting access to water resources, and leading to violent incidents in areas such as Galab/Kolgi (naming is disputed) over access to water.

Displacement and restricted movement

As the conflict has escalated, thousands have also been displaced from areas of active conflict. The [UN has reported](#) at least 20,000 people moving into neighbouring Chad, additional displacement to Ethiopia and Egypt, and many more Sudanese and South Sudanese nationals alike moving to South Sudan. It has been reported that there is limited to no humanitarian presence at border points, increasing risks to those seeking to relocate to safer areas. Internally, ongoing violence also continues to displace tens of thousands of people, many of whom were already displaced in earlier iterations of violence. This places further stress on already constrained support for displaced communities, internally and in neighbouring states. In some cases, movement is being compelled by armed actors; in one example in West Darfur, armed actors have gathered next to a large IDP camp and demanded residents leave the area. For these IDPs, there is no clear pathway to safety or to other shelter.

For many civilians, movement to safer areas has not been an option amid ongoing violence, broken ceasefire agreements, and movement increasingly restricted internally by armed actors. For example, in areas of North Darfur, it is reported that armed actors have surrounded towns and are restricting all movement.

Sexual and gender-based violence

When active violence increases, so too does sexual and gender-based violence against women and girls. Even prior to the escalation, one interlocutor described gender-based violence in the region as “off the charts, used as a weapon of attrition against communities”, particularly for those women and girls residing in IDP camps. In the wake of the escalation, incidents of SGBV have spiked, including in urban areas where armed conflict has provided a cover to increase the opportunity and lower the threshold for targeted SGBV. There have been widespread

reports of armed actors separating women and girls from other family members in order to perpetrate SGBV.

Even before the escalation, the capacity of women to seek accountability for the sexual and gender-based violence they experience was severely constrained by the significant challenges they face in reporting cases of violence to authorities. Survivors of violence report that authorities have required a male guardian, such as a husband or father, to accompany survivors to make an incident report. This requirement poses a significant barrier for women who may not have a male guardian or who may fear further violence if they report the incident with a male present. In addition, local leaders are informed and cases quickly become public knowledge throughout the community, resulting in stigma and ostracisation. This has resulted in a low reporting rate of violence against women. Even before the April 2023 escalation, there was little to no support for survivors (such as psycho-social services). This leaves women and girls with few options for responding to SGBV at a time when their risk exposure is rapidly increasing.

Intercommunal violence

Prior to the escalation in April 2023, intercommunal violence already presented a major civilian protection concern, particularly in Darfur. As political tensions have persisted amongst parties to the Juba Peace Agreement, these have been exploited and have played out in active fighting at the intercommunal level, with communities themselves bearing the brunt of physical and psychological harms associated with this violence. This acts in a feedback loop, as hostility and grievance against other groups becomes more deeply entrenched and accelerates cycles of violence. In the wake of the escalation, clashes between groups – particularly between nomadic and static farming communities – have increased and resulted in negative impacts on civilians. This is made more dangerous and insecure by widespread looting and distribution of small arms and light weapons to communities. In one example from West Darfur, communities reported that “young people...asked the police to

provide them with weapons to defend themselves, but the police refused which resulted in looting of the weapons store in the police headquarters. Once everyone received the guns, the clashes started.” This has included injury and death to civilians as well as an escalation in displacement because of ongoing violence.

Child protection

The recent escalation has occurred at a time when resources for the protection of children have reduced, despite increased child protection risks, even prior to April 2023. Amid the current violence, children are being [intentionally targeted for violence](#) (e.g. reports of children being directly shot), and increasing recruitment to armed forces.

Infrastructure such as child-friendly spaces, many resourced for decades, were unable to be continued by child protection actors due to recent reductions in funding. Shortly after well-established sites were closed in 2022, many sites were looted and no longer remain functional.



Urgent actions and recommendations



The protection needs of civilians across Sudan are urgent and escalating and require a comprehensive response. Some of these urgent responses are a matter of international humanitarian law, and basic respect for civilian life. Civilians are not a target. Parties to the conflict must adhere to international humanitarian law and its requirement to protect civilians. This includes an immediate stop to the use of explosive weaponry in areas populated by civilians, and the protection of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools.

An immediate cessation of hostilities, and the (re)commencement of an inclusive negotiation process that prioritises the protection of needs of civilians, is critical to a safe future for Sudan. In the absence of a comprehensive ceasefire, parties to the conflict must adhere to temporary ceasefire arrangements that aim to provide windows of time for civilians to move to safer areas. The terms (and potential risks) of these ceasefires must be clearly communicated to civilians in both digital and analogue modalities so that they can make informed decisions about their own movement and safety. Safe passage and access for humanitarian teams must be guaranteed by parties to the conflict so that emergency assistance can reach those who need it most.

More specifically, there are several actions and recommendations that must be implemented by international actors, including humanitarian organisations and donors, to address the gap that persists and that is growing between the protection needs and risks to civilians, and the responses currently available.



This includes an immediate stop to indiscriminate violence, the use of explosive weaponry in areas populated by civilians, intentional targeting of civilians, and the protection of civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools.

1. Scale up a proactive protection response

Monitoring harm to civilians is not enough. A proactive protection response not only observes and documents the harms and risks civilians face but must be able to respond directly and proactively to prevent threats from escalating as they emerge. There must be a dedicated protection response. This includes protective presence by international humanitarian actors, the protective accompaniment of at-risk populations to access services and increase mobility and safe passage. This is particularly critical given the current, deep mistrust of armed actors by the civilian population. Though all humanitarian actors have a responsibility to integrate the centrality of protection in their programming, this also requires a dedicated response by organisations with protection expertise (including those organisations focused on direct protection through unarmed civilian protection, SGBV, child protection and mine education and action). Refocusing on the presence and action of protection actors, alongside a scaled-up material aid response, is a necessary and urgent complement to existing material aid distributions, particularly considering impacts of the recent escalation.

2. Act now

Risks to civilians are present now and cannot wait for a slow response. Humanitarian actors need to immediately plan for a scaled-up mobilisation of funds, personnel, and resources to meet present and emerging needs of affected populations. This planning must centre leadership and coordination with local actors and civil society currently on the ground in Sudan, and focus first on how to strengthen their existing efforts with

direct funding, security support, and advocacy.

This planning must also encompass additional and ongoing support for those currently displaced, both internally and in neighbouring states. The scale up in Chad, South Sudan, Egypt, Ethiopia, and other areas needs to meet the specific and immediate needs of those recently displaced and requires dedicated resources above and beyond the responses to existing needs already in place in these locations. Information on these services, legal support, and government assistance needs to be clear and accessible to displaced populations.

3. Refocus on conflict-sensitive programming

All humanitarian actors must redouble their efforts to [integrate conflict sensitivity](#) – that is, ensuring that interventions do not exacerbate conflict conditions – in their programming and advocacy. Prior to the escalation in April, particularly in Darfur, humanitarian aid was almost exclusively directed toward IDPs, with nomadic communities sidelined from access. This is in part because nomadic communities are perceived as inaccessible or hostile to outside assistance, though with careful planning by humanitarian organisations, this need not be the case ([see Case Study on Tarshana](#)). Because some populations receive greater assistance than others, exclusion seeds discontent and conflict between communities. Holistic context and needs analyses that account for these dynamics are even more essential as the situation across Sudan deteriorates and creates more opportunity for violent conflict between different groups.

4. Invest in community-led protection mechanisms

Insufficient investment in community-led protection and peacebuilding prior to the withdrawal of international protection actors has meant that now, with the renewal of conflict, communities are under-resourced to implement their own protection and humanitarian response. With the promise of protection from duty bearers not only unmet but actively violated with the escalation in early April, and with international actors

evacuating staff across the country, humanitarian and protection response is being [led by civilians providing mutual aid and assistance where possible](#). One NP staff member worked with neighbours and friends to clean a pediatric clinic that had been looted and helped to manage incoming patients, enabling its continued use at this critical time. Local civilian-led groups in Darfur have [brokered temporary ceasefires](#) that have largely held, enabling civilian movement and access to aid.

Though the protection of civilians is ultimately the responsibility of duty-bearers, these responsibilities are not being met. It is essential to ensure that, given this context, communities have the resources and skills to protect themselves through direct response, de-escalation of potential violence, mediation of disputes, and proactive identification and response to risks through Early Warning Early Response (EWER) mechanisms. These strategies can make a real difference in strengthening civilian harm mitigation. A rapid upscaling of resourcing dedicated to community-led unarmed civilian protection can act to strengthen these capacities, particularly in the absence of state duty bearers and third-party protection forces.

RECOMMENDATIONS SUMMARY

