

Besieged areas in Sudan: Hunger, oppression and the obstruction of aid

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The conflict in Sudan, now in its third year, has displaced 12 million people and created the largest humanitarian crisis in the world today. The war has been characterized by mass atrocities, obstruction of international and local humanitarian actors, systematic sexual violence and the use of starvation as a weapon of war.

With the [fall of El Fasher to the RSF](#) in late October, mass atrocities against civilians are ongoing.

The international community, including the government of Canada, must act decisively to put pressure on all actors and external actors involved to stop the war.

They should use their leverage—based on diplomatic and trade relationships with external actors—to press for humanitarian access, accountability and protection of civilians. They should expand humanitarian funding for Sudan, prioritizing flexible funding for local responders.

On October 9, the [Canadian Civil Society Working Group on Sudan](#) convened a confidential briefing on Sudan's crisis, bringing together four expert panelists representing senior leadership in Sudanese feminist civil society, international humanitarian organizations and grassroots emergency response networks. All four are actively engaged in responding to the crisis.

This document summarizes information shared by the expert panelists.

The panelists shared first-hand information on:

1. Sudan's shifting conflict zones and political dynamics
2. Darfur and the siege of El Fasher
3. Kordofan and the siege of Kadugli and Dilling
4. The devastating toll for women and girls across Sudan
5. Challenges for humanitarian aid and actors
6. Geopolitical dimensions of the war
7. Key recommendations for the international community

For security reasons, the briefing was conducted under Chatham House Rule. Information shared should not be attributed to panelists or organizations. For follow up or to contact the panelists, email Amani Khalfan, co-chair of the working group: akhalfan@interpares.ca

Further resources: Canadian civil society has released several joint statements and demands. See: [64 civil society organizations call on Canada to respond to crisis in Sudan](#) (Dec. 11, 2024) and [11 civil society organizations call for end to crisis in western Sudan](#) (Sept. 12, 2025).

1. Sudan's shifting conflict zones and political dynamics

Since early 2025, the war's epicentre has shifted as the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) regained control of areas in central and northern Sudan, including Khartoum and Gezira states, and pushed the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) further to western Sudan. Fighting has displaced millions of civilians in Darfur and Kordofan, as the RSF and allies fight for to cement their control over these regions.

Blockades, starvation and violence have trapped hundreds of thousands more in El Fasher, Kadulgi and Dillinj.

Beyond “two generals”

The common narrative that Sudan's conflict is a civil war between the leaders of the SAF and the RSF is dangerously simplistic.

The conflict has become regionalized and internationalized. External actors that have a stake in the perpetuation of the conflict are providing financing, weapons and logistical support to fighting parties.

Countries implicated include the UAE, Russia, China, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Chad, Ethiopia, Libya and South Sudan, among others.

This external involvement has entrenched the conflict, making it also a proxy battlefield for regional and global powers. Any resolution must address these broader geopolitical dynamics.

New political formations threaten fragmentation

February 2025 saw the creation of an RSF-led political coalition, the [Sudan Foundation Alliance \(in Arabic, Tasees\)](#) that aims to establish itself as a governing entity. It includes the Sudan People's Liberation Movement–North, al-Hilu faction (SPLM-N).

Sudan's main warring parties are in a struggle for sovereignty. Their external legitimacy and control over humanitarian aid have become key aspects in the war, trapping local and international responders between rival demands. This is true weaponization of humanitarian aid.

“Sudan's crisis is neglected. I can't say it's forgotten. But what's happening is not reflected at the level of the international community and the media. This is why we face all these challenges now.”

2. Darfur and the siege of El Fasher

“For North Darfur, it’s an absolute blockage. We’re talking about crimes against humanitarians here. I want to stress that this humanitarian crisis could be stopped at any moment. The conflicting parties are deliberately employing bureaucratic and obstructive processes to deprive people of the life-saving aid they are desperate for.”

Strategic importance

Darfur, vastly rich in resources (gold, livestock, petroleum), has long been marginalized and militarized. El Fasher, capital of North Darfur and the last major city in Darfur not fully controlled by the RSF, is now the epicentre of the conflict. Multiple armed forces are operating.

The siege of El Fasher

RSF forces have [fully encircled El Fasher with a wall several metres high](#), leaving only a few controlled exit points. Civilians attempting to flee face extortion, sexual violence, abduction or execution at checkpoints. Those who escape to nearby towns like Tawila find little relief, as resources are scarce.

Humanitarian collapse

Hunger is described by local responders as “over-catastrophic.” Children die slowly from starvation and disease, while bombardments kill instantly. Small amounts of food are smuggled in on people’s backs, but this is negligible compared to the needs of hundreds of thousands. Those who risk smuggling in meager food and medicine face execution.

“We have a complete picture of actually using starvation as a weapon against the people”

Emergency response rooms (ERRs)

ERRs are grassroots mutual aid networks run by volunteers throughout Sudan. Their work recently earned them the 2025 [Right Livelihood Award](#), also known as the “Alternative Nobel,” but the scale of need far exceeds their capacity.

Despite immense risks, ERRs continue to operate—including in besieged areas—by:

- Running communal kitchens to feed civilians affected by the conflict.
- Providing basic clinical services.
- Organizing evacuations to safer areas like Tawila.

3. Kordofan and the siege of Kadugli and Dilling

"One of the things I find incredibly upsetting about South Kordofan is that it is a truly silent catastrophe"

South Kordofan has endured decades of conflict, particularly in the Nuba Mountains, leaving its population already deeply vulnerable.

- Kadugli (capital of South Kordofan) and Dilling have been under siege for months by the RSF and SPLM-N. Panelists estimate that 250,000 - 300,000 civilians are trapped.
- Civilians face starvation, cholera outbreaks and collapse of healthcare. Children bear the brunt.
- Many are surviving by eating leaves, grass, worms and tree bark.
- Farming across South Kordofan has largely ceased. Families cannot reach their fields because of road closures and armed groups.
- Prices of staples like sorghum have skyrocketed, with the SAF monopolizing supplies.

Humanitarian collapse

- Local markets have been destroyed, and supply chains severed. What is available is scarce and largely unaffordable, and liquidity has largely dried up.
- Food once smuggled in by camel or rickshaw is now blocked.
- Community kitchens have closed due to lack of supplies.
- Families flee on foot for weeks to reach the Nuba Mountains, often injured and destitute.

Crackdown on local and international responders

- SAF has arrested dozens of local aid workers and merchants attempting to smuggle food.
- Humanitarian aid is at a standstill. UN shipments trying to cross from el-Obeid (North Kordofan) into Kadugli are stopped by the RSF.
- In the only recorded delivery since May 2025, three UN trucks reached Kadugli and Dilling in September, after being stuck for months.
- Journalists, local responders and health workers have been targeted and silenced.
- Communications are restricted; Starlink devices are controlled by SAF officers.

4. The devastating toll on women and girls across Sudan

“Sudanese women and girls have proved to be resilient. And their resilience has been tested beyond human limits. We need to commit ourselves to hear their voices, and to address their needs and their protection.”

Women and girls throughout Sudan face intersecting vulnerabilities:

- Sexual violence, including rape, harassment and exploitation is systematically used as a weapon of war by all parties. Protection, justice or medical care are absent for survivors.
- War has displaced 25 per cent of the Sudanese population, depriving them of livelihoods and incomes. Millions of women are heading households in displacement areas.
- Even in so-called “safe zones” in eastern and central Sudan, food gaps and famine are expected. Women have limited access to sanitation, drinking water and food.
- Health systems have been targeted and have collapsed, leaving women without maternal care, reproductive health services or sanitary products.
- Education has been decimated, with schools destroyed or unsafe. Families often keep daughters at home for fear of violence. Forced marriage and child marriage has increased.
- Psychological trauma is widespread, with little access to mental health support.

Sudanese women-led organizations are leading responses by:

- Supporting community kitchens, distributing sanitary kits and offering psychosocial support and primary health services.
- Documenting gender-based violence.
- Supporting grassroots responses from a feminist perspective.

5. Challenges for humanitarian aid and actors

“We meet Sudan’s darkest hour with the lowest level of donor support since the war began.”

Obstruction and weaponization

- Humanitarian convoys are routinely blocked, looted, or attacked. Local responder groups are directly targeted. More than 35 aid workers have been killed so far in 2025.

- Both SAF and RSF use starvation as a weapon of war, preventing aid from reaching civilians.
- The [ALPS platform](#) was intended to address humanitarian access challenges at the diplomatic level but has not produced a tangible outcome in over a year.

Funding collapse

- International donor support has plummeted. The Sudan Humanitarian Response Fund is only 23 per cent funded.
- U.S. funding has ended and European contributions have declined, forcing programs to shut down.

Neutrality at risk

- Warring parties view control of aid as a tool of legitimacy.
- NGOs are caught between rival demands, undermining humanitarian neutrality.

Local responders as lifeline

- Small-scale cash transfer programs to local responders have proven an effective modality.
- ERRs and women-led groups are the backbone of survival strategies, but face harassment, detention and lack of resources.

“The humanitarian catastrophe is largely manufactured by the restriction and prevention of local responders and of international organizations to provide any meaningful assistance at any scale.”

6. Geopolitical dimensions of the war

“This will not be resolved unless there’s concerted diplomatic pressure not only on the warring parties themselves, but also their backers.”

Panelists underscored that external backers are prolonging the war.

- SAF is supported by remnants of the former Islamist regime, with backing from Iran, Turkey and Qatar.
- The UAE is supporting the RSF and is a party to the war, as acknowledged by the UN. However, the UAE, through its role in the [Quad](#) has positioned itself, and is treated by the international community, as an ally for peace.
- Other regional players, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Chad and Libya, play complex roles.

7. Key recommendations for the international community

“The international community [including Canada] can take a strong role in reviving humanitarian access negotiations and confronting the severity of the crisis. This is something that is far above and beyond the ability of local responders or international NGOs operating in this environment. This requires diplomatic level and minister-to-minister level engagement.”

Panelists converged on several urgent recommendations for the international community:

Diplomatic pressure on external backers

- The international community must put pressure on all states involved to stop the war. They should engage Turkey, Qatar, UAE and Egypt directly.
- Sudan’s armed groups are able to insulate themselves from outside pressure and listen only to stakeholders who are directly supporting them. However, other governments, including Canada, have leverage through their diplomatic and trade relationships with these states. They should use this leverage to press for humanitarian access and accountability.
- Governments should leverage their direct bilateral relationships with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Qatar, Turkey, Libya, Chad and South Sudan to make Sudan part of all broader negotiations (including trade) and political engagements.

Humanitarian access

- Immediate pressure on the actors and external actors in the war to open safe corridors into besieged cities, including air corridors from South Sudan to Kadugli.
- Pressure the UAE to compel RSF to allow aid into Darfur and Kordofan, secure roads and allow organizations to operate beyond Tawila.

Support for humanitarian responses

- Sustain and expand humanitarian funding for Sudan, and prioritize funding for local responders: ERRs, women-led groups, and grassroots initiatives.
- Expand flexible cash-based support models, which are well-documented models of supporting local responders for direct operations.

Protection of civilians

- Diplomatic efforts must make clear that using hunger as a weapon of war will lead to severe consequences. Diplomatic efforts should anchor on UN Resolution 2417, which prohibits starvation as a weapon of war.
- Demand accountability for attacks on civilians and aid workers and prioritize protection for women and girls.