

Besieged And Bombed Amid Famine, Hundreds Of Thousands Of IDPs Struggle To Survive In Darfur



12-21-2024 ~ *As the war between Sudan's security forces continues into its 21st month, casualties mount in North Darfur's*

besieged capital El Fasher, which has been cut off from food aid amid spreading famine while local markets are being bombed.

The lives of hundreds of thousands in the famine-struck Zamzam camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs) hang in the balance as the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have intensified attacks on North Darfur state's capital El Fasher.

Having [overrun the Sudanese Armed Forces \(SAF\) in the other four states of Darfur](#), the RSF has besieged this city since May to take the last army foothold in Sudan's western region. The RSF has nearly [completed its ethnic cleansing campaign in West Darfur](#).

While the RSF has been shelling its way into the city, the SAF has been making little effort to protect civilians. On the contrary, the army has resorted to indiscriminate aerial bombardment of densely populated civilian areas to target RSF troops, seemingly interested in only guarding its headquarters. It has thus caused the bulk of the casualties.

Caught up in the fighting between the two former allies whose internal power struggle hurled the country into a civil war since mid-April 2023, tens of thousands of civilians have since been killed in Sudan. Thousands have perished in El Fasher alone, said Saleh Mahmoud, president of the Darfur Bar Association (DBA).

Late on the night of Saturday, December 14, the RSF hit the city's central neighborhood Awlad Al-Reef with drone strikes, [killing 38 civilians](#) and wounding

several others. Doctors were forced to halt operations the previous day at the state's last functioning main hospital in the city after RSF drones fired four missiles at it, leaving beds with [debris from its damaged walls and ceilings](#).

Earlier, on December 11, the Zamzam camp on the southern outskirts of El Fasher suffered another round of heavy artillery fire. This set ablaze the shelters of several displaced people and [killed eight](#). Many more are injured and are unlikely to get medical attention. The field hospital of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) in the camp has not been functioning since December 2.

Patients—including those injured the previous day when the RSF started this latest spate of attacks on the camp by [killing over 10](#)—had “to run for their lives” along with the doctors treating them when shelling resumed that morning, [killing four more](#) and maiming over a dozen.

The “hospital is now empty, with the last three ICU patients—still dependent on oxygen—evacuated under dangerous conditions,” MSF [said](#) in a statement later that day, describing the situation as “a living nightmare for the displaced people in Zamzam camp.”

In the Shadow of the Darfur Civil War

This camp was established in 2003 at the start of the Darfur civil war, which by the end of the decade had displaced 2.5 million people and [claimed up to 300,000 lives from violence, hunger, and disease](#).

The [Janjaweed](#) militias created by the SAF during this war to commit atrocities—including mass killings, rapes, and burnings of villages—were coalesced later to form the RSF in 2013 under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo aka Hemedti. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, SAF's regional commander in Darfur during this war, took charge of the army later.

Burhan and Hemedti had become the closest confidants of dictator Omar al-Bashir, who had seized power in a coup in 1990. When the December Revolution—the mass pro-democracy protests that erupted at the end of 2018—forced the ouster of Bashir in April 2019, Burhan and Hemedti together formed a military junta.

Using the combined strength of their forces, they orchestrated a violent crackdown on the pro-democracy movement. The latter nevertheless continued

mass demonstrations until April 15, 2023, when the power struggle escalating within the junta between Burhan and Hemedti erupted into a war.

In the 20 months since, the ongoing war between the SAF and the RSF has forced [over 14 million people, nearly a third of Sudan's population](#), to flee from their homes, causing the world's largest displacement crisis.

After the RSF's attacks on El Fasher began this April, [nearly 350,000 were displaced only from this city and its surrounding localities](#). A bulk of them, along with many IDPs forced to flee from other nearby camps that had come under attack, flocked to the Zamzam camp for shelter. Its population rose from 350,000 before this war to a current estimate of 500,000 to 800,000.

This increase in the population of the already crowded camp dependent on humanitarian aid for survival made the conditions even more precarious, especially since May when it was cut off from food aid after the RSF laid siege on El Fasher.

Famine Declared

On August 1, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) [declared a famine](#) in the Zamzam camp. "This famine is fully man-made," [said](#) Catherine Russell, executive director of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Three days later, SAF warplanes [dropped two barrel bombs](#) on the camp's starving people, destroying 20 houses and injuring many, including children. Later in November, it [reportedly](#) set up defensive positions inside the camp to use its IDPs as a cover, inviting attacks on them by the RSF.

In the meantime, for nearly four months since the famine was declared in August, food trucks of the UN World Food Program (WFP) were unable to reach Zamzam. It was not [until late November](#) when the WFP's first convoy arrived at the camp. With the RSF shelling the camp since December, its food supply has been cut off once again.

"The majority of the camp's population—about 60-70 percent—are women, children, and the elderly," said Adam Rojal, spokesperson of the General Coordination of Darfur Displaced People and Refugees.

"Both warring parties are using this war as an opportunity to eliminate the

surviving witnesses of the war crimes” that the SAF and the militias that later went on to form the RSF had committed together during the Darfur civil war, he said.

Witnesses have provided “detailed accounts of mass murder, torture, rape, targeting of civilians, burning and pillaging of entire villages” of Darfur in the 2000s, the International Criminal Court’s chief prosecutor Karim Khan [told](#) the judges hearing the ongoing trial on December 11.

To “exterminate” these witnesses, both the SAF and the RSF have “weaponized starvation,” Rojal said, adding that people in more than 100 of the approximately 170 IDP camps in Darfur are suffering from hunger.

In its alert in August declaring famine in Zamzam, FEWS NET added, “It is possible [f]amine... is also ongoing in Abu Shouk and Al Salam IDP camps, but available evidence is limited and reduces the ability to confirm or deny this classification.” It went on to warn that famine was threatening to engulf “the rest of El Fasher.”

Bombardment of Markets Has Exasperated Food Shortage

In the four months since the siege on El Fasher began, the city has been fast hurtling toward famine. The RSF’s attacks continue to restrict food supply from outside and the SAF has been bombing the nearby rural market towns, further depleting the food availability.

One such town is Kabkabiya, about 180 kilometers to the west of El Fasher. Fearing an attack, the local leaders had [decided to close down its market](#). But the decision was implemented too late. On December 11, the [town’s weekly market day](#), SAF planes dropped eight bombs in the morning when residents of surrounding villages had crowded the place to buy essentials, destroying shops, killing over 100, and injuring several hundred others, including children.

SAF claimed it had destroyed a combat vehicle with its crew and “a truck carrying weapons and ammunition.” Another 45 people, [including over 12 children](#), were killed and more than 200 injured on December 4 when SAF bombarded the market in El Koma. This town, [hosting over 45,000 families displaced](#) mostly from El Fasher, has reportedly suffered [about 70 air raids which have killed hundreds](#), most of them in October and November. The market in Melit was also shut after a series of airstrikes, including on December 3, which [reportedly](#) killed seven

civilians.

International Institutions Fail the Sudanese People

“We are alarmed by the recent attacks on markets and civilian infrastructure in North Darfur,” the UN Human Rights Office Spokesperson [said](#) last Friday. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization (WHO), [called](#) the RSF’s attack on the state’s last main functioning hospital in El Fasher on Saturday as “deplorable.”

The UN’s resident and humanitarian coordinator in Sudan, Clementine Nkweta-Salami [is](#) “deeply concerned by reports of the indiscriminate shelling of Zamzam camp, health clinics, and shelters of displaced people.”

“They are all concerned, alarmed, shocked... But nobody does anything more than issuing statements, which merely describe the situation,” DBA President Mahmoud said, expressing a deep disappointment with the international institutions.

“The situation is well known. Journalists, activists, [and] social media users all describe it. What is expected of the UN is to take action to stop the war,” he said, explaining that nothing short of a deployment of joint force to stop the two sides from fighting can bring this war to a halt.

“African institutions do not have the will or the capacity to lead such a joint force,” he said with regret. And divided as it is between the U.S.-led NATO countries on one side and Russia and China on the other, “the UN Security Council has become incapable of even seriously discussing our situation, let alone reaching a unified position to stop this war.”

By Pavan Kulkarni

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Peoples Dispatch](#) / [Globetrotter News Service](#). Pavan Kulkarni is a journalist with Peoples Dispatch.

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