

Sudan conflict: Intensifying violence, systems collapse, and surging humanitarian needs



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KEY MESSAGES

- **9 months since the outbreak of fighting, the conflict continues to escalate.** Violence has spread to many parts of the country, including the Darfur states and greater Kordofan. On December 15th, the conflict reached Wad Madani, a city south of Khartoum, where many displaced people had been sheltering.
- **In conflict hotspots, populations face acute risks to safety and wellbeing.** With reports of insecurity restricting movement for some populations, households face severe protection needs and emergency levels of food insecurity, forcing many to make **dangerous trade-offs between immediate safety and access to basic survival needs.**
- **Humanitarian needs are also high outside of the areas caught in the frontlines.** Largescale internal displacement has disrupted livelihoods, strained the absorption capacity of critical services in hosting communities to the extent of systems collapse, and fueled the risk of disease outbreaks. With no end to the conflict in sight, needs are expected to continue rising in 2024.
- **Against a complex operating environment and limited funding, there is a need for innovative ways to identify and deliver assistance to people in need to stave off largescale loss of lives.** This should include both **high-level access negotiations** and integrating **mechanisms to better support and collaborate with frontline workers**, including local responders. If the current situation endures and the response remains curtailed, Sudan risks slipping into a forgotten crisis of catastrophic dimensions.

CONTEXT

Conflict erupted between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) in Khartoum on the 15th of April, triggering a guelling civil war.

Conflict and displacement are driving increasingly dire humanitarian needs among the affected population as critical services have largely collapsed and key infrastructure has been destroyed in conflict hotspots. Secondary impacts of the conflict, including disrupted harvests, sharp economic decline, and outpbreaks of various infectious diseases are further contributing to high risks for the population inside Sudan and in fragile neighbouring countries. 9 months into the war, heavy fighting continues in Khartoum and has been registered in multiple other states, including the Darfurs, Greater Kordofan, and now also Al Gezira state, signalling an intensification of conflict.

9 million

persons are estimated to be displaced by conflict inside Sudan, making Sudan the **world's largest internal displacement crisis** ([IOM 23 January 2024](#)).

17.7 million

persons are likely to face acutely food insecurity through February 2024, compared to **7.7 million** during the same season last year ([IPC December 2023](#)).

CONFLICT CONTINUES TO ESCALATE, INTENSIFYING NEEDS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

New frontlines signal the expansion and intensification of conflict

On the 15th of December, exactly 8 months since the start of the conflict in Khartoum, [fighting broke out](#) in the outskirts of the city of Wad Madani (Gezira State), spurring largescale displacement. According to the latest estimates, [over half a million people fled the region in the span of 3 weeks](#). On 16 and 17 December, [clashes also renewed](#) in war-torn Al Fasher (North Darfur State) and [Umm Shadida](#). These events happen against a continuous escalation of conflict in the country since April 15th and **signal an intensification and spread of fighting**.

Unprecedented displacement

To date, the conflict has driven [over 6 million](#) people into internal displacement, while [1.5 million](#) people have crossed international borders. These figures mark Sudan as **the world's largest internal displacement crisis**, and the trend shows [no sign of slowing](#). With the expansion of conflict into areas previously sheltering displaced populations, secondary and tertiary displacement is affecting an increasing number of people. Almost half of the people displaced from Wad Medani have reportedly been displaced for the second time.

Protection crisis

While displacement figures are extremely high, findings from the [REACH assessment of hard-to-reach areas in Darfur](#) suggest that some **people who want to leave remain trapped in conflict areas**, where access to key services, including markets and healthcare, is highly restricted. Reports from key informants on the situation in those areas echo the growing narrative of **a severe protection crisis**, with widespread [security concerns](#), including for instance a [sharp increases](#) in violence, sexual abuse, abduction, and [explosive hazards](#) and limited freedom of movement among the remaining population. **Meanwhile, protection concerns are increasingly reported in relatively stable areas** and [social tensions](#) appear to be growing in areas of displacement.

% of assessed hard-to-reach settlements where most people reportedly did not feel safe in the month prior to data collection (September 2023)

98%

Zalingei -
Central Darfur

94%

Nyala -
South Darfur

85%

West Darfur

Collapse of critical services

In addition, heavy fighting has damaged critical infrastructure, further impairing the functionality of services. Reportedly, 70-80% of hospitals in conflict-affected areas are no longer functioning [due to damage, displacement of staff and a lack of medicine and electricity](#). [Country-wide, an estimated 60-70% of people are now unable to access health services](#). Similarly, key trade routes and markets have been damaged. REACH's [Joint Market Monitoring Initiative](#) has found **low levels of market functionality, especially in the Darfur region, coupled with a sharp increase in the price of basic items, at a time of heavy reliance on markets**. With many people relying on mobile banking services, [largescale telecommunications disruptions](#) further [prevent people from accessing essential items](#). Moreover, damaged water infrastructure, in addition to regular power outages and limited access to bottled water, [further exacerbates the lack of access to safe water](#), increasing health risks. These are mere examples of key services that are on the brink of collapse due the conflict.

Most reported barriers to accessing healthcare in hard-to-reach settlements in Zalingei in Central Darfur and in Nyala in South Darfur (September 2023):

1. Lack of medical staff
2. Lack of medicine
3. No functioning health facilities
4. Travel limited by insecurity
5. Road closures

Heavy toll on displaced and hosting communities

The conditions of displaced populations are often dire, with signs of highly vulnerable persons arriving in reception areas inside Sudan and in neighbouring countries, where various actors [have raised the alarm](#) of the [worrying numbers of acutely malnourished and traumatised](#) people among the new arrivals.

Additional REACH data and analysis on the impact of the Sudan conflict on South Sudan can be found [here](#).



Most people displaced inside Sudan are staying in urban neighbourhoods or villages, seeking safety with host communities or in informal emergency shelters such as schools and makeshift infrastructure. However, the local capacity to support displaced people is wearing thin as displacement happens in a [context of unprecedented economic decline and a collapse of livelihoods and services](#), and as local frontline responders providing life-saving assistance, themselves belonging to affected communities, have limited resources and face security challenges.

COMPOUNDING SHOCKS AND ERODED RESILIENCE WILL LIKELY EXACERBATE NEEDS IN 2024

In summary, the onset of the conflict, less than a year ago, has catapulted Sudan into a country-wide humanitarian emergency. In line with the expansion and intensification of violence, needs have risen sharply not only in areas directly affected by active fighting, but also in areas that were indirectly affected by displacement and economic decline. The continuous spread of violence and the inability to come to a ceasefire, let alone a peace agreement, is a worrying signal for 2024.

A hunger disaster is looming

The concurrence of continued economic decline, price hikes, intensifying conflict, and displacement is driving **severe food insecurity** particularly in conflict hotspots. According to the [latest food security projection analysis](#), 17.7 million people (37% of the total population) are likely acutely food insecure and require urgent assistance through February 2024. **This number is more than twice as high as the same time last year and is atypical in the context of Sudan**, where food needs are traditionally at their lowest during this time of the year due to the availability of the harvest. The most severe food insecurity is projected in conflict-affected areas where humanitarian access is constrained.

The World Food Programme (WFP) [has warned](#) that, if the situation continues to impede regular access to affected communities, **the start of the traditional lean season in May is likely to initiate catastrophic hunger conditions**, which are characterised by significant acute malnutrition, starvation, and death.

Disease outbreaks contribute to high and immediate risk of preventable loss of life

The compounded impacts of conflict, displacement, and climatic shocks, including limited access to critical services, a lack of clean water and sufficient nutrition, overcrowding in areas of refuge, and flooding contribute to **outbreaks of infectious diseases that are less easy to get under control in the context of war**. As of 15 December, the number of cholera cases and associated deaths reportedly [continues to dramatically increase](#). The outbreak has spread into 9 of the country's 12 states, yet ongoing vaccination campaigns [struggle to keep up with the spread](#), particularly in conflict-affected areas where most health services [have ceased](#). **As such, the risk of largescale, preventable loss of life is high and rising**, which was also reiterated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in [a joint statement](#) issued on 18 October 2023.

Moreover, on 19 September, Save the Children warned the lack of access to health services will mean that close to [30,000 babies will likely be born without medical assistance in the next 3 months](#), which indicates significant risks to the life and long-term health of mothers and their babies in a country where maternal mortality was already [among the highest in the world](#) prior to the start of the conflict.

Coping mechanisms are eroding

After 9 months of war, figures suggest that many people are likely only able to maintain access to basic survival needs [through using negative coping mechanisms](#), including depletion of livelihoods assets, that erode their capacity to deal with future shocks. In the hard-to-reach assessment, key informants commonly reported that people remaining in [hard-to-reach settlements](#) were mostly relying on social connections to access income and food. **However, the capacity of communities to continue this support will likely diminish the longer insecurity and economic decline persist, particularly in the hardest-hit areas**. Ongoing displacement might further unravel communities' social fabric, leaving considerable holes in existing community support mechanisms while people on the move are also less likely to be able to fall back on their social networks for support.

As a result, a continuation of the current dynamics will likely mean that vulnerabilities will continue to increase. Light, seasonal shocks that would be, under normal circumstances, mitigated through traditional coping mechanisms **can have serious humanitarian consequences**.

Any further expansion of conflict and a further decrease of humanitarian access will likely have devastating consequences inside Sudan and in neighbouring countries. In the current context of the recent expansion of conflict in Gezira, this scenario is of particular concern considering the [ongoing cholera outbreaks](#) inside Gezira and neighbouring Gedarf and Sennar, which now host many of the people displaced from Wad Madani. Increased insecurity in these areas will exacerbate health risks.

AGAINST AN INCREASINGLY COMPLEX OPERATING ENVIRONMENT, MORE COLLABORATIVE AND FLEXIBLE WAYS OF AID DELIVERY ARE REQUIRED

While humanitarian actors have significantly increased the response in Sudan following the conflict, in line with the Revised Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), as of 15 November, only an estimated 4.9 million persons (out of the estimated 24.7 million people in need) [have been reached with some kind of assistance since April](#).

Insecurity is a key barrier to access conflict-affected communities

Insecurity remains a key barrier to access affected communities, particularly in conflict-affected areas in Khartoum, Omdurman, Bahri, Kordofan, and, recently, Gezira. Insecurity, including violence against humanitarian personnel and looting of assets, has thus far prevented the establishment of sustainable pathways that allow the type of regular assistance and emergency scale-up needed to ensure a lifeline to isolated communities. That said, **access negotiations have** in some instances **proven successful in enabling the delivery of much-needed assistance** to communities in or near the most affected areas in the last months.

% of assessed hard-to-reach settlements where people had reportedly not received any assistance in the month prior to data collection (September 2023)



However, insecurity is far from the only challenge

The response is curtailed by a multitude of factors beyond insecurity barriers, including significant bureaucratic and administrative impediments, high fuel prices, a lack of cash due to a decline in banking services, as well as communication barriers, damaged physical infrastructure, and a large funding gap. As of the end of December 2023, the response is [only 43% funded](#).

A combination of access advocacy and additional funding is needed

The plethora of different factors that challenges the humanitarian response in Sudan calls for a multi-tiered approach to aid. Against this backdrop of a shrinking operational space, **high-level access advocacy**, which has proven successful in enabling [cross-border delivery in this context](#), and **additional funding are both**

urgently needed to scale up the delivery of emergency assistance to prevent loss of life among affected communities.

Increased, meaningful support to locally-led initiatives is critically needed

In addition, there is growing consensus that the international response urgently needs to support, coordinate and collaborate with locally-led initiatives. Since the start of the crisis, local responders and community-based organisations, building upon a history of mutual aid in Sudan, have played a leading role in the humanitarian response, [rapidly organising themselves](#) to support communities, even in the most violent areas where the international response has been mostly absent.

Despite growing recognition of the critical role played by civil society in Sudan in reaching affected communities with life-saving assistance and [initial pledges made to substantiate this](#), **systemic change is needed to formalise and facilitate effective collaboration between external aid actors and locally-led initiatives.** Communications obstacles, security risks, lack of financial resources, and bureaucratic impediments, including lengthy procedures to request funding from international donors, [are among the main reported challenges local action](#).

In this light, there is a critical need for a clear strategy that recognises the importance of local action, enhancing the coordination and collaboration between local actors and international agencies and that allows flexible resources to support their critical work. This would strengthen the security and protection of local actors while ensuring a context sensitive approach to collaboration and adherence to humanitarian principles. Furthermore, the response would benefit from the long-term relationships and trust local initiatives have developed with communities, ensuring a participatory approach to the humanitarian response, in line with the [IASC commitments on accountability to affected populations](#).

ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).