



The Anatomy of Atrocity: A Century of Human Rights Violations in Sudan (2003–2025)

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Abstract

The paper examines the continuum of mass human rights violations in Sudan from the Darfur genocide (2003–2005) through the ongoing civil war (2023–2025). Drawing on reports from the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the analysis traces how a state-building failure and the institutionalization of militia violence produced cycles of atrocity crimes. The paper documents that between 2003 and 2008, approximately 300,000 civilians died in Darfur, with 2.7 million displaced. From April 2023 to December 2025, the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has killed over 40,000 people, displaced 14 million, and pushed 21.2 million people (45% of the population) into acute food insecurity, with famine confirmed in multiple locations. The paper argues that the RSF, as the direct successor to the Janjaweed, has operationalized genocide as a systematic tool of territorial control, while the SAF has committed war crimes through indiscriminate bombardment and the recruitment of child soldiers. International responses, including UN sanctions and ICC prosecutions, have proven insufficient to deter ongoing atrocities. The paper concludes that accountability mechanisms require urgent reform to address the structural impunity that has enabled successive Sudanese regimes to weaponize ethnic violence.

Keywords: Sudan, genocide, human rights violations, International Criminal Court, civil war, famine, displacement, child soldiers

Introduction

Since its independence in 1956, Sudan has endured more than four decades of military rule, two prolonged civil wars, and a genocide that killed an estimated 300,000 people in Darfur between 2003 and 2008. The collapse of the Omar al-Bashir regime in 2019 raised hopes for democratic transition, but the military coup of October 2021 and the subsequent civil war that erupted in April 2023 between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have produced a humanitarian catastrophe of staggering proportions. By December 2025, the UN had declared Sudan the world’s largest displacement and hunger crisis, with over 14 million people uprooted from their homes and famine confirmed in multiple locations. The United Nations Independent Fact-Finding Mission titled its 2025 report *War of Atrocities*, a descriptor that captures both the scale of violence and its systematic, ethnically targeted character.

The paper addresses three central questions. First, what are the historical origins of state-sponsored militia violence in Sudan, and how did the Janjaweed transform into the RSF? Second, what specific categories of international crimes, genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, have been documented in the Darfur genocide and the 2023–2025 civil war? Third, to what extent have international legal and political responses

(UN sanctions, ICC prosecutions, humanitarian interventions) succeeded in preventing or punishing these violations? The paper proceeds in four parts. Part I provides the historical background of Sudan's post-colonial state failure and the emergence of the Janjaweed. Part II examines the Darfur genocide (2003–2008) as a template for militia-based atrocity. Part III analyses the current civil war (2023–2025), focusing on displacement, famine, sexual violence, child soldier recruitment, and foreign interference. Part IV evaluates international responses and concludes with policy recommendations.

Historical Background: The Janjaweed and the Making of a Militia State

Sudan's postcolonial trajectory has been defined by a centralized, Arab-dominated state's systematic marginalization of non-Arab peripheries, particularly Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, and southern regions. Under Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019), the government armed and funded Arab pastoralist militias, collectively known as Janjaweed, to suppress rebellions by non-Arab groups such as the Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa. The Janjaweed were not a spontaneous phenomenon but a deliberate counterinsurgency instrument that the state used to depopulate rebel-supporting areas through scorched-earth tactics. The Holocaust Encyclopedia documents that "From 2003 to 2005, Sudanese forces, in cooperation with the Janjaweed, engaged in a scorched earth campaign in Darfur" that included "the intentional burning of homes, villages, and crops and the systematic destruction of food stores" (USHMM, 2025).

In 2013, al-Bashir formalized the Janjaweed into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under the command of Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"), institutionalizing militia violence as a parallel military structure. This decision proved fateful. When al-Bashir

Table 1: Key Indicators of the Darfur Genocide (2003–2008)

Indicator	Estimate	Source
Civilian deaths (2003–2008)	~300,000	USHMM (2025); UN estimates
Internally displaced persons	2.7 million	USHMM (2025)
Primary perpetrators	Sudanese government forces & Janjaweed	USHMM (2025)
Targeted ethnic groups	Fur, Masalit, Zaghawa	USHMM (2025)

was ousted in 2019, the RSF remained a powerful armed actor. In October 2021, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (SAF) and Hemedti (RSF) staged a joint military coup, dismantling the fragile civilian-led transitional government. Their alliance collapsed in April 2023 over disagreements about integrating the RSF into the national army, triggering a civil war that has since drawn in regional powers and produced a new wave of atrocity crimes (Frontline, 2025).

The Darfur Genocide (2003–2008): Template for Atrocity

The genocide in Darfur established a pattern that would be replicated two decades later. Between 2003 and 2008, armed conflict and targeted killings caused approximately 300,000 civilian deaths and displaced 2.7 million people (USHMM, 2025). The United Nations estimates that 300,000 people were killed in the conflict that began after a revolt in Darfur in 2003 (Legalbrief, 2026). Government and Janjaweed forces systematically depopulated land inhabited by Fur, Masalit, and Zaghawa communities through forced displacement and violent attacks on civilians, acts that the US Secretary of State termed genocide in 2004. The violence included aerial bombings of civilian areas, mass rape, and the deliberate obstruction of humanitarian aid (USHMM, 2025).

In 2008, ICC Chief Prosecutor Luis Ocampo alleged that al-Bashir bore individual criminal responsibility for genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes committed since 2003 in Darfur. The ICC issued an arrest warrant for al-Bashir in 2009 for war crimes and crimes against humanity and later added genocide to the charges (Legalbrief, 2026). Al-Bashir became the first sitting head of state ever indicted by the ICC, yet he remained in power for another decade without facing trial. The failure to execute the ICC warrant, due to non-cooperation by African Union member states and the UN Security Council's inability to enforce compliance, established a precedent of impunity that directly enabled future atrocities. As of 2025, al-Bashir remained in Sudanese detention, and ICC negotiations for his transfer were ongoing (Legalbrief, 2026).

Table 1 below summarises key indicators of the Darfur genocide.

ICC indictment of head of state	Omar al-Bashir (2009)	Legalbrief (2026)
Legal determination	Genocide (US, 2004); ICC charges (2009)	USHMM (2025); ICC

The 2023–2025 Civil War: A New Phase of Systematic Violence Civilian Casualties and the “War of Atrocities”

The civil war that began on 15 April 2023 between the SAF and RSF has produced civilian casualty figures that rival or exceed the Darfur genocide, though the conflict is far from over. By November 2025, clashes had killed more than 40,000 people and displaced over 14 million others, making Sudan one of the world’s worst humanitarian crises (Coptic Solidarity, 2025). The UN Human Rights Office documented at least 3,384 civilian deaths in the first half of 2025 alone, with approximately 70% of civilians killed in military operations in densely populated areas and at least 990 people summarily executed (UN, 2025). The UN Secretary General warned in November 2025 that the war was “spiraling out of control” (Coptic Solidarity, 2025).

The UN Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Sudan titled its 2025 report War of Atrocities, documenting that both parties detained individuals arbitrarily without charge or legal process, subjected them to torture and inhumane treatment, and committed large-scale

sexual violence (Altaghyeer, 2025). The report covered violations from the start of the conflict until August 2025, based on interviews with survivors in Sudan and refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

Displacement: The World’s Largest Crisis

Sudan is now the world’s largest displacement crisis. As of October 2025, approximately 14 million people had fled their homes, with nearly 12 million still displaced. This includes 7.3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 4.2 million refugees, asylum-seekers, and returnees who sought safety in neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2025). The UNHCR’s mid-year trends report identified Sudan as the largest displacement situation globally, with 13.4 million refugees, asylum-seekers, and IDPs (UNHCR, 2025). Pre-existing displacement compounds the crisis: 2.3 million Sudanese were already internally displaced before the conflict, and over 837,000 Sudanese refugees were in countries of asylum (UNHCR, 2025).

Table 2 provides displacement figures as of late 2025.

Table 2: Displacement in Sudan (2023–2025)

Category	Number	Source
Total forced to flee (since April 2023)	14 million	UNHCR (2025)
Currently displaced	~12 million	UNHCR (2025)
Internally displaced persons (IDPs)	7.3–10 million	UNHCR; IOM (2025)
Refugees, asylum-seekers, returnees in neighbouring countries	4.2 million	UNHCR (2025)
Sudanese displaced before 2023 conflict	2.3 million	UNHCR (2025)

Famine as a Weapon of War

The conflict has deliberately induced famine. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analysis of September 2025 confirmed that famine (IPC Phase 5) is occurring in El Fasher town (North Darfur) and the besieged town of Kadugli (South

Kordofan), with conditions expected to persist through January 2026 (IPC, 2025). At the peak of the lean season in September 2025, an estimated 21.2 million people, 45% of the population, faced high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), including

6.3 million in Emergency (IPC Phase 4) and 375,000 in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) (IPC, 2025).

The Famine Review Committee found that famine thresholds for food consumption, acute malnutrition, and mortality had been surpassed in El Fasher and Kadugli, towns largely cut off by conflict from commercial supplies and humanitarian assistance (UNICEF, FAO, WFP, 2025). Over 60% of localities covered by SMART surveys between January and July 2025 show Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates above 15%, with four localities in Greater Darfur showing prevalence around or above the 30% famine threshold (IPC, 2025).

Genocide Revisited: The RSF in Darfur (2023–2025)

Human Rights Watch documented in May 2024 that the RSF and its Arab allies committed genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity against ethnic Masalit and non-Arab communities in El Geneina, West Darfur, between April and November 2023. The UN estimated that 15,000 people were killed in El Geneina alone. Witnesses described the RSF rounding up and shooting men, women, and children who attempted to escape, and using derogatory racial slurs against Masalit groups, declaring that the land would become “the land of the Arabs” (HRW, 2024; BBC, 2024).

In February 2026, a UN probe concluded that the RSF’s capture of El Fasher (October 2025) bore “hallmarks that point to genocide.” The UN Fact-Finding Mission found that the RSF carried out mass killings of non-Arab communities (Zaghawa and Fur) following an 18-month siege where the RSF “imposed conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of non-Arab communities.” The report stated that “the scale, coordination, and public endorsement of the operation by senior RSF leadership demonstrate that the crimes committed in and around al-Fashir were not random excesses of war

... They formed part of a planned and organized operation that bears the defining characteristics of genocide” (UN Fact-Finding Mission, 2026).

Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

Sexual violence has been weaponized systematically. The UN Fact-Finding Mission found large-scale rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, amounting to crimes against

humanity, committed mainly by the RSF but also by the SAF, often targeting women and girls based on their combined gender and ethnicity (Altaghweer, 2025). The UN Human Rights Office recorded 368 conflict-related sexual violence incidents involving at least 521 victims as of May 2025; more than half were rapes, typically targeting displaced women and girls, and over 70% were attributed to the RSF (UN, 2025). The UNFPA reported that over 12.2 million people in Sudan, mostly women and girls, are at risk of gender-based violence, a figure that surged by 80% since the previous year and 350% since the war began (UNFPA, 2025).

Child Soldiers

Both the SAF and RSF have systematically recruited and used child soldiers in violation of international law. The US Department of State’s 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report found that “both the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have employed or recruited child soldiers, including children who were compulsorily recruited,” and that the government did not convict any traffickers or investigate officials for forced recruitment or use of child soldiers (USDOS, 2025).

Known on social media as “lion cubs” (“shibli” in Arabic), child soldiers have become a recruitment tool for both sides. UN investigations in 2023 and 2024 found the RSF “systematically recruited and used children in hostilities,” exploiting food shortages and displacement to bring poor or isolated children into combat ranks. UNICEF reported 16 cases of the rape of children under five, including the rape of four one-year-old babies (PAEMA, 2025).

Foreign Interference

Regional powers have fuelled the conflict. The UAE allegedly supplies the RSF with weapons, drones, and fuel via a network of brokers spanning Libya, Chad, Uganda, and the Central African Republic (DW, 2025; RUSI, 2025). Iran has supplied drones to the SAF in exchange for potential naval access on the Red Sea (AEI, 2025). Egypt has supported the SAF, while the UAE’s backing of the RSF is driven by interests in Nile waters, gold, agriculture, and Red Sea access (The East African, 2025). This external arming has prolonged the conflict and increased civilian harm.

Table 3 summarizes key human rights indicators from the 2023–2025 war.

Table 3: Human Rights Indicators from the Sudan Civil War (April 2023 – December 2025)

Indicator	Estimate	Source
Total conflict-related deaths	>40,000 (likely undercount)	Coptic Solidarity (2025)
Civilian deaths (first half 2025)	3,384 documented	UN Human Rights Office (2025)
Summary executions (first half 2025)	≥990	UN Human Rights Office (2025)

People forcibly displaced	14 million	UNHCR (2025)
People facing acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3+)	21.2 million (45% of population)	IPC (2025)
People in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5)	375,000	IPC (2025)
Famine-confirmed locations	El Fasher, Kadugli (IPC Phase 5)	IPC (2025)
Conflict-related sexual violence victims (documented, to May 2025)	≥521	UN Human Rights Office (2025)
People at risk of gender-based violence	12.2 million	UNFPA (2025)
Child soldiers used	Systematic by both SAF and RSF	USDOS (2025); UN reports
Children requiring humanitarian assistance	>15 million	PAEMA (2025)

International Responses: Sanctions, Courts, and Failure UN Security Council

The UN Security Council has maintained a sanctions regime on Darfur (Resolution 1591) since 2005, including targeted sanctions (asset freezes and travel bans) and an arms embargo. In September 2024, the Council renewed the 1591 regime until 12 September 2025 (S/RES/2750) (Security Council Report, 2025). However, the arms embargo applies only to Darfur, not to the rest of Sudan, and enforcement has been weak. In June 2024, the Council demanded that the RSF halt its siege of El Fasher (S/RES/2736), but the demand was ignored, and the city fell to the RSF in October 2025 (Security Council Report, 2025). The Council terminated the mandate of the UN Integrated Transition Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) in December 2023 (S/RES/2715), effectively removing a UN political presence at the worst possible moment (Security Council Report, 2025). The Security Council has been unable to agree on a nationwide arms embargo, with calls from US senators for such an extension remaining unimplemented as of 2025 (Booker & Rounds, 2025).

International Criminal Court

The ICC has maintained its Darfur investigation since the UN Security Council referred the situation in 2005. In 2025, the ICC convicted Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman (a Janjaweed leader) of war crimes and crimes against humanity, sentencing him to 20 years in prison, the first ICC conviction for Darfur atrocities (DW, 2025). Following the RSF's capture of El Fasher in October

2025, the ICC Prosecutor announced that the Office was “taking immediate steps regarding the alleged crimes in El Fasher to preserve and collect relevant evidence” (ICC, 2025).

However, the ICC has been unable to arrest al-Bashir or other senior figures for nearly two decades. As of 2025, al-Bashir remained in Sudanese detention, and negotiations for his transfer to The Hague were ongoing (Legalbrief, 2026). The ICC's dependence on state cooperation and the Security Council's refusal to enforce arrest warrants against sitting heads of state have severely limited its deterrent effect.

Humanitarian Response

Humanitarian access has been systematically blocked by both parties. The World Food Programme, FAO, and UNICEF reported in November 2025 that in areas cut off from assistance, famine had taken hold, and they called for an immediate end to hostilities and safe, unimpeded, and sustained humanitarian access (UNICEF et al., 2025). The closure of USAID in 2025 led to an 80% reduction in emergency food kitchens that had been a lifeline for civilians, drastically reducing humanitarian assistance (Frontline, 2025). The UNHCR reported that USD 1.8 billion was needed to support 4.8 million people who had fled Sudan to neighbouring countries, but only 17% of that funding had been made available (UNHCR, 2025).

Table 4 summarizes international response mechanisms and their limitations.

Table 4: International Responses to Sudan's Human Rights Crisis

Mechanism	Action Taken	Limitation
UN Security Council sanctions (1591 regime)	Arms embargo on Darfur; asset freezes; travel bans	Embargo excludes rest of Sudan; weak enforcement
UN Security Council resolutions	Demanded halt to El Fasher siege (S/RES/2736, 2024); called for Ramadan ceasefire (S/RES/2724, 2024)	RSF ignored both; Council took no enforcement action
ICC investigation	2005 referral; first conviction (Abd-Al-Rahman, 2025); ongoing evidence collection	No senior leaders in custody; no arrest of al-Bashir after 16 years
Humanitarian appeals	USD 1.8 billion requested for regional refugee response	Only 17% funded (UNHCR, 2025)
US determination	Genocide determination against RSF (2025)	No military or enforcement action taken

Discussion

The evidence presented above demonstrates a clear continuum: the Sudanese state outsourced violence to ethnic militias (Janjaweed, then RSF) as a strategy of counter-insurgency and territorial control. This strategy produced genocide in Darfur in 2003–2005 and again in 2023–2025. The RSF is not a breakaway faction but the direct institutional successor of the Janjaweed, and its leadership includes individuals who commanded genocidal campaigns two decades ago.

The failure of international accountability is striking. The ICC's arrest warrant for al-Bashir (2009) remains unexecuted. UN sanctions have not prevented the flow of arms from the UAE to the RSF or from Iran to the SAF. The UN Security Council, paralysed by geopolitical divisions, has been unable to impose a nationwide arms embargo or enforce its own resolutions demanding ceasefires. The termination of UNITAMS in December 2023 removed the UN's political mission precisely when it was most needed. Meanwhile, humanitarian agencies operate with a fraction of required funding, and famine, a weapon of war, is being used with impunity.

Several limitations of this analysis should be acknowledged. First, casualty figures are almost certainly undercounts, as conflict conditions prevent comprehensive documentation. Second, the paper focuses primarily on Darfur and the 2023–2025 civil war, with less attention to other conflict-affected regions (e.g., the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile). Third, the analysis of foreign interference

is limited by the availability of

open-source intelligence. Future research should examine the role of mercenary networks and private military companies more systematically.

Conclusions

Sudan's history of human rights violations is not a story of spontaneous ethnic hatred but of deliberate state policy. From 2003 to 2005, the al-Bashir regime armed the Janjaweed to commit genocide against non-Arab populations in Darfur, killing 300,000 and displacing 2.7 million. The ICC indicted al-Bashir for genocide in 2009, but impunity prevailed. In 2013, the regime institutionalized the Janjaweed as the RSF. When the civilian transition failed after the 2021 coup, the RSF and SAF turned on each other, unleashing a war that by late 2025 had killed over 40,000 people, displaced 14 million, and pushed 21.2 million into acute hunger.

The RSF has repeated the Darfur playbook in El Geneina, El Fasher, and elsewhere: systematic ethnic cleansing of Masalit, Zaghawa, and Fur communities; mass rape; summary executions; and the deliberate destruction of livelihoods. The SAF has responded with indiscriminate aerial bombardment and its own war crimes. Foreign powers, including the UAE and Iran, have supplied arms to both sides, prolonging the slaughter.

The international legal architecture has failed. The UN Security Council's sanctions are limited to Darfur and routinely violated. The ICC has secured only one conviction of a mid-level

commander while the architects of genocide remain free. Humanitarian appeals are grossly underfunded. Famine has been confirmed, yet access for aid is blocked.

If there is to be any prospect of accountability, three actions are urgently required: first, the UN Security Council must impose a mandatory, enforceable, nationwide arms embargo on Sudan, with monitoring mechanisms and sanctions for violators. Second, states party to the Rome Statute must cooperate to execute outstanding ICC arrest warrants, including against al-Bashir and senior RSF commanders. Third, humanitarian access must be prioritised as a

binding condition of any ceasefire negotiation. Without these measures, Sudan will remain what it has been for two decades: a laboratory for atrocity crimes conducted with impunity.

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