
LARGEST HUMANITARIAN CRISIS- AN OVERVIEW OF THE SUDAN EPISODE

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ABSTRACT

The armed conflict that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 has escalated into one of the largest humanitarian crises in the contemporary world. Triggered by a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the conflict has rapidly evolved beyond a political dispute into a sustained humanitarian emergency marked by mass displacement, civilian casualties, and widespread destruction of essential infrastructure. With over twelve million people forcibly displaced, Sudan presents a stark illustration of the human cost of prolonged internal armed conflict. This paper examines the Sudan crisis through a humanitarian and legal framework, situating the conflict within its historical, geographical, and political context. It traces the collapse of the post-2019 transitional arrangements and the subsequent militarisation of governance that culminated in open hostilities. The study further analyses the conflict under international humanitarian law, classifying it as a non-international armed conflict governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II. Persistent violations of core humanitarian principles—particularly distinction, proportionality, and humane treatment—are highlighted through documented incidents, including mass atrocities against displaced civilians. By evaluating the response of the United Nations and the broader international community, the paper underscores the urgent need for effective enforcement of humanitarian norms and accountability mechanisms. The Sudan episode ultimately exposes the limitations of existing international responses in preventing civilian suffering amid internal armed conflicts.

Key Words: - *Sudan Conflict, Humanitarian Crisis, International Humanitarian Law, Non-International Armed Conflict, Civilian Protection.*

Sudan's Humanitarian Emergency

On 15 April 2023, Sudan plunged into a severe humanitarian disaster as the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) clashed violently with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Having once operated jointly under General Omar al-Bashir's regime through 2019, these groups turned hostile. The fighting has displaced over 12 million people and killed thousands of non-combatants¹, creating both a massive human suffering scenario and a critical test for international humanitarian law (IHL) alongside human rights standards.

Geographical Features

Sudan's landscape comprises broad desert zones, savanna grasslands, and the expansive Nile River valley. SAF dominates eastern and northern territories including Khartoum, while RSF maintains strongholds across western regions. This rich ethnic, linguistic, and cultural mosaic intensifies challenges surrounding the violence and aid distribution efforts.

Conflict Background

Massive 2019 demonstrations demanding President Bashir's ouster—with protesters chanting "Leave, leave Bashir"—culminated in RSF and army intervention against him. An interim authority then emerged to balance civilian and military governance, raising hopes for democratic evolution.

That balance eroded rapidly. General Burhan's military faction assumed sole authority by 2021, nullifying civilian partnerships and triggering 2023 combat. Integration disputes between RSF² leader Hemedti and Burhan over RSF absorption into SAF erupted into warfare. Combat expanded from Khartoum into El Fasher and Darfur regions, unleashing systematic rape, killings, dismemberment, and robbery against civilians targeted for mere survival.

International Humanitarian Law Framework

¹'Sudan Crisis Explained' *UN Refugee Agency (USA for UNHCR)* (9 April 2025) <<https://www.unrefugees.org/news/sudan-crisis-explained/>> accessed 18 December 2025.

²'Sudanese Civil War (2023–present)' *Wikipedia* <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudanese_civil_war_\(2023%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudanese_civil_war_(2023%E2%80%93present))> accessed 18 December 2025.

IHL limits warfare consequences by protecting non-participants in hostilities and regulating combat techniques. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols establish civilian and vulnerable group safeguards during armed strife.

³This SAF-RSF struggle constitutes non-international armed conflict, activating Common Article 3 and Additional Protocol II with baseline humanitarian mandates for combatants. All parties must ensure humane conduct, explicitly barring violence against life, torture, or degrading treatment.

Field reports from Khartoum, Darfur, and El Fasher chronicle massacres, sexual assaults, population flight, and civilian asset destruction—demonstrating repeated IHL breaches. Combatants routinely ignore the distinction principle requiring civilian-combatant separation.

Homicide, rape, looting, and civilian infrastructure destruction qualify as potential war crimes under customary IHL, enabling individual prosecutions. These standards bind state forces and insurgents equally, regardless of Sudanese domestic classifications for SAF or RSF.

Zamzam Displacement Camp Atrocity

RSF launched a devastating assault on 10 April 2025 at Zamzam camp, executing over 1,500 civilians. Health facilities collapsed under casualty loads as children died hourly; women and minors suffered most severely. ⁴Attackers demolished numerous residences, trading centers, and clinics including the principal market area. UN human rights documentation verified pervasive executions, rapes, tortures, and disappearances, confirming gross IHL and human rights violations.

United Nations Response to Sudan

UN agencies spearhead dual humanitarian-legal responses. OCHA and UNHCR facilitate food, healthcare, housing, and security for millions of internal refugees, demanding combatants

³Samuel Nuoi, 'Legal Analysis: The Consequences of Violations of International Humanitarian Law in the Sudan Conflict' (SSRN, 15 October 2024) <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5004405> accessed 18 December 2025.

⁴"'They Slaughtered Us Like Animals': The Inside Story of How One of the Biggest Atrocities of the Sudan War Unfolded in Zamzam' *The Guardian* (7 August 2025) <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/aug/07/genocide-sudan-zamzam-camp-timeline>> accessed 18 December 2025.

provide unrestricted aid access.⁵UN monitoring tracks IHL/human rights abuses via records of civilian, medical, educational, and camp attacks. This evidence supports accountability systems including possible ICC transfers.

UN Security Council resolutions denounce civilian targeting and mandate ceasefires. Darfur precedents confirm international liability for state/non-state actors alike. UN initiatives reinforce combatants' duties to protect populations, enable relief operations, and prevent atrocities—noncompliance risks sanctions or ICC proceedings.

The Need for Accountability and Sustainable Protection

A lasting resolution to Sudan's humanitarian crisis cannot be achieved through relief operations alone. Accountability for violations of international humanitarian and human rights law is essential to deter future atrocities and restore faith in legal norms. Documentation of abuses by United Nations bodies and human rights organisations provides a critical foundation for future prosecutions, whether before international tribunals or domestic courts exercising universal jurisdiction. Without credible accountability mechanisms, cycles of impunity are likely to persist, perpetuating violence against civilian populations.

Equally important is the need for sustained international engagement aimed at strengthening civilian protection frameworks. This includes ensuring unhindered humanitarian access, reinforcing compliance with IHL obligations, and supporting inclusive political processes that prioritise civilian governance. The Sudan crisis serves as a cautionary example of how fragile transitions, when militarised, can collapse into humanitarian catastrophe.

In conclusion, Sudan's ongoing conflict exposes the stark gap between humanitarian law in theory and its application in practice. Addressing this crisis requires not only immediate humanitarian assistance but also long-term legal, political, and institutional commitments. Without decisive action to protect civilians and enforce accountability, Sudan risks enduring instability, deepening human suffering, and irreversible national fragmentation.

Conclusion

⁵'UN Urges War Crimes Probe into Sudan Attack That Killed over 1,000' *Daily Sabah* (18 December 2025) <<https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/un-urges-war-crimes-probe-into-sudan-attack-that-killed-over-1000>>accessed 18 December 2025.

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan illustrates the devastating consequences of internal armed conflict when political power struggles eclipse civilian protection. What began as a contest for military authority between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces has evolved into a large-scale humanitarian emergency, displacing millions and exposing civilians to systematic violence. The collapse of governance structures and the militarisation of political processes have rendered ordinary life untenable for large segments of the population.

From a legal standpoint, the conflict represents a profound breakdown in compliance with international humanitarian law. As a non-international armed conflict, it is governed by Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocol II, which establish minimum standards of humane treatment and civilian protection. Yet, widespread reports of killings, sexual violence, looting, and attacks on civilian infrastructure demonstrate persistent violations of these obligations. The deliberate targeting of displacement camps and medical facilities highlights the erosion of the principle of distinction, a cornerstone of humanitarian law.

The assault on the Zamzam displacement camp exemplifies the acute vulnerability of civilians in Sudan. Spaces intended to offer refuge have instead become sites of mass atrocity, underscoring the failure of warring parties to respect even the most basic humanitarian norms. Such conduct raises serious concerns of individual criminal responsibility and reinforces the necessity of accountability mechanisms under international law.

While the United Nations and humanitarian agencies have played a vital role in providing relief and documenting abuses, their efforts have been constrained by access restrictions, security challenges, and limited enforcement capacity. Repeated calls for ceasefires and civilian protection have had minimal deterrent effect, revealing the structural limitations of international responses in the absence of sustained political will.