

Proxy war for Sudan by regional powers has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis

Jean Shaoul**9 November 2025**

More than 80,000 people have fled el-Fasher, the capital of the Darfur region in western Sudan, and the surrounding areas since the city fell to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), one of the parties in Sudan's brutal civil war, on October 26 after an 18-month siege.

Most are fleeing on foot to Tawila, 60 kms to the north east. They have told of mass rape, abductions and streets lined with corpses. Satellite imagery shows streets awash with blood and strewn with bodies and earth markings indicative of mass graves. Many of the city's 250,000 residents remain unaccounted for.

The UN Human Rights Office said that RSF militia—born out of the notorious Janjaweed that devastated Darfur 20 years ago—carried out atrocities in el-Fasher, including “summary executions” of civilians trying to flee their attacks, “with indications of ethnic motivations for killings”, while Volker Turk, the UN high commissioner for human rights, said the “risk of further large-scale, ethnically motivated violations and atrocities in el-Fasher is mounting by the day.”

This has plunged the people of el-Fasher city and the refugees who have fled the city, many of whom are living out in the open, into a catastrophic situation, with the IPC global hunger watchdog declaring a famine. The UN and international aid agencies have warned that Sudan is in the midst of one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world and that 14 million children need vital assistance to survive, with health and livelihood conditions continuing to deteriorate.

Since the fighting started in April 2023, 40,000 people have been killed and at least 12.6 million have been displaced in what the UN's International Organization for Migration (IOM) has called the world's largest displacement crisis. Of these, around 3.3 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries including Chad, South Sudan and Egypt, overwhelming their slim resources. The vast majority remain inside Sudan, many in internally displaced people (IDP) camps.

Amnesty International said that the RSF had committed

crimes, including house-to-house killings and brutal attacks on civilians, in horrific conditions that exacerbate the suffering of the people and raise concerns about war crimes.

The RSF has now acceded to calls for a humanitarian ceasefire by the so-called Quad—comprised of the United States, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Saudi Arabia—in the face of the international outcry and general combat weariness.

The war between two former allies and military chiefs, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, leader of the Sovereign Council, head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and de facto ruler of the country, and his deputy Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the paramilitary RSF, began when vicious fighting broke out in April 2023. The intensely bitter conflict has been characterised on both sides by war crimes, including targeting civilians and blocking humanitarian aid.

It split Sudan, with the RSF, based in the Darfur region, seizing the west of the country, and the SAF taking the eastern part of the country, including the Red Sea Port Sudan. But al-Burhan's forces recaptured Khartoum in March this year, with Egyptian, Turkish, Iranian and other outside backing. Al-Burhan appointed Kamil Idris to head a government, the first civilian prime minister since the resignation of Abdalla Hamdok and the collapse of the Transitional Government in 2022, which had been put in place by the preemptive military coup backed by Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE after months-long mass demonstrations against longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir, in a bid to draw Sudan into their axis.

Both rival military factions, composed of sub-ethnic groups with competing economic interests, have the backing of various local militias and constantly shifting support from outside forces. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and Iran have backed al-Burhan and the SAF, while the UAE and Russia's mercenary Wagner Group have supported Dagalo and the RSF, mobilising regional allies in Libya, Chad and South Sudan, although more recently Russia has supported al-Burhan.

These Arab and African states are using Sudan's conflict

to gain power, influence and access to resources, gold, minerals and agricultural land in the war-torn country. As the gateway to the Sahara, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, Sudan's location, bordering on seven countries and its 800-kilometre coastline along the Red Sea that carries around 15 percent of world trade by volume, gives it enormous geostrategic importance.

Multiple sources have found evidence that the UAE has supplied the RSF with arms. Bulgaria had found mortar rounds exported to the UAE in Sudan. Similarly, parts supplied by the UK to the UAE have been found on the battlefield in Sudan, used by the RSF. Evidence has also emerged that the UAE has provided Dagalo and the RSF with weapons and mercenaries from Colombia, transported via Somalia's UAE-controlled base in Bosaso to Libya, Chad and elsewhere in the region to RSF-controlled territory.

While Abu Dhabi has denied supplying weapons to the RSF, its ties to Dagalo go back to when he helped recruit RSF fighters along with soldiers from the SAF to fight the war against the Houthis in Yemen. Dagalo, a multi-millionaire who chairs a vast array of companies with interests in gold, farming and construction, has also funnelled gold to the UAE. The UAE views him as the best way of combating the resurgent Islamists in the SAF, some associated with the regime of President Omar al-Bashir, which had the support of Qatar and Turkey and hosted militant Islamists, including Osama bin Laden.

But another member of the Quad, President Abdel Fattah el Sisi, Egypt's dictator and a close Washington ally, has close links with SAF leader al-Burhan, whose forces hold Port Sudan on the Red Sea near the entrance to the Suez Canal. He views the SAF and al-Burhan as a useful bulwark against any democratic resolution to the crisis in Sudan and by inference in Egypt, as well as a key ally against Ethiopia, whose recently inaugurated Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam he views as a potential threat to Egypt's water supply. To that end, he welcomed Sudan's SAF-installed Prime Minister Kamil Idris to a meeting at the Presidential Palace in August.

Earlier this year, as-Burhan signed an agreement with Moscow that would allow Russia to build and operate a naval base at Port Sudan that would host up to 300 Russian personnel and accommodate four warships, including nuclear-powered vessels, giving Russia a foothold in one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints—the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

The United Nations, faced with the imperialist powers' refusal to oppose the UAE—a crucial ally in their preparations for war against Iran in the resource-rich Middle

East and beyond—has failed to take any measures to enforce its declared arms embargo on Sudan. Weapons and technologies made in the US, UK, China, Russia and France have been identified as being used by the RSF.

The UN and aid agencies launched a \$6 billion appeal for humanitarian aid in February. As of last month the UN agencies had raised just \$1.13 billion, leaving millions without food, water, shelter, or medical care.

Now with the capture of el-Fasher and the SAF's withdrawal, the RSF controls all of Darfur's regional capitals and has direct access to trans-Saharan trade routes and the ability to impose blockades and extract resources.

This creates a de facto partition of the country, some 14 years after South Sudan seceded from Sudan, with the RSF under Dagalo controlling the west and south, and the SAF under al-Burhan, controlling the centre and east of the country, including the capital Khartoum, the riverine breadbasket and Port Sudan. Such a division would be unstable, with the foreign backers of the two military forces competing to entrench their position and influence in the region, leading to further fragmentation along ethnic and tribal lines as has happened in Libya and Somalia.

It would further destabilize a region already contending with multiple crises amid drought and famine: increasingly tense relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea that could escalate into war as Ethiopia pushes for Red Sea access; political tensions in South Sudan that could reignite civil war; Somalia's fragile political order; and, across the Red Sea, the civil war in Yemen between Houthi rebels and Saudi and UAE-backed forces.

A war in this region could disrupt maritime traffic, threaten Red Sea port infrastructure, and draw in outside powers already invested in the area—from Egypt, Sudan, Turkey and Russia to the Gulf monarchies and the navies of the US, Japan, China, France and Italy stationed in Djibouti.



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