UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

PROTECTION BRIEF
DARFUR REGION

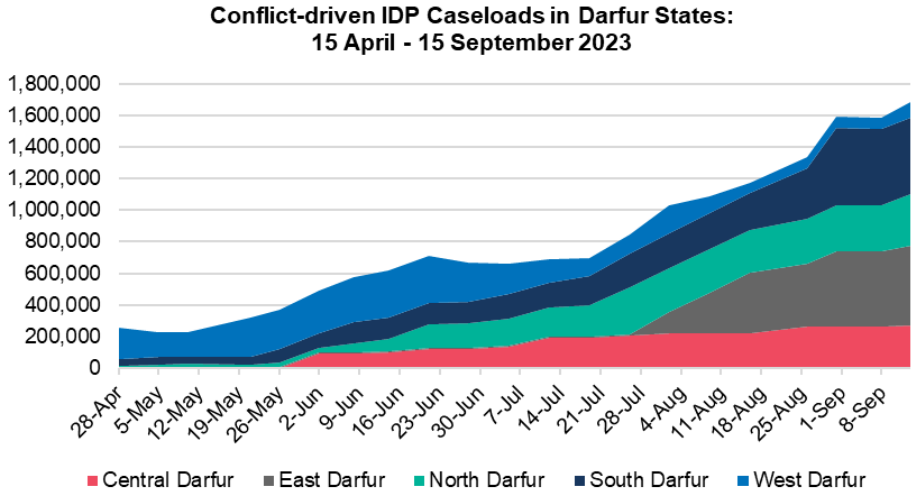
OCTOBER 2023

Assessment of malnutrition cases among refugee and Sudanese children in Al Lait, North Darfur, where the situation remains dire amid lack of humanitarian assistance and access. Photo: SAHARI

Key Trends & Figures

Over 470,250 people sought refuge from the conflict in countries neighbouring Darfur.[1] Since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April 2023, 1,086,510 people have fled Sudan to other countries in the region. Of this number, over 40% have fled to countries neighbouring Darfur and are likely to be predominately displaced from the Darfur States. Chad has received 420,834 refugees from Sudan, the largest refugee caseload of any neighbouring state. In addition, 18,545 people have sought safety in the Central African Republic (CAR). While the majority are Sudanese refugees (13,844), the figure also includes 4,701 CAR refugees compelled to return under adverse conditions. A further 30,250 Sudanese nationals have fled to South Sudan, predominately via Kosti in White Nile State, including people from Darfur who were initially displaced internally. Finally, 4,179 people have fled north to Libya.[2]

1.7 million newly displaced people sheltering in Darfur.[3] Prior to the outbreak of conflict, the Darfur States already had a combined population of about 3,095,246 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 185,174 refugees mainly from South Sudan, but also from CAR and Chad. Since the conflict erupted, many IDPs (and some refugees) have been re-displaced from camps and gathering sites while others have been newly displaced from their homes. Initially, the population of those displaced due to the current conflict was largest in West Darfur, where gathering sites that had hosted over 80,000 IDPs in El Geneina were razed to the ground over April and May. The IDP population in West Darfur peaked in mid-June 2023 at an estimated 301,055 people.



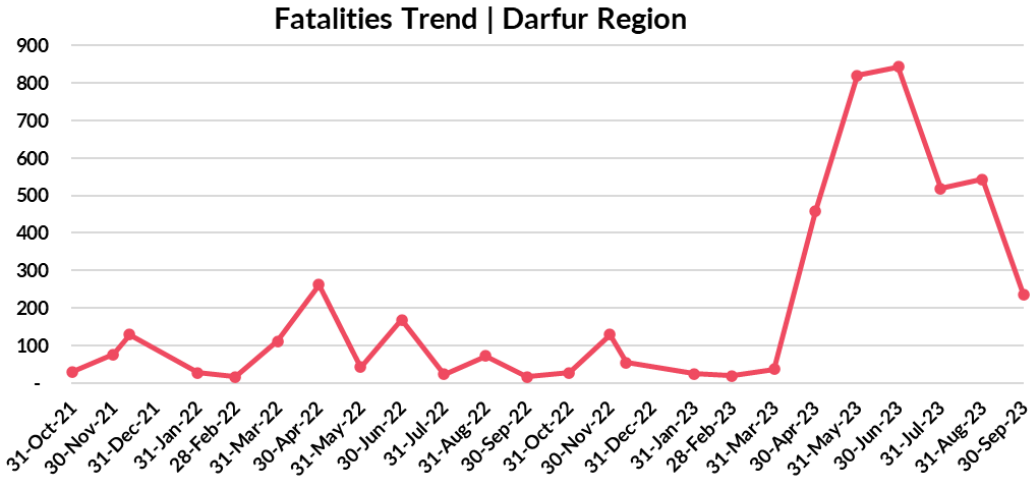
The killing of the Governor of West Darfur on 14 June precipitated a large-scale outflux of people from West Darfur into Chad[4] resulting in the number of internally displaced within the State dropping significantly. In parallel, the number of IDPs across East, South, North and Central Darfur has continued to rise unabated as armed clashes and other forms of insecurity have continued. The IDP population is now largest in the relatively stable State of East Darfur, which hosts over 500,000 IDPs including an estimated 317,870 people displaced from Khartoum and 127,620 people displaced from South Darfur, as well as

[1] *Data available at Situation Sudan situation (unhcr.org), accessed on 2 October 2023.*
[2] *Data concerning displacement to Libya extracted from DTM Sudan – Monthly Displacement Overview (01), accessed on 2 October 2023.*
[3] *Data concerning internal displacement extracted from regular reporting provided by IOM DTM. All reports and datasets are publicly available at Sudan | Displacement Tracking Matrix (iom.int), accessed on 2 October 2023.*
[4] *For reports on the death of the West Darfur Wali, see for example: Wali of West Darfur assassinated - Dabanga Radio TV Online (dabangasudan.org); UN in Sudan condemns killing of West Darfur governor, raises alarm over 'vortex of hate speech' | UN News.*

people from other areas. The overall number of IDPs is expected to grow, with ongoing reports of movements from Nyala and Zalingei into other parts of Darfur, while at the same time small-scale return movements are noted (e.g., back to Tawila in North Darfur).

So far, UNHCR has seen secondary displacements of refugees both within and from outside Darfur States, specifically from Khartoum, Nyala, West Kordofan and East Darfur to Al Lait locality in North Darfur totalling over 4,700 individuals to date. In East Darfur, a total of 1,763 households or 7,262 individuals (majority from Khartoum with 4,814 individuals) have been reported. In South Darfur due to the evolving security situation in Nyala town, urban refugees (the majority from CAR) have remotely reached out to UNHCR, reporting movements of refugees from Nyala town to safer areas in El Obeid, Kosti, Ed Daein, Madani and Port Sudan.

High number of civilians killed and injured across Darfur. While the true figure of civilians killed and injured is unknown, also due to access limitations for protection partners, an analysis of trends over time shows a significant spike in fatalities across Darfur[5] since the start of the conflict on April 15, as compared to period before. Reports received by the Protection Sector in Darfur suggest that over 3,900 persons may have been killed and over 8,400 injured between 15 April and the end of August 2023. Reports indicate that a number of those killed were targeted based on ethnicity or other affiliation[6].



At least 29 cities, towns and villages fully or partially destroyed across Darfur. A recurring characteristic of the fighting tin Darfur, both prior to and since 15 April, is the deliberate destruction of civilian residential areas. Destruction is accomplished through a combination of extensive looting, including even the doors and window frames from buildings, followed by burning of the remaining structures. West and South Darfur States have been particularly severely affected, with 13 locations in West Darfur and nine locations in South Darfur fully or partially destroyed. North Darfur and Central Darfur appear to have been less impacted to date, with five and two locations respectively reported to have been fully or partially destroyed.

Widespread destruction, damage, looting and/or occupation of public buildings, essential service provision facilities and other structures relied upon by the civilian population. Access constraints and telecommunications breakdowns have inhibited consistent reporting, and the data provided below is far from comprehensive; however, the

[5] *See for example various reports and statements from OHCHR including https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/06/comment-un-human-rights-spokesperson-ravina-shamdasani-raising, 24 June 2023, accessed 8 October 2023.*

[6] *See for example https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/06/comment-un-human-rights-spokeperson-ravina-shamdasani*

139 civilian objects known to have been destroyed, damaged, looted or occupied across Darfur to date provide an indication of the impacts of the widespread conflict on the civilian population. Affected civilian objects include:

16 governance structures, including line ministry offices

16 markets

14 law enforcement facilities, including police stations

21 health facilities, including hospitals and clinics

6 transport facilities, including airports

52 educational facilities, including schools

Operational Context Analysis

When conflict broke out at the national level in Sudan on 15 April 2023, clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) quickly ensued across North, South and Central Darfur, with intense fighting in and around the State capitals of El Fasher, Nyala and Zalingei.

In North Darfur, fighting around El Fasher quickly subsided but the town remains divided, and outlying localities such as Kutum and Tawila have borne the brunt of armed conflict. Particularly in Central and South Darfur, conflict gradually spread to other localities, with most now ostensibly under the control of the RSF and allied militias. Nyala, the capital city of South Darfur State has remained the epicentre and theatre of fighting between the SAF and the RSF for the control of the SAF 16th Brigade HQ. This resulted into a dire humanitarian situation with continued deterioration of essential services. All State hospitals, except for the Turkish hospital, are incapacitated with acute shortage of medical supplies and emergency medications, no electricity, and no drinking water. The Turkish hospital has also reported intermittent interruptions in service provision as well as severe shortage of medical supplies including medicines. Nyala town residents are fleeing in large numbers to other localities and parts of Darfur. Zalingei in Central Darfur has also seen intense recurrent clashes over several months and consequent extreme hardship for the remaining civilian population. Outside the State capital, the RSF has gained control of a number of localities while it has remained generally calm in the areas held by the Abdul Wahid bloc of the Sudanese Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A-AW) around the Jebbel Marras. In many parts of the State, the conflict has had a significant impact on public infrastructure and essential services, and rule of law and civilian protection mechanisms have largely collapsed.

In West Darfur, one of the States worst affected by the 2003-2005 conflict and still reeling from successive intercommunal conflicts over 2021 and 2022, local-level intercommunal fighting in Tendelti and Forobaranga in March and April respectively had already put the civilian population on edge. There was immediate recognition by political, tribal and other community leaders of the specific risks the broader conflict in Sudan would pose in West Darfur. Over the week following 15 April, many of those in positions of leadership, authority and influence worked hard to mitigate risks of conflict, including through establishing or reaffirming the role of structures and networks designed to mediate conflicts and other measures. When conflict finally erupted in El Geneina on 24 April, it was not a surprise. Within a month, the gathering sites inside El Geneina sheltering over 80,000 conflict induced IDPs had all been razed to the ground. The violence gradually affected other localities in the State such as Sirba, Foro Baranga and Habila.

Heavy air strikes led to destruction and civilian fatalities in Nyala town, South Darfur on 13 September. Photo: UNHCR

The Darfur region is characterized by the complex interplay of multiple layers of historical impacts of war, conquest and colonization, heightened and sharpened by the recurrent conflicts that have roiled the region since the mid-1980s.[7] A range of factors have shaped these conflicts, including: the longstanding deprivation of the Darfur region relative to its population size; competition for access to land and water between pastoralist groups, between sedentary farming groups and between pastoralists and farmers; and competition for political power between different tribes, tied to jurisdiction over territory.[8] While the driving factors for each individual conflict may differ, they are typically manifested in a predictable manner, with increasing organization of parties to the conflict along ethnic and tribal lines as the conflict progresses. This has been the case even when the political leadership of parties to the conflict has been ethnically diverse, as armed units on the ground have still tended to be organized according to the local community or tribal affiliation of its members.[9] As a result, conflict patterns have generally reinforced the tribalization of different political agendas and, in so doing, increased the risk of conflicts re-emerging. In multiple cases, these consequences have been exacerbated by government policies that effectively delegated the prosecution of military operations to tribal militias.[10] The history of the Darfur region demonstrates that even when the initial drivers of conflict are more broadly political rather than tribal, it is almost inevitable that the delegation of military operations to tribal militia groups will increase short and long-term risks of intercommunal violence.

Six months on from the outbreak of conflict, the political landscape of the Darfur region has been almost entirely upended with the region remaining contested by warring parties. Governance structures, including state authorities led by State-level governors (or *Walis*), Native Administrations, and other community and tribal leadership platforms and leaders, have been disrupted by widespread displacement, key personnel have been killed and, in some cases, replaced or reconstituted under contested conditions.

The governor of the Darfur region, Minni Minnawi, leader of a Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) signatory armed group and political movement (Sudan Liberation Movement – Minni Minnawi bloc, or SLM-MM), has led the engagement of SLM-MM in some clashes with RSF in North Darfur, alongside a second JPA signatory group, Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), for the explicit purpose of 'protecting civilians' as per the provisions of the Juba Peace Agreement. However, both groups, as well as the South Darfur-based Gathering of Sudanese Liberation Forces (GSLF), remain officially neutral in the broader conflict.

[7] *Etefa, T. 'Darfur: tracing the origins of the region's strife and suffering', 1 March 2020, [Darfur: tracing the origins of the region's strife and suffering (theconversation.com)].*
[8] *El-Gack, N. (2016). The Causes, consequences and implications of Darfur Conflict. In J. A. Jaworski (Ed.), Advances in Sociology Research (First ed., pp. 125-144). Nova Science Publishers.*
[9] *Smiles, J. The root causes of the Darfur conflict, contemp_v33_n1_a4.pdf (ufs.ac.za).*
[10] *Flint, J. and de Waal, A, Darfur: A Short History of a Long War (Zed Books, 2005).*

In contrast, SLM-AW has taken a more forward-leaning posture and now claims to control several areas around its traditional base in Jebel Marra, including localities in North, South and Central Darfur, again for the purpose of 'protecting civilians'. Notably, the Wali and Security Committee of North Darfur have officially placed Tawila locality under SLM-AW protection, which is important recognition of the authority and influence of this non-JPA signatory armed group over the population in this area. Meanwhile, SLM's Tambour bloc (SLM-Tambour) based in Central Darfur has explicitly declared an allegiance with SAF, as has Musa Hilal, the former leader of the Darfur Border Guards (a government-backed paramilitary force), who maintains a following in North Darfur.

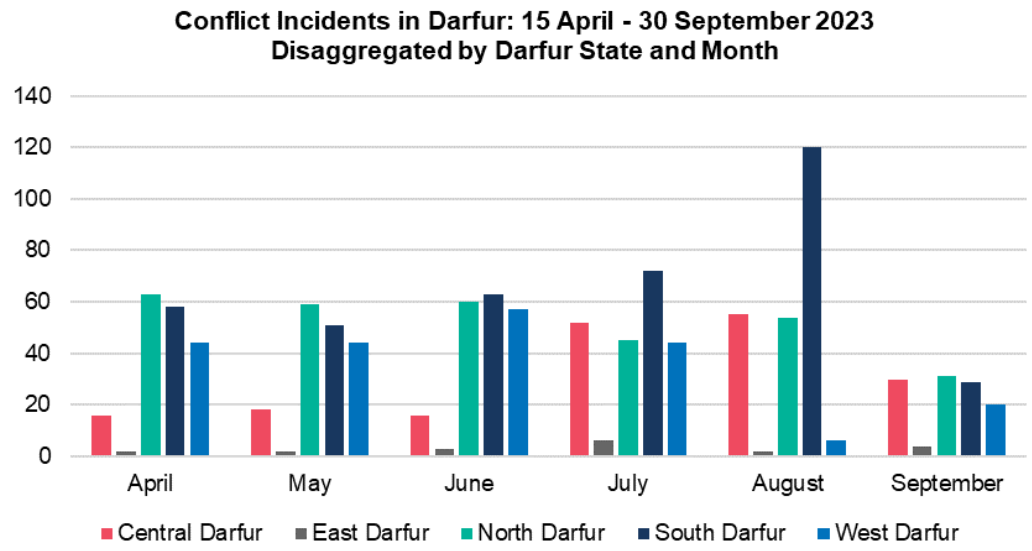
JPA signatory armed groups' claims of neutrality can perhaps be best understood as an effort to avoid escalation of the conflict and preserve space to operate as conflict dynamics shift and evolve across the region. However, it has sometimes drawn criticism from civilian populations feeling that more forceful intervention of JPA signatory armed groups may have enhanced their protection from the conflict.[11]

In parallel to organized armed groups and movements, and perhaps in a reflection of the formal positions of neutrality that many of those groups have taken in Darfur, there has been widespread arming of civilians following calls of various military leaders and the related emergence of less formalized armed groups and militia, as well as localized and informal self-defence groups and initiatives. For example, in Zalingei locality of Central Darfur, community members organized the digging of trenches and placement of barricades at the entry points to neighbourhoods to prevent looting shortly after the conflict broke out. Similarly, local communities in North Darfur have collaborated with security forces in charge of specific quarters of El Fasher town to secure the protection of their neighbourhoods more strongly. At other times, spontaneously created armed community self-defence forces have emerged in response to security risks, such as in Sirba locality of West Darfur, where Eringa tribesmen repelled attacks on Abu Suruj in July. Those attacks were initially spearheaded by Arab militias aligned with RSF, and later received RSF reinforcement.

Arab tribes and militia groups are often assumed to be aligned with RSF but in South Darfur intercommunal conflict between the Beni Halba and Salamat tribes has escalated due to the latter's refusal to publicly support RSF, drawing RSF-aligned fighters from both tribes back to South Darfur from Central Darfur to join the tribal conflict. **The mobilization of this range of different groups, many of them armed, with varying levels of formality and sometimes dramatically contrasting objectives heightens operating challenges for humanitarian actors by complicating deconfliction efforts, increasing the volatility of conflict dynamics, and exacerbating the risks of politicization of aid.**

Since the outbreak of the conflict, the Darfur region has been heavily affected by the direct impacts of the fighting, heightening security risks for civilians and the humanitarian actors attempting to reach them with lifesaving aid and protection services. In particular, the conflict-driven collapse of financial services systems and conflict-related damage to telecommunications infrastructure and lack of access to fuel, has impeded the utilization of key response modalities (such as cash assistance) as well as the provision of remote services, technical support and capacity building to partners. The chart below summarizes publicly available ACLED data on the prevalence of conflict incidents across the Darfur States since the beginning of the conflict. (Note that the rate of incident reporting for September may be artificially reduced due to lags in reporting.)

[11] *It is important to note that the deployment of a 'joint protection force' initially planned by the regional Wali Minni Minnawi faced many delays and in one case in West Darfur pulled back from attempting to reach a contested area after being ambushed by armed militia groups en route. The number of trained troops available to participate in this force is also low relative to the geographic and population size of the areas in which they aim to have a presence.*



While the data in the chart above accurately captures trends in conflict incidents, including the substantial increase in conflict incidents in South Darfur during intense fighting in Nyala in August, it is less able to demonstrate the prevailing and pervasive insecurity that persists across the Darfur region even in the absence of clashes between parties to the conflict or other aligned groups. I**t is this insecurity, as much as the ongoing conflict across the Darfur region, that has created significant and ongoing constraints on humanitarian access.** Parallel efforts to re-establish humanitarian access to the Darfur States have been pursued from the east (by road from Port Sudan via El Obeid and Kosti, through Ad Du'ayn in East Darfur, to Nyala in South Darfur and then to El Fasher in North Darfur) and from the west (by road from Adre in Chad to El Geneina in West Darfur, through to Zalingei in Central Darfur). Both access routes have proven challenging to operationalize and have been subject to unpredictable postponements and delays but nonetheless have enabled delivery of life saving aid to some key locations, generally in and around state capitals. UNHCR participated in the first interagency cross-border assessment missions in August, and successfully transported relief supplies across the border into West Darfur for distributions in early September.

Reaching conflict affected populations outside Darfur State capitals is likely to be exponentially more difficult than reaching those within them, due to the distances separating priority locations, the difficulty of achieving deconfliction with all relevant conflict actors, and the need to mitigate risks (opportunistic criminality targeting aid convoys and warehouses). All those factors are further complicated by the limited capacity of any actors engaged in governance functions (whether on a *de jure* or *de facto* basis) to extend their authority beyond the State capitals in which they are typically based.

These contextual challenges have compelled greater reliance on national and local organizations with pre-established presence in conflict affected areas, as well as community-based networks and other structures that were either previously supported by humanitarian actors or developed organically as part of communities' responses to the conflict. That trend is likely to continue. While local actors are often extremely well positioned to understand needs and identify solutions to logistical barriers, they are also inevitably more intertwined with and affected by local and regional political and conflict dynamics. Ultimately, the course of the conflict in Darfur will be heavily influenced by the outcome of the fighting that continues to rage in Khartoum.

UNHCR and protection partners undertaking a needs assessment for newly displaced individuals in Abu Shouk camp, North Darfur, fleeing Kutum and Tawila, in July 2023. Photo: UNHCR

Protection Risks and Incidents

Severe protection risks face civilian populations including refugees and IDPs across Darfur, ranging from the deliberate targeting of civilian areas and objects by parties to the conflict to ethnically targeted individual killings, conflict related sexual violence, arbitrary detention, deliberate efforts to block or impede those attempting to flee the conflict and depriving those who have fled of the humanitarian aid that they need. Many unfolding incidents reflect the failure of parties to the conflict to adhere to their obligations under international humanitarian law, despite their stated commitment to those obligations, including in the *Jeddah Declaration*.[12] These risks are immeasurably compounded by rampant criminality and a prevailing atmosphere of impunity, reflecting the collapse of justice mechanisms across many areas in the Darfur region.

Intense fighting in civilian residential areas including use of heavy weaponry. SAF and RSF bases are typically located inside or adjacent to residential areas. While these bases are legitimate military targets for parties to the conflict, those parties are nonetheless required to abide by the principle of precaution and proportionality and take all feasible measures to protect civilian populations under their control from the dangers arising from military operations. There are numerous examples of the parties' failure to abide by this principle. For example, on 22 June, fighting between RSF and SAF to achieve control over the SAF base in Zalingei, Central Darfur, resulted in the shelling of an adjacent girls' school causing the deaths of five children and the wounding of nine others according to reports received by UNHCR and partners from affected people in the area. Between 20 and 24 June in South Darfur, heavy clashes between RSF and SAF that centred on the SAF base in Nyala town led to the deaths of at least nine civilians in adjacent residential areas affected by mortars and stray bullets, also according to reports received by UNHCR and partners from affected people in the area. The use of heavy artillery in densely populated areas has been regularly reported, and most recently air strikes were conducted in Nyala impacting residential areas as well.

Destruction of civilian infrastructure necessary to the survival of the civilian population. In El Geneina, water points relied upon by the civilian population, including those from different ethnic backgrounds, were reportedly deliberately destroyed or rendered non-functional by armed groups and militias aligned with different parties to the conflict, including at least four bore holes. Health care facilities serving different

[12] *The Jeddah Declaration was signed by parties to the conflict on 11 May 2023.*

communities were occupied, damaged and/or destroyed, including El Geneina Hospital and Al Naseem Hospital. Reports suggested that medical staff attempting to operate *ad hoc* clinics in private residences after the hospitals in El Geneina were rendered non-functional were also deliberately targeted for attack. Zalingei Hospital in Central Darfur has been targeted for looting and related damage on multiple occasions, depriving residents of both Zalengei and surrounding areas of access to the only nearby referral hospital. Health facilities in both North and South Darfur have also been reported damaged and looted because of the conflict, including hospitals and smaller health facilities in some of the IDP camps. In other areas of Darfur region, where entire neighbourhoods or settlements have been burnt to the ground (including at least 13 locations in West Darfur, nine in South Darfur, five in North Darfur and two in Central Darfur), it is also extremely likely that civilian infrastructure has been destroyed or severely damaged; however, the precise impacts remain difficult to verify where conflict is ongoing and/or humanitarian access remains constrained.

Indiscriminate and targeted conflict impacts on IDP camps and gathering sites. In several instances, IDP camps and gathering sites sheltering populations already displaced because of prior conflicts have been impacted by the conflict. In some cases, those impacts appear to result from indiscriminate shooting or shelling, such as when eight IDPs in Otash IDP camp in South Darfur were killed because of heavy shelling on 23 June. Over 200 IDPs across three IDP camps in Central Darfur were reportedly killed due to intense fighting on 6 September. In other gravely concerning cases, IDP sites appear to have been deliberately targeted by parties to the conflict and/or by armed groups operating in alignment with them. Kassab IDP camp in Kutum, North Darfur was reportedly destroyed and its entire population, approximately 22,000 individuals, secondarily displaced following an attack on the camp on 3 June. Tawila town in North Darfur was also largely destroyed over successive attacks taking place between 15 to 19 June. This led to the (secondary) displacement of thousands of IDPs, forcing some to shelter in relatively unsafe villages prone to militia attack and banditry. A particularly egregious example of this deliberate targeting is the razing of all 86 IDP gathering sites in El Geneina town in the first month of the conflict. IDPs affected by the burning down of the gathering sites reported being told to 'get out' of El Geneina. In early June, during clashes in North Darfur, Kassab IDP camp was reportedly directly targeted by RSF and aligned Arab militias, resulting in the deaths of 54 IDPs from the camp. Later, on 15 September, Hasahisa IDP camp was attacked, resulting in the deaths of three IDPs and injuries to four others. By that point, the camp had been besieged by RSF, leaving the injured IDPs with no means of accessing medical treatment outside the camp. The targeting of IDPs has, in some instances, reflected the attribution to them of affiliation with a party to the conflict. For example, on 16 June, 20 IDP men and youth from El Salam IDP camp in South Darfur were reportedly arbitrarily detained by RSF while travelling between the camp and Nyala town. Reports indicated that the detainees were tied up, beaten, intimidated and coerced into 'admitting' to spying for SAF, despite attempting to explain that they had been travelling to Nyala only to purchase basic commodities and access medical services.

Constraints on civilians fleeing areas of armed conflict. Those attempting to escape from areas of armed conflict across Darfur have frequently reported facing barriers to doing so, including checkpoints on key routes as well as risks of criminality and intimidation by armed persons. In June, following the attack on Tawila in North Darfur, armed men engaged in looting and other harassment of those attempting to flee descended upon the road between Tawila and El Fasher. As a result, only an estimated one in three of those displaced from Tawila managed to reach El Fasher, with the remainder displacing to other locations within Tawila locality where they had reduced access to life saving services and assistance. Also in June, those seeking to flee the violence in El Geneina reportedly faced multiple checkpoints on the road between El Geneina and the Chadian border, at which men of 'fighting age' were ethnically profiled and granted or denied passage, based on tribal membership. Many attempting the journey faced looting of their belongings, while others were physically assaulted or killed. In July, Zalingei was reportedly surrounded by RSF and allied militias, and an estimated 50 irregular checkpoints were reported to be operating along the Zalingei-Nyala Road. These measures severely impeded civilian movement out of Zalingei despite many wishing to escape the widespread looting and ongoing conflict. In the same month, residents of Habila who were attempting to escape to

Chad in the lead-up to the attacks on the town over 16-17 July reportedly faced aggressive behaviour from members of the Arab *damras* along the route between Habila town and Chad. This included imposition of 'fines' and confiscation of donkey carts and other personal property, raising the costs of flight substantially and forcing households to prioritize the flight of those family members they deemed most at risk in the event of conflict (typically men). Also in July, both RSF and aligned militia groups reportedly blocked people from Sirba attempting to flee across the border into Chad after the town was attacked, resulting in the majority of IDPs from Sirba displacing to other areas of Sirba locality or to Kulbus and Jebel Moon localities. There are several checkpoints in North Darfur, particularly around Kutum and Kebkabiya where armed actors are restricting movement and collecting fees and taxes from travellers. In September, travel between Nyala and other localities of South Darfur was also restricted by the growing number of checkpoints along key routes of travel. The checkpoints reportedly require substantial amounts of money to be paid by drivers and passengers to secure passage, allegedly on the basis that these 'fees' are for the protection of travellers from criminal elements.

Protection threats facing civilians remaining in conflict-affected areas. The practice of imposing 'fees', 'fines' or 'taxes' on those attempting to flee has been replicated to those unable to flee, on the pretext of guaranteeing their security; however, reports indicate that the payment of the 'fees' appears unlikely to result in protection from attack or other protection violations. In Habila, the payment of protection 'fees' to members of adjacent *damras* did delay attacks on the town but when the capacity of the residents to pay the fees was exhausted, the town was almost immediately overrun. After the town was overrun, and once a semblance of order was restored, remaining residents were required to pay 'fees' for the operation of RSF checkpoints at the entrances to the town on market days. Similarly, 'taxes' were imposed on civilian populations in the North Darfur settlements of Tawila, Kutum and Kabkabiya in July, after the towns had experienced attacks and came under the control of RSF. Checkpoints within towns also pose protection risks to non-displaced conflict affected civilians, inhibiting freedom of movement and increasing risks of arbitrary detention. This was the case in El Fasher, where stringent security checks and roadblocks were established following clashes between RSF and SAF. The checkpoints reportedly resulted in the arbitrary arrest and detention of numerous individuals, including IDPs, and disrupted the transportation of goods between El Fasher and other towns, to the extent that the main market in El Fasher was forced to almost entirely close down.

Similar constraints on freedom of movement and risks of arbitrary detention were reported in South Darfur since July and were described as inhibiting access to basic services. The operation of checkpoints also enables targeting of individuals based on their profile. In August, reports from Central Darfur indicated the increasing detention of individuals by RSF that appeared to be based on tribal affiliation or suspicion of supporting SAF. At least 60 individuals were reported to be in incommunicado detention in Central Darfur in August alone. In September, in North Darfur, checkpoints operating on the road between the IDP camps and the El Fasher market appeared to be targeting IDPs for arbitrary detention on suspicion of affiliation with RSF. This targeting also reportedly led to increased reports of detention of IDPs as well as other civilians in El Fasher.

There is also a situation of general insecurity, with rising crime reported in places such as East Darfur, where IDPs and refugees in El Neem camp have reportedly experienced indiscriminate shooting, armed robbery, intimidation, threats and kidnapping against the backdrop of increased criminality in the state. On 10 August, unidentified armed men threatened three IDP youth in El Neem camp, looting their mobile phones and injuring one. On 17 September, unidentified armed men targeted an IDP man riding a donkey cart in Ad Du'ayn town, looting seven jars of cooking oil and money from him. A total of three refugees have been killed in farming areas and three IDPs have been kidnapped and released after payment of a ransom. The lack of functioning justice mechanisms in the area has contributed to the rise in criminality, as it effectively provides those engaged in criminal activities with impunity, thereby exacerbating the protection risks faced by groups like IDPs with already heightened vulnerability. Many urban areas are also facing a dire humanitarian situation, such as Zalingei and Nyala, as most essential services have broken down and limited humanitarian or commercial supplies have been able to reach those areas.

Conflict related sexual violence. Undoubtedly, the number of those who have experienced conflict related sexual violence across Darfur because of the ongoing conflict greatly exceeds the number of cases that have been reported to date. Reporting is not only inhibited by the conflict itself but also by lack of access to relevant services for survivors of sexual violence, breakdowns in the telecommunications network, and fear of (further) community stigma. To the extent that it has been possible to engage with communities on the issue, feedback indicates a disturbing scale of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) in conflict affected areas. Respondents engaged through assessments in El Geneina indicates that survivors of CRSV are typically known to the community because incidents were frequently perpetrated in front of family members or others. This practice appears to have been designed to increase feelings of shame and humiliation among survivors, and reports indicate that survivors have in some cases committed suicide as a result. In one case that occurred in early June, a group of armed men reportedly intercepted three minibuses taking passengers from El Fasher in North Darfur to Nyala in South Darfur. The armed men looted the passengers' money, mobile phones and clothing. They then reportedly separated the male and female passengers and drove the women and girls to another location. The armed men then reportedly raped all the women and girls at gun point, before returning them to the group approximately 90 minutes later. In other cases, CRSV has reportedly affected women and girls despite them being in the relative safety of their homes. Over late July to early August when Habila, in West Darfur, was 'overrun' by armed militia members, there were reports of five girls allegedly being abducted and raped in separate incidents. In at least three of those cases, girls were reportedly abducted from their homes. Cases of women being abducted have also been reported in Central Darfur. Problematically, access to services for CRSV survivors has been severely curtailed in many conflict-affected locations across Darfur. Refugee women and girls have become more vulnerable as showed by several reported cases of GBV (rape, physical violence, early marriage). In East Darfur, a total of 10 cases have been reported. In South Darfur, two cases of abduction of women with intention to rape them were reported; the survivors were reportedly rescued.

Children severely affected by direct and indirect impacts of conflict. Children have felt a range of direct conflict impacts, including cases that constitute grave violations of children's rights such as killing and maiming, sexual violence and recruitment of children into armed forces and groups. In addition, the high levels of displacement from conflict affected areas across Darfur have contributed to an observed uptick in the number of cases of unaccompanied and separated children. These children tend to be most visible in marketplaces, where they are exposed to further risks of trafficking, child labour and other abuses. The closure of schools, and the use of many school buildings as shelter for IDPs in areas that have been less directly affected by the conflict means that children have reduced opportunities to access or benefit from referrals to other social services, including psychosocial support. Where it has been possible to conduct needs assessments, initial results indicate that a considerable proportion of children are demonstrating needs for psychosocial support including through experiencing nightmares, violent behaviour, and increased recourse to risky coping mechanisms such as drug and alcohol.

Newly displaced individuals, including children, in a gathering site in North Darfur, in July 2023. Photo: UNHCR

The situation of refugee children in the refugee camps and settlements is also of serious concern. In North Darfur, 12 refugee girls were physically assaulted after Church services. During the first clashes in El Fasher, two refugee children were seriously injured in Dinka camp, while on 15 May, during the second clashes in El Fasher town, three refugee children were reportedly raped as they fled to Dinka camp. Almost all schools in the refugee settlements and camps as well as in urban areas have been closed due to the ongoing conflict in the Darfur. The disruption of education and lack of access to life-saving services have been aggravated by the current conflict, children and particularly girls have been exposed to conflict-related sexual violence, distress, trauma and family separation. The lived experience of the conflict and the flight has had a severe impact on the mental health and psychological wellbeing of children. For example, in South Darfur, on 23 May, through remote monitoring, UNHCR was informed that two refugee girls in Buram settlement were abducted by masked perpetrators on motorcycles with intention to rape them. Refugees immediately shouted and ran after them, securing their release. In the current disrupted socio-economic situation, the risks of neglect and exploitation of refugee children are on the rise, with risks of abduction into forced labour, recruitment into armed groups, and even trafficking.

Dire conditions in camps and gathering sites for refugees and internally displaced people. Particularly in the early weeks and months of the conflict when humanitarian access was at its worst across Darfur, conditions faced by both refugees and protracted and newly displaced IDPs in camps and gathering sites deteriorated sharply. The conditions that IDPs experienced also reflected the broader destruction and disruption wrought by the conflict, including the shutdown of markets in heavily conflict affected areas which significantly reduced the capacity of IDPs to access food, resulting in measurable increases in malnutrition and related health concerns. Reports from key informants on the ground described the daily announcement of newly deceased IDP children's names by mosques in parts of El Geneina town, West Darfur, to which IDPs had fled only to find that they had no or insufficient access to food, water and other essentials. Even in more stable areas, the capacity of the host community to support large influxes of IDPs has been stretched to breaking point. In Sileia, the capital of Jebel Moon locality in West Darfur, the bulk of the IDP population is sheltering in five overcrowded schools. Lack of access to sufficient food and decent shelter has reportedly resulted in high levels of malnutrition, malaria and diarrhoea. The situation of newly arriving IDPs is also poor, given that only limited humanitarian assistance has been provided to date, whilst other new IDP caseloads have yet to be provided with any assistance at all. Where inter-agency assessments have so far been conducted, urgent needs commonly identified include not just food but also WASH, health and shelter. The absence of humanitarian assistance and livelihood opportunities, coupled with the continued insecurity has led to economic instability. Crisis-affected populations struggle to meet their basic needs such as food, shelter, healthcare, further exacerbating their vulnerability. For example, in East Darfur, a high number of women and girls have left the camps to urban areas, seeking livelihood opportunities. They are susceptible to exploitation and sexual abuse, as desperation for income may make them targets to unscrupulous individuals.

Refugees have been particularly badly affected. Refugees in Darfur have been exposed to numerous protection risks since the start of the conflict. One of the immediate impacts has been the suspension of registration by the office of the Commissioner for Refugees (COR), leaving refugees at higher risk of exploitation and denial of access to services due to a lack of documentation. Many refugees have reportedly faced challenges at checkpoints, often being seen as foreign and thus as potentially affiliated to one side or another, causing a risk of arbitrary detention. The number of refugees and asylum seekers with protection and humanitarian needs in Darfur was already critical before the crisis, and the number of those requiring humanitarian assistance has increased as the majority of the refugees are directly affected by the conflict. Almost all essential services previously provided by humanitarians and/or Government in refugee settlements and camps have been disrupted. This applies to health and nutrition services, food assistance, WASH support and access to education, as well as some protection services such as registration. Most partners have fully or partially suspended operations. The lack of access to basic life-saving services including

food, WASH, health care and nutrition, ES/NFIs, disruption of livelihood and scarcity of necessities, restrictions of movements, GBV, lack of access to CMR and MHPSS services as well as disruption of humanitarian aid, have contributed to the precarious situation of the refugees in Darfur. Many refugees reliant on food assistance have been left without support for months, for example in Um Shalaya refugee camp in Central Darfur where food assistance has not been provided since late 2022. By and large refugees in Darfur have gone without food distribution for the last 6 – 7 months, although many had already been without food assistance for several months before the conflict. There is now severe malnutrition reported (for example, lactating and expectant mothers in Al Lait) due to lack of access to food and nutritional supplies, resulting into reported deaths including children. In North Darfur alone, 169 deaths of refugees (children, lactating and expectant mothers) due to severe malnutrition and other related diseases have been reported. Several diseases outbreaks such as measles in refugee settlements and camps have also been reported, whilst the clinics that do remain operational are running out of medical supplies.

Re-escalation of intercommunal tensions and violence. The conflict has enabled those with intercommunal grievances to act on them, reigniting longstanding conflicts between different groups in some areas and creating new conflicts in others. This has perhaps been most clearly demonstrated in West Darfur, where intercommunal conflicts caused recurrent violence in 2021 and 2022. In June 2023, the impacts of intercommunal violence in West Darfur were stark. Multiple reports indicated a campaign of targeted attacks against civilians based on their tribal background, allegedly conducted by Arab militia members and some armed men in RSF uniforms. Targeted individuals most frequently included those in positions of leadership or influence with Masalit tribal affiliations, but also lawyers, human rights defenders and others. In some cases, reports indicate that those conducting the attacks went from house-to-house in specific neighbourhoods, with the aim of identifying and killing targeted individuals. In July, there were reports that lists compiled by local actors in El Geneina ostensibly to facilitate provision of humanitarian aid had been shared/ seen by members of armed forces and/or militia groups, who had then used the information to locate and kill four people. On 12 September, a group of armed men attacked an Arab *damra* near Anjemei village, south-east of El Geneina town, killing five males (including three children) and injuring a sixth. While the perpetrators fled to Chad, there were immediate concerns that the incident could spark an escalation of intercommunal tensions with a range of tribes having communities on both sides of the Chad-Sudan border (including Masalit and Zaghawa). Positively, Chadian authorities swiftly followed up and apprehended the perpetrators. However, reports indicating that the perpetrators may have been from among the Sudanese refugee population in Chad underline the ongoing risk that incidents of this kind may provoke further escalation and potentially even a spill over of the conflict.

In other areas of Darfur, intercommunal tensions and violence have also been triggered for a range of reasons. South Darfur has been a site of intercommunal fighting between different Arab tribes, linked to the refusal of the Salamat to publicly declare their support for RSF (despite members of the Salamat tribe fighting with RSF). While the conflict has largely been between the Salamat and Beni Halba tribes, some reports in September indicated the involvement of Habaniya and Ta'aisha tribesmen in a potential expansion of the conflict. On 23 September, it was reported that over 50 Salamat tribesmen were killed in fighting near Kabbum, after Salamat fighters had burned the town to the ground the previous week causing an unconfirmed number of casualties among the Beni Halba tribe. The conflict has expanded to impact parts of Mukjar locality in Central Darfur, including Boro and Wastani villages. In South Darfur, Nyala, Joint Protection Forces (JPF) were deployed in some residential areas and marketplaces on 28 August. While the deployment reportedly greatly enhanced freedom of movement for civilians and enabled the partial re-opening of some markets by reducing looting and other criminal activities, it also became a source of tension because residents of neighbourhoods predominately inhabited by Arab tribes opposed this deployment. Their opposition illustrates the tendency of broader political conflicts to take on tribal dimensions in Darfur, with Arab tribespeople concerned that JPF elements will be largely composed of and be sympathetic and supportive of non-Arab tribes in their area.

Health facilities in settlements in East Darfur continue to run amid a shortage of medicine and supplies. Photo: UNHCR

Harassment of farmers is also often indicative of rising intercommunal tensions with their roots in competition over land use. Reports have indicated that harassment of farmers is ongoing in several areas. In North Darfur there were reports of farmers, including women, being subjected to harassment or assault when seeking access to farmland around Tawila, whilst in September there were tensions reported in Zam Zam after a cattle rustling incident led to skirmishes with local Arab tribesmen. Similar reports were received from the area around Manawashi in South Darfur. The intercommunal character that often underlies this type of harassment was clearest in reports from Garsila in Central Darfur, where Arab tribesmen were reported to be preventing civilians from accessing their farmland in June, allegedly with the support of RSF, and threatening to kill them should they do so. Farmers described being instructed by Arab tribesmen to 'forget' their farms this year because the land is really owned by Arabs. The risk of intercommunal disputes around land use will rise towards the end of the year, as herders begin to release their livestock creating risks of crop destruction.

Key Elements of the Protection Response

Strengthening community-based approaches. The community has been at the frontline of the response across Sudan, including in Darfur. While many of the Community Based Protection Networks (CBPNs) supported by UNHCR and partners prior to the outbreak of conflict have been disrupted by displacement and other conflict impacts, several continue to function to some extent. Impressively, members of CBPNs who have been displaced to Chad have continued working to identify and refer persons with specific needs and others to specialized services, where possible. UNHCR and partners have also continued to rely on CBPNs and other community-based structures for their contribution to ongoing protection monitoring, which has been sustained throughout the conflict although often conducted remotely. CBPNs including those amongst the refugee community retain a core role in ensuring accountability to affected populations (AAP) as well as supporting the sensitization of communities to risks of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) and enabling the reporting of SEA concerns.

Looking forward, the capacities of CBPNs will continue to be strengthened through consolidating or re-forming disrupted structures, tailored capacity building for new and existing members, and promoting linkages with Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) functioning as hubs for access to information, services and assistance in conflict

affected areas. The MPCCs will enable the operation of Protection Desks, facilitating the identification of persons with specific needs and providing access to information and referrals to specialized services. In addition, the MPCCs will provide a venue for implementation of a range of other activities through collaboration with partners, including psychosocial support, legal counselling, and other services prioritized by community members.

Protection monitoring: Using its wide network of remaining CBPNs as well as networks of Key Informants and working as well in close coordination with its Protection Sector partners, UNHCR has continued to engage in protection monitoring. Much of this has had to be done through remote means. Where UNHCR and/or partners remained physically present, in-person protection monitoring has also been conducted in East and North Darfur, as well as intermittently in South Darfur. Remote protection monitoring has been possible through our pre-existing network of Key Informants and CBPNs in all Darfur States. Although some of the networks have been disrupted and some Key Informants displaced, UNHCR remained in contact with 53 CBPNs and 232 Key Informants, with coverage of all the 'hotspot' areas. In North Darfur UNHCR's partner also successfully reconstituted a number of CBPNs. In total, UNHCR and partners have reached over 90,000 persons through community-level protection monitoring since 15 April. Results of monitoring have been used to inform advocacy, as well as form the basis of referrals to service providers or human rights actors to document potential human rights or IHL violations.

Provision of cash and NFI assistance to IDPs and refugees. Over 10,000 households in North Darfur have received NFIs since 15 April. The NFIs were distributed to newly displaced IDPs and (vulnerable) host communities in El Fasher (which has received many new IDPs not only from locations within North Darfur such as Kutum, Tawila, but also from South Darfur). Earlier on in the conflict, UNHCR had completed communal distributions of NFIs and 4 generators in health centres that service both IDPs and host communities. Through the cross-border mechanism with Chad, UNHCR has organized the transport and distribution of 4,577 NFI kits to IDPs in the West Darfur localities of Kulbus and El Geneina (including newly displaced IDPs in Ardamata), reaching a total of 22,855 individuals. Assessments of additional locations in West and Central Darfur are planned during October, in preparation for further distributions in October and November. In Nertiti, Golo, Rokero towns, as well as Um Dukhun locality, in Central Darfur, cash assistance to support protection outcomes is being provided, as well as provision of dignity kits to women and girls affected by GBV. Further expansion of cash assistance to support protection outcomes is also prioritized for implementation in the fourth quarter of 2023, in collaboration with partners. In South Darfur, SORR has successfully concluded the rapid assessment for the identification of persons with specific needs (PSNs) amongst the newly displaced IDPs in Kalma, Otash and Dereige IDP camps for support with expected 5,000 plastic tarpaulins.

Distribution of lifesaving assistance to displaced individuals in West Darfur through cross-border operations from Chad. Photo: SORR

Promoting social cohesion. In one location, El Neem IDP camp in East Darfur, UNHCR through partners have organized sports activities in the form of football tournaments between the host community and IDPs. This has promoted social cohesion and created inclusiveness. In addition, this has improved the mental wellbeing of both communities, as well as fostering a sense of belonging for the newly displaced IDPs. Such activities have had to be suspended elsewhere but UNHCR will embed social cohesion activities into the MPCCs it now plans to set-up in key locations.

Provision of legal assistance to refugees. Through a local partner UNHCR has continued to provide legal assistance to refugees, including for those in detention. However, the partner has had to suspend operations in several areas where refugees reside due to the conflict.

Support to Persons with Specific Needs. UNHCR Protection partners partially implemented activities in three out of the five States. This included identification of and support to PSNs. Through partners in North, Central and East Darfur, over 2030 PSNs (including protection cases) have been identified for tailored assistance support since 15 April, including from amongst new IDP populations. The assistance provided is either individual protection assistance through partners or multi-purpose cash assistance. These activities are at various stages of implementation, as UNHCR and partners seek to explore modalities for cash distributions in coordination with the Cash Working Group for Darfur.

Prevention and response to GBV and Child Protection. In some locations, such in East Darfur, UNHCR and partners have been able to continue to implement a broader range of protection programmes, in particular for refugees, including responding to GBV and child protection. GBV awareness sessions have been conducted in El Neem IDP camp as well as in El Daein Locality, and partners have been able to respond to GBV cases in both refugee and IDP areas. Elsewhere, UNHCR coordinates closely with the GBV and CP Working Groups which remain active in some Darfur States such as parts of North Darfur with continued limited provision of GBV and CP services in some locations.

Coordination, protection mainstreaming and advocacy. UNHCR continues to lead the coordination of the Protection Sector in Darfur, facilitating regular meetings with sector partners at the State level to encourage the exchange of information about the evolving protection context, promoting the adoption of standardized tools and harmonized ways of working, strengthening the functionality of referral pathways, and identifying emerging protection trends in need of timely and coordinated responses. UNHCR also continues to coordinate the refugee response through Refugee Working Groups, combining these with Protection Sector WG meetings where appropriate to streamline partners' need to attend multiple forums. In addition, UNHCR provides support for the mainstreaming of protection across the response through technical support for conflict sensitivity and ongoing coordination with non-Protection sectors. Advocacy on protection of civilians in Darfur is undertaken through the regular publication of Protection of Civilians Notes shared with key stakeholders including the HCT, together with *ad hoc* advocacy actions conducted in response to urgent protection threats identified through protection monitoring.

Challenges & Opportunities

Security risks, the rainy season, and other **constraints on humanitarian access** pose significant challenges to scaling up UNHCR's response in Darfur. To the extent that humanitarian access has been regained, it remains largely focused on the delivery of supplies for distribution to IDPs, refugees and other conflict affected people. This is of vital importance in the context of the severe deprivation that people across Darfur have been experiencing in the context of the ongoing conflict. However, resumption of core protection services requires predictable physical presence of specialized staff alongside conflict affected people. In some areas, humanitarian access has expanded sufficiently for some UNHCR partners to achieve this level of physical presence, but a number of hotspot locations so far remain inaccessible or impossible to access in a predictable and sustained

manner. UNHCR is working to overcome these challenges through investment in access routes into Darfur from both the east (from Kosti) and the west (from Chad). Cross-border access routes into Darfur from Chad have already enabled access to West Darfur and are anticipated to provide access into Central Darfur, and potentially North Darfur in the coming months.

Disruption and unpredictability of telecommunications networks has also been a key response impediment, making remote outreach to conflict affected locations difficult to achieve and hampering efforts to gather information required for response planning purposes. Recognizing that the re-establishment of physical presence of UNHCR and partners may be difficult to achieve immediately in some locations, improving the functionality of telecommunications networks is required to enable the speedy roll out of remotely supported responses. In some locations in Darfur, improvements to telecommunications infrastructure have been driven by local businessmen setting up satellite internet access through portable, solar-powered satellite receiver sets. Adoption of these types of modalities to ease communication with partners and CBPNs linked to MPCCs would enhance capacity building efforts, enable provision of remote services and support broader protection monitoring coverage.

Across Darfur, **humanitarian infrastructure has been damaged and destroyed** including many of UNHCR's and partners' offices including COR, guesthouses and warehouses. Rebuilding will take time and significant resources and cannot be undertaken at scale until there are assurances that new facilities will be safe from looting and attack. In the interim pending a security risk assessment and building on the access to Darfur already achieved through the cross-border modality, UNHCR is also exploring the establishment of integrated UN premises in El Geneina to enable the return of a static UN presence to the Darfur region which would act as a staging point for missions into more distant parts of West and Central (and potentially North) Darfur.

The response to the catastrophic protection impacts generated by the ongoing conflict in Sudan is currently **only 31% funded**. Under-resourcing the response creates risks of undermining the legitimacy of humanitarian action in the eyes of communities who will not receive the protection services and assistance that they need. It also increases the likelihood that provision of aid will become (further) politicized, as targeting is forced to become narrower in the face of funding shortfalls. The challenges that have impeded the protection response in the Darfur region to date, including the access impediments that have necessitated the adoption of cross-border modalities, mean that activity costs may be higher in the Darfur region compared to other areas of Sudan. Those higher costs are justified by the humanitarian imperative of reaching those most in need of protection and assistance. While local actors continue to operate at the frontline of the response, localization should not be perceived as a cost-saving (or a risk transfer) measure. On the contrary, localization requires appropriate resourcing, to ensure that partners are appropriately supported. A comprehensive protection response must be delivered in Darfur despite the challenges, to create a foundation for the longer-term development responses that are also needed and to provide forcibly displaced people with hope for genuinely durable solutions in the future.

Looted UNHCR warehouse in El Geneina, West Darfur. Photo: UNHCR

Key Messages

Parties to the conflict are urged to:

- Ensure the adherence of all persons acting under their instructions, direction or control to their core obligations under International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law.
- Refrain from attacks expected to cause excessive civilian harm relative to the military objective sought, to facilitate civilians' access to humanitarian assistance and to enable the transport of wounded in need of medical care.
- Recall their obligation to ensure that civilians can leave areas of active conflict safely, and to instruct, direct or influence armed elements in areas under their control to refrain from impeding their movement and from arbitrarily extracting 'fees' or 'taxes' while on the move.
- Immediately prohibit the engagement of all armed elements in areas under their control in any form of sexual violence and investigate thoroughly any reports received concerning the engagement of their personnel in sexual violence. Ensure that those found to have committed acts of sexual violence are appropriately sanctioned.
- Stop all recruitment and use of children in the conflict by issuing command orders that no boy or girl should be involved in the conflict in any combat or support role.
- Recall Sudan's commitments under the Juba Peace Agreement including its provisions on the protection of civilians and security arrangements.

The international community is requested to:

- Undertake all reasonable measures to restore peace and security in the region, as well as provide for robust and adequately resourced protection of civilian mechanisms.
- Accelerate efforts to secure sustained and enforceable ceasefire undertakings in Darfur, alongside immediate humanitarian access, to provide credible safeguards against potential (re-)occurrence of war crimes or crimes against humanity and to establish robust mechanisms to monitor the compliance of all parties to the conflict to core IHL and human rights obligations and to hold them accountable for identified violations.
- Accelerate and place renewed emphasis on providing sustained humanitarian access to conflict-affected populations and ensure access to humanitarian assistance and protection services for all affected populations.
- Scale up the allocation of resources to enable the delivery of the protection response for conflict-affected populations, specifically in the Darfur region where access challenges and the destruction of humanitarian infrastructure may increase resource requirements.

PROTECTION BRIEF
DARFUR REGION

October 2023

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

UNHCR Sudan

data.unhcr.org/en/country/sdn
www.unhcr.org