



**BRIEFING NOTE**

## **Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Sudan in the Ongoing Conflict**

**54<sup>th</sup> Session Human Rights Council | Geneva  
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The Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces are committing conflict-related sexual violence with **horrific impacts**. The **international community must act decisively without delay**.

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan on 15 April 2023, conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, sexual slavery, forced disappearances of women and girls with risks of trafficking, as well as other forms of sexual violence have been reported. Due to challenges to reporting and data collection in the current environment, the full scale and scope of the violence are unknown. By 29 August 2023, the Combating Violence against Women Unit in Sudan's Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Children verified 124 rapes since the beginning of the conflict,<sup>1</sup> while civil society organisations and activist networks have documented dozens of others.<sup>2</sup> The true number of women and girls subjected to sexual violence in Sudan since April is likely to be significantly higher.<sup>3</sup>

Reported cases suggest that **two dynamics currently characterise the nature of the conflict-related sexual violence** that is taking place. Many cases of sexual violence, in particular, although not exclusively in the Darfur region, indicate that individuals are targeted based on their **ethnic background**, sharing similarities with the nature of sexual violence during previous episodes of ethnically motivated violence in the region.<sup>4</sup> Reports of sexual violence occurring in urban centres such as Khartoum and Omdurman suggest that sexual violence is also **being used to exploit, terrorise and dominate the wider civilian population** with vulnerable groups, including migrants and refugees, at particular risk.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See interview with Sulima Ishaq, Head of the Combating Violence against Women Unit, Sudan Ministry of Social Affairs, Women and Children in The Guardian, '[Women in Sudan facing a 'tragedy' of sexual violence as rape cases rise](#)', 29 August 2023. See also [statements](#) of the Combating Violence against Women and Children Unit, Sudan Ministry of Social Welfare.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, '[Kidnapping and Slavery: The RSF is committing more dangerous rights violations in this malign war against civilians in Sudan](#)', 1 August 2023; Amnesty International, '[Sudan: "Death came to our home": War crimes and civilian suffering in Sudan](#)', 3 August 2023, 27-29; Dabanga - Radio TV Online, '[Calls to address sexual violence in Darfur, El Burhan orders investigation into 'war crimes'](#)', 7 August 2023; Human Rights Watch, '[Darfur: Rapid Support Forces, Allied Militias Rape Dozens](#)', 17 August 2023.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, [n.2](#), 28; The Guardian, [n.1](#).

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, [n.2](#).

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR, '[UN experts alarmed by reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by RSF in Sudan](#)', 17 August 2023.

## CRSV in Darfur – Identity-based targeting

In West and South Darfur in particular, the violence has reportedly taken an interethnic dimension.<sup>6</sup> In attacks reminiscent of previous instances of ethnically motivated violence in Darfur,<sup>7</sup> the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militias have targeted towns and villages mainly inhabited by non-Arab communities, including the Massalit, resulting in the death and injury of hundreds of civilians.<sup>8</sup> Many of the cases of rape and sexual violence reported in the context of these attacks appear to have been ethnically or racially motivated.<sup>9</sup> Survivors in most instances have identified perpetrators as belonging to the RSF and allied militias and have reported that attackers often explicitly mentioned their ethnic identity or used ethnic slurs referring to their Massalit or non-Arab identity.<sup>10</sup>

## CRSV to dominate and terrorise

In Khartoum and other urban centres, sexual violence appears to be used **to exploit, terrorise, and dominate the wider civilian population**. Most allegations involve members of the RSF or allied militias.<sup>11</sup> Cases of rape and sexual violence committed by soldiers of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and members of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), although less widespread, have also been reported.<sup>12</sup> While Sudanese and others of non-Arab background are also being targeted by the RSF in urban centres, including South Sudanese, Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants and refugees, the violence is wide-ranging, with women and girls of Arab background also being subjected to rape and sexual violence.<sup>13</sup>

Women and girls have been targeted for rape and sexual violence when seeking food or other necessities.<sup>14</sup> Those fleeing the fighting are frequently being subjected to sexual violence when on the move, including at checkpoints.<sup>15</sup> Reports also indicate that sexual violence is being used as a tool to **force civilians from their houses and to target vulnerable** and exposed groups, including migrants, internally displaced populations, refugees, poor households and other vulnerable members of the civilian population.<sup>16</sup> Recent reports, in particular in Khartoum, have involved members of the RSF breaking into houses and raping women and girls in front of family members, causing particularly severe consequences in terms of social stigma. Some survivors feel they will never be able to return to Sudan as a result.<sup>17</sup> Individuals

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<sup>6</sup> UNITAMS, '[Statement by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sudan and Head of UNITAMS, Mr. Volker Perthes, on the situation in Sudan](#)', 13 June 2023.

<sup>7</sup> See for an overview Al Jazeera, '[Is history repeating itself in Darfur?](#)' 6 July 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Amnesty International, [n 2](#), 18.

<sup>9</sup> OHCHR, [n 5](#); Human Rights Watch, [n 2](#).

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, [n 2](#).

<sup>11</sup> OHCHR, [n 5](#); Amnesty International, [n 2](#), 27-29.

<sup>12</sup> Al Jazeera, '["Don't let the other soldiers watch": Rape as weapon in Sudan war](#)', 14 August 2023; Al Jazeera, '[Women speak out about sexual violence in Sudan fighting](#)', 16 May 2023. 3 cases have been reported to the Combating Violence against Women Unit where perpetrators have been identified as members of the SPLM – Rights for Peace interview with Sulima Ishaq, 8 September 2023.

<sup>13</sup> Al Jazeera, [n 14](#); Hadhreen | حاضرين, [Twitter statement](#), 30 May 2023.

<sup>14</sup> BBC News Arabic, '[Women tell the BBC how the Rapid Support Forces resort to rape as a "weapon of intimidation"](#)', 26 July 2023.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, '[UNHCR: Heightened risks, violations and sexual violence reported by civilians fleeing Sudan](#)', 15 June 2023; BBC News, [n 14](#); africanews, '[Sudanese women recount the horror of rape](#)', 14 June 2023.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Sulima Ishaq in The New Humanitarian, '[Q&A: The civil servant documenting sexual violence in Sudan's conflict](#)', 26 June 2023; OHCHR, [n 5](#).

<sup>17</sup> Rights for Peace interview with Sulima Ishaq, 8 September 2023.

suspected of being daughters or wives of former regime members (Kizan) are also being targeted by the RSF in areas considered to be inhabited by former regime members or affiliates, such as Kafori, Bahri and Omdurman. During these attacks, survivors have been threatened with death if they resist, have been called daughters of Kizan and Shaigiya (a Nothern tribe), and perpetrators have stated that they are refusing them because they consider them Abeed (slave).<sup>18</sup> Reports suggest that individuals are also being targeted as a result of their involvement in human rights work.<sup>19</sup>

Several sources have reported numerous **abductions** and unlawful killings of female civilians, with the total number likely to be significantly higher than reported by families due to stigma and fear of reprisals.<sup>20</sup> Some reports suggest that women and girls have been kidnapped and held **hostage** in order to be ransomed back to their families.<sup>21</sup> In some of these cases, women have been raped while being held hostage.<sup>22</sup> In other cases, groups of women and girls are reported to have been abducted, detained and subjected to rape and sexual violence by members of the RSF in conditions which **may amount to sexual slavery**.<sup>23</sup> Reports from Khartoum and Nyala in particular suggest that members of the RSF have detained women and girls in hotels and warehouses for the purposes of **sexual exploitation**.<sup>24</sup>

### CRSV in Detention Centres

According to testimonies, reported by Emergency Lawyers, from people who were detained in centres in different parts of Khartoum, including Omdurman and Shambat, sexual violence is being committed against both men and women in detention. Arbitrary detentions are taking place in a range of ad hoc locations, including houses and offices, for the purposes of interrogations. Some individuals have been detained for more than two months, suffering torture including sexual violence. According to the statement of an individual who has been recently released, one of the cases of arbitrary detention refers to detention by the SAF, which included torture. There is also one report of a death in detention resulting from an interrogated individual being unwilling to cooperate.<sup>25</sup>

### Limited access to medical services

In conflict-affected areas, survivors of sexual violence have limited access to emergency post-rape care, medical treatment and psychosocial support. Most have been unable to access rape kits, Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) against HIV infection, preventative drugs against Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), and unwanted pregnancy emergency pills.<sup>26</sup> Many

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<sup>18</sup> Rights for Peace interview with Sulima Ishaq, 8 September 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Human Rights Watch, [n 2](#).

<sup>20</sup> Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), [n 2](#); Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, [Twitter statement](#), 16 June 2023; Amnesty International, [n 2](#), 28; OHCHR, [n 5](#).

<sup>21</sup> Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, [n 2](#).

<sup>22</sup> The Guardian, [n 1](#).

<sup>23</sup> Amnesty International, [n 2](#), 28; Save the Children, '[Sudan: Children as young as 12 raped and assaulted, as sexual violence rips through the country](#)', 7 July 2023.

<sup>24</sup> See [3 August statement](#) of the Combating Violence against Women and Children Unit, Ministry of Social Welfare. See also Amnesty International, [n 2](#), 28.

<sup>25</sup> Emergency Lawyers report, September 2023. On file with Rights for Peace.

<sup>26</sup> Rights for Peace interview with Sulima Ishaq, 8 September 2023. See also [Sudan Study on the Status of and Opportunities for Reparations for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#), 37.

medical facilities have been damaged and looted and medical staff have fled. **Survivors are often unable to contact or access medical facilities** and services that remain in operation due to movement restrictions as a result of the security situation or due to weak communication networks in some areas.<sup>27</sup> Many survivors are also unable to seek medical care due to stigma and fear of reprisals.<sup>28</sup> Without access to medical care or abortion services, some survivors are turning to herbal and other traditional remedies to prevent pregnancies and infections.<sup>29</sup> For those who are able to access medical services, many hospitals are only able to offer minimum standards for the clinical management of rape, focussing only on emergency contraception and preventing sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>30</sup>

## Impact of CRSV in Sudan

[Research](#) conducted by Rights for Peace with survivors of CRSV in Sudan before the outbreak of conflict in April has highlighted the grave physical, psychological and socioeconomic impact of CRSV on survivors. The **physical impacts of CRSV are brutal and long-lasting**. They can include the physical injuries sustained during an attack, trauma to the reproductive organs, fistula and infection with HIV/AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases. In Darfur, the physical damage inflicted by CRSV may be worsened due to the widespread practice of female genital mutilation (FGM). Many survivors also experience significant psychological trauma, expressing feelings of hopelessness, restlessness, anger, anxiety and insomnia. Some survivors have reported attempts or desires to commit suicide due to hopelessness. Stigma and ostracisation exacerbate the impact of CRSV on survivors and their children, who are often shunned or abandoned by their husbands and may not seek medical care due to the risk of exposure. Survivors are also often economically vulnerable, lacking the means of securing their livelihood due to displacement, stigma and ostracisation.<sup>31</sup>

## Recommendations

The Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces are committing conflict-related sexual violence with **horrific impacts**. The **international community must act decisively without delay**. The warring parties must uphold their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to protect civilians, including to refrain from sexual violence of all kinds. They must remain committed to humanitarian agreements, such as the May 2023 Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan, to allow survivors of CRSV to access humanitarian assistance and medical services.<sup>32</sup> All parties to the conflict should publicly condemn and demand the cessation of sexual violence against civilians and immediately hold perpetrators in their ranks to account.

Flexible funding should be made available to support training and documentation of violations, including conflict-related sexual violence.

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<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, [n.2](#); Amnesty International, [n.2](#), 28; Save the Children, [n.23](#).

<sup>28</sup> Amnesty International, [n.2](#), 28; Dabanga - Radio TV Online, [n.2](#).

<sup>29</sup> The Guardian, '[Anguish as rape survivors in Sudan unable to access vital medication](#)', 14 June 2023.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Sulima Ishaq, [n.16](#).

<sup>31</sup> [Sudan Study on the Status of and Opportunities for Reparations for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence](#), 25-27.

<sup>32</sup> [Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan](#), 11 May 2023.

The UN Human Rights Council should **urgently establish an independent mechanism to investigate violations of international humanitarian law and human rights law**, including a focus on conflict-related sexual violence, with a view to ensuring that those responsible are held accountable and that survivors may access reparations.