

The War Economy in Darfur Between the RSF and Abdel Wahid's Movement



Before the current conflict erupted, the town of Tawila in North Darfur, western Sudan, was little more than a remote outpost, lacking the basic essentials of life: clean water, electricity, and supply routes. Today, it hosts around 665,000 displaced people, most of whom fled from the brutality of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in El Fasher.

Located about 60 kilometers west of El Fasher, Tawila has become Sudan's primary hub for internally displaced people (IDPs). Families fleeing violence arrive with nothing, only to be trapped in a system that imposes taxes and fees without providing even the most basic services in return.

The Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM), led by Abdel Wahid Mohamed al-Nur, has turned this displacement crisis into a financial opportunity. The group imposes fees on local communities and humanitarian efforts that are meant to assist the most vulnerable, particularly single mothers and children separated from their families during the chaos in El Fasher.

Abdel Wahid's faction is one of the most hardline rebel groups in Darfur, refusing to participate in formal peace talks. It enjoys solid backing from the Fur ethnic group and continues to champion a narrative of resistance against what it describes as a deeply unjust distribution of wealth and power.

The movement controls the rugged Jebel Marra mountains in central and southern Darfur. These natural defenses have helped the group fend off government efforts to reclaim the territory dubbed "liberated areas" by the SLM where it has established its own civil administration.

At the onset of the conflict, the SLM capitalized on the military's withdrawal from remote parts of South, Central, and North Darfur, including Tawila. The movement claimed its takeover was meant to protect civilians and ensure the provision of basic necessities, all while maintaining a position of neutrality in the wider conflict.

How Do the Displaced Live?

Tawila has become a preferred destination for those fleeing violence due to the presence of UN agencies and international organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). But these organizations cannot meet the overwhelming needs of the displaced population.

Only 21% of IDPs live in camps; 74% reside in informal settlements or open gathering spaces, while the rest stay with host families.

According to the UN Population Fund, many families are forced to sleep in the open, increasing the risk of violence, exploitation, and abuse, especially for women and girls. The lack of shared toilets and privacy compels them to seek isolated spots at night, exacerbating protection risks.

A report published by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on October 29 stated that 98% of families in Tawila lack basic sleeping materials such as blankets, mattresses, and mosquito nets. Meanwhile, 80% suffer from overcrowding, and 41% report feeling unsafe at night.

The hardships go beyond sleeping arrangements. Food insecurity is widespread, with 86% of the displaced reporting inadequate food consumption. Malnutrition is a serious issue, with 30% of children under five either underweight or not growing properly, according to the report.

Access to basic services is severely limited. Most families face significant challenges in obtaining healthcare; half of them have not received the medical treatment they need due to shortages and unaffordable costs, even amid outbreaks of malaria, diarrhea, and respiratory illnesses.

The report also noted that 76% of families face movement restrictions inside

Tawila due to insecurity, checkpoints, and landmines evidence of the SLM's tight security grip on the area.

A needs assessment released by the Norwegian Refugee Council on August 18, 2025, revealed that 98% of families cannot meet their basic needs due to lack of income, job opportunities, disability, or illness. Around 46% rely on food aid and communal kitchens, 44% depend on donations or purchases, and the rest resort to loans or begging.

Without sustainable livelihoods, families are adopting harmful coping mechanisms reducing meal portions, consuming lower-quality food, limiting movement to save money, avoiding healthcare due to cost, and depending heavily on aid.

Humanitarian Extortion

The SLM has reportedly charged a local initiative, the Al-Mihad Charity, two million Sudanese pounds about \$550 for setting up a communal kitchen for newly arrived IDPs from El Fasher. A receipt of this transaction was leaked online, sparking outrage.

This profiteering is not new. The movement has long operated a parallel economy, previously taxing markets within IDP camps. After taking control of Tawila, it began imposing a variety of levies on local communities including cuts from humanitarian aid shipments.

A volunteer in Tawila said the movement charges local organizations up to \$1,500, and international NGOs around \$5,000, just to operate in the area. Additionally, it deducts between 4% and 20% of incoming funds earmarked for aid.

The SLM also levies fees on street vendors, local shops, and truck operators passing through Tawila, further straining the local economy and inflating commodity prices.

Turning humanitarian aid into a revenue stream for a well-resourced armed group a group that reportedly extracts 2 to 3 kilograms of gold daily from the Kidinir mine east of Jebel Marra and sells it to the RSF and its affiliated traders is nothing short of humanitarian extortion.

The group maintains an iron grip over Jebel Marra and bans media access. Entry into its territories is restricted to individuals from the Fur tribe. There is speculation that the funds extorted in Tawila are being funneled into rebuilding the group's military strength, as it periodically announces the training of new recruits.

A Lasting Impact

Displaced families have little choice but to comply with the taxation, despite having no income or work opportunities. Returning to Al-Dabba in northern Sudan or Tina on the Chadian border is virtually impossible due to insecurity, RSF checkpoints, and high transportation costs.

Some IDPs can't even afford the fare from the outskirts of El Fasher to Tawila, forcing them to walk on foot. A journey to Al-Dabba can take three days and passes through numerous military checkpoints.

Ongoing taxation of humanitarian operations hampers the delivery of vital aid to those who have lost everything and endured prolonged hunger and violence. Many now live in makeshift shelters of fabric and plastic sheets or in open spaces under the scorching sun.

The constant siphoning of resources from communal kitchens could soon bring them to a halt. These initiatives rely on volunteers and social media donations, which are dwindling as most Sudanese have exhausted their savings during the protracted conflict.

The SLM's policies offer a stark example of how civilian suffering is being exploited for financial gain in the absence of a central government and the collapse of public services.

Since the outbreak of war on April 15, 2023, Sudanese civilians have borne the brunt of atrocities killings, displacement, sexual violence, looting, and infrastructure destruction only to find themselves now subject to indirect looting by armed groups through aid extortion.