

War in Sudan: Questions and Answers



On April 15, 2023, fighting broke out in Sudan's capital, Khartoum, between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Within hours, the conflict had spread across the capital's tri-city area and quickly extended to other towns and cities nationwide, including Darfur and Kordofan in the west, Gezira in central Sudan, and Sennar in the southeast.

The Sudanese Armed Forces are led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who also serves as head of the Transitional Sovereignty Council. The RSF is commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as "Hemedti." The two men jointly orchestrated a coup against Sudan's transitional civilian government on October 25, 2021.

After the coup, their uneasy alliance began to unravel as both men vied for dominance. Tensions spiked after a new political framework agreement was signed in early December 2022 between the civilian bloc "Forces of Freedom and Change" and the military leadership represented separately by the SAF and the RSF.

How did the war in Sudan start?

The framework agreement outlined key principles and a vision for a transitional

government, but deferred five contentious issues among them, security sector reform to a second phase of negotiations. These matters were partially discussed in early 2023 before the outbreak of war.

Once talks over military and security reforms began, fierce disagreements emerged between Burhan and Hemedti, especially concerning the timeline for integrating the RSF into the national army. Burhan proposed a two-year window for the process, while Hemedti insisted on a much longer period no less than ten years. In the lead-up to the conflict, both sides began stockpiling weapons at strategic locations, including in Khartoum.

On April 4, 2023 ten days before the outbreak of war the Sudanese newspaper Al-Sudani reported that the RSF had repositioned some 60,000 fighters inside Khartoum. Darfur regional governor Minni Arko Minnawi later stated that RSF forces in the capital had numbered around 25,000 to 30,000 six months prior to the war, but Hemedti managed to mobilize over 120,000 troops just hours before the fighting erupted clear signs of advanced preparation.

Further evidence includes the RSF's relocation of dozens of armored vehicles from Darfur to Khartoum. These were spotted on Airport Road just 48 hours before hostilities began.

Who started the war?

There are three competing narratives about who initiated the war:

The RSF's account: It claims its forces stationed in the Al-Madina Al-Riyadiya (Sports City) district in southern Khartoum were attacked by the army on the morning of April 15, prompting a counterattack.

The Forces of Freedom and Change's account: It blames remnants of the former regime, accusing them of sparking the war through loyalists embedded in the army.

The most widely accepted account: It holds that the RSF launched a preemptive strike with the aim of seizing power. On the morning of April 15, the RSF rapidly captured key infrastructure, including Khartoum International Airport, the Presidential Palace, various ministries, and other government institutions. Hemedti declared that he had encircled the army's general command and that Burhan had no option but to surrender or face arrest.

This version is endorsed by numerous global think tanks, including the Council on Foreign Relations, Yale University's Sudan Conflict Observatory, and Alex de Waal, Executive Director of the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University's Fletcher School.

What is the current map of territorial control more than a year into the war?

The RSF continues to control most of Khartoum, with the exception of Omdurman, where the army has regained about 70% of the city in a large-scale operation. Hemedti's forces also hold most of the Darfur region excluding its capital, El Fasher as well as the state of Gezira, except for parts of Al-Qurashi and Al-Manaqil localities.

The RSF has recently advanced into Sennar State, capturing parts of the city of Sennar and the entire strategic area of Jabal Moya. This puts them in a position to threaten Sennar city and neighboring states including White Nile, Blue Nile, and Gedaref unless the army manages to push them out.

Conversely, the Sudanese Armed Forces maintain control over White Nile and Blue Nile states, the northern states, the eastern region including the temporary capital, Port Sudan and parts of Kordofan, as well as El Fasher in Darfur. In defending El Fasher, the SAF is joined by a joint force composed of allied armed movements.

Overall, the map reveals that Hemedti's RSF controls a larger share of territory than the SAF, prompting the following question:

Why does the RSF hold a military edge?

From the outset of the battle for Khartoum, the RSF made unexpectedly swift gains. The militia, originally established by the army as an auxiliary force, ended up defeating the SAF in the capital and then advanced into Gezira and Sennar, eventually seizing most of Darfur.

The RSF's military superiority stems from three main factors:

High-quality, unrestricted arms supply from the UAE via neighboring Chad: The SAF has failed to disrupt RSF supply lines or secure equivalent support from potential allies like Turkey or Egypt.

A New York Times report revealed that Hemedti's forces had received surface-to-air missiles and armored vehicles through an Emirati air bridge. Photographs also surfaced showing RSF fighters armed with Israeli-made LAR-160 precision-guided rockets.

Tribal recruitment and foreign mercenaries: The RSF has successfully mobilized large numbers through tribal networks and has enlisted thousands of foreign fighters. Many joined either due to tribal allegiance or to engage in looting. Areas captured by the RSF were systematically looted—especially valuables like vehicles, gold, and cash.

Structural weaknesses in SAF leadership: The army has adopted a largely defensive posture, with the exception of earlier battles in Omdurman. It faces widespread criticism for failing to protect civilians.

Over a year into the war, the SAF has lost the trust of much of the population. For instance, while it repeatedly promised to retake Wad Madani (Gezira's capital), it instead lost parts of neighboring Sennar State in just days and with little resistance.

What are the casualties and humanitarian toll of the war?

The International Rescue Committee estimates that the war has killed around 150,000 people ten times higher than UN figures, which stand at 15,000.

Reports indicate that tens of thousands of civilians have been arbitrarily detained by the RSF and subjected to severe human rights abuses. The SAF's intelligence apparatus is also detaining civilians, though in smaller numbers.

Salima Ishaq, Director of the Unit to Combat Violence Against Women and Children, revealed that 191 cases of sexual violence against women had been documented since the war began most involving the RSF, according to survivors.

She noted that these figures were collected in Khartoum, Gezira, South and West Darfur, and North Kordofan but actual numbers may be far higher due to poor communication and internet blackouts.

Sudan is now facing the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Over 12 million people have been displaced 10 million internally and 2 million across borders.

Roughly 25 million people more than half the country's population of 44 million urgently need humanitarian aid and protection. Some 18 million are suffering from acute food insecurity due to shortages of food, water, medicine, and fuel.

Why do civilians flee when the RSF arrives?

From the onset of the war, civilians have fled en masse from towns and cities at the RSF's approach. Over 80% of Khartoum's residents left the capital after the RSF seized control early in the conflict. The same occurred in Gezira State, and most recently, more than 55,000 people fled Sennar and surrounding villages as soon as the RSF entered the area.

The mere arrival of the RSF typically signals widespread atrocities summary executions, rape, looting, humiliation, and abuse of unarmed civilians.

How can people show solidarity with the Sudanese people?

Economists estimate that Sudan has suffered \$100 billion in direct economic losses. Over 90% of the country's factories have been destroyed. Agricultural production has plummeted by 70% following the RSF's takeover of Gezira, and the service sector is operating at just 25% capacity.

To alleviate the suffering of Sudanese civilians, international governments and institutions must be pressured to focus on the crisis. More crucially, they should

pressure foreign actors fueling the conflict like the UAE to stop arming the RSF. It is vital for Arab states and regional and international organizations to recognize the scale of this escalating humanitarian catastrophe. Over half of the population now requires urgent assistance. Humanitarian aid must increase, and partnerships with reliable local actors are essential to ensure it reaches those in need.

Solidarity on social media also plays an important role. Every post, article, or voice helps raise awareness and keeps Sudan's tragedy in the public eye despite global distractions.

Finally, Sudanese refugees abroad victims of a war they did not start need emotional, psychological, and financial support. Host societies must push back against racism and anti-refugee sentiment, and challenge efforts to scapegoat Sudanese communities for economic or political issues in their new countries.

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