

## Graves without names: How many people are missing in Sudan's war?



In Sudan, the war is no longer merely a confrontation between the army and the Rapid Support Forces militia. It has also become a crisis of names and identity, after thousands of people disappeared and large numbers of bodies were buried in haste, in temporary or unmarked graves, without sufficient documentation linking the body to a name.

As of late March 2026, more than 11,000 missing-person cases were being handled by the Sudanese Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross, including cases inside and outside Sudan, some of them predating the current war, according to the latter organization.

As for the war itself, which began in mid-April 2024, The Associated Press reports more than 8,000 missing people, a figure that does not necessarily reflect the full scale of the crisis, because many families are unable to report cases or do not know where to look.

With more than 11 million people displaced and morgues, laboratories, and records damaged, the search for the missing has become an extremely complex task. So what does the map of disappearances in Sudan look like? Who are the

missing? And how does the process of searching and documentation begin, from a family's report to the attempt to restore a name?

The map of disappearances and the missing in Sudan

The International Committee of the Red Cross says it received more than 8,300 requests to search for missing people from April 2023 through March 2026, and only about 1,100 cases were resolved.

But the reality extends beyond these figures. Relief officials say many families cannot or do not dare file reports because of displacement or fear of the authorities.

As a result, it is impossible to produce a final number for the missing. Their numbers continue to change as fighting persists, communications collapse, and different armed groups control vast areas.

Where are disappearances concentrated?

**Khartoum state:** It includes the capital, Omdurman, and Khartoum North. After the fighting, streets, areas around homes, playing fields, and public sites became crowded with temporary graves, and authorities transferred about 30,000 bodies out of 50,000 that had been buried in haste.

Here, the causes of disappearance overlap between shelling, clashes, displacement, and unannounced detention, while it later becomes difficult to link many bodies to their owners' names because of rapid burial and the absence of documentation.

**Darfur region:** Cities such as El Fasher, Nyala, and Zalingei came under attack, prolonged siege, and mass displacement. In El Fasher, the UN refugee agency reported in November 2025 that tens of thousands had fled or been scattered after fighting escalated, with unknown numbers remaining trapped or unregistered.

Here, too, the causes of disappearance overlap between violence on the ground, detention, displacement, communications outages, and the difficulty families or organizations face in reaching search locations.

**The states of Kordofan, Al-Jazirah, and Sennar:** These areas have seen intermittent fighting and widespread hunger, but documentation of the missing is less precise. Many residents fled their villages to other areas or across the border, making it more complicated to trace their fate.

Who are the missing?

**The living missing:** People whose whereabouts are unknown and who may be displaced in remote areas or detained by one of the armed forces, while their

families do not know where they are. They are considered missing until an official body confirms their whereabouts.

**Detainees of unknown location:** Individuals detained by an armed or government entity without their families being informed of where they are, placing their status at the intersection of enforced disappearance and political detention.

**Unidentified bodies:** Bodies whose owners cannot be identified by ordinary means and require DNA analysis. The model law on the search for missing persons stipulates that records of these bodies must be preserved until their identities are established.

**Graves without names:** Burial sites that bear no identifying markers and are not recorded in official records, usually the result of rushed burials during fighting.

**Mass burial sites:** Numerous reports have been published about the discovery of mass burial sites, especially in some neighborhoods of Omdurman.

**Why is it difficult to determine a final number?**

The main reason lies in the multiplicity of controlling authorities and the collapse of state institutions, as burial and documentation methods differ between areas controlled by the army and those under the Rapid Support Forces militia or local movements.

In addition, the flight of millions abroad or to internal camps has reduced the number of recorded reports. Many families do not know that a reporting mechanism exists, or fear the consequences of contacting official bodies.

The destruction of hospital and morgue records, along with the absence of a unified database, also obstructs any attempt to compile the numbers.

**Stages of search and documentation**

The process of searching for the missing in Sudan does not always follow a single organized path. Under normal circumstances, it is supposed to begin with a report from the family, followed by data registration, then matching reports with bodies, detainees, or survivors.

But the war has broken many of these links. Some areas are inaccessible, some bodies were buried before they were documented, and many families were displaced or lost contact with the entities that could register their reports.

### 1. Reporting and case registration

When a person disappears, the family usually begins searching through relatives, neighbors, hospitals, and displacement centers, and may, where possible, turn to the Sudanese Red Crescent, the International Committee of the Red Cross, or local authorities to file a report.

The required data usually include: full name, age, a recent photo, the last place where the person was seen, the clothes they were wearing, distinguishing physical features, phone number, and the names of the people who were with them.

But this information is not always recorded completely. Some families have been displaced, some fear reporting, and in some areas there is no entity capable of receiving reports in the first place.

In cases where a report is registered with an organized body, the family may receive a number or reference for follow-up, but that does not necessarily mean there is a unified national database capable of linking all reports to bodies or detainees.

## 2. Initial search and site identification

After the report is registered, the stage of initial search begins, often through limited means: asking survivors, reviewing hospitals and morgues, searching displacement camps, or contacting people who remained in the area where the person disappeared.

In areas that witnessed shelling or clashes, temporary graves or bodies buried in haste may appear near homes, roads, or playing fields.



Employees of the Sudanese Forensic Medicine Authority exhume the body of an

elderly man killed in 2023 by the Rapid Support Forces, April 20, 2026 (AP)

Here, local teams or volunteers, if security conditions allow, try to record the burial site, photograph the location, and document any belongings or signs that may later help identify the body.

But this stage is the most fragile. Many burial sites were not documented from the outset, and some were opened or moved after control of the area changed, making it harder to link the body to its owner's name.

### 3. Forensic examination

When a body is found, it is supposed to be transferred to a morgue or examination point, if facilities are still functioning. There, an initial examination is conducted to estimate age, sex, height, and the probable cause of death, while recording clothing, belongings, and physical features.

But in Sudan, this is not always possible. Morgues have gone out of service, medical facilities have been damaged, and the number of forensic specialists has declined. As a result, some bodies may be examined in the field or reburied under a temporary number instead of a name, pending the possibility of later examination.

### 4. DNA samples

In cases where clothing, belongings, or the body's features are not enough for identification, DNA samples become an essential tool. A sample may be taken from bone, hair, or teeth from the body and later compared with samples from potential relatives.

But this step faces its biggest obstacle in Sudan: the damage to or shutdown of laboratories that could have been used for DNA testing, in addition to shortages in resources and personnel. As a result, samples may be preserved or numbered instead of analyzed immediately, in the hope of matching them later if laboratories or international support become available.

In other words, taking a sample does not mean the identity will be known immediately; sometimes the sample is merely a deferred promise of possible identification.

### 5. Matching and notifying families

If sufficient data are available, an attempt begins to match families' reports with what has been recorded about the bodies: place of discovery, clothing, belongings, physical features, or DNA results if available.

In cases where a match is confirmed, the family can be notified and the death documented, or the body reburied under a known name. But if the evidence is

incomplete, the identity may remain “probable” rather than confirmed, or the body may be buried as “unidentified” while retaining a number, sample, or description that may prove useful later.

But many cases never reach this stage at all, because of missing records, scattered families, the lack of sufficient laboratories, or the loss of information about the body at the time of the initial burial.

The main obstacles to identifying the missing

The process suffers from serious obstacles, summarized in the following points:

1- Absence of DNA laboratories: DNA units were destroyed or looted by the Rapid Support Forces militia. As a result, samples are buried in separate graves instead of being analyzed, prolonging families' wait and increasing the number of unidentified cases.

2- Shortage of personnel and facilities: Only two forensic doctors remain in Khartoum after the closure of four morgues and the destruction of the Omdurman morgue. This slows examinations and leads to a buildup of bodies.

3- Urgent burial without documentation: During shelling, civilians bury their dead quickly for fear of disease, resulting in graves without names. This practice makes later identification nearly impossible.

4- Multiple conflict parties: Searchers move between areas controlled by the army and others under the control of the Rapid Support Forces militia or local groups, disrupting access to some sites and preventing the unification of documentation procedures.

5- Family displacement: More than 11 million people have been displaced, many of whom cannot return to file a report or take part in identifying a body. Communications outages also hamper data collection.

6- Absence of a national database: The International Committee, the Red Crescent, and resistance committees operate separate databases, and the lack of coordination leads to information being lost or duplicated.

Sudan's missing-persons crisis goes beyond numbers. It is a crisis of identity that leaves thousands of families suspended between a long wait and a grave without a marker.

That is why understanding the distinctions between a living missing person, a detainee of unknown location, and a body without a name is essential to grasping the complexity of the issue. With multiple zones of control and no unified official institutions, finding truth and justice remains an enormous challenge.



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