

SUDAN'S HUNGER CATASTROPHE

Ending The Silence

MARCH 2024

Nearly a year into the conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the population of Sudan faces a full-blown humanitarian catastrophe. Over 25 million people – nearly half the population – require urgent assistance to survive, and people are already dying of starvation in parts of the country. Yet, despite staggering needs and increasing disregard for International Humanitarian Law (IHL) by all conflict parties, the Sudan crisis has not been prioritized by donors nor diplomats. As the situation continues to deteriorate for millions of people, there is no time to waste to prevent further suffering and death. Global leaders should take urgent and bold action to help bring an end to violence against civilians, ensure the delivery of principled humanitarian assistance, and provide sufficient funding for an immediate scale-up of the humanitarian response.

Introduction

The conflict has thus far claimed at least [14,000 lives](#) and displaced over [eight million](#) people across Sudan and into neighboring countries. Of these, over 6.4 million people are displaced internally, making Sudan the **largest internal displacement crisis in the world**.

Communities in Sudan are suffering amidst what can only be described as global indifference. As of March, [less than 5%](#) of funds required by the 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan for Sudan have been allocated, with important gaps across all sectors including food, health, nutrition, water, shelter, and protection.

As the needs continue to escalate, dangerous levels of food insecurity risk turning into famine. Agricultural production is in decline due to the conflict and local markets, while still active in many parts of the country, risk collapsing in the absence of immediate support. Humanitarian responders are currently doing everything possible to contain the crisis by supporting people in need with life-saving assistance and services, even in hard-to-reach

areas. This includes local responders known as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), who have been recognized as [vital](#) to the humanitarian response. But severe funding shortfalls – with particular challenges for ERRs in accessing funds – combined with an increasingly constrained and unsafe operating environment for humanitarian actors and a spreading conflict with no end in sight, are forming a perfect storm that threatens to push communities to their breaking point.

Famine warnings so far ignored

Food security has deteriorated sharply since the outbreak of the conflict in Sudan, turning an existing crisis into a catastrophe. According to the most recent Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) analyses, nearly [18 million people](#) across the country suffer from acute hunger (IPC 3 and above), including five million facing emergency levels (IPC 4) of hunger. Alarming, these analyses were conducted before key aggravating events, such as the December attacks on Al Jazirah State, which until then was a major agricultural producer for the country and a haven for many of the people displaced by the conflict.

As of the second half of 2023, many warnings of the rapidly deteriorating food insecurity and malnutrition situations were already provided.

EARLY WARNINGS

August 3rd, 2023

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) issued a grave [warning](#) on Sudan's deepening food crisis.

October 31st, 2023

Sudan was [identified](#) as one of four hunger hotspots of highest concern for food insecurity for the next six months.

December 13th, 2023

WFP [warned](#) that a hunger catastrophe was looming in Sudan without urgent food assistance.

February 1st, 2024

The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) [sounded the alarm](#) on rising levels of hunger and expected emergence of catastrophic levels (IPC 5) of food insecurity for worst-affected populations in the lean season.

February 2nd, 2024

The World Food Program (WFP) [warned](#) that they were already receiving reports of people dying of starvation.

February 5th, 2024

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), after conducting assessments in Zamzam camp in North Darfur, [warned](#) that one child dies every two hours due, in part, to malnutrition.

February 8th, 2024

Researchers from the Clingendael Institute [projected](#) that in the most likely scenario, seven million people will face catastrophic levels (IPC 5) of hunger by June 2024, amounting to famine conditions.

February 9th, 2024

UNICEF [warned](#) that they expect more than 700,000 children to suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year but will only be able to treat 300,000 of them without increased access and funding.

AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL MARKETS: LIFELINES AT RISK

80% of the population relies on agriculture for income in Sudan – a sector devastated by the conflict. Farmers in conflict areas have either been forced to flee their farms or are unable to buy seeds due to loss of purchasing power. A recent [survey](#) from the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) found that close to a third of the farmers were displaced from their farms' locations and 40% were unable to prepare for planting season due to the conflict. Similarly, a Mercy Corps survey of farmers across Blue Nile and South Kordofan in June-July 2023 found that of the farmers who were not intending to plant, 53% stated they had no money to purchase seeds. The conflict has also caused fuel price hikes, hindering the use of machinery and agrochemicals in industrial farming, which accounts for the production of most of the key staple crop of sorghum. By October 2023, thanks to remote sensing analyses, Mercy Corps was already [reporting](#) on the downward trend in vegetation in key agricultural areas, indicating that the next harvest was unlikely to be as positive as the previous year. Since then, additional analyses confirmed that harvests are [expected](#) to be significantly below average this year.

Unable to produce, people rely increasingly on local markets for staple foods. While markets have been impacted by the conflict, with some reported scarcity of specific items, [evidence](#) shows that they are still active in many parts of the country. However, due to the surge in prices and impacts of the conflict on incomes, people are not able to afford food and essential items available in local markets. As people's purchasing power continues to decline, local markets are increasingly threatened, and so is the ability of populations to cope with the crisis. If local markets cease to function, food insecurity levels will continue to soar until millions of people inevitably face famine conditions. It is vital to ensure that humanitarian in-kind supply chains do not further undermine local markets. Instead, wherever possible, cash-based programs should be prioritized both to keep markets afloat and support people to address a multitude of basic needs.

Preventing widespread famine is still possible. Donors should live up to their commitments to early action in crises and take preventive action now. This means scaling-up medium to longer-term, flexible funding – a larger proportion of which should be allocated for cash-based programs and direct support to local responders. However, this will remain of limited value if assistance cannot reach populations most in need. Therefore, diplomatic efforts by donors to secure free and unfettered access to assistance by populations in need are critical.

IHL breaches on the rise

The conflict in Sudan has been characterized by a blatant disregard by warring parties for basic international humanitarian law (IHL), including through the brutal targeting of civilians and essential civilian infrastructure such as hospitals, homes, and markets, as well as arbitrary denial of humanitarian access to communities in need. Sudan was listed by independent humanitarian analysis provider [ACAPS](#) as one of four countries globally with the worst access constraints. Security threats on humanitarian personnel, facilities, and supplies are rampant. In December 2023, the UN [stated](#) that at least 20 aid workers had already been killed and 36 injured since April, almost all Sudanese. Stifling bureaucratic and administrative impediments also continue to hinder the timely delivery of principled humanitarian assistance across Sudan. These include serious constraints such as requirements for internal travel notifications for humanitarian staff, burdensome and unpredictable visa procedures, heavy tax and custom procedures for humanitarian supplies including medicine, and requirements for the involvement of authorities in humanitarian activities. In March 2024, WFP [warned](#) that 90% of the people facing emergency levels of hunger in Sudan were stuck in areas they could not access.

Even with limited access, humanitarian organizations have been able to support people with life-saving assistance across Sudan. Local organizations, including women-led organizations, have played a vital role in ensuring that people in the hardest-to-reach areas can receive assistance. In Darfur, NGOs

alone reached close to two million people since July 2023. However, to significantly increase aid provision and ensure the survival and well-being of millions more in the coming weeks, unhindered access needs to be guaranteed and facilitated – in line with international humanitarian law.

With Sudan's surface area being roughly three times the size of France, ensuring timely and efficient delivery of assistance to people in need across the country requires as many routes and entry points as feasible to be made fully accessible, including across borders and lines of conflict, regardless of territorial control. Nearly 3,000 kilometers separate Geneina in West Darfur from Port Sudan, the temporary capital. Use of cross-border entry points from neighboring countries such as Chad and South Sudan to reach the Darfur region and other remote areas is therefore essential. However, a recent decision from SAF-led authorities to withdraw their consent for cross-border operations from Chad (which was then partially reversed) indicates that these access options are shrinking, instead of expanding to allow a scale-up of the response. This poses a serious risk to the humanitarian response and threatens to plunge millions more women, men and children into life-threatening levels of hunger, malnutrition and disease.

Meanwhile, the silence of the international community on the situation in Sudan has been deafening. Global leaders urgently need to act and hold the primary parties to the conflict accountable to their IHL obligations to protect civilians and allow rapid and unhindered humanitarian access, while at the same time promoting inclusive dialogue and negotiations towards lasting peace.

Spreading conflict and failed diplomacy

The only lasting solution to bring an end to human suffering in Sudan will be a political one. Yet despite several international and regional mediation initiatives, no meaningful progress has been made to stop the war affecting people inside and outside Sudan since it began in April 2023. As the conflict spreads, so do the horrific reports of widespread,

egregious, and [systematic](#) human rights abuses committed against civilians, especially in Darfur. [Sexual violence](#), including gang rapes, [ethnically targeted killings and pillage](#) all seem to have become commonplace in this war.

Some of the most notable efforts to facilitate dialogue, such as the negotiations in Jeddah facilitated by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other regional actors, have consistently faltered and resulted in countless failed ceasefires. The Jeddah process and other initiatives, such as various efforts to facilitate mediations from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa, the African Union, and States such as Egypt and Turkey, have been fragmented and uncoordinated. While those efforts have helped in securing some [commitments](#) by SAF and RSF to the protection of civilians and humanitarian

access, as required under IHL, they failed to ensure implementation of these commitments, or to resolve the conflict. Instead, the conflict continues to expand, including in key agricultural areas. In addition, leaders of [civilian-led initiatives](#), including essential [women-led initiatives](#) focusing on violence prevention, peaceful coexistence, and addressing the root causes of violence and conflict, have consistently been sidelined from these efforts, further undermining any chance at lasting peace.

To date, the public outcry we would usually expect in a context like Sudan, where communities are faced with horrifying levels of man-made suffering and starvation, has not happened. And diplomatic efforts to end the violence and find a sustainable, inclusive solution to the conflict instead of intensifying, have waned.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The international community's response has so far failed to match the horror and severity of the situation in Sudan, but it is not too late. Global leaders can end the silence surrounding this crisis and risks of widespread famine, and through the following actions, prevent some of the worst outcomes for millions.

- › **Coordinate a peaceful, inclusive and sustainable political resolution to the conflict:** All states and institutions involved in mediation efforts to reach a ceasefire in Sudan should coordinate and unite, instead of working on fragmented initiatives that undermine each other.
 - The African Union, through the High-Level Panel on Sudan and with support from all actors involved in mediation, should take a leading role in coordinating all these initiatives and enable a strong, united voice calling for the implementation of an unconditioned, sustainable ceasefire agreement.
 - Mechanisms for meaningful inclusion of Sudanese civilian voices and civil society into the peace process should be established to ensure a ceasefire agreement that is informed by and representative of the diverse needs of the Sudanese people, and local civilian-led initiatives for peace should be supported, learned from and built upon.

- › **Ensure respect for IHL, including the obligation to allow and facilitate free and unfettered humanitarian access and to ensure the protection of civilians:** All State signatories to key IHL instruments, the UN Security Council (UNSC) and UN senior officials (including the Secretary General and Emergency Relief Coordinator) should take stronger action and use all diplomatic tools at their disposal to urge parties to the conflict to prioritize respect for IHL. Governments and institutions with influence should:
 - Monitor and systematically denounce arbitrary denials of access. This should include the immediate release of statements from *inter-alia* IASC Principals and the Troika among other key actors on the risks posed to millions of people by the recent decision from the government of Sudan to reduce cross-border access from Chad into Darfur, as well as by the continued barriers to operations across lines of conflict.

-) Donors should immediately allocate and disburse the \$2.56 billion still required to fully fund the 2024 Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan**, allowing humanitarian actors to reach more people in need and prevent further starvation. Considering the current famine warnings for the upcoming lean season, there is no time to waste. The majority of funds should be allocated before April 2024 to avoid further loss of life.
- At least 25% of funds should be allocated directly to local groups and actors through innovative funding models that provide more comprehensive support to these actors. For example, establishing a dedicated multi-donor fund for Emergency Response Rooms would enable them to access funds more rapidly and easily.
 - The funding should be medium-long term, flexible and sustained, with a larger proportion being disbursed by humanitarian operational agencies in the form of cash-based programming where markets are functioning.
-) Heed famine warnings and urgently lead a coordinated and complementary response that addresses urgent needs whilst building recovery and resilience:**
- The UN country team should, in close collaboration with civil society operating in Sudan, expedite the finalization of the UN Famine Prevention Strategy – which should urgently receive adequate financial support from global donors.
 - Humanitarian donors and UN leadership in Sudan should recognize the criticality of cash-based programs as an efficient, multi-sectoral component of famine prevention. At a minimum, OCHA should invest in a full-time senior Coordinator for the Sudan Cash Working Group to support the coordination and urgent scale-up of cash support wherever possible.
 - Even while responding to urgent needs, donors and responders should build future resilience of food systems. This should include supporting and strengthening functional markets and food systems where they exist and continuing support to local agricultural production, especially ahead of the next planting and harvest seasons.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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