



NORWEGIAN
REFUGEE COUNCIL

INVISIBLE

THE REGIONAL DISPLACEMENT CRISIS
TRIGGERED BY THE SUDAN CONFLICT



December 2023

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INTRODUCTION

After more than six months of conflict in Sudan, violence continues with no political solution on the horizon. The scale of the crisis is overwhelming: 6.3 million people have fled their homes, more than 20 million are food insecure, including six million on the brink of famine, and essential services are collapsing. The scale and complexity of the displacement crisis in Sudan is also affecting the country's neighbours in many significant ways. At their core lies the fact that more than a million people have fled Sudan to countries that are also fragile, affected by conflict and are grappling with their own humanitarian crises.

This report attempts to capture the experience of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Sudan and refugees in neighbouring countries with a focus on key areas where international engagement and support can make a difference.

KEY messages

Continued fighting, economic collapse and the breakdown of essential services means **the flow of people displaced inside Sudan and seeking safety outside its borders shows no sign of diminishing**. Planning figures for IDPs, refugees and returnees are steadily being revised upwards. For millions of people, life will not return to what it was before.

In Sudan's neighbouring countries, the flow of displaced people is driving overlapping and **reinforcing humanitarian crises, instability, and the potential for conflict**.

This is now one of the world's fastest displacement crises. Yet, it remains grossly **neglected, both in terms of funding and political attention**. Humanitarian needs will worsen in 2024 if the trend is not reversed.

The regional humanitarian crisis will be **protracted**. Many refugees surveyed say they have no intention of returning to Sudan in the short term, even if the security situation were to improve. Yet host countries are struggling to cope with their existing caseloads of displaced people.

CALL to action

Urgent resources and action are needed to meet these growing needs both within Sudan and in the countries hosting people displaced from Sudan. Funding for the Sudan refugee response should not divert resources away from vital ongoing humanitarian assistance in host countries.

Sustainable support and longer-term programming with a focus on durable solutions are needed. This includes a truly coordinated and joined-up response across the humanitarian development peace nexus.

Intensify diplomatic engagement in resolving the conflict in Sudan, and in so doing address the root causes of displacement.

Meet commitments made under the Global Compact for Refugees in Sudan and neighbouring countries by providing safe and legal migration pathways for those fleeing the conflict in Sudan.

1 NEEDS

Sudan has long been said to be the heart of Africa, and the effects of its internal conflict are being felt throughout its seven neighbouring countries. The personal stories of people fleeing the violence are each unique, but this report attempts to capture the broad themes and trends that tie their experiences together.



📷 IDPs in an abandoned school in Kosti, Sudan. ©Ahmed Omer/NRC

1.1 A NEW DISPLACEMENT EMERGENCY

PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT

Cycles of conflict and mass killing in Sudan's peripheries left the country in a state of constant displacement crisis from the early 2000s. Before the eruption of the current conflict on 15 April 2023, there were already 3.8 million IDPs in Sudan, of whom more than half a million were forced to flee their homes in Darfur between 2020 and 2023. The rest of the country's IDPs have largely been stranded for decades in neglected mass camps with little hope of achieving durable solutions to their plight. More than 400,000 people also fled Darfur for Chad between 2003 and 2020.

Sudan was also home to a million registered refugees as of March 2023, mainly from South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Syria, and an unknown number of non-registered asylum seekers and migrants – people who fled one warzone only to find themselves in another.

Sudan is also a central link in the irregular migration route to the Mediterranean, including for some people who saw no future in the country's refugee camps and were often trafficked on to Libya. The impact of the current conflict on this dynamic is unclear, but it must be assumed that the sheer scale and scope of additional displacement will aggravate all possible outcomes.

REPEATED DISPLACEMENT

The current conflict has not only triggered new displacement. It has also shattered one of Africa's largest communities of IDPs, refugees and migrants. A considerable but unknown number of people displaced by the fighting had already been forced to flee two, three or even four times in their lifetime.

In contrast to previous wars in Sudan and most other conflicts in the region, the fighting that erupted in April has largely been in urban centres rather than rural peripheries. The cities of Khartoum, Nyala, Geneina and Zalingei have borne the brunt of the violence, before which they also had the country's largest concentrations of displaced people. In Geneina, for example, the city's 100 or so informal settlements were burned to the ground, and the entire displaced population – estimated at 90,000 before the war – was forced to flee again. An unknown number were killed on the way.

The capital, Khartoum, also hosted many thousands of refugees and IDPs from earlier conflicts. Some displaced families had lived there for more than a generation, but on 15 April the city of refuge became a battlefield. Some of the worst-affected neighbourhoods, such as Mayo, Eddeim Jereif and Sahafa, were also the most marginalised, hosting large communities of IDPs and refugees from Eritrea, Ethiopia and South Sudan, who fled again.

1.2 DISPLACEMENT WITHIN SUDAN

PATTERNS OF DISPLACEMENT

Extreme levels of urban violence have forced residents, and those already displaced, to flee at an unprecedented rate to other urban centres. There were more internal displacements in Sudan in the first five months of the war than in the past 14 years put together. Around 200,000 a week were recorded until September, with the rate slowing to around 78,000 in October.

The largest exodus has been from Khartoum state. Around 33 per cent of its pre-war population has fled. More than 5.1 million internal displacement are recorded since the start of the war, 65 per cent or nearly 3.4 million have been from the capital. According to the International Organization for

Migration (IOM), most of the country's IDPs are in the Darfur and Kordofan regions.

Displacement patterns since the war have in part been influenced by family links, with some people seeking refuge in their area of origin or in places where they are most likely to find relatives to host them. People's limited financial means have also been a major factor in determining where and how they have fled, along with the insecurity, blocked roads and local authorities' management of population influxes.

Field visits to collective shelters in areas of Doka in the eastern state of Gedaref found that many people sheltering there had no affiliation with the area, nor had they had much of a say in why they had ended there. It was the only option available to them at the time. Displaced families originally from Darfur in the far west of the country who had sought refuge in Khartoum, for example, were now secondarily displaced in the far east of the country.

For refugees fleeing the capital, their legal status and the vulnerabilities associated with it have been the main factors in shaping the patterns of their displacement. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), around 191,000 refugees and asylum seekers have fled Khartoum, mainly towards White Nile, the East and Port Sudan. In many cases, they were directed to existing camps hosting people of the same nationality and/or ethnicity.

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

Most displaced people have found shelter in urban centres hosted by relatives or the local community. Yet as the months of conflict drag on, the ability of hosting families to continue to support displaced people is being stretched, and displaced families may have to join the more than 1 million people living in camps, informal settlements, and collective sites in public buildings.

In most cases families are living in very cramped conditions, sharing rooms with other families, with limited access to clean water and sanitation facilities. For example, in October 2023 a cholera outbreak was declared in the states of Gedaref, Jazira, South Kordofan and Khartoum with IDPs living in collective shelters among the most impacted.

The management of population flows has been extremely challenging for local authorities in hosting areas. A lack of space for those hosted in public buildings and spaces has led several local and state authorities to redirect displaced people to less overcrowded areas. Though this has meant that IDPs were placed in more remote areas, away from essential services like healthcare, schools, and markets.

NO OPTION TO LEAVE

Fleeing is not an option for many people. Obstacles to movement are likely to include attacks, roadblocks and extortion at checkpoints. Parties to the conflict in Zalingei in Central Darfur, for example, restricted movement out of a camp for IDPs in, Hasahisa and armed men in Sirba in West Darfur used violence to prevent people fleeing towards Chad.

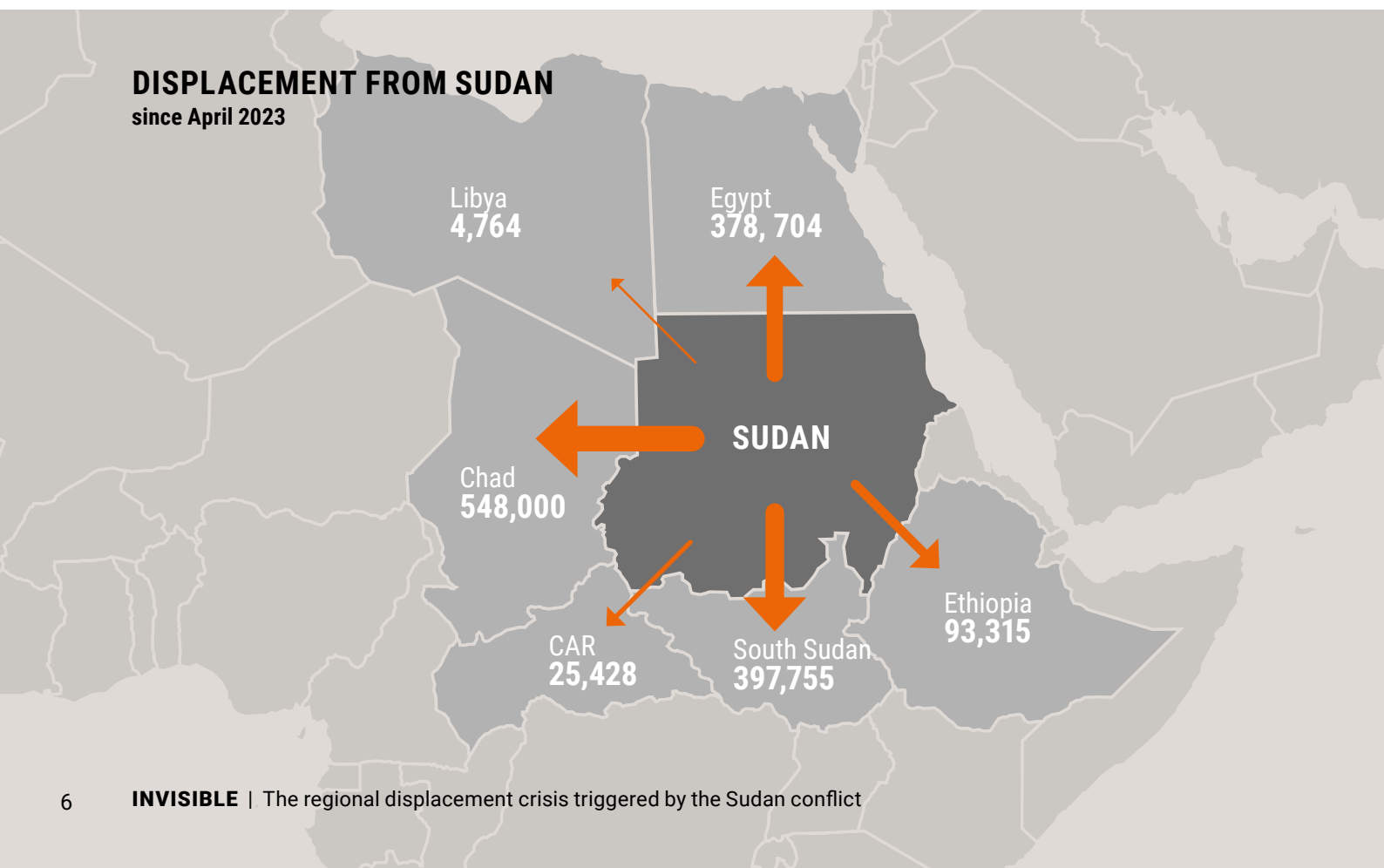
Testimony collected among IDPs in Gedaref and White Nile’s collective shelters also reveals that the cost of transport out of Khartoum, which has skyrocketed since the start of the conflict, was one of the main reasons for others staying behind.

1.3 CROSSING THE BORDER

Within days of the outbreak of conflict, people began crossing Sudan’s borders in search of safety. The largest flows in the first days were towards Egypt, and there are distinct differences between the experiences of people entering Egypt and those crossing into Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia and CAR. Around 1.2 million people had fled Sudan as of 1 November, according to UNHCR, of whom 74.4 per cent were Sudanese refugees, 23.6 per cent returnees and two per cent non-Sudanese asylum seekers.

Official figures from the Egyptian government put the number of people seeking international protection because of the Sudan crisis at 378,704. The vast majority are Sudanese and the remainder third-country nationals. There is no systematic registration at the crossing points though and the figures do not include people who enter Egypt irregularly. Local organisations providing aid to refugees suggest that about half of those who approach them for assistance have entered irregularly.

These movements have been driven in large part by new border restrictions. Since June, all Sudanese people regardless of age and gender must have valid travel document and apply for a



visa. Thousands of people have been stuck in Wadi Halfa on the Sudan side of the border as a result, waiting to receive permission to enter Egypt.

A UNHCR sample survey of new arrivals in Egypt indicated that 60 per cent of people had waited between one and three months for their visa to be processed. In the absence of accurate figures on irregular entries, it is estimated that the number of “regular” entries has dropped from around 5,000 to 300 a day since the new entry procedures were put in place.

There are no official restrictions on people crossing the border into Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, or CAR. Chad has received the highest number, with 548,000 people arriving in the eastern provinces of Ouaddaï, Sila and Wadi Fira. This includes both refugees and as many as 100,000 Chadian returnees who had lived in Sudan for most of their lives. Hundreds of people continue to arrive daily and the Chadian government estimates that 600,000 people will have done so by the end of the year unless circumstances change.

A reported 397,755 people have crossed from Sudan into South Sudan, the majority in Upper Nile state, and more than 2,000 are doing so every day.

In Ethiopia, 93,315 people have entered via crossing points at Metema in Amhara region and Kurmuk in Benishangul-Gumuz region. Others have used entry points in Gambella region.

CAR has received 25,428 people. The country officially grants access to all people fleeing the conflict in Sudan, but one in three households surveyed said they had had difficulties trying to cross the border.

UNHCR has also reported an increasing movement of people unable to cross into other countries towards Eritrea. The reopening of the border between Sudan and Eritrea is said to have provided a safe exit for people who then use Asmara airport to travel to third countries for which they have valid entry visas.

OVERWHELMING NEEDS

People crossing Sudan’s borders are extremely vulnerable, and most have significant needs. Whether in camps, host communities, or informal settlements, there are significant gaps in basic services. People lack food, water, shelter, sanitation and hygiene, education, health and protection.

Those in Chad live mainly in informal sites along the border, though around 40 per cent have been relocated to camps. The new camps are in remote locations with little infrastructure and no services and needs already far exceed the capacity of aid agencies to respond – a challenge across most of the countries hosting people displaced from Sudan.

REFUGEES AND RETURNEES

Many people who have fled Sudan are classified as returnees, meaning they are former refugees going back to their country of origin or, in the case of Chad, people who had chosen to live in Sudan because services and economic prospects were better there. Until recently most people who crossed the border into South Sudan were classified returnees. Their individual stories may differ, but many had been out the country for many years, some are married to Sudanese nationals or were born and educated in Sudan. While there are legal or operational reasons to differentiate between returnees and refugees, their humanitarian needs and the pressures on aid agencies to respond to them are largely similar.

There is a shortage of at least 50,000 household shelters across all the sites receiving people from Sudan. Nor is there enough safe water. UNHCR estimates people have less than seven litres of water a day, less than half the emergency indicator. Half of the children in the camps are malnourished, with rates of acute malnutrition ranging between 10 and 20 per cent among new refugees.



📷 Water reception area in a transit centre in Renk, South Sudan. © Lumago Moses/NRC

Children have also lost access to education. Ninety per cent of displaced households have children who were in school in Sudan, but there are few education services in their places of refuge. Further camps are being planned, but there is not enough funding to complete them. Other refugees are living in host communities, where there are also few if any education or other services. Adre, a border city 27 kilometres from Geneina, is the main crossing point from West Darfur into Chad and around 150,000 refugees are still living there.

Most people who have crossed the border from Sudan into South Sudan have been identified as returnees. As such, in terms of government and humanitarian agency policy, they should be returning to their places of origin. Before people can be moved or find their own way, however, they are housed in overcrowded transit sites without adequate shelter, water or food.

This leaves people facing tough decisions. Many are being transported to and are trying to settle in places they have not lived in for many years, if ever. Affected by years of conflict and with no services, many locations are unable to absorb them. Nor is what little local communities have enough to support the new arrivals. People want to leave the overcrowded transit sites as quickly as possible, but they are often confronted by similar conditions in the areas they move on to.

The Kumer refugee site in Ethiopia, about 70 kilometres from the border with Sudan, was established in June and is already sheltering more than 9,000 people, about 3,000 more than its intended capacity. Only about 1,300 people have been transferred from the Kurmuk entry point in Benishangul-Gumuz to the pre-existing Sherkole refugee camp because there is no space in it or other already established camps to accommodate new arrivals. In areas such as Metekal-Guba thousands of returnees have received little to no assistance at all.

The first groups of refugees to arrive in Egypt had the means to support themselves, but later arrivals have needed extensive support, which has mainly been provided by local organisations and residents of the city of Aswan. All new arrivals take refuge in the local community, either with host families or in rental properties, and to a much lesser extent in temporary shelters. Aswan does not, however, have the resources or capacity to support the continued influx.

Anyone who wants to register with UNHCR or formalise their status in Egypt must travel to Cairo to do so. Those who have entered the country irregularly face the risk of arrest and deportation en route, while for many others the cost of the journey is prohibitive. Newcomers to the capital also stay with host families, many of whom are migrants or refugees themselves, often in already overcrowded areas.

1.4 PRE-EXISTING NEEDS IN COUNTRIES OF REFUGE

Almost all of the countries hosting refugees from Sudan had significant pre-existing humanitarian needs of their own.

Chad ranks at the bottom of most human development indicators. It has one of the highest hunger levels in the world and 42 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. Fewer than half of the country's children have access to safe drinking water. Around 1.9 million people in eastern Chad already needed humanitarian assistance before the Sudan crisis, and many communities had malnutrition rates exceeding the World Health Organization's critical threshold. The country also has 300,000 IDPs and pre-existing refugee case load of more than 400,000.

South Sudan has experienced several decades of internal conflict, leaving 9.4 million people, or three-quarters of the population, in need of humanitarian support before the start of the Sudan crisis. More than seven million are acutely food insecure and 2.3 million internally displaced.

Ethiopia has also experienced several intense internal conflicts in the past five years, causing internal displacement and humanitarian needs on an unprecedented scale, including in the two regions that have received most refugees from Sudan.

In CAR, 44 per cent of children were out of school at the start of 2023. Providing quality education in rural areas, including those hosting Sudanese refugees, is particularly challenging as a result of scarce resources and capacity and persistent insecurity. The average student-to-teacher ratio in primary schools in the Nord-Est region, where most refugees are located, is one to 216.

Services in Egypt were also already overstretched before the arrival of significant numbers of people from Sudan put further strain on health and education systems. Secondary and tertiary medical care, affordable maternal health services and psychosocial support are of particular concern. A decree granting refugees from Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen access to public education has yet to be renewed for the 2023-2024 academic year, affecting tens of thousands of pupils and university students. Community-based refugee schools, which follow the Sudanese curriculum, are unable to cope with the additional influx of students.

2 PROTECTION



📷 Families fleeing Khartoum found refuge among already displaced community in White Nile, Sudan. © Ahmed Omer/NRC

2.1 CONFLICT DYNAMICS AND RISING LOCAL TENSIONS

THE REGION: YEARS OF CONFLICT AND INSTABILITY

Many of the countries that have received refugees from Sudan are themselves fragile states that have long been affected by conflict, where the influx of tens or hundreds of thousands of displaced people has the potential to aggravate existing tensions and accentuate political fault lines.

South Sudan is a particular case in point. It gained its independence from Sudan in 2011 after decades of conflict, and then became the scene of a civil war that lasted until 2018. It is still slowly implementing the peace agreement that brought the war to an official end, but conflict and insecurity continues, and potentially destabilising elections are scheduled for late 2024.

Against this backdrop the arrival of tens of thousands of people in areas experiencing continuing cycles of intercommunal violence has considerable potential to aggravate local disputes. Intentions surveys among new arrivals, many of whom previously sought shelter from violence in South Sudan in Sudan, also indicate that people wish to return to towns and homes from which they fled. In many cases, however, their homes have been occupied by others in their absence. Without systems to manage housing and land disputes, there is a clear risk of widespread instability.

The 1,400-kilometre border between Chad and Sudan is historically insecure. N'Djamena and Khartoum have in the past used armed groups to fight an intermittent proxy war, and the multitude of armed groups still present in Chad

poses a distinct risk of similar dynamics re-emerging. Bordering both the Sahel and Central Africa, Chad has experienced the spillover of conflict, violence and refugees from both regions. Political instability and military takeovers in Gabon, Niger and Burkina Faso in the last two years have added to the tensions. Within Chad, pastoralists and farmers are also frequently in conflict over the control of increasingly scarce natural resources.

Continued instability in Ethiopia's Amhara and Tigray regions has led UNHCR to project that around 30,000 people could cross into Sudan between November 2023 and February 2024. They would include Ethiopians fleeing violence in Amhara and potential Sudanese returnees, refugees and asylum seekers currently residing in the Metema sites near the border with Sudan.

In Sudan itself, the conflict shows no sign of abating. Almost half of all the people displaced in Sudan fled from Darfur and Kordofan regions where heavy clashes and the mobilisation of new fighters continues. With it comes the risk of renewed attacks on civilians and the conflict spreading to new regions.

DISPLACEMENT-DRIVEN TENSIONS

Local tensions between host communities, IDPs and refugees in Sudan are likely to increase, particularly over the sharing of scarce resources and the assumption that new arrivals drive inflation. Such tensions between IDPs and host communities have already been reported in Wadi Halfa and Wad Madani.

Tensions between refugees and host communities raise additional concerns because they have already led local authorities to enforce stricter encampment policies. Some host communities have also asked that refugees be sent back to their country of origin. The authorities have not done so, but it raises the highly problematic risk of refoulement.

Ethnic tensions among refugees, often mirroring the conflicts in their home countries, are also a risk. Authorities and humanitarians have mitigated it by allocating camps based on ethnicity, but families of mixed marriages – for example between Amharan and Tigrayan, or Tigrayan and Eritrean refugees – who used to live

relatively safely in Khartoum now face more complicated and heightened protection risks.

Areas in and around Kurmuk in Ethiopia are also witnessing increased tensions between refugees and host communities, and between refugees of different ethnic groups, fuelled grievances related to perceived favouritism by humanitarians.

Host communities and the authorities in Chad have been welcoming of new arrivals, but there are now three refugees for every host community member in the east of the country, and the scarcity of resources and the scale of the influx pose significant challenges. Tensions between host communities, long-term refugees, recent arrivals and returnees over evictions and access to land, water and firewood have the potential to trigger violence. As more people flee to Chad this potential increases and could be aggravated if host communities perceive refugees to be receiving more aid.

There has been a rise in discrimination and stigma towards refugees expressed on social media in Egypt, which has led to heightened tensions between Egyptians and refugee and migrant communities, and among the refugee and migrant communities themselves.

2.2 GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, CHILD PROTECTION AND TRAFFICKING

The Sudan crisis has exacted a severe toll on women and children. Many have survived conflict-related violence, sexual violence, torture or detention on their journeys to the border. UN experts have denounced reports of the widespread use of rape and other forms of sexual violence by parties to the conflict as a weapon of war.

The number of cases is unknown because of the collapse of the health system and the reluctance of many survivors to report such violations. Sudanese women and girls in urban centres and in Darfur have been particularly vulnerable to violence, as have female refugees and migrants. UNHCR has said some rape survivors have arrived in neighbouring countries pregnant.

Displaced people are widely reported to be at heightened risk of violence and forced recruitment given their proximity to porous and unsecured border areas. Gender-based violence (GBV) also takes place in camps and informal settings, where women and girls have been ambushed on their way to latrines and at night. UNHCR found that 31 per cent of surveyed households did not feel safe in some areas because of the risk of GBV.

More than 900 incidents of GBV have been reported in areas of displacement in CAR since the outbreak of war in Sudan, half of which were related to attacks against property. It is likely that protection incidents have been vastly underestimated, because monitoring in the most remote areas has only been systematic since June.

Almost 40 per cent of registered refugees in CAR are children of school age, but their lack of documentation and the presence of armed groups in the border area put them at increased risk of recruitment and other negative coping strategies. This is particularly the case for unaccompanied children.

A lack of food and the temporary suspension of distributions has become a key driver of protection risks for refugees and asylum seekers in Ethiopia in the past couple of months. Many separated and unaccompanied minors are arriving from Sudan in highly vulnerable situations, and that around 3,200 children in the Kumer refugee site are out of school. Reports also show that refugees have resorted to extreme coping mechanisms such as prostitution, child labour and other hazardous work to survive.

Many children have also arrived at border points with South Sudan separated from their parents and are likely to face a similar range of protection risks.

© Barbara Kemisa/NRC



RETURNEES IN RENK, SOUTH SUDAN

Abuk Ayong, 25, is a mother-of-three from Warrap state in South Sudan who had been living in Sudan with her husband. When the conflict erupted, her life took an unexpected turn, and she made the heart-wrenching decision to leave her husband behind with hope of a future reunion.

Face with much uncertainty, she embarked on a difficult journey back to South Sudan, during which she crossed paths with Angelina Kuor, a 46-year-old blind woman who was travelling alone with no one to help her. Together they endured the chaos and commotion of their journey, and Abuk, her children and Angelina reached Renk in Eastern Nile state, where they found shelter in the same communal house and began to navigate the challenges of their new reality.

W *We have nowhere to go. We arrived ten days ago, and we have not received much help. We are really tired, and we have nothing left."*

Abuk

Around 75 per cent of people crossing into Egypt at the start of the Sudan crisis were women, children and elderly people, and women and girls still accounted for more than 50 per cent of new arrivals as of October. Many have experienced sexual violence and other protection concerns on their journeys and family separation is common.

Already an issue before the outbreak of war in Sudan, the conflict has also heightened the risk of people smuggling and trafficking along the country's borders. The dynamics have also changed. Sudan used to be a country of origin, destination, and transit for mixed flows, but it is now only a country of origin.

2.3 BASIC RIGHTS UNDERMINED

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

Sudan's conflict has heightened the specific vulnerabilities of refugees in the country, whose movement was already restricted before the war broke out. In Sudan's peripheries, and particularly in the east, authorities enforced a policy of encampment. On arrival in the country, refugees were allocated camps with few alternative options. They usually require permits to travel in and out of the camps on essential journeys and to engage in economic activities. Authorisation for travel between states is more difficult to obtain. In contrast, refugees living in Khartoum used to have more freedom of movement. The conflict, however, has changed that and reinforced the restrictions other refugees face.

PROTECTION FROM EVICTION

IDPs in Sudan are also at risk of forced eviction and onward displacement. Hundreds of thousands have taken refuge in public buildings and particularly schools. The authorities have so far delayed reopening schools across the country, in part because most teachers have not been paid since March and in part because IDPs are living in the classrooms. The imminent and necessary reopening brings the risk of eviction if no alternative accommodation is provided.

RIGHT TO DOCUMENTATION

Many people displaced within and from Sudan lack the documentation they require to exercise their rights. They may have lost birth certificates, identity documents and/or property deeds as a result of the conflict or during their displacement, or some may not have had such paperwork in the first place. Refugees are rarely able to replace lost documents or record new births, and IDPs may face similar difficulties.

Housing, land and property (HLP) issues affect many communities, including those returning to South Sudan who often find their land grabbed, housing destroyed, and property confiscated and no longer have the documents to prove their ownership. Mechanisms to resolve these issues are weak, inaccessible and under-resourced.

Protection risks related to people's lack of identity and civil documentation and its effect on shelter, housing and land issues are particularly concerning. CAR, for example, faces major challenges in resolving such issues for its own people, let alone the refugees it hosts.

Among recently displaced arrivals in Chad, 47 per cent are thought to not have civil documents. People have lost documents fleeing violence, and UNHCR notes that nearly a third report having lost them to fire or destruction. Lack of documentation is a consequence of forced displacement across the region, and people unable to prove their identity and nationality risk having their freedom of movement curtailed because they are unable to travel through official border checkpoints. This means they may turn to other, more dangerous channels such as smuggling. Others may be refused asylum and may not be able to apply for refugee status. It will also be more difficult for people to return to their places of origin without proof of identity and nationality.

3

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Against the backdrop of a displacement crisis of exceptional scale and scope, humanitarian resources to respond are being stretched to breaking point. The crisis in Sudan caught the international diplomatic community off guard, and humanitarian operations in neighbouring countries were already underfunded and working at maximum capacity when people began to flood across their borders.



📷 New refugee arrivals. Metema, Ethiopia. © Sarah Casteran/NRC

3.1 REACHING PEOPLE IN NEED

ACCESS IN SUDAN

Reaching IDPs and refugees alike is extremely difficult in Sudan. Access is severely restricted nationwide as a result of the conflict, increasing criminality and direct constraints that have emerged and redoubled. Entry into the country for humanitarian workers has been a struggle over the past six months, and international NGOs continue to find it difficult to obtain visas. Humanitarian convoys must undergo cumbersome approval processes, and authorisation for movements at the state level are becoming increasingly difficult to obtain in the east. Bureaucratic impediments have undermined

humanitarian organisations' ability to attend to displaced people at the scale and speed required.

ACCESS IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

The vast majority of the people fleeing Sudan have sought shelter in hard-to-reach peripheries of neighbouring countries. CAR, Chad, Ethiopia and South Sudan are also landlocked, making the cost of delivering humanitarian assistance to areas bordering Sudan much higher than in many other refugee responses.

Chad's infrastructure is particularly underdeveloped in the eastern provinces that border Sudan, where roads, bridges and drainage systems are almost non-existent. The rainy season fills up six major wadis from June to October each year, turning what was previously open space into impassable areas, blocking the few roads that do exist and cutting off many locations. These two factors significantly impede the humanitarian response and at the same time limit people's access to basic services such as hospitals.

Conflict in all of Chad's neighbours, except for the Cameroon-Chad border, has also closed trade and access routes. Before war broke out in Sudan, eastern Chad relied on Sudanese trade routes, many of which are now closed, as are previous corridors for aid supplies through Libya.

Access challenges in Ethiopia have aggravated an already dire situation. Benishangul-Gumuz has long been a neglected region with very significant constraints. Humanitarians were unable to access some areas, such as the Guba *woreda* or district, for more than three years as result of conflict, and now it is accessible again, the flow of assistance has been negligible. The Kurmuk entry point from Sudan is remote with no large city nearby, and getting even small supplies to the area is extremely difficult. Recent violence in Amhara led to the suspension of internet access and constrained communication, making the monitoring of needs and the delivery of essential assistance increasingly difficult since August.

Insecurity plays an important role in CAR, but access there is mostly hampered by physical restrictions in the form of poor roads. The closest humanitarian hub to the Am Dafock border point with Sudan is in Birao, 70 kilometres away. The journey can take three hours even in normal conditions, and during the rainy season it is impossible overland. All roads become impassable, and the border area is prone to flooding, leaving access by air as the only option.

Relocations to Korsi, near Birao, started over the summer to ensure that displaced communities are better protected and have better access to basic services and aid. By the end of September, however, only 1,825 people had been moved before the process had to be suspended because of the rainy season and the withdrawal of MINUSCA, the UN's stabilisation mission in CAR, from the Am Dafock area.

Access to Egypt's border areas with Sudan requires a security permit, and the only organisation officially allowed in is the Egyptian Red Crescent. Some individuals seem to have acceptance to provide ad hoc assistance, however, along with small local community initiatives and networks and people from Sudan previously displaced to Egypt.

Most organisations operate primarily in Cairo, with little if any presence outside of the capital. Presence and local coordination mechanisms have increased in Aswan, but it is still 300 kilometres from the border and most people still need to go to Cairo for further assistance and administrative procedures.

3.2 FUNDING

The ability of aid agencies to respond to the growing needs triggered by the large-scale displacement from Sudan is significantly hampered by funding shortages across all the countries receiving those fleeing.

The 2023 humanitarian response plan (HRP) for Chad was updated in September, with the number of people in need increasing from 6.9 million to 7.6 million, but it is only a quarter funded. Part of the funding destined for the country's existing internal crises has been redirected to eastern Chad. The World Food Programme (WFP) has stopped assistance to 320,000 crisis-affected people in other areas of the country for lack of funding.

South Sudan's HRP for 2023 is only 53 per cent funded, despite the country being home to around 2.2 million IDPs as of the end of July. Around 5.8 million people are also expected to face crisis levels of food insecurity or worse by early 2024. There were around 1.4 million malnourished children in the country before the arrival newly displaced people from Sudan.

Only 23 per cent of requirements for the Sudan refugee response in Ethiopia had been covered as of October, leaving a funding gap of about \$70 million. The lack of funding has pushed many partners to suspend essential services. In Kurmuk, NRC witnessed a pregnant woman in need of urgent care who could not be taken to the hospital because there was no fuel for an ambulance, and the distribution of meals, high energy biscuits and bottled water at the Metema

entry point was interrupted for several weeks in August.

The \$126 million refugee response plan for Egypt is only 35 per cent funded. Cairo continues to state that it will support those seeking international protection, but it has also indicated that it is not receiving the international support it had expected and would like to see increased responsibility and burden sharing.

Sudan's own HRP for 2023, which called for \$2.6 billion, is only 33.5 per cent funded, and funding is diminishing for local responders.

Across all the countries affected by Sudan's displacement crisis discussions are ongoing for the 2024 humanitarian programme cycle. With people continuing to be displaced inside Sudan and across its borders, the gap between burgeoning needs and available funding is growing. This reality means aid agencies will be forced to make very difficult decisions and prioritise the needs of some people over others.

CONCLUSION

Eight months since the start of the conflict in Sudan, two distinct dynamics are unfolding. The first is that while the conflict continues, the scale and scope of the humanitarian crisis will also continue to expand. With no obvious pathway to any political resolution visible, and the complexity of the conflict deepening as new actors enter the fight, more people will be impacted and displaced. Added to which, as the conflict drags on, the resilience of displaced people and the communities hosting them, will be worn down by economic and state collapse pushing ever more people into situations of dire need.

The second dynamic is that the Sudan displacement crisis is becoming increasingly neglected, eclipsed by Gaza and Ukraine. Yet while the attention of the world is rightly seized by the political and humanitarian repercussions of these crises, the risks of falling off the international agenda for Sudan and its neighbours are critical. Neglect matters as it allows for more human suffering. It delays action at a time when increased political will is needed to find solutions, prevent further conflict, alleviate humanitarian needs, and find durable solutions for displaced people.

