

From the Sahel to Sudan: Genocide, Mass Atrocities, and a World Looking Away

Jannatul Toba Jhumu¹



Source: Global Center for Responsibility to Protect

Across Africa, some of the world's most devastating conflicts are unfolding. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, militant groups violence has become one of the deadliest conflicts in Africa. Fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in these three countries have outpaced those in other regions of Africa for several years, with close to 49,000 deaths tied to extremist violence in the Sahel since 2022 alone.² Groups such as Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), al-Qaeda's regional

¹ Jannatul Toba Jhumu is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS and MSS in Development Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Mounting Fatalities Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa amid Shifting Tactics," August 12, 2026, [Mounting Fatalities Linked to Militant Islamist Violence in Africa amid Shifting Tactics – Africa Center](#)

affiliate, and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) now operate across large areas of the region and have expanded their activities towards neighboring countries. In 2025 alone, political violence killed more than 10,000 people across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.³

In Sudan, since fighting began between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), in April 2023, millions of people have been forced from their homes. More than 13 million people have been displaced, making Sudan the world's largest displacement crisis.⁴ The confirmed death toll has already passed 59,000, although the actual number is believed to be much higher.⁵ In Darfur, the violence has also raised serious concerns about genocide. UN human rights investigators have warned that some of the violence bears "the hallmarks of genocide",⁶ while the United States formally determined in January 2025 that genocide was taking place in Darfur.⁷

Civilians face mass atrocities and widespread suffering. Millions of people have lost their lives, and faced displacement. Yet, these crises remain outside the main focus of international news and political debate. This difference in attention matters. When a crisis receives little international attention, the people affected by it can become almost invisible. The suffering does not stop, but the world hears less about it.

Why This Region is Vulnerable

The region's crisis is shaped by political and institutional weaknesses that existed long before the current wars. In Sudan, British colonial rule treated the western and southern periphery as a labor reserve. The 1922 Closed District Ordinances restricted movement and investment, while development remained concentrated around the riverine center and Khartoum.⁸ After

³ Héní Nsaibia, "Economic Warfare Escalates as Militants Expand beyond the Sahel," ACLED, December 2025, [Economic warfare escalates as militants expand beyond the Sahel | ACLED](#)

⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace, "Sudan's Genocide Warnings: Why the World Isn't Watching," *Vision of Humanity*, July 29, 2026, [Sudan's Genocide Warnings: Why the World Isn't Watching](#)

⁵ Kate Bartlett, "Besieged Sudanese City Faces Relentless Drone Strikes and Risk of Mass Atrocities, U.N. Warns," *WUNC News*, August 7, 2026, [Besieged Sudanese city faces relentless drone strikes and risk of mass atrocities, U.N. warns | WUNC News](#)

⁶ David J. Scheffer, "The Specter of Genocide Returns to Darfur," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 13, 2026, [The Specter of Genocide Returns to Darfur | Council on Foreign Relations](#)

⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Darfur," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, accessed September 20, 2026, [Darfur | Holocaust Encyclopedia](#)

⁸ Darius Spearman, "Sudan Humanitarian Crisis: The Hidden Roots of War," *African Elements*, September 7, 2026, [Sudan Humanitarian Crisis: The Hidden Roots of War – African Elements](#)

independence in 1956, power remained concentrated among a narrow elite in Khartoum. Darfur, Kordofan and the south remained deeply marginalized, creating a “racialized center and a marginalized periphery”.⁹ The RSF grew from Arab militias once armed by Khartoum to fight unrest in the periphery.¹⁰

Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger were also fragile before the recent coups. Since 2020, at least seven West African governments have been overthrown by their militaries, creating what some analysts call a “coup belt”.¹¹ The withdrawal of UN peacekeepers further weakened the existing security system. No durable replacement has emerged. GIGA now describes the region as “more fragile than ever, while other assessments warn of growing spaces for JNIM and ISSP to operate.”¹²

Ethnic diversity itself does not cause conflict. But political actors have repeatedly used identity to mobilize violence. Sudan has more than 500 ethnic groups and over 400 languages. Communities such as the Fur, Beja, Nuba, Zaghawa and Masalit have long been concentrated in marginalized regions. Arab and African identities were historically fluid, shaped by centuries of intermarriage. Political power later hardened these identities. Successive governments promoted an Arab and Islamic national identity, while the Janjaweed and later the RSF used “Arab” identity to target communities labelled African.¹³ The conflict is therefore not simply religious. The Masalit, Fur and Zaghawa are predominantly Muslim. In 2023, RSF forces and allied militias carried out mass killings and ethnic cleansing against the Masalit around El Geneina. After El Fasher fell in October

⁹ Lara Lamie, “Darfur: The Same Crimes, the Same Victims, the Same International Neglect,” *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*, December 16, 2025, [Darfur: The Same Crimes, the Same Victims, the Same International Neglect - VU Amsterdam](#)

¹⁰ Yonas Yizezew, “The Making of Darfur’s Periphery: Colonial Legacies and the Risk of Sudan’s Partition,” *Horn Review*, November 11, 2025, [The Making of Darfur’s Periphery: Colonial Legacies and the Risk of Sudan’s Partition – HORN REVIEW](#)

¹¹ African Security Analysis, “Threat and Risk Assessment of West Africa and the Sahel: Converging Threat Vectors and Strategic Breakdown,” December 26, 2025, [Threat and Risk Assessment of West Africa and the Sahel: Converging Threat Vectors and Strategic Breakdown | African Security Analysis](#)

¹² Arda Alkis, “Sahel Crisis 2026: Bamako under Blockade, the Fall of Kidal and Niger’s Failed Coup,” *WARWATCH*, September 18, 2026, Arda Alkis, “Sahel Crisis 2026: Bamako under Blockade, the Fall of Kidal and Niger’s Failed Coup,” *WARWATCH*, September 18, 2026,

¹³ Willow Berridge, “Sudan’s Civil War Is Rooted in Its Historical Favouritism of Arab and Islamic Identity,” *The Conversation*, April 17, 2024, [Sudan’s civil war is rooted in its historical favouritism of Arab and Islamic identity](#)

2025, UN investigators documented more than 6,000 killings in the first three days and said the attacks showed the “hallmarks of genocide”.¹⁴



Source: Middle East Eye

The Sahel faces a different but related problem. Colonial borders divided communities that had long moved across the region. Fulani, Dogon, Bambara, Tuareg and Songhai communities now live across several states. The Fulani, in particular, are spread across many countries. Some armed groups have recruited from Fulani communities, often exploiting poverty and local grievances. This has also exposed Fulani civilians to state and vigilante violence, even when they have no links to armed groups.¹⁵ In central Mali, this has contributed to cycles of violence between Fulani and Dogon militias. These conflicts are not simply ancient ethnic rivalries. Colonial rule helped sharpen some social identities, which postcolonial states and armed groups later weaponized.

Climate stress adds another layer. Temperatures in the central Sahel are rising roughly 1.5 times faster than the global average. Niger also loses more than 100,000 hectares of arable land each

¹⁴ United Nations, “Sudan: ‘Hallmarks of Genocide’ Found in El Fasher, UN Investigators Detail Mass Killings and Ethnic Targeting,” *UN News*, February 13, 2026, [Sudan: ‘Hallmarks of genocide’ found in El Fasher, UN investigators detail mass killings and ethnic targeting | UN News](#)

¹⁵ Arab News, “How the Sahel’s Tribal Divisions Undermine Security in Conflict-Prone African Region,” *Arab News*, June 15, 2023, [Arab News | How the Sahel’s tribal divisions undermine security in conflict-prone African region](#)

year to erosion and desertification, increasing pressure on land and water.¹⁶ Climate change does not automatically cause conflict. But it can intensify competition over land and water, especially where state policies already favor some groups.

Who is killing and Who is Fueling?

In Sudan, the main perpetrator is the RSF, a paramilitary force descended from the Janjaweed militias that carried out the Darfur genocide in the early 2000s under Omar al-Bashir.¹⁷ Human Rights Watch documented the 2023 attack on El Geneina, where thousands of Masalit civilians were killed and more than 570,000 people were driven into Chad. It found that the RSF's actions may meet the legal definition of genocide and ethnic cleansing.¹⁸ After the RSF seized El Fasher following an 18-month siege, similar violence followed. Reports documented door-to-door killings, mass sexual violence and attacks on civilians sheltering in the Saudi Maternity Hospital. A later UN fact-finding mission concluded that the RSF had committed genocide at El Fasher, citing killings of Zaghawa and Fur civilians and the deliberate destruction of the groups.¹⁹ But the RSF is not the only actor responsible for abuses. UN experts and Sudanese civilians have also accused the SAF of ethnically targeted killings in areas it recaptured.²⁰ Both sides have also used drones against hospitals, markets and water systems outside Darfur.

The Sahel shows a similar pattern. Civilians are caught between armed groups and state forces. JNIM and ISSP have massacred civilians accused of supporting governments, including Fulani communities in Burkina Faso. At the same time, Burkina Faso's military and VDP militias have been accused of mass killings of Fulani civilians. Human Rights Watch documented more than

¹⁶ International Rescue Committee, "The Central Sahel: How Conflict and Climate Change Drive Crisis," *International Rescue Committee*, June 13, 2025, [The Central Sahel: How conflict and climate change drive crisis | The IRC](#)

¹⁷ David J. Scheffer, "The Specter of Genocide Returns to Darfur," *Council on Foreign Relations*, March 13, 2026, [The Specter of Genocide Returns to Darfur | Council on Foreign Relations](#)

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, "'The Massalit Will Not Come Home': Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan," May 9, 2024, ["The Massalit Will Not Come Home": Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan | HRW](#)

¹⁹ Al Jazeera, "UN Probe Finds Mass Killings, Gang Rapes by Sudan's RSF Amount to Genocide," *Al Jazeera*, July 9, 2026, [UN probe finds mass killings, gang rapes by Sudan's RSF amount to genocide | Sudan war News | Al Jazeera](#)

²⁰ National Public Radio, "Sudan Paramilitary Says It Seized Last Army Stronghold in Darfur," *NPR*, October 27, 2025, [Sudan paramilitary says it seized last army stronghold in Darfur : NPR](#)

1,800 civilian deaths across 57 incidents between January 2023 and August 2025.²¹ In one major incident, Burkinabè special forces and VDP fighters reportedly killed more than 130 Fulani civilians near Solenzo in March 2025.



Source: Al Jazeera

Foreign support is also helping sustain these wars. In Sudan, the UAE has been identified by UN experts, US lawmakers and independent investigators as a major external supply line for the RSF.²² Cargo flights reportedly carried supplies to Amdjarass in eastern Chad before they were moved overland into Darfur. UN experts documented multiple flights along this route in 2024 and 2025. Earlier investigations also traced UAE-linked arms channels through Libya, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Uganda. Emirati-made armoured vehicles have also been found with the RSF.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Islamist Armed Groups Massacre Civilians,” September 15, 2025, [Burkina Faso: Islamist Armed Groups Massacre Civilians | Human Rights Watch](#)

²² United Nations Security Council, Letter dated 22 January 2024 from the Permanent Representative of Burkina Faso to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2024/65, January 22, 2024, [Document Viewer](#)

In the Sahel, Russia is not the source of the region's conflicts, but its growing military role can help sustain them. Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have moved away from Western security partnerships and toward Russia. Russia provides military training, arms and combat support while gaining political influence and access to resources. Through Wagner and now the Africa Corps, Moscow provides combat forces, training and military support to governments fighting jihadist insurgencies. Russian-backed operations have also been linked to civilian killings and abuses, particularly against Fulani communities, adding another layer to an already complex cycle of violence.²³

Warned Before, Warned Again

What makes the crises in Sudan and the Sahel especially difficult is that much of the violence was predicted. In Sudan, the US Holocaust Memorial Museum warned in June 2023 that civilians in Darfur faced a serious risk of genocide.²⁴ A year later, Human Rights Watch documented mass killings and ethnic cleansing of Masalit civilians in El Geneina. It also warned that similar atrocities could spread elsewhere in Darfur, specifically identifying El Fasher as a likely next target.²⁵ Seventeen months later, El Fasher fell and the atrocities followed. The warnings produced limited action. The UN Security Council renewed its arms embargo on Darfur in September 2024, but it remained limited to the region. Russia later vetoed a resolution calling for stronger civilian protection. Efforts to expand the embargo to all of Sudan remained stalled into 2026.

A similar warning cycle is now unfolding around El Obeid. Satellite evidence showed preparations for a possible siege. By June 2026, the UN Security Council warned of an “imminent risk of mass atrocities” and pointed to El Fasher as a warning.²⁶ By July, around half a million civilians were trapped in the city, while UN officials warned of a looming catastrophe.²⁷ By August, heavy drone

²³ Human Rights Watch, “Mali: Russia’s ‘Africa Corps’ Airstrikes Kill Civilians,” July 31, 2026, [Mali: Russia’s ‘Africa Corps’ Airstrikes Kill Civilians | Human Rights Watch](#)

²⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Museum Warns Risk of Genocide in Darfur,” March 13, 2026, [Museum Warns Risk of Genocide in Darfur - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#)

²⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur,” May 9, 2024, [Sudan: Ethnic Cleansing in West Darfur | Human Rights Watch](#)

²⁶ United Nations, “Sudan: Security Council Warns of Mass Atrocity Risk in El Obeid,” *UN News*, June 24, 2026, [Sudan: Security Council warns of mass atrocity risk in El Obeid | UN News](#)

²⁷ Al Jazeera, “El-Obeid under Siege by RSF: Could This Be Sudan’s Next el-Fasher?” *Al Jazeera*, July 6, 2026, [El-Obeid under siege by RSF: Could this be Sudan’s next el-Fasher? | Sudan war News | Al Jazeera](#)

attacks and strikes on water and power infrastructure had already created a serious humanitarian emergency. The question is whether El Obeid will become another case where the warning comes before the atrocity, but action comes after it.

Why the World Keeps Looking Away

The question is no longer whether the world can see these crises coming. The tools to predict mass atrocities have existed for decades. Barbara Harff's early models identified factors linked to genocide risk. The UN later developed its own Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes. The Early Warning Project, run by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Dartmouth College, continues to assess countries at risk of mass killing. Newer models combine statistical and case-based analysis to improve prediction. These systems look for warning signs such as armed conflict, weak institutions, exclusionary ideology and a history of group-based violence (Mass Atrocity). Sudan and parts of the Sahel have shown many of these signs for years.



Source: NRC

Yet prediction has repeatedly failed to become prevention. One problem is limited international attention and funding. Sudan's 2026 humanitarian response plan sought \$962.6 million but was

only 16 percent funded in early spring, even as needs continued to grow.²⁸ But this is also about how attention is distributed. Wars compete for limited media and political attention. Conflicts with clear front lines or simple narratives are often easier to keep in the headlines. Sudan's fragmented battlefields, restricted access and limited footage make sustained coverage harder. Reporting conditions make this worse. Internet blackouts, attacks on journalists and restrictions on independent media have made Sudan's war harder to document in real time. In the Sahel, military governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have also restricted independent reporting. This means available casualty figures may underestimate the scale of violence.

Geography matters too. Crises in regions seen as less strategically important often struggle to compete for international attention. This is where geopolitics matters. States do not respond to humanitarian crises alone. They also consider alliances, security interests, regional rivalries and economic relationships. Sudan has no single outside power with both the ability and a clear strategic incentive to end the war. Instead, external actors have competing relationships with the SAF and RSF. Rivalries within the diplomatic "Quad" of the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt have also complicated efforts to develop a common approach.

There is also a gap between international commitments and political action. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), endorsed by UN member states in 2005, commits the international community to preventing genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.²⁹ Yet a 2025 UN General Assembly review described the "Never Again" promise as still largely unfulfilled.³⁰ The lack of political will is also responsible. The US has made a formal genocide determination, UN investigators have confirmed genocide at El Fasher, and sanctions and a partial arms embargo remain in place. Yet weapons continue to reach the RSF, attacks on civilians continue, and warnings about El Obeid and Kordofan continue to grow.

²⁸ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *Sudan Humanitarian Situation Report No. 40*, February 28, 2026, [Sudan-2026-2026-04-09](#)

²⁹ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "What Is R2P?," accessed September 21, 2026, [What is R2P? - Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect](#)

³⁰ Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, "Summary of the 2025 UN General Assembly Plenary Meeting on the Responsibility to Protect," June 27, 2025, [Summary of the 2025 UN General Assembly Plenary Meeting on the Responsibility to Protect - Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect](#)

Economic interests add another layer. Sudan's gold economy is closely linked to the war. Both the SAF and RSF have sought control of gold-producing areas, while much of Sudan's gold enters regional markets through the UAE.³¹ These revenues help sustain the competing war economies. The conflict therefore creates not only humanitarian costs but also economic interests for some external actors. Ending the war can mean giving up influence, access or economic benefits.

Sudan and the Sahel show that the problem is not simply that the world does not know. Researchers document the risks. Humanitarian agencies issue warnings. Journalists report what they can. Governments make statements. What remains fragmented is the political response. The challenge is therefore not only predicting future atrocities. It is acting on what the world already knows.

Before the Next Catastrophe

Sudan and the Sahel are not the only places where civilians are suffering. Conflicts are active across many parts of the world, and in each of them, mass people are the most affected. No human life is worth more than another. Yet the attention, funding and diplomatic effort follow strategic interests, familiar narratives or crises that are easier to document and report. Geopolitics shapes whose suffering receives sustained international concern. As El Obeid awaits another potential catastrophe, even if the world chooses to look away, the reality on the ground will remain harsh. The consequences will not disappear because they are less visible. It will be ordinary people who bear them. Responsibility therefore does not rest only with those who directly commit the atrocities. The wider international community also bears a responsibility for looking away, for ignoring repeated warnings and for failing to act when there is still time to prevent further suffering. The world already knows many of the warning signs. The question is whether that knowledge will lead to action before El Obeid, or whether the international community will once again respond after the killing has already taken place.

³¹ Chatham House, "Gold and the War in Sudan," March 28, 2025, [Gold and the war in Sudan | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank](#)