

# IF BULLETS MISS, HUNGER WON'T

**Beyond the Numbers: Hunger and Conflict in Sudan**



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September 2024

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# Executive Summary

The unanimous adoption of UN Security Council resolution 2417 in 2018 was a milestone that established a global consensus on the need to address the links between conflict and hunger. Today, however, Sudan's conflict has fuelled a hunger crisis of historic proportions. It has already become the primary cause of suffering for people across the country, and without urgent action it will soon claim more lives than the fighting.

Based on testimonies from people in regions including Darfur, Kordofan and Khartoum, combined with analysis of the crisis in Sudan, this report reveals the direct and indirect ways in which the conflict and widespread violations of international humanitarian law have led to suffering and starvation countrywide.

## Key messages

### **The hunger crisis is human-made**

The parties to the conflict have heavily disrupted the food system, triggered mass displacement and decimated livelihoods. They have also impeded the delivery of humanitarian relief, deliberately obstructing access to aid for millions of people in desperate need.

### **Hunger is not simply a byproduct of conflict**

It is the result of deliberate choices by warring parties to disregard basic international laws. They have failed to protect civilians and essential infrastructure, including food supplies, and have blocked aid from reaching those in desperate need. As a result, hunger has become a weapon of war.

### **The full extent of the crisis is hidden**

Lack of sufficient data hides the true scale of food deprivation, starvation and death, particularly in Darfur, Kordofan and Khartoum. This report's first-hand testimonies from affected communities reveal a harrowing situation that must trigger immediate international action.

## Calls to action:

In interviews with communities and aid workers, several calls to action emerged:

**Mitigate the impacts of the conflict:** The immediate priority for affected people is an end to the fighting. While a nationwide ceasefire appears out of reach, priority should be given to

ensuring respect for international humanitarian law. This includes facilitating rapid and unhindered access for humanitarian staff and supplies across borders and frontlines and protecting civilians and essential infrastructure from indiscriminate attacks.

**Improve people's purchasing power:** Many communities expressed their desire to be supported with cash assistance and more livelihood opportunities to enable them to buy food and other basic necessities from local markets and service providers.

**Boost food production:** Farmers were clear that a successful agricultural season and increased food production depend on improved security, the removal of explosive remnants of war from farmland and their ability to afford agricultural inputs and labour.

**Support local resilience networks:** Against all odds, local communities have found ways to revive markets and organise themselves into lifesaving mutual aid groups. They need cash support and liquidity, including e-cash, and safety guarantees to sustain and scale up their work.

**Address protection risks:** Community members expressed fears for children, women and girls who face increased threats of abuse and exploitation because of the lack of food. The humanitarian community and hunger watchdogs should monitor and address the protection implications of hunger before these threats become entrenched, making it even more difficult to protect the most vulnerable.

# Background

The brutal conflict that erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in April 2023 has compounded an already dire humanitarian crisis in Sudan, plunging millions into catastrophic needs.

Today, with the lean season in full swing and conflict spreading, both violence and hunger are expected to cause widespread death and suffering in Sudan. The country faces the world's largest hunger crisis, with more than 25 million people, over half the population, suffering acute food insecurity. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) initiative identified a risk of famine in 14 areas of the country as of June 2024. It categorised 8.5 million people as facing emergency (IPC 4) levels of hunger, and another 755,000 facing catastrophic (IPC 5) levels. This means these families are all already facing an extreme lack of food.

Nearly 80 per cent of those facing extreme hunger (IPC 4+) live in areas most affected by the conflict in the Darfur and Kordofan regions and Al Jazirah and Khartoum states. People in many parts of Darfur and Kordofan survive on only one meal a day. Malnutrition rates are rising and cause death among the most vulnerable, including children and pregnant women, at an alarming rate. Civilians trapped by de-facto sieges and urban warfare in the capital are unable to afford food or find safe drinking water, leaving some to die of hunger in destitution.

The Famine Review Committee determined in August 2024 that famine was ongoing and likely to continue beyond October in the Zamzam camp for displaced people in North Darfur. For a population of about 500,000 people in Zamzam, reaching the famine threshold meant that people were already dying each day due to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease.

Sudan's hunger crisis is undeniable and goes far beyond what the quantitative data reveals. Food insecurity reports such as the IPC's provide vital insights, but they fall short of capturing the full magnitude of the situation. In regions such as Darfur, Al Jazirah, Khartoum and Kordofan, access and data gaps have impeded the international community's reporting of what many communities and local aid organisations have known for months: people are dying of hunger.

A July 2024 [assessment](#) from Mercy Corps found that across five areas of Central Darfur, nearly 25 per cent of children screened were suffering severe acute malnutrition, the most dangerous and life-threatening form of the condition. It also found that in one health facility of South Darfur, four to five children a day were reported as dying of malnutrition.

## UNSCR 2417

UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2417 of 2018 recognises the brutal links between armed conflict and food insecurity, and highlights the fact that they can reinforce each other in a vicious cycle. It condemns the use of starvation as a weapon of war and underscores the obligation of all parties to comply with international humanitarian law (IHL).

This includes their duty to respect and protect civilians and civilian objects necessary for food production and distribution, such as farms and markets; and those indispensable to people's survival, such as foodstuffs, crops and agricultural assets. The resolution also condemns the unlawful denial of humanitarian access, including wilfully impeding relief supplies and responses to food insecurity caused by conflict.

# Beyond the Numbers: Starving in Sudan

As the situation in the Zamzam camp shows, by the time experts confirm famine conditions, widespread deaths have already occurred. The international community cannot wait for more official data to act with the urgency the situation requires. Reports and testimonies from people in Sudan reveal a dire reality which if left unaddressed will lead to countless preventable deaths and unimaginable suffering.

In the face of extreme hunger, people resort to extreme measures to survive. Skipping meals is widespread across the country. An NRC market assessment conducted in Al Geneina, West Darfur, as early as December 2023 found that 81 per cent of respondents were skipping meals. As the peak of the lean season approaches, families are restricting themselves even more, down to one meal a day if any, even in urban areas:

“ We reduced the amount of food we feed our children. Sometimes we fast for two days, sometimes we wait for gifts from charities, relatives and friends outside Sudan.”

“ I did not eat yesterday. My baby is two years old and he cries all the time. I don't know how to breastfeed him anymore.”

Focus group participants in Al Geneina

Meals often consist only of sorghum or millet porridge or sometimes lentils, the only foodstuffs families can afford. Those more desperate eat leaves from trees and even soil. Local officials interviewed also said that highly vulnerable families in remote areas of Sirba and Kreinik had resorted to eating animal feed such as peanuts shells. Such poor diets create dire nutritional deficiencies which make people more susceptible to illness. Children, pregnant women, young mothers, elderly people and the chronically ill are particularly vulnerable.

“ We faced other challenges with my parents who are diabetic ... we are not able to offer them good nutritional food because it is expensive and we can't afford it. They are suffering a lot from lack of medication and good food. Their health situation has become more worrisome but, praise be to God, they are still alive.”

Displaced person in Al Geneina

“ Before the conflict, we had several meals a day - breakfast, lunch and dinner - with nutritious food like vegetables, fruit and meat. Now many breastfeeding women can't feed their children, and some men have abandoned their families.”

Displaced woman in South Darfur

Even this meagre living is often dependent on the exhaustion of a range of negative coping mechanisms, the least of which are informal loans and the sale of limited assets.

“ [I've been coping by] borrowing money from friends in better circumstances to meet the family's needs, and sometimes we sell our furniture to be able to buy food.”

Trader in South Kordofan

With many men and youth out of work, or killed or disappeared by parties to the conflict, much of the burden of securing an income to buy food falls on women, who have become pivotal to their families' and communities' survival.

“ My life transformed from being a housewife and a simple trader to a mother who roams the markets to earn a living and travels to other localities for goods. My husband has his hands tied and is unable to travel outside the country because of the lack of security for men.”

Displaced woman from Al Geneina



© Mathilde Vu / NRC

This also pushes many women towards extreme measures and risks. As respondents in West Darfur told us:

“ We all depend on the women to work because there is no work opportunity for men. Even the women work in marginal businesses such as selling tea, snacks and falafel, and this work is affected because the number of customers is very few, sometimes they don't sell anything from morning to evening ... This work also puts girls at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse every day.”

Focus group participant in Al Geneina

“ We have cases of women working in homes, as cleaners for example, and not getting paid, or only paid with food. But the food they receive is too little compared with the money they should have received. Others have no other choice but to beg. Shockingly, community groups have shared concerns about women resorting to transactional sex, or sex for food ... This remains very unspoken, the fact that community themselves raise it shows that it is increasing.”

Aid worker in Al Geneina

Several respondents raised serious concerns about the pressures children face, with many parents unable to send their children to school because they are unable afford school meals, even in facilities supported by education in emergency programming:

“ [Children] all complain about the lack of meals before and after the school day. Their ability to understand has decreased because of the hunger, so parents prefer to let them stay home instead of being enrolled in school.”

Focus group participant in Kadugli, South Kordofan

Other children work to support their families. Protection monitoring suggests child labour is the most common negative coping mechanism.<sup>1</sup> In attempts to help sustain families' livelihoods, children move materials in wheelbarrows, wash cars or work in construction or as maids.

With public schools closed and private schools beyond the means of most families, children are left with few options and are exposed to exploitation. Many parents highlighted the expansion of criminal activity targeting children, including the trade and consumption of illicit drugs. Other children and youth join armed groups in search of an income and protection for themselves and their families.

The true extent of life-threatening hunger in Sudan remains untold. A climate of oppression and latent threat across the country and particularly in Darfur prevents the full story from emerging. Many interview respondents feared saying too much about the impact that war and hunger have had on their lives.

<sup>1</sup> Confidential protection report, DRC.

# How Conflict Breeds Hunger

## Mass Displacement

**Put simply, conflict causes displacement which causes hunger. The parties to the conflict demonstrate a blatant disregard for international law. Tactics such as deliberate attacks on civilians' houses, farms and markets have forced millions of people to flee, losing their homes and livelihoods and becoming much more vulnerable to food insecurity in the process.**

From day one, the conflict has involved intense clashes in densely populated urban areas. Homes, public buildings, shops, markets and offices, including those of aid organisations, have been attacked, looted or ransacked. In many cases, civilians were deliberately targeted. The worst episode of violence took place in Al Geneina in 2023, when between 10,000 and 15,000 people were killed in an ethnically motivated campaign of destruction and executions.

### Those who can't flee

**Amid the violence not everyone is able to leave, and those who remain face some of the direst conditions. In cities such as Khartoum, El Fasher in North Darfur and Kadugli in South Kordofan, where conflict is ongoing and unrelenting, the conflict parties have effectively laid de facto siege to certain neighbourhoods and in some cases the whole city. They cut off supply lines for cash and essential goods including food while trapping the local population inside. Many others who are not trapped are still unable to flee because they cannot afford the cost of the journey.**

The violence has not, however, been confined to towns and cities. It has also spread to rural areas, including some of the country's most fertile and agriculturally productive states. Attacks, looting and destruction have caused whole villages to flee, forcing farmers to abandon their land. This has fuelled hunger not only for their families but also for the communities that relied on the food they produced.

Whether people flee from cities or the countryside, most arrive at their destinations with little if anything more than the clothes on their back. Some leave on foot and are unable to carry much, while others have their belongings stolen on route. Displaced people interviewed as part of protection monitoring also report facing many other obstacles while fleeing, including armed checkpoints, movement restrictions imposed by armed groups, assault and extortion. Young women and adolescent girls are at particular risk of threats, intimidation and gender-based violence, and men of abduction or forced recruitment.

“It was so difficult ... We started our journey from Al Geneina to Adré ... On the way they were coming to kill the people. They even shot at us, but we ran and crossed the border. Looking behind, we saw other people running. But many fell on the ground. They were shot. More than 30 people, I saw it with my own eyes.”

Female refugee in Chad.

Setting out on such perilous journeys is also expensive. In areas of active conflict, the cost of transport skyrockets, further depleting people's already meagre resources.

Displacement has not only heightened the vulnerability of those forced to flee. All members of host communities interviewed for this study said that providing for relatives, friends and sometimes strangers put an immense strain on their resources. Food insecurity has also increased significantly in areas of displacement as a result. As many as 97 per cent of Sudan's internally displaced people (IDPs) are in areas with severe levels of hunger of IPC 3 and [above](#).

Significant numbers of people have fled to under-served rural areas. Violence around Kadugli in South Kordofan forced civilians to flee into the Nuba mountains and take refuge in isolated communities or areas under the control of a local armed group. These areas have seen little aid or government services over the past decade and now face [high levels of hunger](#).



Similarly, the sharp escalation of conflict in North Darfur forced huge numbers to flee towards areas such as Tawila and Jebel Marra. Aid workers on the ground describe large makeshift settlements in the open or in schools and considerable humanitarian needs. In both areas, markets are functioning albeit at low capacity, but inflation is high and cash in short supply.

“ The little food that people had is gone because they had to share it with the new families who fled here. Now, some families are hosting three or more families, and they’ve run out of stock. Some people are eating millet husk to get by.”

Aid worker in the Jebel Marra, Central Darfur.

Since the end of 2023, the spread of violence to “refuge cities” such as Al Jazirah, Al Fasher and Sennar, which had been relatively safe areas hosting millions of IDPs, has led to spiralling numbers of people on the move. Many have been forced to flee two or three times since the start of the war, their vulnerability heightened with each displacement.

“ When the conflict came to Khartoum, we decided to find a safe place in Sennar, where we lived in a school. Then the violence arrived in Sennar. We

*had to flee again and began our journey to Gedaref... On our way we were stopped by a gang that stole all our money and belongings. We had to walk for long hours and other times we had to use a local donkey cart to get there.”*

Displaced man from Khartoum in Gedaref

Now, more and more people are also being displaced as a result of hunger caused by the conflict. Interviews conducted as part of protection monitoring in Central Darfur, South Kordofan and Khartoum indicate that active conflict is still the main trigger of displacement, but 34 per cent of interviewees said they had fled for lack of food and basic items.

“ If I’m unable to plant and this planting season is unsuccessful, we will all suffer from hunger to an unimaginable level that will force us to migrate out of the state or even leave the country.”

Farmer in South Kordofan



In the Chadian town of Adré, on the border with West Darfur, humanitarian organisations have observed a steady influx of refugees of all tribes who are not fleeing a specific attack, but are escaping an untenable situation with no food or livelihood. Unable to meet even their most basic needs, many people from West, Central and South Darfur, often women, are making difficult and dangerous journey to the borders.

“ I left my village near Al Geneina four days ago. I was stopped many times on the way. The Rapid Support Forces tried to stop me from leaving. They threatened me, saying: ‘Why are you fleeing, you should remain in West Darfur’. I told them there was nothing to eat in my village, and they let me pass. But I know they stop the men.”

Female refugee in Adré, Chad

## Food production under attack

**The conflict has had a profound impact on food production, turning farmland into battlefields and decimating the arable and livestock sectors, on which many Sudanese also depended for income. Across the industrial sector, more than [90 per cent](#) of factories have ceased to operate.**

These include the Samil factory in Khartoum, which used to produce 60 per cent of Sudan’s ready-to-use therapeutic food for children; and the Sayga Food Industries factory, also in the capital, which previously produced 5,500 tonnes of flour a day, employed around 8,000 workers, and was regarded as one of the country’s the most significant producers.

The most severe disruption has been in agriculture, which provides the bulk of the country’s food. The impact of the conflict on areas with major agricultural schemes, such as Al Jazirah, South Kordofan and Sennar has had devastating impacts. Some are obvious and immediate, such as physical damage to farms, crops or machinery, the reported [raiding of seed banks](#) and the [displacement of farmers](#).

Others, such as the fear of insecurity, are less palpable but still have a significant effect. Even in areas where conflict has largely subsided, such as West Darfur, a perceived lack of security, concern about the potential for conflict between pastoralist and agrarian communities and the presence of explosive remnants of war have discouraged farmers from working their land:

“ We are at the beginning of the rainy season and we want to farm, but first of all we are afraid, and second, we can’t buy seed and tools because we don’t have money. There are also a lot of mortars spread across the farmland.”

A farmer in Al Geneina

Farmers’ loss of purchasing power and the increased cost of inputs and labour had a significant impact on the 2023 agricultural season. According to a March 2024 [assessment](#) by the Food and Agriculture Organization, insecurity and the limited availability and high price of agricultural inputs were largely to blame for a 46 per cent decrease in cereal production in 2023. The sharpest reductions, to as much as 80 per cent below average, were in the Greater Kordofan and Greater Darfur regions, where the conflict has been particularly intense. The situation was worst in West Darfur, where high levels of insecurity prevented farmers from working their land and resulted in a total failure of the agricultural season last year.

“ Here in Kreinik we have not been able to farm for two years already. In 2022 our homes were attacked during Ramadan and we fled. We did not farm. Then last year the war started, our homes were burned and we fled again. We could not farm. Maybe this year, God willing.”

Displaced man in Kreinik, West Darfur



Even in areas that were heavily affected by the conflict in 2023 but have since returned to relative stability, the loss of purchasing power is a key barrier to cultivation. When we asked farmers in South Darfur and South Kordofan whether they would be able to plant in 2024, they said insecurity and high prices were both barriers:

“ I will plant this season, God willing, but with the security risks and difficult economic conditions, I will reduce the area I cultivate because the costs have become too high. Among the challenges facing agriculture are a lack of good seed, lack of income, high input prices, bad weather conditions and lack of security.”

Farmer in South Darfur

“ We are not planning to plant. Our farm is inaccessible because the road leading to it is insecure and we can't afford to buy seed and pesticide.”

Female farmer in Kadugli, South Kordofan

These findings show that supporting farmers who still have access to their land by increasing their ability to access agricultural inputs and pay for labour presents an opportunity to boost food production this year. Farmers have already planted this season, but many still need labour and inputs to keep their crops healthy. Farmers in irrigated areas could also be supported with inputs and cash to keep producing food during the dry season in November. Any such support, however, would have to be accompanied by greater efforts to protect farmers from violence and insecurity.

This is particularly important because the 2024 agricultural season risks being even more compromised than in 2023. Before the conflict, Al Jazirah produced 56 per cent of the country's wheat and with Gedaref and South Darfur a third of its cereals. Now the spread of the conflict into Sennar, which stepped up its food production significantly in 2023 to make up for losses elsewhere, is a cause for particular concern. Significant areas of Sudan are still contested and the conflict increasingly threatens the east of the country, including the agriculture-rich state of Gedaref. Should more agricultural areas become warzones, an already dire food security situation would worsen dramatically.

## Disrupted markets

**Markets and supply chains have suffered many disruptions since the start of the conflict. Large city markets have been bombarded, food stocks destroyed and supply routes cut. These impacts combined with price rises and people's decreased purchasing power have left markets in a highly fragile state, but they have still been able to provide people with essential goods throughout the crisis.**

Destruction and looting have led to the shutdown of markets, including in state capitals such as Al Geneina, [Nyala and Zalingei](#). However, evidence shows though that many have adapted, relocated and reopened, an indication of their resilience. A recent analysis, however, [found](#) that while markets of Al Geneina and Zalingei were recovering and operational with staple goods available, albeit at high prices, consumers' low purchasing power was a key challenge.

Many markets have had to find new sources of goods and produce as part of this recovery. The conflict cut an important supply route from Khartoum and other, longer routes are now used instead. Many traders have started to import goods from neighbouring countries, which has had a severe impact on prices. As one trader in Al Geneina explained:

“ Before we were bringing our goods from Khartoum, but now we are unable to do this, so we started importing from Chad. But there are many checkpoints and at each of them we have to pay a lot of money affecting the product price in the markets.”

In South Kordofan where conflict remains active, traders continue to be affected by the threat of insecurity and the presence of a multitude of armed groups. They have had no choice but to raise prices due to high levels of extortion at various checkpoints and the constant risk of looting on the roads. One trader in Kadugli explained:

“ We were once considered one of the main suppliers to Kadugli, but the threats of insecurity have affected us too much. Our goods have been looted by an unidentified group along the road and we face too many charges at checkpoints ... Up until now business hasn't bounced back to the same level as before the conflict, but at least we are working and earning some income.”

Price rises not only undermine families' ability to buy food, but also the livelihood of those working in the markets as traders. Due to the high prices, the demand becomes increasingly scarce, and vendors are not able to secure a decent income.

“ The market is unstable. Sometimes we don't sell anything all day because there are no customers. This is affecting my personal and family life. In the past I was able to bring plenty of food home, but now I have to buy for one day at a time and sometimes I'm even unable to do that.”

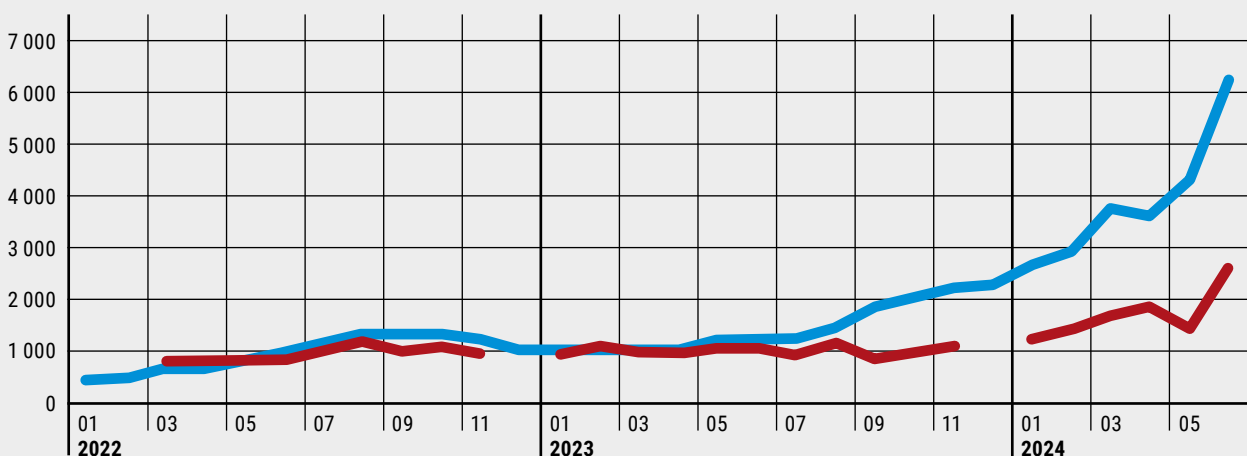
Trader in West Darfur

“ The price of goods has risen dramatically, work has become unprofitable. Trade has become an undesirable profession, and bringing in goods has become difficult. This has had an impact on meeting my family's requirements.”

Trader in South Darfur

### EVOLUTION OF SORGHUM PRICE

■ Kadugli ■ Port Sudan



Markets in more remote areas of West Darfur such as Kreinik and Sirba have reopened but only partially. Significant parts of them are still damaged and not functional, in part because there is not enough demand to justify further repairs and a full reopening. As one baker in Sirba explained:

“ Before the war, there used to be 15 bakeries working daily in the town. Now people can no longer buy bread. So only five of us are working, and we rotate. Each bakery works one day a week. People cannot eat bread anymore. They eat seeds.”

People’s inability to buy food is mainly a question of its [affordability rather than availability](#) which while reduced, still has the potential to feed many communities. The World Food Programme [has recorded an 148 per cent rise](#) in the average price of the local food basket since the start of the war. One community member provided stark insight into how the loss of livelihoods caused by the conflict combined with soaring prices are driving the country’s deepening hunger crisis:

“ I was a civil servant. My family depended on me for all our needs. But when the conflict started in West Darfur we lost our jobs. There have been no salaries since the start of the conflict. This situation affects my family directly. We started to depend on gifts from our relatives and sometimes friends to buy food.”

Man from Ardamata, West Darfur

The collapse in employment opportunities since the start of the conflict has clearly undermined families’ ability to buy food and medicines even when they are available. Some day labour may still be available, but at the cost of exhaustion for very low pay and with risks of exploitation. An 85-year-old displaced woman in Kreinik, West Darfur explained:

“ My children are no longer able to provide for me like they used to, so I have to work. I shell peanuts. It takes me a week to go through a bag. I will be paid 1,000 Sudanese pounds, enough for only five small pieces of bread.”

The breakdown of the financial system at the start of the conflict also heavily affected families’ liquidity. Many bank branches in Khartoum and Darfur were looted, and the central bank suffered a catastrophic failure that affected access to cash

and finance for individuals and public and private entities across the country.

Larger banks have managed to rebuild in the east, but their services are not back to pre-conflict levels. In Darfur and parts of Kordofan and Khartoum, the banking system no longer exists. With bank-to-bank transactions and receipt of transfers from abroad largely impeded, many people have found themselves unable to access money just when they needed it most. One displaced woman in Kassala told us:

“ When the conflict became untenable for my family in Nyala we decided to leave, but we didn’t have any money because the banks were closed. I had to sell our furniture to be able to buy bus tickets for the whole family.”

In such circumstances people have become increasingly dependent on digital banking apps that allow the rapid and secure transfer of funds, including for remittances from abroad and humanitarian organisations’ cash programming. This potentially makes recurrent or extended telecommunications outages a matter of life and death.

## Telecommunications

Offline areas coincide with those facing high levels of hunger. When available, the internet allows civilians to access mobile cash. It is also used for basic purchases such as food and fuel, and it facilitates the coordination and delivery of humanitarian assistance. Volunteers and local aid groups who have established soup kitchens and food basket distributions are completely reliant on it to receive funding for their lifesaving activities.

Much of the telecommunications infrastructure in Khartoum has been destroyed in the conflict. After a general shutdown in February 2024 that left most people without access to phone network or the internet for more than a month, service providers migrated to Port Sudan. The east of the country maintains some level of connectivity, but the west and south, and particularly Darfur, Kordofan and some areas of Khartoum and Al Jazirah, have been under a near total blackout for more than six months. The only available service in these areas is Starlink, but it is prohibitively expensive for most people.

## Obstruction of humanitarian access

**Widespread hunger is aggravated by the parties to the conflict systematically hindering and arbitrarily denying the delivery of essential humanitarian assistance including food and cash. About 1.78 million people across Darfur, Kordofan and Khartoum were denied such assistance in June 2024 because of violence, logistical constraints and bureaucratic and administrative impediments.**

In 2024, according to OCHA, 38,1 metric-tons of aid supposed to be delivered were cancelled or postponed, while only 24,1 metric-ton, less than 40 per cent of the total planned, were able to reach communities in need by conflict parties.

Throughout the conflict, there has been widespread raiding and looting of aid facilities and trucks, and local responders - often the only providers of food and other lifesaving support in conflict areas - have increasingly been [attacked, harassed and even detained](#).

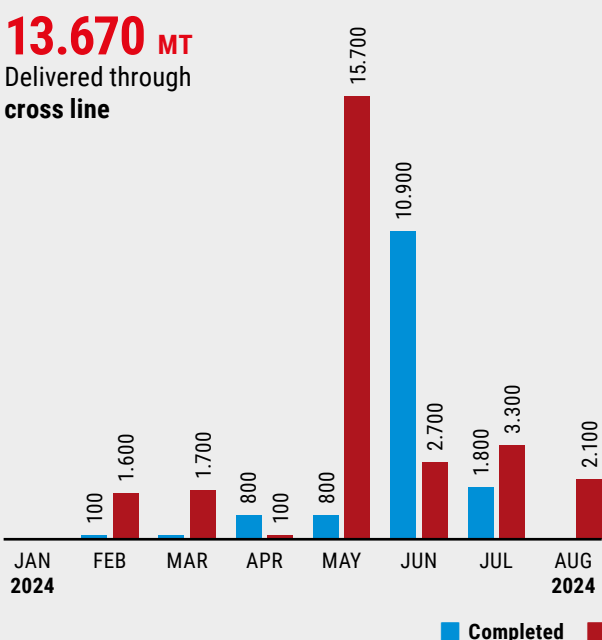
Beyond violence, the political decisions of the parties to the conflict have done much to fuel hunger and humanitarian needs. They have increasingly blocked or delayed the entry of aid, particularly to areas under their opponents' control, banned humanitarians from using essential roads, and [denied](#) the existence of famine. Hunger has effectively been turned into a weapon of war.

At the beginning of the conflict in June 2023, authorities backed by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) allowed the movement of aid across the border from Chad into Sudan, in accordance with IHL. This enabled humanitarian organisations to deliver assistance from Adré into West Darfur and onwards to other parts of the region. Humanitarians were also able to run cross-line operations from Port Sudan into Kordofan and Darfur, although these faced significant bureaucratic, security and logistical challenges.

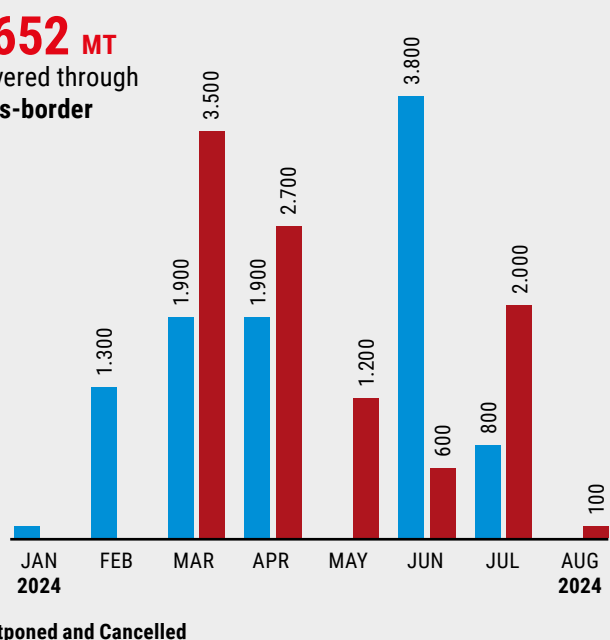
Six months later, however, the policy shifted radically, with devastating consequences for populations in dire need. SAF *de facto* [blocked](#) cross-line assistance, effectively cutting off vital supply routes from Port Sudan into the Kordofan region, parts of Khartoum and Al Jazirah. And in February 2024, withdrew consent for cross-border operations via Adré, which drastically limited the delivery of aid into Darfur at a time when needs were escalating rapidly, and hunger was worsening.

The alternative route allowed by SAF through the border crossing point at Tina rapidly became compromised by escalating conflict, blockades mounted by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) as well as flooding. The route also adds 250 kilometres to the journey and is burdened by lengthy and restrictive bureaucratic processes. Another route imposed, from Port Sudan into North Darfur, turned out to be plagued by time-consuming approvals, immense logistical challenges, obstructions and insecurity.

**13.670 MT**  
Delivered through  
cross line



**9.652 MT**  
Delivered through  
cross-border





After seven months of banning the use of the border crossing at Adré, SAF announced in August 2024 that it would re-allow the use of the key corridor for a period of three months. However, the conditions proposed by SAF such as lengthy approval processes and a stringent monitoring mechanism will likely set the effort up for failure. To enable a scale up of cross-border assistance into Darfur, these conditions must be lightened significantly, and the decision extended beyond the three months period. The good will of RSF is also needed so that none of the trucks entering through Adré are obstructed, as a number of trucks in direction to Al Fasher and Zamzam Camp have been blocked by the RSF for weeks. At the time of writing, it is still unclear whether the opening decision will actually be implemented in a way that enables a response to the mounting hunger.

All parties to the conflict have imposed significant and often unpredictable bureaucratic and administrative impediments in the areas they control, impeding humanitarian efforts to save lives and alleviate suffering. These include complex requirements and unpredictable timelines for travel permits, interference in beneficiary selection and the obstruction of needs assessments and project implementation. Local authorities also often interfere in recruitment and procurement processes, further complicating the delivery of principled aid.

At a time when only urgent and large-scale interventions will prevent hunger causing widespread deaths, any obstruction or delay should be considered fatal. The parties to the conflict have the power to stop hunger spreading and change the course of the country's crisis by allowing unfettered humanitarian access, but they have yet to take such a decision.

# Humanitarian Response: Investing in What Works

## Sudanese-led response

Many of those interviewed said their main source of support came in the form of charity from relatives, friends and neighbours. Others hailed local youth initiatives intended to provide food and services and strengthen social cohesion:

“*There is volunteer work done by young people in the community. They ... fulfil citizens' needs and raise the concerns of ordinary people with the responsible authorities.*”

Female trader in Al Geneina, West Darfur

Throughout the conflict, community-based groups such as Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) have provided comprehensive mutual aid. Across the country and particularly in areas most affected by the conflict, these local responders reach some of the most vulnerable populations with lifesaving assistance and services, often at great personal risk.

They provide food, clinics, transport, protection and psychosocial support. ERRs in Bahri in Khartoum state run dozens of communal kitchens that are providing one or two meals a day to families in desperate need. These initiatives play a lifesaving role for some, but they do not have the reach and scale to cover all needs, primarily for lack of funding and safety.

Many communal kitchens depend on financial support from the diaspora, leaving them vulnerable to funding shortages, particularly given the problems with internet access. The lack of quick and reliable funds means they are under constant threat of closure. They continue, however, to face bureaucratic blockages and delays and a disproportionate risk and compliance burden, which impede their access to sufficient and timely funding. Donors' and aid agencies' limited and poorly articulated appetite for risks adds to those challenges.

Some international organisations have started to fund initiatives run by ERRs, particularly through group cash transfers. Communal kitchens in East Bahri that have received such support said it had helped to stabilise their operations with a forward-looking workplan and secure weekly supplies.

ERRs also have to deal with safety concerns. They and other volunteer-led initiatives have no national legal protections and no recognised status as humanitarians, making them extremely vulnerable to insecurity and other risks arising from the conflict.

The international community was already lagging on localisation in Sudan before the war. Local responders have been recognised as an essential part of the response on paper, but they are still not meaningfully supported, funded or included in the humanitarian system and decision-making structures. Nor are they meaningfully consulted by the donor community. ERRs were not, for example, invited to the April 2024 Sudan conference in Paris, and the emergency directors group did not meet them when it visited Sudan the following month.

## Cash and markets: vital lifelines

Despite all of the challenges outlined in this report, markets in most locations, even those experiencing active conflict, continue to function albeit at a reduced level. When traders were asked about their ability to scale-up supplies, most believed they would be able to increase their activities by 50 per cent if consumer demand were to rise. They also identified the need for specific support, such as access to cash or credit, improved security, warehousing assistance and a reduction in checkpoints and taxation. These dynamics demonstrate the critical importance of both cash and market support interventions for the humanitarian response in Sudan.



Cash has proven an efficient and cost-effective way to address hunger while keeping markets afloat over the past year. The international community has resisted prioritising cash programming because of concerns about potential risks, but it has so far not led to any significant reports of fraud, diversion or safety issues. This is in line with global [evidence](#) that cash is not any more risky or prone to diversion than other types of assistance.

Post-distribution monitoring conducted by Mercy Corps in Central and South Darfur in May 2024 shows that 97 per cent of respondents who received multipurpose cash assistance (MPCA) spent some of it on food items, while 48 per cent spent some of it on medicines and health. This confirms the importance of cash assistance in supporting people's access to food and other essential goods at local markets. About 25 per cent of them also spent some cash assistance on debt repayments. Asking local shops for food on credit is a common coping strategy in times of acute hunger.

“ When we arrived we had nothing and my husband bought some vegetables from a local farmer on credit to be able to then sell them on the market and make some money. When we received cash assistance two weeks ago, we first paid my husband's debt and then bought food and medicine.”

Displaced woman from Khartoum in Gedaref

NRC also monitored the impact of MPCA programmes in 2023 and found that people's food consumption scores increased by 95 per cent and their ability to meet their basic needs by 309 per cent. Such findings are encouraging, but as of August 2024 cash programming still represented only two per cent of the funding disbursed for the Sudan response.

People in need also consistently cite cash as their preferred type of assistance because it restores agency and dignity and can be used to cover a range of basic needs. This point was echoed in recent protection monitoring by the Danish Refugee Council and needs assessments by Mercy Corps, which found that MPCA was cited as the preferred modality of assistance by a majority of respondents.



Consistent MPCA distributions support families, revitalise markets and preserve communities' dignity. Beyond such interventions, regular group cash transfers for local responders and initiatives help them to continue operating and ensure communities, including the ones that international organisations are unable to reach themselves, continue to receive lifesaving support. They also help local responders expand their reach and improve their assistance, including the nutritional value of the meals they provide.

## Inadequate international response

Local responders and other humanitarians on the ground require significant support from the international community to expand their lifesaving work. The humanitarian response so far, however, has been grossly inadequate. Pledges made at the Paris conference started being disbursed too late, hindering efforts to keep people's needs from spiraling, and despite repeated calls from humanitarian actors to frontload funding in order to avert the worst impacts of starvation. The [humanitarian response plan](#) (HRP) is currently funded at [41 per cent](#), an unacceptable gap as starvation continues to spread and claim lives.

The response has also been marked by troubling apathy and lack of innovation. NGOs began sounding alarms about the risk of famine as early as December 2023, but the UN leadership was slow to trigger the necessary measures. A delayed famine "prevention plan" was published in April 2024, too late to mitigate the risk of famine let alone prevent it. With 121 localities and 116 humanitarian activities planned, it lacks strategic prioritization and realistic targeting.

Despite evidence of the efficiency of cash interventions, even in areas with serious access challenges and at risk of famine, the humanitarian country team (HCT) and UN agencies have still not taken the steps required to implement them at scale. This hesitancy, combined with many donors' low risk thresholds, has delayed and restricted meaningful support for communities in dire need, and for local responders despite their key role in famine prevention and response.

All informants and focus group participants said the assistance provided was insufficient, even when UN agencies and international humanitarian organisations had access and could provide in-kind support. In some parts of Darfur, standard humanitarian rations have been divided and reduced, and only a small number of people in targeted communities have received aid. There is also concern in the east about assistance only being provided to IDPs sheltering in official sites. Those staying with host families, who represent the majority of Sudan's displaced population, receive nothing, putting a severe burden on their hosts. Overall the assistance provided so far is nowhere near enough to stave off hunger and starvation.

“Aid agencies are providing food assistance, but it is not enough. They give two kilos of sugar, two of millet and a litre of cooking oil for a household of 10 for a month. This is not enough even for three days. Nor do all families received aid, it only reaches part of the community. There is no consistency in the distribution.”

Focus group participants in Al Geneina

“We arrived from Sinja two weeks ago and we are staying in this school, but we have no water and we are not receiving any support. The only thing we received was 25 kilos of wheat flour from a national organisation. We rely on the host community nearby to get water and other things we need to survive.”

Man displaced from Sennar in Kassala

The humanitarian response must urgently recalibrate to meet the needs of the suffering population in Sudan with greater funding, innovation, strategic planning and impartiality.

# Recommendations

As millions face the threat of man-made starvation in Sudan, we must revive the spirit of international solidarity and the momentum that led to UNSCR 2417. The international community must rally behind the humanitarian response and apply the political pressure necessary to alleviate suffering on an unprecedented scale. The tireless resilience of the people of Sudan underscores both the urgent need and opportunity for increased support. Sixteen months into the war and the deepening hunger crisis it has triggered, the indifference must end. What's at stake if we failed to act is dramatic: 755,000 people facing catastrophic levels of hunger could die over the next months.

## Uphold International Humanitarian Law

**In line with International Humanitarian Law and UNSC 2417, all parties to the conflict must protect food and market systems and related infrastructure and enable principled humanitarian action regardless of territorial control.**

- ➔ Immediately cease all actions that endanger food supplies, agricultural assets, and civilian infrastructure necessary to food production and distribution.
- ➔ Ensure the proper functioning of food and market systems by lifting taxation at checkpoints, facilitating the movement of humanitarian and commercial goods, ending de-facto sieges and ensuring that key supply routes and agriculture lands are deconflicted.
- ➔ Fast, unrestricted and safe routes to areas facing severe hunger must be established and respected by all parties. This includes the Adré border crossing into Darfur and cross-line access to Kordofan, Khartoum, Al Jazira and White Nile.
- ➔ A 'non-objection' stance for aid delivery should be extended to all cross line and cross border movement, allowing humanitarian assistance to reach starving civilians at scale.
- ➔ Violence against humanitarian workers and local responders as well as attacks of humanitarian facilities and blockage of aid supply must end immediately.
- ➔ Relevant bodies overseeing aid should streamline and reduce bureaucratic and administrative impediments.

## Intensify Humanitarian Diplomacy

**The UN Security Council, the UN leadership and member states should engage in proactive diplomacy that highlights the connection between conflict and hunger, as per Resolution 2417 and the G7 Famine Prevention Compact.**

- ➔ A monitoring of the risk of use of starvation as a tactic of war should be mandated. It could be supported by a cross-sector reporting mechanism documenting instances of IHL violations leading to hunger, including denials of humanitarian assistance.
- ➔ Regular updates, with a specific focus on conflict-induced hunger should be delivered by the UN Secretary General to the UN Security Council.
- ➔ Public condemnation of arbitrary denials of access by all parties should be systemized.

## Recalibrate the Humanitarian Response

**The humanitarian community must re-prioritize its approach to widespread hunger and famine threats and urgently scale up its presence across Sudan.**

- ➔ The UN Famine Prevention Plan should be shifted to a Famine Response Plan, addressing in priority the 14 locations under famine threats or possible famine.
- ➔ The UN should immediately re-establish permanent presence of senior staff across Sudan to deliver an efficient famine response.
- ➔ Area-based response must be reinforced, and the UN must accelerate the establishment of the hubs and spokes approach.

## Support Farmers in Boosting Food Production

**The humanitarian and development sectors should coordinate to urgently step up support for local agricultural production as the key to addressing urgent food needs and stabilising the food insecurity crisis.**

- ➔ Ensure farmers' access to seeds and other agricultural inputs to support their participation in this year's irrigated planting season and preparations for next year's primary season.
- ➔ Improve farmers' safety and security, including investment in the removal or detonation of explosive remnants of war in agricultural areas, and integration of emergency explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) into the response for farmers and other affected communities.
- ➔ Sustain efforts to build a resilient food system by supporting the recovery of agricultural markets and addressing the pre-existing drivers of food insecurity.

## Prioritise Cash Assistance and Support for Market Actors

**The humanitarian community should prioritise cash assistance as a default response wherever markets are functioning, with parallel interventions to help market actors strengthen their operations.**

- ➔ Donors should significantly increase funding for cash programming, particularly MPCA and group cash transfers.
- ➔ The HCT should acknowledge the limitations of in-kind assistance in the current access environment and support the scaling up of the cash response. This should include promoting a cash-first approach wherever markets function, ensuring that UN agencies cooperate fully with MPCA implementers; and including budgets and targets for MPCA in the 2025 HRP.
- ➔ Cash programming should be combined whenever possible with interventions to strengthen markets actors' capacity to meet the demand for essential commodities such as food. This should include cash grants to support business recovery and short-term actions to mitigate the drivers of price increases for key commodities.

## Enable Safe Local Responses

**The international humanitarian community should support community-led mutual aid groups such as ERRs and other local responders in expanding their lifesaving work and staving off widespread deaths from starvation in their communities.**

- ➔ Harmonise engagement to strengthen coordination and minimise administrative burdens on local responders, including by establishing joint principles of engagement, an independent pooled fund mechanism and clear joint protocols on risk monitoring and mitigation.
- ➔ Take steps to ensure that local responders are meaningfully included in the humanitarian system and decision-making structures.
- ➔ Apply diplomatic pressure on the main parties to the conflict to recognise local responders as humanitarian actors protected under IHL.
- ➔ Provide local responders with adequate and flexible funding and resources to ensure they have enough staff, equipment and supplies to cope with a surge in urgent needs.

## Put Conflict Sensitivity and Protection at the Heart of the Response

**The humanitarian response should put the protection of vulnerable populations at its heart, mainstreaming protection programming across the response and abiding by the "do no harm" principle.**

- ➔ Humanitarian organisations should ensure that interventions are carried out in a conflict and context-sensitive way and include gender mainstreaming considerations.
- ➔ Responses should account for populations' unique vulnerabilities by scaling up protection monitoring and supporting sustainable community-led protection networks.
- ➔ The HCT should accelerate implementation of its protection strategy to address the risks of conflict-induced hunger. Implementation must affirm the centrality of protection as a strategic priority in the response.

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