

Drone warfare reaches deeper into Sudan as peace talks stall

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August 23, 2024

Situation Update | August 2024

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Sudan at a Glance: 6 July – 16 August 2024

VITAL TRENDS

- Since fighting first broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) on 15 April 2023, ACLED records over 7,230 events of political violence and more than 20,000 reported fatalities in Sudan.
- From 6 July to 16 August 2024, ACLED records over 420 political violence events and over 1,195 reported fatalities.
- Most political violence was recorded in Khartoum and North Darfur states during the reporting period, with 157 and 68 events and 260 and 396 reported fatalities, respectively.
- The most common event type was battles, with 163 events recorded, followed by explosions/remote violence, with 160 events. Compared to the previous six weeks, ACLED records a 24% decrease in battles. Most of these battles were related to fighting in Khartoum.

SUDAN



Horn of Africa | Situation Update
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Key Figures

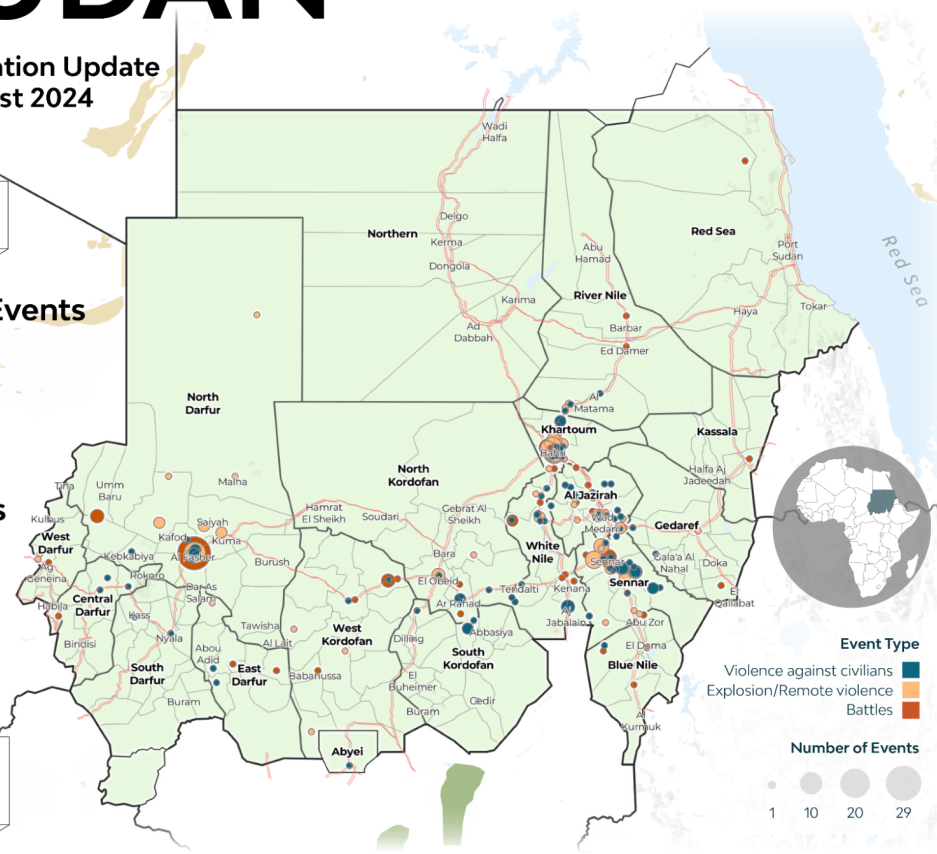
Political Violence Events

423
20% decrease compared to the six weeks prior

Reported Fatalities

1,199
23% decrease compared to the six weeks prior

Key Developments



Political Events

- 23 JUL.** The US and Saudi Arabia invite the SAF and RSF to ceasefire talks in Switzerland
- 23 JUL.** Arab and Zaghawa ethnic militias sign a peace agreement in Abu Gamra, North Darfur
- 8 AUG.** Al-Jazirah governor issues a directive to dismiss voluntary popular mobilization fighters and replace them with retired soldiers
- 13 AUG.** The SPLM-N al-Hilu faction announce a famine in some parts of South Kordofan and Blue Nile states
- 14 AUG.** Talks begin in the Swiss city of Geneva without representatives of the SAF
- 15 AUG.** Sudan government opens five border crossings with neighboring countries to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid

Violent Events

- 21 JUL.** The SAF and its allies clash with the RSF in al-Dowdia, West Kordofan, killing 40 people
- 26 JUL.** SAF airstrikes against the RSF kill more than 50 people in Gandahar market in Omdurman
- 31 JUL.** SAF General Burhan survives RSF drone attacks during a military graduation ceremony in Red Sea state
- 5 AUG.** RSF troops attack civilians in multiple villages in al-Gitina, White Nile state
- 10 AUG.** The RSF launches a multifront offensive on the SAF in El Fasher, North Darfur
- 11 AUG.** The RSF attacks civilians and kills dozens in Galgani village, Sennar

While talks between international delegations on humanitarian issues began in Geneva, Switzerland on 14 August,¹[Sudan War Monitor, 'Mediator: Some progress in Geneva talks,' 17 August 2024](#) as of the time of writing, it is unclear whether the SAF and RSF will come to the negotiating table. The RSF delegation arrived in Geneva, but the SAF remains absent, insisting it will not participate unless the agreement made in Jeddah, called the Jeddah Declaration, is implemented. The SAF says that the May 2023 agreement, which includes a number of commitments related to not targeting civilians and humanitarian operations, means the RSF should remove its presence from residential areas.²[Hussein Awad Ali, 'A just and sustainable peace in Sudan is possible,' Al Jazeera, 16 August 2024](#) Mediators are attempting to persuade the SAF to join the Geneva talks by holding separate consultations in Cairo to discuss the implementation of the Jeddah Declaration.³[Voice of America, 'Sudan sending delegation to Cairo to meet US, Egyptian mediators,' 18 August 2024](#) Despite these efforts, these and previous attempts at reaching a lasting ceasefire for Sudan's 16-month war have achieved no significant breakthrough to date.

Meanwhile, hostilities between the warring parties show little sign of abating in North Darfur state, despite torrential rainfall and floods slowing down the pace of fighting in the country and compounding an already dire [humanitarian crisis](#).⁴[United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#), 'Sudan: Rainy season ushers in severe floods, worsens plight for thousands displaced by war,' 9 August 2024 For its part, the RSF launched high-profile drone attacks that targeted SAF-controlled areas previously considered safe and far from the conflict zones. Among these attacks was an assassination attempt against Sudanese army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan on 31 July.

The threat from above expands to previously safe areas

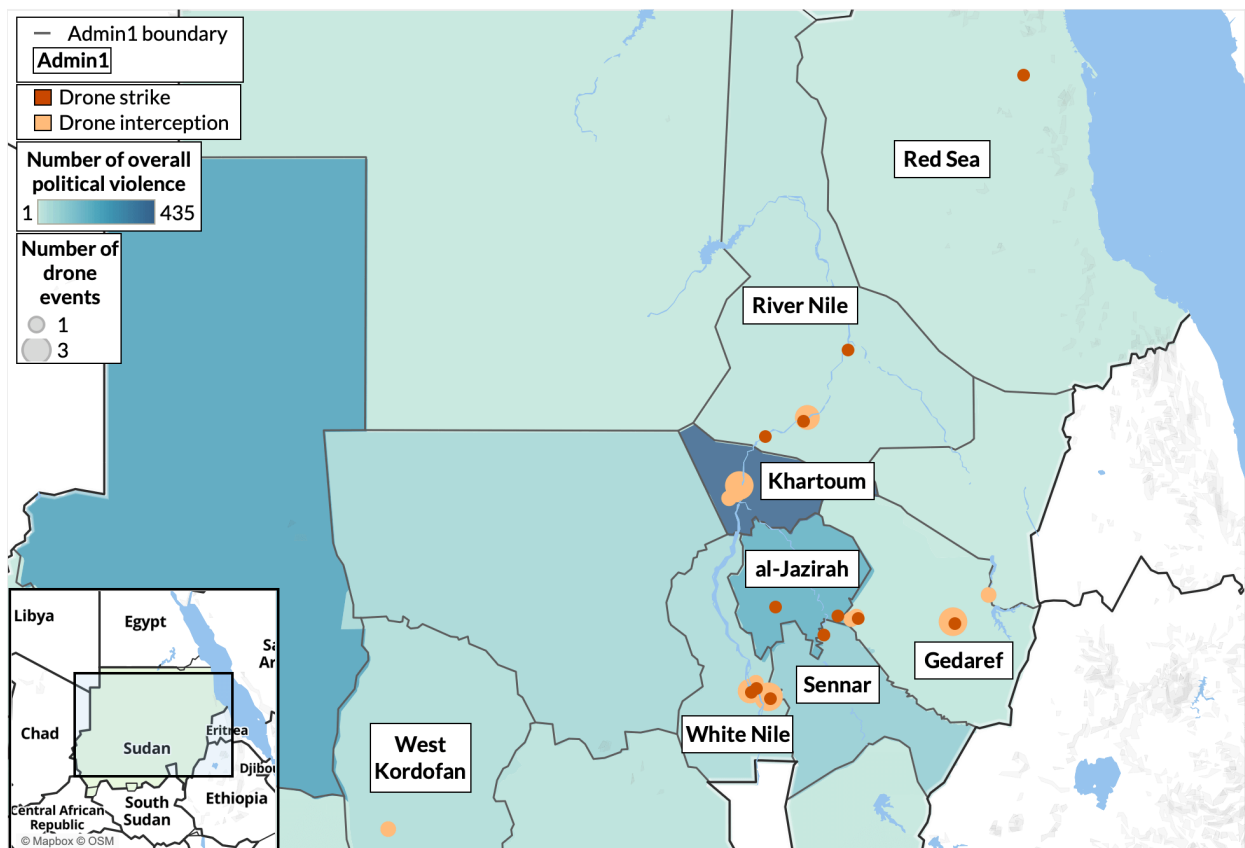
The unexpected reach of fighter drones launched by the RSF has shattered the sense of security in regions far from conflict zones, making once peaceful areas vulnerable to sudden and devastating assaults. Since [the war erupted in April 2023](#), the SAF maintained a monopoly on airstrikes. Khartoum area was the target of SAF fighter jets as the army attempted to wrestle control of the capital from the RSF. Despite controlling several non-operating airports, the RSF does not have an air force or fighter jets. However, as the war progressed, both the SAF and RSF began acquiring and deploying various types of combat drones.⁵[Sudan War Monitor](#), 'Drone war intensifies,' 21 July 2023 While the SAF already possessed drones stored at the Yarmouk Factory for Military Industries — [which fell under RSF control in June 2023](#) — both sides have since received supplies from their regional allies. Multiple reports indicate that Iran supplied drones to the SAF, while the United Arab Emirates has provided equipment to the RSF. However, both the SAF and the UAE denied their involvement.⁶[Africa Defense Forum](#), 'Drones Supplied by Iran and UAE Threaten to Prolong the Conflict in Sudan,' 9 July 2024; [The New Arab](#), 'Will RSF drones tip the balance of Sudan's war?,' 26 June 2023.; [BBC](#), 'Evidence of Iran and UAE drones used in Sudan war,' 13 June 2024

Drones have primarily been used to drop shells and bombs on targeted locations, contributing to significantly expanding the geographic reach of warfare. Since the outbreak of the war, ACLED records over 280 drone strikes conducted by the SAF. Nearly all of these strikes — 98% — were conducted in Khartoum state. In contrast, ACLED data indicate that the RSF has carried out at least 10 drone strikes.⁷ACLED's 'Air/drone strike' sub-event type only captures reported incidents that exclusively involve airstrikes. Reported use of drones during ground offensives are not captured under this sub-event as they are coded as 'Battles.' Moreover, many instances of drone usage are not reported at all if in the context of a ground offensive. Thus, this number may exclude some drone strike incidents and strikes intercepted by the SAF. While the SAF uses drone strikes as a supplementary tactic to support ground offensives, the RSF uses drones with a more strategic approach aimed at draining SAF troops in areas previously considered safe. These strikes are designed to create a sense of constant threat, forcing the SAF to stretch its defenses, thereby weakening its overall capacity to sustain prolonged engagements.

ACLED data show that, since May, the RSF has conducted several drone strikes and attempted drone attacks that were intercepted in states that are currently not a frontline and in control of the SAF, like Shendi in River Nile state, Kosti and Rabak in White Nile state, and Gedaref in Gedaref state (see map below). The strikes targeted military camps, airforce bases, and airports. These cities, situated well within SAF-controlled areas and away from frontlines, highlight the growing vulnerability of regions previously considered safe from direct conflict.

Mapping the RSF's drone use

1 May - 16 August 2024



The reach of RSF drones was starkly highlighted on 31 July, when SAF Commander Burhan survived an assassination attempt that targeted a military ceremony in the Red Sea state. While Burhan was not injured in the attack, the two strikes on the Jabit military base reportedly killed five servicemen — including two of Burhan’s bodyguards — and injured others.⁸[Abdi Latif Dahir, 'Drones Target Sudan Army Base During Top General's Visit,' New York Times, 31 July 2024](#) The assassination attempt occurred a day after the Sudanese government conditionally accepted the US invitation to participate in ceasefire talks in Switzerland, which it has since rejected.⁹[Sudan Tribune, 'Sudan's Burhan rejects peace talks, demands RSF withdrawal,' 13 August 2024](#)

The drone attack inside Jabit base — located deep within SAF-controlled territory and far from the RSF strongholds — underscores the reach and threat of drone warfare. This attempt on Burhan’s life was not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of drone attacks targeting gatherings, government buildings, and military bases across Sudan. The

small size, ease of assembly, and operational simplicity of drones present a new and formidable challenge for the SAF as they struggle to fortify their positions. This development indicates that remote violence is likely to remain a central feature of the war.

The ongoing battle for strategic dominance in El Fasher despite severe floods and rainfall

Severe flooding around the North Darfur capital of El Fasher since late July has reportedly disrupted troop movements, impacting either party's ability to conduct operations.¹⁰[Xinhua, 'Heavy rain, flooding and fighting paint grim picture of Sudan: UN,' 14 August 2024](#) While waiting for roads to dry and adapting to the muddy conditions, the RSF heavily relied on artillery shelling as they prepared their troops for upcoming offensives. However, the RSF, alongside allied Arab militias, launched new offensives aimed at breaking through the defenses of the SAF and Darfur Joint Forces.¹¹The Darfur Joint Forces umbrella was established as a neutral force consisting of signatories of the 2021 Juba Peace Agreement and deployed on 27 April 2023 to protect civilians in El Fasher. However, since December 2023, various members of the Joint Forces have changed their alliances. Some backed the SAF, while others maintained their neutrality. Despite the relentless RSF attempts to advance and seize control within the city, the Joint Forces have successfully managed to repel them, pushing the RSF back to positions east of the city.

These assaults typically involved multi-front attacks, with the RSF intensifying artillery shelling and deploying drone strikes for several days before advancing on El Fasher in order to gain control over the SAF 6th Infantry Division. Nevertheless, the SAF continued to control El Fasher regardless of repeated attempts by the RSF to gain control of the city. On 27 June, the RSF conducted heavy artillery bombardments and drone strikes, which lasted for five days. In response, the SAF repeatedly conducted airstrikes against the RSF positions to the east of El Fasher. During this period, the RSF bolstered its offensive capabilities by deploying new Howitzer cannons and bringing in reinforcements to strengthen its forces. Another significant offensive was launched on 3 August, with the RSF attacking from the southern and southeastern fronts. Prior to this assault, the RSF and SAF exchanged artillery fire, and the SAF launched three airstrikes. Despite the ferocity of the attack, the SAF and Darfur Joint Forces managed to repel the RSF advance.

The RSF persisted with this offensive pattern, launching another major assault on 10 August from four directions (north, east, south, and southwest). The RSF managed to make some headway on the southern front, which had emerged as a particularly vulnerable area in SAF and Joint Forces defenses. Using this route as its main axis of advance, the RSF succeeded in penetrating the al-Thawra Janoub neighborhood located close to El Fasher airport. However, the Joint Forces were once again able to push back the RSF and reportedly inflicted heavy losses on RSF.¹²[Xinhua, 'Sudanese army says repulses major attack by paramilitary forces on El Fasher,' 11 August 2024](#) The continued clashes underscored the volatile and brutal nature of the conflict in El Fasher, with both sides locked in a deadly struggle for control of the city.

The renewed fighting in El Fasher exacted a heavy toll on civilians, with at least 188 people reportedly killed and 429 households displaced.¹³[International Organization for Migration, 'DTM Sudan Flash Alert: Conflict in Al Fasher \(Al Fasher Town\), North Darfur,' 5 August 2024](#) Amid the prolonged war and severe restrictions on humanitarian access, parts of North Darfur — notably the Zamzam IDP camp — have been pushed into famine.¹⁴[Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\), 'Famine Review Committee,' July 2024](#) The population of Zamzam IDP camp, which is estimated to be at least 500,000 people, has faced extreme hardship as the conflict has escalated. Since mid-April, an additional 150,000 people have been displaced due to the intensifying violence, further exacerbating the crisis.¹⁵[Sudan Tribune, 'U.S concerned over famine in parts of Sudan's North Darfur,' 1 August 2024](#) The famine conditions are expected to persist through at least the harvesting season in October, which is also threatened with disruption or delays due to ongoing clashes.¹⁶[Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\), 'Famine Review Committee,' July 2024](#)