

Sudan Situation Report Analysis

Conflict Developments and their Implications for Aid Agencies

July 2023

The Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan had a limited focus on humanitarian issues, while subsequent ceasefires had practically no effect on the fighting. Any spillover effects of the Sudanese conflict on neighbouring countries may affect aid operations regionally. Attempts to influence the conflict through sanctions are highly likely to affect aid operations.

Summary

- Fighting will remain largely within urban areas, despite a likely increase in the ongoing conflict, with Khartoum, West, South and North Darfur, the Kordofan states and parts of Blue Nile seeing the heaviest fighting. Neither side is likely to gain a significant advantage in the next six months.
- Tribal and ethno-religious loyalties are already fuelling recruitment and support for both sides and this is only likely to increase if – as seems likely – the conflict continues. This in turn risks sparking a more general tribal/ethnic conflict, particularly in Darfur, with complex implications for aid agency recruitment and collaboration with local partners.
- The conflict could see spillover effects on neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Chad and South Sudan, with the influx of refugees escaping violence in Sudan likely adding additional pressures on their resources and stability. The situation in Libya poses further risks, because the country serves as an optimal rear base for the combatants in Sudan, due to its role as a black-market logistics hub, while South Sudan could see economic repercussions, particularly if the RSF targets the country's oil infrastructure.
- The international community's will to address Sudan's humanitarian and security issues has been insufficient thus far, but global attention will continue to be crucial to prevent the conflict from escalating into a regional war. Therefore, longer-term sustained pressure from the international community, including the Quad (United States, UK, Saudi Arabia and UAE), is key.
- Further sanctions intended to force conflict parties to the negotiation table may affect aid operations. Measures to address the lawlessness, organised crime and international terrorism that is increasingly prevalent in Sudan may also further complicate aid operations.
- Conflict parties in Sudan and some foreign powers may not perceive aid agencies as neutral, impartial, and independent, and may attempt to undermine their humanitarian intentions.
- A possible destabilisation of the oil market may significantly affect fuel and food prices, with implications for aid operations.

Developments to mid-July 2023

The Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan announced by the United States and Saudi Arabia on 11 May was designed to recognise “the obligations of both sides under international humanitarian and human rights law to facilitate humanitarian action” to protect civilians affected by the conflict. However, clashes continued the following day between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF), with neither side prepared to give ground.

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The conflict has seen a number of ceasefires. The last internationally negotiated truce finished on 21 June, while the United States adjourned **further talks** on the same day, because the “format is not succeeding in the way” that was hoped. Since then fighting has surged, with Darfur seeing fresh clashes involving an increasingly ethnic dimension especially following the death of **Khamis Abakar**, the governor of West Darfur, after he accused the RSF and its allied Arab militia of “genocide”. This point was also highlighted by the UN envoy in Sudan, Volker Perthes, who was promptly declared persona non grata by the Sudanese government, although the UN has **stated** that this sanction cannot be applied to UN envoys.

This comes as conflict has developed in the south-western areas of the country, where Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North forces have clashed with the SAF in South Kordofan state, leading to many refugees leaving the state’s **capital**, Kadugli, and adding to Sudan’s burgeoning IDP population.

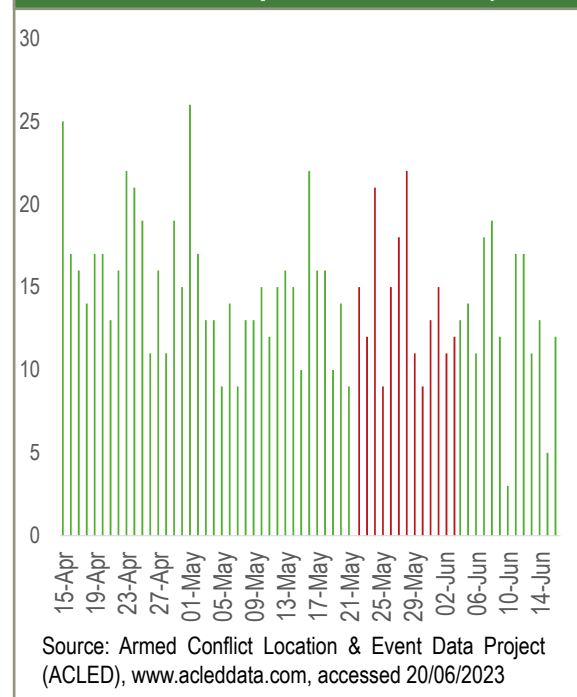
Meanwhile, Al Jazeera reports that the West Darfur capital, El Geneina, has seen up to 5,000 people killed, although this has yet to be verified, including senior aid worker Al Sadiq Muhammad Ahmed, the commissioner of the Sudan Humanitarian Aid Commission. There are claims that he was assassinated. The fighting therefore appears to be spreading throughout Sudan, with Khartoum, Darfur and Kordofan states continuing to see the worst of the conflict.

Concurrently a peace process led by Kenya, and three other regional states - Ethiopia, South Sudan and Djibouti (part of IGAD) - is still in its infancy, and took its first steps on 10 July in Addis Ababa, with discussions surrounding a regional intervention force.

Conflict situation in early July 2023

- Prior to the 15 April outbreak of fighting between the RSF and SAF, Darfur was by far the most violent area of the country, experiencing **56% of all reported incidents of political violence**.
- Heavy fighting was reported in Khartoum city, Khartoum North and Omdurman, with clashes on 25 June focused around south Khartoum. The RSF claimed to have taken the Central Reserve Police Headquarters in the southern part of the capital, which they had targeted due to the weapons, ammunition and vehicles stored there. The headquarters is 12 km south of another RSF camp, and the RSF likely hopes to mount a pincer movement from there around SAF-held areas in Khartoum. There have also been eyewitness accounts of air strikes and artillery fire in north Omdurman.
- Although the international media has focused on the fighting for Khartoum and efforts to evacuate foreigners, clashes between the opposing factions were reported in 17 states during the first two weeks of fighting. This reduced to nine states over the following weeks, and the epicentre of the violence became Khartoum (and neighbouring Omdurman and Bahri), as well as parts of Darfur (particularly the West Darfur capital, El Geneina, which is now almost without communications and humanitarian aid; Nyala in South Darfur; and El Fasher, Kebkabiya, and Tawila in North Darfur), North Kordofan, and Northern states.

Figure 1: Recorded incidents of political violence and protest across Sudan, 15 April-16 June 2023)



- On 24 June the spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ravina Shamdasani, called for “safe passage” for those fleeing the fighting. This followed “persistent hate speech” (including death threats) directed towards the Masalit people. She also requested access for aid workers to El Geneia and the surrounding region.
- Fighting was reported to have increased substantially on 4 July across areas in Omdurman city (which lies across the Nile from Khartoum city), as the SAF attempted to cut off supply routes used by the RSF to bring up reinforcements. The RSF is attempting to bring reinforcements through Omdurman towards Khartoum and Khartoum North (the three cities that are based at the confluence of the Blue and White Niles rivers), and is seeking to capture the main capital area.
- The UN has also stated that El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, is now inaccessible to humanitarian workers due to ongoing clashes in the area.

Urban conflict

Fighting is mainly occurring in and around urban areas in Khartoum state and West and North Darfur, with the main two combatants – the RSF and SAF – attempting to secure military supplies and control key areas and the apparatus of national governance.

Implications for tribal and ethnic relations in Sudan

Although initially local armed groups based outside the country’s main urban areas tried to avoid being drawn into the fighting, some former members joined the ranks of the SAF or RSF. Indeed, both combatants have been recruiting and training fighters in Darfur over the same period, mostly youths from the Arab Rizeigat and Taaisha tribes, although the SAF has publicly denied recruiting based on tribal affiliations. It has, however, also attempted to recruit members of the Um Jalul clan of the Arab Mahamid tribe of Musa Hilal, which rivals the Rizeigat Mahariya tribe of the RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (“Hemedti”).

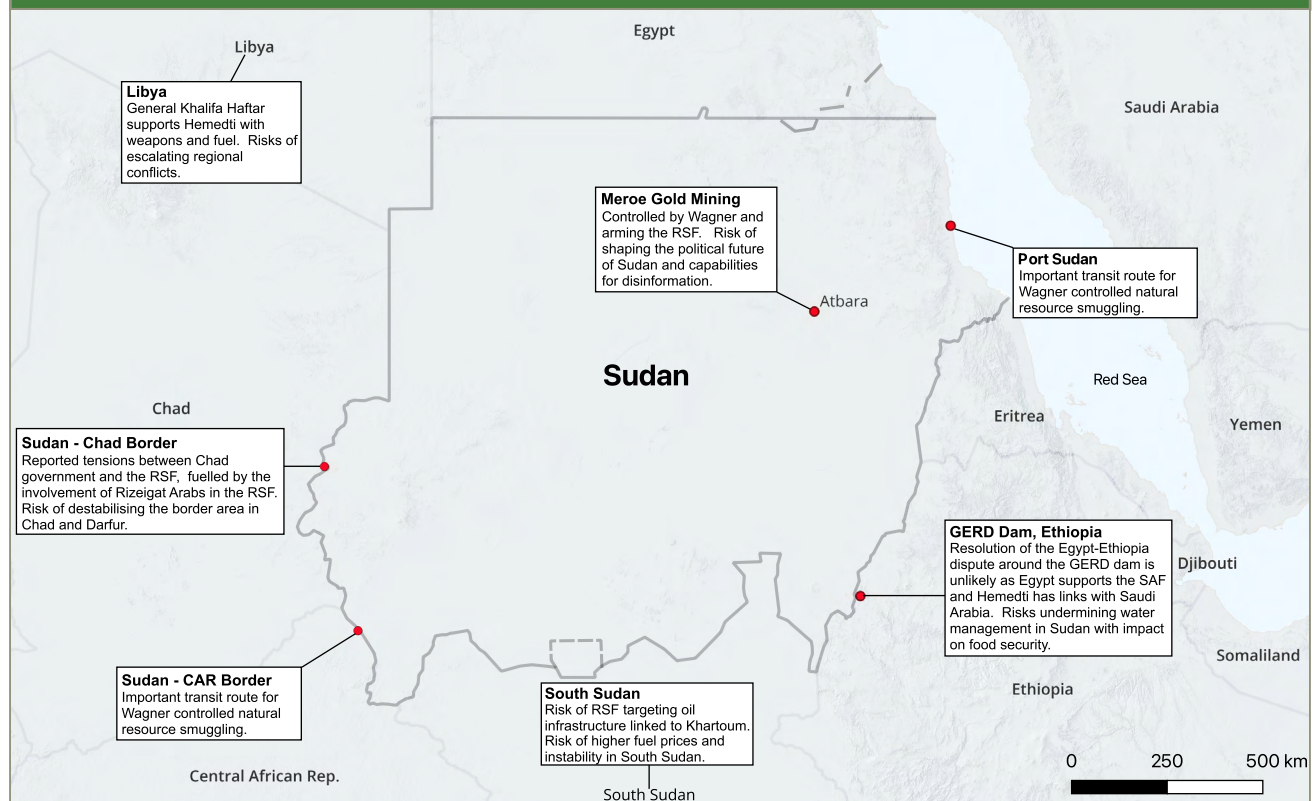
At the same time, violence has risen significantly in Darfur. There have been **significant intercommunal clashes** in El Geneina, West Darfur, with reported violence in the city increasing more than fourfold compared with the monthly average over the preceding year, with over 700 fatalities reported since 15 April. These clashes initially centred on areas where members of the Masalit tribe lived, but have since spread across the entire city. The RSF has reportedly blamed such violence on “outlaws” fighting a “tribal conflict”, accusing the SAF of facilitating the escalation and claiming that the deployments of its (the RSF’s) own allies was merely its attempt to get aid into the city. However, the majority of the violence in this area has involved Arab militias affiliated with the RSF. Meanwhile in El Fasher, North Darfur, an Arab militia linked to the RSF attacked the city’s Shala prison and released prisoners. Five armed groups that are signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement – the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) led by Minni Minnawi, SLM-Transitional Council, Justice and Equality Movement, Gathering of Sudan Liberation Forces, and Sudanese Alliance Movement – responded by deploying forces in the city to maintain security.

On 8 May the SLM withdrew forces from northern Omdurman to augment those already in North Darfur, raising fears of a renewed civil war in Darfur, while weakening the SAF’s position in Omdurman. If the conflict escalates, heightened RSF and SAF engagement outside Khartoum may also exacerbate fighting between local armed groups elsewhere in the country. There is also scope for further spillover if one or both sides attempt to recruit key figures involved in long-standing tensions between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists.

Regional implications

With no signs of either the SAF or RSF backing down, a prolonged civil war is becoming increasingly likely. This will have implications for the wider region due to Sudan's strategic location and agricultural wealth.

Figure 2. Contexts that may fuel instability in Sudan and neighbouring countries



- **Displacement**

Sudan's neighbours, including Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Chad, are already facing an influx of refugees escaping the violence in Sudan, while Ethiopia, Chad, and South Sudan are also dealing with the aftermath of their own internal conflicts.

- **Oil exports from South Sudan**

South Sudan is vulnerable because the RSF may target oil infrastructure linking it to Khartoum, disrupting oil exports and destabilising the economy, which is heavily dependent on oil revenue, an outcome that could lead to President Salva Kiir's regime supporting the SAF.

- **Tension in Chad and the Darfur conflict**

Chad is also at risk of being drawn into the conflict due to **reported tensions** between the country's government and the **RSF**. While physical risks to Chad's oil infrastructure are low, an escalation of violence in Darfur would lead to wider insecurity, given the tribal dimension of much of the tension there (the RSF draws its forces largely from the ethnic Rizeigat Arab tribe, which is also present in parts of Chad and Libya).

Read our **Crisis, Conflict and Food Insecurity** report on how the conflict in Sudan impacts food security and recommendations for stakeholders

- **Egypt-Ethiopia dispute over the GERD**

The conflict in Sudan is likely to hinder the resolution of the Egypt-Ethiopia dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Both countries are already aligned on opposing sides in the Sudan conflict: Egypt is a staunch backer of the SAF and has reportedly deployed air strikes against RSF positions. The RSF leader, Hemedti, on the other hand, has cultivated a close relationship with Addis Ababa. Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed is unlikely to provide the RSF with direct support, because this would risk sparking a proxy conflict with Egypt especially because escalating tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia could further complicate the GERD issue.

- **Libya's role**

Meanwhile, General Khalifa Haftar, who controls significant parts of Libya, is playing a major role in resupplying the conflict in Sudan. Hemedti relies on Haftar's control over south-eastern Libya, which is a crucial route for external logistical support to reach the RSF. Haftar's involvement in resupplying the RSF is crucial to the conflict's sustainability, with reports of ammunition and missiles being supplied, and intelligence sharing already documented. Haftar's son, Saddam, oversees efforts to divert Libyan fuel to the RSF, particularly for fighters travelling long distances across the desert to reach Khartoum (see further details below).

The conflict will therefore exacerbate the destabilisation of neighbouring states, amid rising resource nationalism and heightened interstate tensions. These factors will have a tangible impact on the humanitarian environment for global NGOs operating in the region, affecting logistical routes (especially cross-border routes) and supply chains into the country.

International implications

Major geopolitical dimensions are at play in the conflict in Sudan, with global powers such as Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) vying for influence in the country.

- **Russia, the West and Middle Eastern powers**

The possibility of a Russian base being established on the Red Sea has raised concerns among Western powers, while the Quad, comprising the United States, UK, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, has sponsored **mediation efforts** in Sudan. Although the United States' main role has been to attempt to broker ceasefires and pressure the warring sides to negotiate a solution to the conflict, its reliance on its Gulf partners in efforts to end the conflict indicates a withdrawal from its grand strategy for Africa, with Saudi Arabia hosting representatives of both sides in Jeddah (6-11 May 2023) in the hopes of brokering a solution. The hosting of these talks indicates that Saudi Arabia is trying to demonstrate its ability to play a leading diplomatic role in the Arab world after years of a negative global image caused by its role in the war in Yemen. Moreover, Sudan is an important investment hub for Saudi Arabia, particularly in terms of the latter's food security strategies.

Meanwhile, the UAE has been involved in Sudan's conflict through the use of clandestine networks to exert influence in the strategically important Horn of Africa. The UAE has created a **complex web** of connections and dependencies. This web allows it to link partners,

competitors, and both state and non-state actors, and thus to elevate its status as a vital hub in the region, which it is using to establish connections with Hemedti and provide his forces with financial support, arms, and mercenaries. The UAE has also extended its reach into Sudan by leveraging its connections in Libya and Russia. Its involvement in the Sudanese conflict has raised concerns among Western diplomats, who now accuse the UAE of supporting warlords, aligning with Russia, and promoting mercenaries. The UAE's network-centric statecraft makes it a crucial player that is able to exert leverage in the region, and anyone seeking to end the fighting in Sudan must engage with the UAE.

- **Libya**

As discussed above, Libya's General Haftar is playing a significant role in resupplying the conflict in Sudan. Haftar is allied with the UAE, Hemedti, and the Russian Wagner Group, and uses his control over south-eastern Libya to make the area a crucial route for the provision of external support to the RSF, with Haftar's proxies, such as the Salafist militia Subul al-Salam, operating along the Libya-Sudan border. His 128th Brigade, led by Hassan al-Zadma, sources mercenaries from Sudan and Chad to support Haftar. Haftar's involvement in resupplying the RSF is crucial to the conflict's sustainability.

- **Egypt**

Egypt is also concerned about the implications of the Sudanese conflict on its borders. Tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees have fled to Egypt, straining its resources and raising fears of a Muslim Brotherhood resurgence and potential infiltration. Egypt's military is already stretched thin, dealing with the insurgency in northern Sinai and guarding its western border with Libya. Moreover, Egypt's support for the SAF conflicts with the UAE's backing of the RSF, potentially straining their relationship at a time when Egypt needs financial support.

- **Wagner Group**

Several reports have pointed to the involvement of Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries in Sudan, particularly in terms of gold mining and arming the RSF. Despite the chaotic situation in Sudan, Wagner's affiliate Meroe Gold continues to operate gold mines, with Hemedti's support. In exchange, Wagner is suspected of supplying Hemedti and the RSF with surface-to-air missiles and other weapons to fight the SAF. Wagner has been using its bases in the Central African Republic and Libya to provide weapons and support to the RSF, with flights from Wagner's bases in Libya and Syria documented to have **landed** at RSF bases in Sudan. Wagner has also been involved in smuggling gold out of Sudan, with an estimated 32.7 metric tons worth nearly US\$1.9 billion smuggled out between February 2022 and February 2023.

The relationship between the Wagner Group and the RSF dates back to 2017, when Wagner mercenaries arrived in Sudan at the invitation of then-President Omar al-Bashir. The group established Meroe Gold and built ties with Hemedti and the RSF even after the ousting of al-Bashir. Wagner's involvement in Sudan serves Russia's goal of maintaining an authoritarian regime that protects its interests, rather than favouring one side in the conflict. However, the Wagner Group staged a so-called "mutiny" in Russia on 23-24 June led by its head, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who threatened to march on Moscow. This puts any future supplies of arms for the RSF in some doubt, although Russia is highly likely to maintain some presence in Sudan due to the profitability of the gold industry, with The Guardian **quoting** one analyst as saying that it was "business as usual" for the Russian group in Sudan.

Read our Attacks on Health Care Bi Monthly News Briefs for global incidents of threats and violence affecting health care

Possible scenarios

• National/tribal conflict

- Talks in Jeddah on 6 May mediated by the United States and Saudi Arabia resulted in the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan. However, this had a limited focus on humanitarian issues and possible ceasefire, and civil society groups have described the declaration as “meaningless” because it has had practically no effect on the fighting on the ground. There is no sign of a more meaningful agreement being negotiated in the weeks or months ahead. The violence is therefore likely to persist as long as both factions have the ability to continue fighting, with the RSF potentially backed by foreign fighters (including some linked to Wagner/the Russian government) facing the SAF’s dominance in military hardware – particularly attack aircraft.
- Local tensions and disputes and other latent instability will almost certainly also increase in parallel with the broader national-level conflict between the SAF and RSF, both of which will attempt to gain control of the capital, Khartoum, and its surrounds.
- Fighting will continue in urban areas, although neither side will gain a significant advantage in the next six months, despite a likely increase in the ongoing conflict, with Khartoum, West, South and North Darfur and parts of North Kordofan states seeing the heaviest fighting. Control of Khartoum city and the surrounding area will be a particular aim of both sides, in order to take control of national governance centres.
- Tribal and ethno-religious loyalties are already fuelling recruitment and support for both sides, and this is only likely to increase if – as seems likely – the conflict continues. This in turn risks sparking a more general tribal/ethnic conflict, particularly in Darfur. This has implications for aid agency recruitment and collaboration with local partners.

• Regional

- The conflict in Sudan, with its potential for a prolonged civil war, could see spillover effects on neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, Chad, and South Sudan, with the influx of refugees escaping violence in Sudan likely adding additional pressures on their resources and stability.
- The situation in Libya poses further risks because the country serves as an optimal rear base due to its role as a black-market logistics hub, facilitating the movement of weapons, food, fuel and fighters. This makes it an ideal launching point for attacks into Sudan or Chad. If Hemedti retreats from Khartoum to Darfur, tribal conflicts and the collapse of peace agreements in Darfur could potentially draw Libya into a regional war. Internally in Libya, General Haftar, despite his involvement in official political agreements and the UN-approved power-sharing deal for the country, may perceive Hemedti’s insecure position as a reason to increase his military power and leverage his relationship with the Wagner Group to gain dominance in Libya. This would disrupt the fragile balance of power in Libya and increase the likelihood of another regional war.
- The conflict in Sudan could have economic repercussions for South Sudan, particularly if the RSF targets oil infrastructure that connects South Sudan to Khartoum. Disruptions in oil exports and South Sudan’s heavy dependence on oil revenue could destabilise its economy and therefore potentially lead to its regime backing the SAF.

Read the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC) factsheet on violence against health care in Sudan in 2022.

- **International**

- The United States has imposed sanctions on certain individuals who it accuses of destabilising Sudan. There are calls for freezing and seizing the financial and business assets of Hemedti and SAF commander General Abdel Fattah Abdelrahman al-Burhan, which would enable the United States to impede their ability to fight and resupply their forces, forcing them back to the negotiating table. However, this is unlikely in the foreseeable future. It is also unlikely that the United States would sanction al-Burhan, given his official position as the head of Sudan's Transitional Military Council and de facto ruler of Sudan, unless he becomes linked to any potential war crimes SAF forces may commit. Diplomatic efforts to arrange a ceasefire are still under way, but their success remains uncertain, because many earlier ceasefires were **broken**.
- The conflict in Sudan will have broad transregional impacts beyond the country's immediate neighbouring states. The displacement of large numbers of the population and the collapse of security across the country have created a permissive environment for transnational crime, illicit trafficking, and terrorism. Sudan's strategic importance to various regions, including the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, is highlighted by its role as a transit country for Islamic State operatives and human traffickers.
- The international community's will to address Sudan's humanitarian and security issues has been **insufficient**, but global attention will **continue** to be crucial to prevent the conflict from escalating into a regional war. Therefore, longer-term sustained pressure from the international community, including the Quad (United States, UK, Saudi Arabia and UAE), is key, although a solution seems unattainable in the near future, due to both sides refusing to negotiate a peace agreement that would ensure longer-term stability.
- This, added to the ongoing exacerbation of the conflict by various Arab and African actors arming opposing sides in Sudan, means that further longer-term negotiations are highly unlikely at present. That being said, the UAE may shift its support depending on the trajectory of the internal fighting. The United States has coordinated with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in attempts to negotiate ceasefires in Sudan, and the Biden administration sees Abu Dhabi as having an important role in influencing Hemedti. However, it is unclear what influence the UAE can exert over Hemedti at this stage.
- The potential establishment of a Russian base on the Red Sea will likely raise concerns among Western powers, with the development leading to increased tensions and competition between Russia and other global powers, potentially affecting the dynamics of the conflict in Sudan. Although this may be delayed in the short term (particularly following the Wagner "mutiny"), it will likely remain a longer-term Russian foreign policy objective, with Russia already making moves to take over the lucrative gold trade in Sudan and thus continue its links with the RSF.

- **Humanitarian**

- Humanitarian access will remain challenging particularly for food aid, and will require complex negotiations.

**Read our Social Media Monitoring report on
Sudan's Doctors Falsely Accused of Siding with the RSF.**

- IDPs are likely to increase, with numbers now at least 1.9 million, especially if the rains cause widespread flooding (as they did in 2020). Many IDPs have left Khartoum, Darfur and Kordofan states, moving to already large IDP populations in Gedaref, Kassala, Blue Nile and White Nile states. NGOs will need to build resilience into the routes they use to deliver aid, using local knowledge where possible.
- Health centres are currently estimated to be working at 20% capacity, while conflict parties are likely to force health workers to prioritise treatment for their troops over civilians. The availability of medical facilities and supplies is unlikely to increase, unless NGOs are able to negotiate safe passages through areas affected by fighting, especially with reports of military strikes affecting health care (see the Insecurity Insight report on **Attacks on Health Care in Sudan**).
- Fuel and food prices will increase as the conflict widens, especially if the opposing forces are able to take control of oil fields or refineries. This also means that supply chains are highly likely to be disrupted in the next six months, especially when the flooding season (August-September) starts. This will exacerbate the unavailability of food supplies and lead to higher prices.
- Physical cash is in short supply.
- Access to **grain and agricultural supplies** is likely to worsen through 2023 to 2025. Sudan is not only susceptible to flooding, but with the warming climate and with El Nino now starting to dominate the global climate, the country will likely see lower rainfall this year, as has already been forecast throughout Darfur, Kordofan, Khartoum, and Kassala states. This, combined with concerns over the **Black Sea Grain Initiative** (negotiated due to the current Russia-Ukraine conflict), which Russia has continually threatened to pull out of, could see grain and oil supplies decrease in the next year, especially since other major grain producers such as Canada have experienced wildfires this year caused by hotter summers.

Recommendations for aid agency advocacy

- **International humanitarian law duty bearers and conflict parties:**

Where possible, reinforce all conflict parties' awareness of and responsibility to implement the principles of international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions

- All feasible precautions must be taken to prevent the damaging or destruction of civilian objects and to allow unhindered humanitarian access to those in need.
- Advocate for a better understanding of humanitarian principles among conflict parties and the public. The latter increasingly shape opinions through the use of social media comments and reactions.

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