



# Designation of MSF Attackers as “Armed Men” Criticised by SAF Supporters in Sudan

Social Media Monitoring: MSF Targeted by Online Threats

September 2023

To support the humanitarian response in Sudan, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing [social media monitoring](#) to understand sentiments towards the aid sector as expressed on social media. The aim is to contribute to the development of aid agencies’ risk management and communication strategies at a time when social media use is growing rapidly in many crisis-affected countries.

## Summary

This brief presents findings on sentiments expressed online in relation to an attack on an MSF convoy in southern Khartoum, Sudan, that occurred on 20 July 2023. The findings of a qualitative sentiment analysis of social media comments highlighted the views of predominantly men, mainly in Khartoum and who support the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the military government. This group reacted very negatively to MSF’s neutral description of those who perpetrated the attack as “armed men”, because the social media users presumed the armed men to be Rapid Support Forces (RSF) members. Among this group who actively engaged with comments in relation to the attack on MSF were the following:

- Some 31 users explicitly expressed their belief that MSF “deserved” to be attacked by the RSF (16.5%).
- Some 13 users explicitly expressed their belief that MSF collaborated with the RSF or its supporters (6.91%).
- Some 19 users also issued direct online threats against MSF (10.11%).

These views cannot be assumed to reflect opinions among other groups in the conflict; rather, they represent views shared in groups close to the SAF (see “Methodology”, below).

## Context

In southern Khartoum on 20 July 2023, an MSF convoy transporting medical supplies to the Turkish Hospital was [stopped](#) by armed men less than a kilometre away from the hospital. The armed men reportedly questioned MSF’s presence in the area, and then proceeded to physically assault members of the MSF team, which comprised 18 people. The driver of one of the MSF vehicles was detained and his life was threatened before he was released. An MSF vehicle was also stolen during the incident.

Following the incident, MSF issued a [statement](#) in which the members of the group responsible for the attack were referred to as “armed men”, without mentioning or alleging any further association.

Mailing List

Following the incident, MSF warned that medical activities in the hospital were in serious jeopardy and that the organization will not be able to continue to provide medical care if minimum safety guarantees are not met. The Turkish hospital supported by MSF is one of only two hospitals that remain open in southern Khartoum. In Sudan, more than two-thirds of hospitals remain [out of service](#), partly due to insecurity. Between 15 April and 21 July 2023, Insecurity Insight’s monitoring identified [164 attacks on health care](#), in which health facilities were damaged at least 39 times and 26 health workers killed.

### Social media usage in Sudan

Although an estimated 13.49 million people – 28.4% of the population – had internet access in Sudan in January 2023, it was concentrated in key areas such as the capital, Khartoum. In 2022, it was estimated that Khartoum accounted for around 70% of the country’s electricity usage, with most rural areas suffering from unsteady access to electricity. As a result, internet and social media usage is heavily biased towards Khartoum.

Although detailed data on social media usage is [not available](#), in December 2020 Facebook was the [fourth most visited website](#) in Sudan, indicating that it is the preferred social media platform. While Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and other social media platforms are available in Sudan, internet freedom is low, with [indications](#) that the authorities “use intimidation to coerce internet users to delete content” they object to.

## Findings from social media sentiment analysis

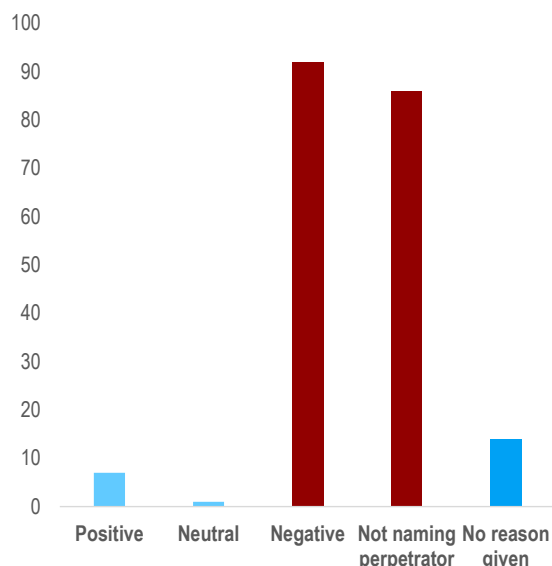
- **Not naming perpetrators responsible for prevalent negative sentiment towards MSF among SAF supporters**

The vast majority of the 204 Facebook comments related to the attack on MSF in the sample – or 92% – expressed negative sentiments towards MSF when discussing the 20 July incident (see Figure 1). The main reason, which explains around 90% of all negative sentiment, was MSF’s decision not to name the perpetrators of the attack, who were assumed by most social media users to be militia members of the RSF. In fact, the users appeared to be shocked and incensed that, in their opinion, MSF was either seeking to protect the RSF’s reputation or was too afraid to identify the RSF and expose itself to retaliation from the militia group. One male social media user from El Obeid said, “*You deserve it [the attack] because you are hiding the facts. Name the armed group*”. Another from Khartoum said, “*Are you afraid, or are you covering for them, or is the word rapid support too difficult for you[?]*”.

Some social media users explicitly suggested that the cause of their anger towards MSF was its failure to identify the perpetrators. A user from Khartoum commented, “*What are you afraid of? An armed group? Just say rapid support [forces], so that we support you, [otherwise] let them rob you because you are cowards*”.

Only one social media user appeared to be aware of the neutrality principle that humanitarian organisations try to adhere to, commenting: “*My dear brothers, just for the*

Figure 1: Sentiment and reasoning explaining sentiment



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

record, humanitarian organisations do not disclose the aggressors in public [because they fear that] their individuals and their crews working on the ground [would be targeted]”.

The extent of negative sentiments towards the organisation can also be discerned from the tone of the comments. An estimated 24.5% of comments directed at MSF included insults – some of them considered vulgar in a Sudanese Arab context – including “shoes”, “gays”, “girls”, “cowards”, “traitors”, “trash”, “donkeys”, “hypocrites”, “sons of bitches” and “stray dogs”. One social media user told the organisation to call itself “cowards without borders”.

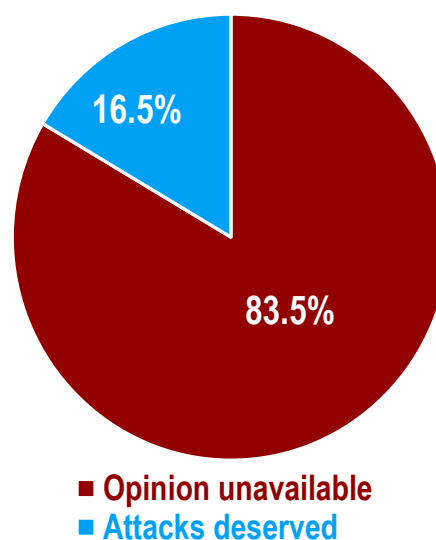
- **An important section of social media users explicitly stated that MSF “deserved” to be attacked by the RSF**

At least 16.5% of comments include specific arguments that MSF deserved the 20 July attack or even that it deserved to be attacked again by what the social media users presumed to be RSF militia members (see Figure 2). A female user from Kosti commented, “The ‘armed group’, whenever they see I hope they give you what you deserve, God willing”. Similarly, a male user from Khartoum commented, “Anyone who says an armed group without naming it, God willing they [will be] attacked again”. A female user from Khartoum said, “As long as you don’t acknowledge them [by their name], God willing, you will be murdered by them”. A male user from Sennar said, “They didn’t just attack them, they should have killed them directly”.

- **Some users threatened MSF with violence**

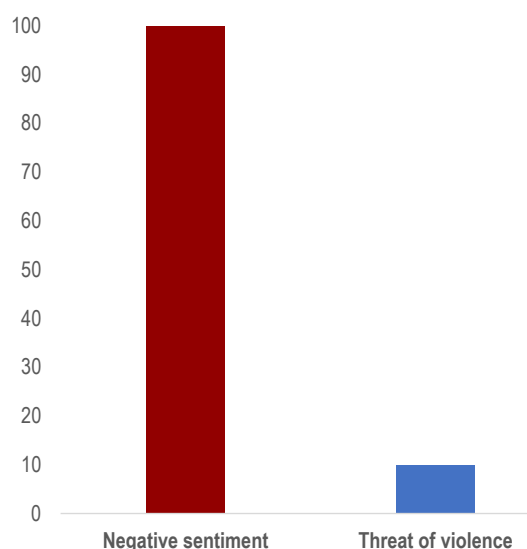
Around 10% of comments – some 19 individuals – included threats of violence against MSF. These statements normalised and incentivised violence against a humanitarian organisation. These threats tended to be formulated in two different ways. Some social media users threatened the organisation with violent acts without specifying who should use such violence. For example, a male user from Khartoum commented, “You [the MSF members] deserve above all to be whipped, God willing”. In other instances users expressed the hope that other parties, in particular the RSF, would attack MSF. For example, one male user from Damazin said, “An armed group? God willing, they will kill them [i.e. MSF members]”. The group calling for violence is a small minority among the group expressing negative sentiments.

Figure 2: Proportion who said the attack was deserved



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

Figure 3: Proportion of negative sentiments expressing threats of violence

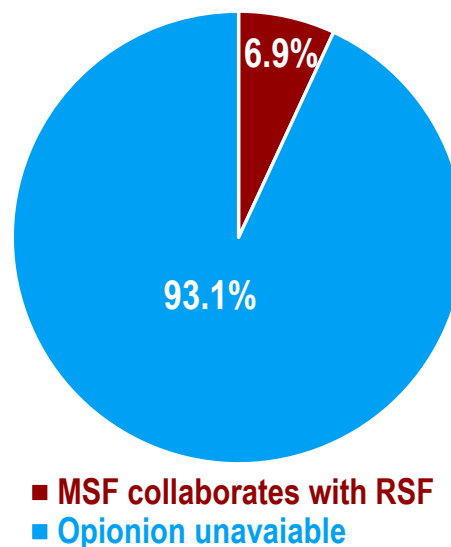


Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

- **Some social media users believed that MSF collaborates with the RSF or its supporters**

An estimated 6.9% of comments included references explicitly arguing that MSF collaborates in some way or another with the RSF or its supporters such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For example, a male user, referring to the UAE currency (the dirham), commented “[MSF] are full of trash, they can’t [name] the Rapid Support militias, the dirhams [have] reached them”, effectively implying that MSF had received UAE funds to keep the group to which the perpetrators belonged secret. Another male user from El Damar commented, “Where is your Rapid Support ally?? But they [MSF] still support their attackers [laughing emoji]”. One user said, “You agents, we know well your dirty role wrapped in humanity and your cooperation with the mercenaries, traitors, and rapists, and this statement only confirms it”. Another male user explicitly argued that MSF is supplying the RSF in various ways, commenting “Meanwhile these organisations are delivering military supplies, food and medicine for the Janjaweed [i.e. the RSF]”.

**Figure 4: Proportion of comments implying that MSF collaborates with the RSF**



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

## Discussion and some key questions

- **Where is the right place to promote humanitarian principles on social media?**

This analysis of sentiment expressed on social media highlights that the humanitarian principle of neutrality is not widely known among commentators who are active on social media. Among increasingly radicalised online groups, the use of the generic language that aid agencies use to remain neutral is perceived as being partisan by not naming those who commit violence against such agencies. The same reactions were also observed in relation to statements by the [Sudanese Doctors Syndicate](#) and in [Burkina Faso](#). This leaves aid agencies with complex and difficult questions of how the humanitarian principles should be promoted and implemented in an age of rapidly growing social media use where increasingly individuals from outside the diplomatic and humanitarian context shape conflict-related sentiments. There is therefore no simple answer to the questions of where or how humanitarian principles can be promoted on social media. Exchange on ideas and experiences of how to engage online communities around the humanitarian principles would be an important way forward.

- **How much do the views of a few radical individuals matter?**

Every hour billions of comments are being shared via social media and it is difficult to judge how important the views of some 200 individuals are who are clearly not representative of wider public opinion in Sudan. Opinions shared via social media groups are often more extreme than overall sentiments and opinions that may be shared via other media. However, the extreme views discussed by relatively small groups of individuals can have an important influence on other radicalised individuals. They are particularly important when these individuals are linked to groups with the power and influence to use violence.

## Recommendations for aid agencies

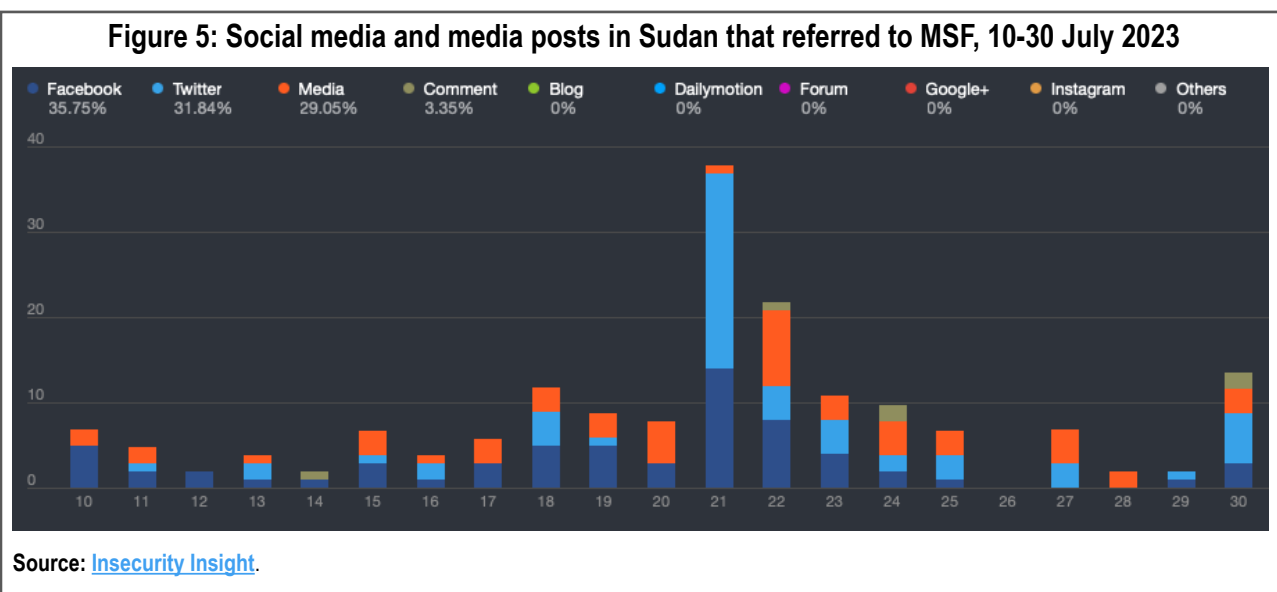
- Avoid any publications or public statements that could trigger a social media discussion about aid activities that could in any way be linked to the current political situation.
- Stay in close interpersonal conversation with staff, partner organisations and other stakeholders to understand any sentiments that may arise.
- Carefully consider the use of language referring to perpetrators of violence. Some conflict parties may perceive stating the identity of a perpetrator of violence as a more honest neutral position than generic language referring to “conflict parties” or “armed actors”.

## Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in Sudan for the period 10-30 July 2023 using key words in Arabic linked or referring to MSF. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data. In this period, a total of 179 public media and social media posts in Sudan included “Doctors without Borders” in Arabic, 33% of which were posted in the two days following the security incident on 20 July 2023 (see Figure 5).

The data used for this brief consisted of a total of 204 Facebook comments by social media users in which they reacted to 179 public posts related to the incident. Contrary to posts, especially on Facebook the comment section tends to be more dynamic and very rich in terms of opinions and discussion. Moreover, Facebook comments – which are not captured in Figure 5 – tend to be much more numerous than posts or comments on other prominent social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter). The Facebook comments used as data for this brief were taken from a number of Facebook posts uploaded in the days immediately following the incident. All included quotes are from posts, and no calls to attack MSF prior to the incidents were found on social media posts with settings that made the posts public.

The comments and the commentators’ profiles were analysed in a database across a number of categories, including: (i) comment date; (ii) commentator’s sex; (iii) commentator’s location; (iv) sentiment towards MSF; (v) reasoning behind the sentiment; (vi) violent threat



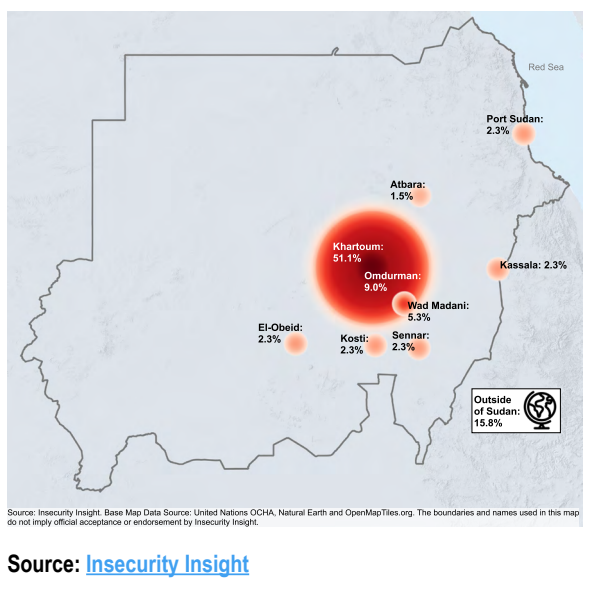


towards MSF expressed in the comment; (vii) commentator believed that MSF deserved to be attacked; (viii) commentator indicated the belief that MSF collaborates with the RSF; and (ix) comment included insult(s) directed at MSF.

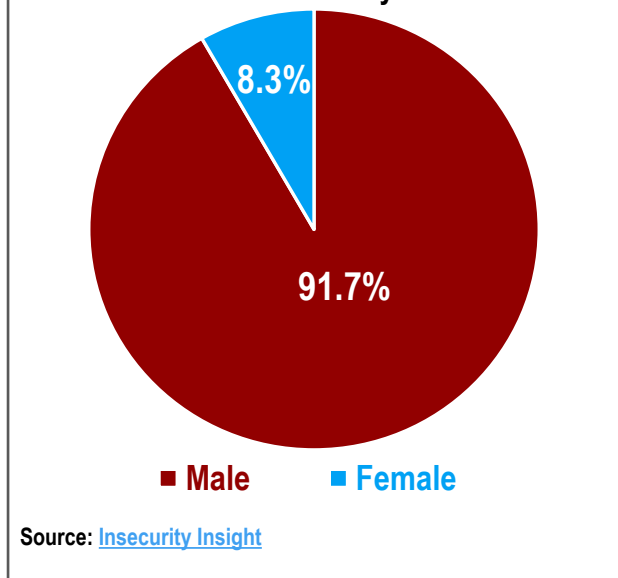
The data contains a number of limitations. First, due to the inequality in internet and electricity access in Sudan, commentators tend to come mostly from the Khartoum area. Indeed, around half of those users who provided information on their place of residence indicated Khartoum as their location (see Figure 6).

Secondly, the majority of people commenting on the MSF attack were men (some 176 social media users, or 92% of social media users whose views are discussed here). Very few Sudanese women commented on the attack on the MSF convoy (see Figure 7).

**Figure 6: Location of social media users who commented on the MSF attack**



**Figure 7: Proportion of women who commented on posts about the attack on the MSF convoy**



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