

# Unsafe on the ground, Unsafe online: Humanitarian Workers in Sudan's civil war

July 2024



## Summary

Humanitarian organisations in Sudan face significant dangers both on the ground and online. An analysis of nearly 1,000 comments on Facebook from April to May 2024 shows that misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (MDH) on social media remains a challenging issue in the Sudanese online space.

Claims of collusion with the RSF, derogatory labelling, and accusations of fueling the conflict have been made towards key international humanitarian organisations operating in Sudan. These hostile comments not only jeopardise the safety of aid workers but also challenge the neutrality and credibility of humanitarian efforts.

Efforts to combat MDH and promote accurate portrayals of humanitarian work are essential for ensuring the safety and efficacy of aid operations in conflict-affected areas like Sudan.

## Context

Since April 2023, a civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has been raging in Sudan, provoking the death of thousands and the forcible [displacement](#) of over 9 million civilians.

According to the Safeguarding Health in Conflict Coalition (SHCC), in 2023 [56 health workers were killed](#) in Sudan, compared to 13 in 2022, while at least 28 were kidnapped. Evidence indicates that health workers were deliberately and systematically attacked, including while working inside hospitals, clinics, or their homes.

The killing of an [MSF staff member](#) due to a shell strike in El Fasher city on 25 May 2024 is yet another stark reminder of the deadly dangers humanitarian workers face on a daily basis in war zones in Sudan.

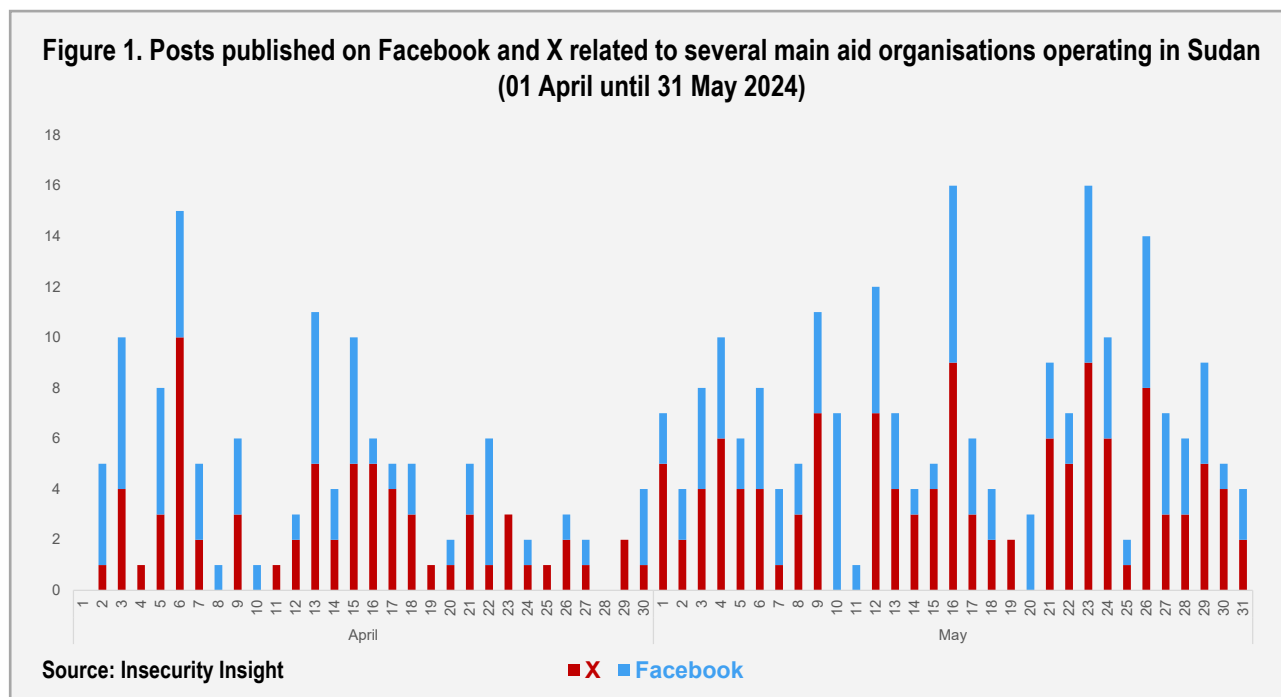
However, health workers and humanitarian organisations do not only face dangers on the ground. In 2023, Insecurity Insight reported how doctors and humanitarian organisations were repeatedly targeted with misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (MDH) on social media platforms, further endangering their safety.

This brief, which seeks to update these findings by examining whether MDH targeting humanitarian organisations is still a recurrent phenomenon in 2024, suggests that MDH in online spaces remains a significant challenge for aid organisations present in Sudan.

Mailing List

## Aid organisations within the online social media space in Sudan

Figure 1 shows that between April 1 and May 31, 2024, **at least 347 public posts were published by accounts linked to Sudan on Facebook and X related to several major aid organisations operating in the country.** No posts were recorded on other major social media platforms, such as Instagram or TikTok, indicating that Facebook and X are the primary platforms for disseminating information about aid organisations on social media.



These posts on Facebook and X are estimated to have reached nearly 3.4 million social media users, highlighting the significant interest that aid-related content generates on social media platforms.

Additionally, **these posts garnered over 9,000 engagement actions**, including comments, likes, and shares. The majority of these interactions occurred on Facebook, suggesting that social media users are much more likely to engage with aid-related content on Facebook than on X.

## Misinformation, Disinformation, and Hate Speech (MDH)

Following the outbreak of civil conflict in Sudan in April 2023, Insecurity Insight highlighted the systematic targeting of humanitarian organisations on social media platforms. This targeting included disinformation accusing these organisations of colluding with parties involved in the conflict, hate speech, and threats of violent reprisals due to perceived support for specific factions.

An analysis of nearly one thousand comments posted on Facebook in April and May 2024 in response to content related to several critical humanitarian organisations indicates that MDH continues to be an issue within the online space of these organisations operating in Sudan.

This persistent misinformation and hostility undermine the efforts of aid groups and pose challenges to their operations and credibility in the conflict-affected region.

## Claims of Partiality in the Conflict

A significant manifestation of MDH involved claims and accusations that international humanitarian organisations in Sudan were closely linked to a conflict party, specifically the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Aid workers were derogatorily referred to as “Janjaweed”, a term associated with the Arab nomad militia group involved with the RSF. Some commentators accused humanitarian organisations of directly collaborating with the rebels. For instance, one Sudanese commentator questioned, “How can a [humanitarian] organisation work with bastards, homeless, and mercenaries?” while others labelled aid organisations as “paid traitors” and “spies and followers” of the RSF.

Such disinformation-laden comments aim to challenge and undermine the organisations' principle of neutrality in the conflict, which is critical to their continued operations in areas controlled by rival factions. One comment, targeting a specific organisation's humanitarian work, even suggested that the organisation selectively evacuated the wounded, favouring the RSF over the opposing party. The comment stated, “The people all knew that this particular organisation is a criminal and has nothing to do with humanitarianism. The [aid organisation] people were the last ones to visit the RSF outposts and refused to evacuate the army's wounded, instead preferring to evacuate the RSF's wounded.”

## Claims that humanitarian organisations are fuelling the conflict

Furthermore, in some instances, organisations' assistance to civilians in areas controlled by the RSF in Darfur was interpreted as contributing to the continuation of the conflict.

For example, one comment accused aid organisations of “feeding on Sudan's conflicts and fuelling the fires of Darfur and their continuation”.

Furthermore, some seem to argue that organisations directly benefit from the conflict in Sudan: “The problems in Sudan are linked to the presence of organisations ... it is logical to create the wars and crises that you live on, so all foreign organisations should be expelled.”

## Calls for international humanitarian organisations to be expelled from Sudan

Several comments also demanded humanitarian organisations, specifically international ones, to be expelled from Sudan by the Khartoum-based military government.

Although disinformation associating organisations with the RSF clearly plays a role, another reason sometimes accompanying the call for expulsion is the claim that international organisations are also aligned with the “Western” interests.

For instance, equating the “West” with humanitarian organisations and calling both “hypocritical”, one commentator asked the leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces, Burhan, to “expel the rot”.

Another, referring to international humanitarian organisations, argued that “Western organisations” collect military intelligence and are thus “more dangerous” than the enemy.

## Prevalent Hate Speech targeting Humanitarian Organisations

Hate speech is a recurring issue in negative comments directed at humanitarian organizations. Aid workers are frequently labelled with terms such as “criminals” and “traitors”, and are subjected to demeaning language, including being called “liars” and “evil”.

These hostile remarks can contribute to creating a hostile and threatening environment for aid workers, potentially endangering the safety of those providing critical assistance in conflict zones.

This kind of rhetoric undermines the credibility and legitimacy of humanitarian efforts, making it more difficult for these organisations to operate effectively and maintain trust with the communities they serve.

Moreover, the persistence of hate speech against humanitarian organisations on social media highlights the broader issue of online toxicity and the challenges of moderating harmful content in conflict areas. The prevalence of such speech indicates a need for increased efforts to combat misinformation and promote accurate portrayals of the vital work carried out by aid organisations.

Addressing this issue is crucial for ensuring the safety and efficacy of humanitarian operations in conflict-affected areas like Sudan.

## Conclusion

In the context of the ongoing civil war in Sudan, which has resulted in the deaths of thousands and the displacement of over 9 million civilians since April 2023, humanitarian organisations face severe challenges both on the ground and in the digital sphere. Insecurity Insight's analysis reveals that misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech (MDH) targeting these organisations remain pervasive issues in 2024. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, are primary channels for disseminating information and for engaging with content related to aid organisations.

However, these platforms are also rife with harmful comments that undermine the credibility and neutrality of humanitarian efforts. The persistent MDH includes accusations of collusion with conflict parties, derogatory labelling of aid workers, and claims that aid organisations are fueling the conflict. These disinformation campaigns not only jeopardise the safety of humanitarian workers but also hinder their ability to effectively provide aid. Moreover, the prevalence of hate speech exacerbates the hostile environment, threatening the well-being of those dedicated to humanitarian missions.

Addressing the spread of MDH through enhanced efforts to combat misinformation and promote the neutrality of aid organisations are essential to maintaining their operational integrity and ensuring their continued ability to assist those in need in conflict-affected regions like Sudan.

## Methodology

Publicly available Facebook and X data were first collected in Sudan for the period 01 April-31 May 2024 using keywords associated with several key international humanitarian organisations operating in Sudan. Nearly 1000 Facebook comments were collected and analysed to analyse the online space within which organisations operate in the Sudanese context. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on Facebook.

**Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: [info@insecurityinsight.org](mailto:info@insecurityinsight.org)**

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