

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Ten months into the war, human rights violations constitute the current protection crisis in Sudan. These violations include the deliberate targeting of civilians, conflict-related sexual violence, enforced disappearances, forced displacements, and violations against the crisis-affected civilian population, including children. Humanitarian access challenges resulting from insecurity and obstructions to the aid response compound this complex crisis, further increasing protection needs.

- The continued conflict in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) that began in April 2023 has increased protection concerns for the civilian population. As at 5 February 2024, an estimated 25 million people, 14 million of whom were children, were reported to need humanitarian assistance (OCHA 20/12/2023; UNICEF 09/02/2024).
- Increased violent events in Darfur, Khartoum, and most recently Aj Jazirah have displaced about 7.8 million people internally to other states and 1.6 million refugees, returnees, and third country nationals (TCNs) from Sudan across the borders to the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, and South Sudan (UNHCR 06/02/2024). As at 16 February, civilian deaths were estimated at 14,600, while the injured numbered about 33,000. Much of these were a direct consequence of violence (ACLEDD 16/02/2024; OHCHR accessed 05/02/2023). There were also 10,700 suspected cholera cases, with 292 reported deaths, as at 17 February (OCHA 23/02/2024). A near-collapse healthcare system is worsening the prevailing morbidity and mortality rates for diseases such as cholera, measles, malaria, and malnutrition (MSF 12/10/2023; OCHA 12/02/2024).
- Despite the conflict and violence directly or indirectly affecting the entire country, much of the armed conflict is concentrated in Aj Jazirah; Central, East, South, and West Darfur; Khartoum; and pockets of Kordofan region. In Khartoum state and Darfur region, armed confrontations have persisted since the onset of the conflict on 15 April 2023, but in other regions, the violence is sporadic (UNHCR 06/02/2024).
- Protection concerns are rising throughout the entire country as a result of conflict-induced displacement, the collapse of key state services such as healthcare, the damage of critical infrastructure such as communications, and a decline in banking services (REACH 31/01/2024).

Crisis drivers

Conflict and violence

- Armed confrontations and violence between the SAF and the RSF have resulted in heightened protection risks for the country's 25 million people in need. Direct military action, such as air strikes, indiscriminate bombings, armed confrontations, and the threat of unexploded ordnance and mines, disrupt life for civilians, especially IDPs and refugees on the move (EWM et al. 06/02/2024; DRC 07/02/2024). On 10 January 2024, air strikes hit Nyala town in South Darfur, damaging and destroying civilian facilities and displacing people (GPC 15/01/2024). In Shendi city, River Nile state, a bus ran over a landmine on 21 January, killing its ten civilian passengers (GPC 15/02/2024).
- At the beginning of the conflict, armed confrontations started in Khartoum, contested by both the SAF and the RSF (OCHA 17/04/2023; REACH 31/01/2024). Both groups seeking to assert dominance resulting in a trend of protection concerns affecting civilians, and human rights abuses becoming more salient. Reports emerging from Central, East, South, and West Darfur indicate growing concerns about the targeting of minority ethnic groups, such as the Masalit community (GCR2P 24/01/2024; MSF 08/01/2024; RI 01/02/2024). The persisting armed conflict is also restricting humanitarian access, with pervasive insecurity and safety concerns preventing people from reaching assistance and limiting the response provided by humanitarian organizations.

Enforced displacement

- Sudan's humanitarian emergency has evolved over the past ten months to become the world's largest internal displacement crisis (OCHA 12/02/2024). As at 4 February, the conflict had displaced 10.7 million people, including about nine million IDPs and 1.6 million refugees, TCNs, and returnees (OCHA 04/02/2024). Between 15-19 December 2023, about 509,800 people in Wad Madani, Aj Jazirah, were forced to migrate to other parts of the country as RSF combatants took over the state (IOM 29/12/2023; ICG 09/01/2024; OCHA 16/12/2023). About 234,000 individuals experienced secondary displacement, while an estimated 275,800 were new IDPs experiencing further vulnerabilities and increased protection needs (IOM 29/12/2023; IRC 22/01/2024). 280 orphans and their caregivers previously displaced from Khartoum into Wad Madani also faced secondary displacement, exposing them to further protection concerns (UNICEF 27/12/2023; AJ 08/06/2023).

Erosion of the rule of law and descent into criminality

- The security situation has deteriorated across most of the country. Lawlessness has expanded in urban centres, exposing civilian populations to violence, assault, theft, and looting. At the same time, proponents of the warring parties have been reported to promote criminality in areas under their control, including instances of looting, assaults of civilians, abductions, and enforced disappearances (GPC 10/08/2023). Worsening this situation are the mobilisation and arming of civilians by both parties of the conflict and part of the civilian population arming themselves for protection from armed violence, heightening protection risks among the public.

Collapse of key government institutions

- An escalation of hostilities in Khartoum and the subsequent transfer of remaining government services to Port Sudan have resulted in a fragmented government and the collapse of critical services, such as health, finance, and education (ACW 29/08/2023). The absence of key services means that the conflict-affected population lacks the infrastructural support to meet urgent protection needs. The legal and justice departments have collapsed, meaning survivors of sexual violence have limited options for legal redress and pathways to seek accountability, further aggravating psychological and mental traumas (OHCHR 22/02/2024 and 23/02/2024). A collapse of the healthcare system has resulted in the population with chronic ailments, violence casualties, and victims of sexual violence not being able to access medical care. This situation exposes them to other vulnerabilities, such as limited movement options for the critically ill or injured and the risk of involuntary separation or neglect. In the education sector, close to 19 million school-going children cannot access education, elevating their protection needs as they are missing out on education as well as being exposed to risks such as child labour, recruitment and involvement in armed conflict (UNICEF 09/10/2023; STC 09/10/2023). As at 19 February, it is estimated that 3 million children have been internally displaced since the outbreak of fighting, with 2 million displaced in previous crises, and were susceptible to alternative coping mechanisms, most of which had potentially negative consequences (UNICEF 09/02/2024; STC 19/02/2024). Schools have also been turned into IDP sites and, in some cases, taken over by armed parties (NYT 27/10/2023; Reuters 10/08/2023). More concerning is that Sudan's current fractured state is neither willing nor able to steer humanitarian operations across the entire country. Instead, much of the aid coordinated from Port Sudan is only reaching areas where the army has control, with humanitarian access to areas under RSF control remaining restricted (Sudan Tribune 11/02/2024; MSN 11/02/2024). This situation worsens the needs of the distressed population and exposes them to more protection risks.

Anticipated scope and scale

The conflict has shown no signs of stopping. It is instead expanding into new areas and areas previously considered calm and safe for displaced populations and that have been turned into new centres of humanitarian operations.

Humanitarian operations and aid response in Sudan continue to face barriers with the looming expiration of operating licences for local and international NGOs on 31 March 2024 (OCHA accessed 28/02/2024; SUNA 12/09/2023). The suspension of cross-border aid operations into RSF-controlled areas further obstructs the response and humanitarian access to populations in need (US DOS 23/02/2024). Growing protection concerns will be entrenched with a limited response to the civilian population. Sudan's 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan estimated that the population with protection needs stood at 7.7 million as at 21 December 2023, with 3.6 million targeted in 2024 (OCHA 21/12/2023). The failure to renew the licences of local and international NGOs operating in this context will increase protection risks for people exposed to the conflict, consequently increasing protection needs.

Lean seasons typically take place between April–July in Sudan, but forecasts show that they could begin even earlier for deeply conflict-affected areas (FEWS NET 02/02/2024). Existing food stocks are running low, while the next harvests are projected to be poor because of agricultural sector disruptions. This, coupled with the limited sources of livelihood for the distressed population, has the potential of elevating the use of potentially harmful coping mechanisms.

CRISIS IMPACT

Enforced disappearances and abductions

There has been a surge in cases of enforced disappearances and abductions in the ten months of the conflict (SIHA Network 23/01/2024). Much of the documented disappearances have occurred in Aj Jazirah and Khartoum states and Darfur and Kordofan regions, targeting children, men, women, and people with mental and psychological disorders (Sudan Tribune 05/12/2023; OHCHR 08/11/2023 and 12/09/2023). The Sudanese Group for Victims of Enforced Disappearance recorded 842 victims between April–December 2023 (SIHA Network 23/01/2024; Sudan Tribune 05/12/2023). There has also been a surge of cases of journalists, activists, and community responders being forcefully disappeared because of their increased calls to the conflict parties to uphold and respect international humanitarian law (FIDH 14/02/2024; Dabanga 23/11/2023). Previous Sudanese Governments have traditionally used forced disappearances to silence human rights groups, a practice that both warring parties are employing against populations already made vulnerable by the effects of the conflict (OHCHR 06/12/2022). Increased cases of abductions and kidnappings targeting women for sexual exploitation and sexual slavery have also been reported, especially in areas under RSF control (CNN 16/11/2023; OHCHR 16/10/2023). In Ag Geneina, there are reports of women being coerced into sexual activities in exchange for access to basic needs, such as water and food (CNN 16/11/2023). The extortion and coercion of family members who are relatives of victims of enforced disappearances have also been reported (TWP 29/11/2023). In some cases, families are forced to pay to secure the freedom of the victims in the context of limited livelihood options, with reports indicating amounts between USD 1,000–5000, further heightening people's exposure to protection risks (Sudan Tribune 05/12/2023).

Forced conscription and recruitment

Both the SAF and the RSF are reported to have undertaken civilian recruitment into their ranks to bolster their strength and capacities (OHCHR 22/02/2024 and 23/02/2024). Some forced recruitment victims solely do so to shield their families and loved ones from being violated (TWP 30/11/2023). Targets include men choosing to return to their places of origin given the unbearable conditions in refugee camps, resulting in secondary displacement as people flee recruitment (MSF 09/06/2023; TWP 30/11/2023). Both sides have openly called for civilians to enlist in their military fold, but it is unclear if the process is completely voluntary or has elements of coercion (CEIP 15/02/2024; VOA 26/05/2023; DW 03/07/2023).

Recruitment/use of child soldiers

Child recruitment into the conflict has been attributed to both the RSF and the SAF (OHCHR 22/02/2024). In Kordofan region and areas near Khartoum, unaccompanied and separated children and children from poor families are easy targets for recruitment into combat roles, highlighting increased vulnerabilities for these children (UNHRC 16/10/2023). Continued armed violence and the decline in child protection structures expose children to the increasing risk of being enlisted as child soldiers in the conflict; in 2023, the number of children recruited into the war increased by 11% compared to 2022 (UNSC 05/06/2023; OCHA 19/12/2023). Their involvement in the war has resulted in casualties among children (UNICEF 09/02/2024; UNHRC 16/10/2023).

Separated and unaccompanied minors

The violence and scale of displacement brought about by the conflict have increased the number of unaccompanied minors and family separations (UNICEF 01/06/2023; UNHRC 16/10/2023). Separated and unaccompanied children face the risk of sexual exploitation, abduction, and recruitment into combat, as they are easy targets for armed groups (PI 04/05/2023; GPC 10/08/2023). In Chad, family separations have increased the number of unaccompanied minor refugees crossing the border from Darfur. As at 16 June 2023, close to 300 separated and unaccompanied minors had crossed into Chad from Sudan, exposing them to insecurity and hunger (UNICEF 01/06/2023). Psychological distress from the loss or absence of family members, along with the effects of the violence, also continues to heighten protection needs for this group of children (PI 04/05/2023; GPC 10/08/2023).

Sexual violence

The surge of sexual violence and its use as a weapon by armed groups in the conflict speak to the level of threat populations are facing (OHCHR 30/11/2023; UNICEF 05/07/2023). Poor reporting and documentation mechanisms fail to paint an accurate picture of the true scale of sexual violence and the toll it has taken on victims (UNICEF 05/07/2023). These groups disproportionately target women and girls with multiple cases of sexual assault, including rape and sexual slavery, in the absence of authorities to curb the abuse and medical facilities to treat both the physical and mental effects of sexual violence (UNHCR 15/06/2023; UN Women 19/06/2023; OHCHR 30/11/2023). The limited adequacy of healthcare systems that the war has equally decimated aggravates the threat of sexual abuse and violence (SIHA Network 25/10/2023).

Loss of documents

Conflict-induced displacements have elevated the risk for people in distress to lose personal or crucial documents (OCHA 13/02/2024). These documents, such as for identification, birth registration, and land and property ownership, could be lost during displacement, resulting in the denial of critical services for an already vulnerable population (AP 16/06/2023; HRW 13/07/2023). As embassies abruptly closed and relocated in the wake of the conflict, the passports of Sudanese civilians and foreigners held by these embassies have been destroyed or gone uncollected, trapping these people in the country (CNN 28/04/2023). On 10 June 2023, Egypt changed its visa requirements, obligating all Sudanese citizens seeking entry into the country to have a valid passport and visa, despite people either losing travel documents or not having the ability to obtain them with the closure of relevant offices (Govt. Egypt accessed 26/02/2024). This meant limited pathways to security, especially for women, children and older people as they are vulnerable to security threats (HRW 13/09/2023).

Involuntary returns for refugees to countries of origin

The conflict has forced refugees in Sudan to involuntarily return to their origin countries, where they are likely to experience elevated vulnerabilities (IOM 18/05/2023; SJAC 05/10/2023). As at 9 February 2024, the estimated number of refugees that had been displaced from Khartoum and other states was 195,000, and the figure was projected to rise to 231,000 by the end of 2024 (UNHCR 09/02/2024). Prior to the conflict, Sudan hosted about a million refugees and asylum seekers, a majority of whom were fleeing the respective crises in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Syria (UNHCR 24/07/2023; IOM 15/12/2023). The deliberate targeting and indiscriminate attacks on civilians also put refugees at the same threat levels as the Sudanese population (TWP 29/11/2023).

Restricted movement

Both the SAF and the RSF have imposed movement restrictions in their areas of control, precipitating increased protection concerns for both civilians and humanitarian aid workers (IRC accessed 28/02/2024). In Omdurman city, parts of which have been besieged since April 2023 by both parties making offensive gains in the city, the civilian population entrapped continues to experience restricted movement, exposing them to violence and the lack of access to safety (The Guardian 17/02/2024; Darfur24 30/09/2023). As at 8 January 2024, an access route from Sharg An Neel, Khartoum, into Aj Jazirah state was closed, leading civilians and traders to take longer routes to access vital supplies and resources, such as medicine and food, despite their elevated needs (OCHA 08/01/2024). Movement restrictions affect not only Sudanese populations but also refugees vulnerable and more exposed to protection threats.

In White Nile, the authorities have imposed movement restrictions for South Sudanese refugees as a mitigation measure to protect them from the conflict (UNHCR 18/01/2024). Mobility restrictions can expose civilians to elevated protection needs, especially given the rapid and spontaneous shifting of front lines.

Torture and degrading treatment

Sudan has been facing a systemic pattern of human rights violations since the onset of the conflict (HRW 06/02/2024 and 26/11/2023). Both the SAF and the RSF have instituted ethnically motivated assaults, including the killing and arbitrary detention of largely minority groups in a manner consistent with systemic targeting (RI 01/02/2024; The Guardian 17/02/2024). Even with human rights groups across the country documenting the prevalence of torture alongside other atrocities as a weapon of war, the scale largely remains underreported because of pervasive access constraints (UN 22/01/2024). In Omdurman, the SAF have targeted non-Arab IDP communities from Darfur, while in El Geneina, West Darfur, reports of the RSF committing human rights violations against ethnic minority groups persist (RI 01/02/2024; The Guardian 17/02/2024). Civilians are profiled and targeted not only in areas in close proximity to active conflict and violence but also in those considered safe spaces (AJ 16/01/2024).

AGGRAVATING/COMPOUNDING FACTORS

Continued and expanding conflict

The rapid expansion of conflict towards eastern Sudan carries the threat of further exposure to violence, forced displacement, human rights violations, and humanitarian access constraints for civilians and aid organisations (UN 17/01/2024). Eastern states saw relative calm until the RSF took over Aj Jazirah (AJ 21/09/2023; UNICEF 19/12/2023). As a result, more displaced people have fled to Port Sudan, where the SAF headquarters are based, but the sense of calm and peace in these regions is not completely guaranteed, going by the previous pattern of violence in other states (Africanews 19/09/2023). Given that Port Sudan is the current fort of operational aid organisations, conflict expansion into this region will cease aid operations, cutting off access to humanitarian assistance for more people, consequently elevating protection risks and threats (UN 17/01/2024). The entry and intensification of other armed groups, such as Abdelaziz Adam al Hilu's Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, in Kordofan will likely aggravate access in the region (OCHA 22/08/2023). The mass mobilisation of civilians by conflict parties and the entrenchment of communal and ethnic violence in Darfur and Kordofan regions compound these issues (USAID/IMMAP 22/11/2023).

Worsening food insecurity

Food insecurity aggravates protection risks for the conflict-affected population. In Zamzam IDP camp in Darfur, about 13 children were estimated to die per day because of malnutrition and disease (MSF 05/02/2024). About 17.7 million people (37% of the population) face Crisis (IPC Phase 3) or worse conditions, and the situation is projected to worsen along with increased acute malnutrition cases and morbidity and mortality risks (CARE 15/02/2024; IPC 12/12/2023).

Diminishing livelihood opportunities

The disruption of the Sudanese economy, trade, and agriculture has contributed to a decline in livelihood sources for the civilian population (CARE 01/10/2023; OCHA 12/02/2024). As at 26 February, the country was experiencing a 152% inflation rate on average consumer prices, while GDP growth had contracted by 18.3% (IMF accessed 26/02/2024). As a result, much of the population is unable to meet the most urgent and basic needs. Continued hostilities over the past ten months have limited survival options for the civilian population (OCHA 12/12/2024). A decline in economic prospects for affected civilians, coupled with the complexity of the crisis and collapse of the banking sector, means that displaced people in transit, including refugees and TCNs, are unable to afford rent or other services during onward movements, consequently exposing them to further vulnerabilities (UNHCR 15/05/2023).

Telecommunication interruptions

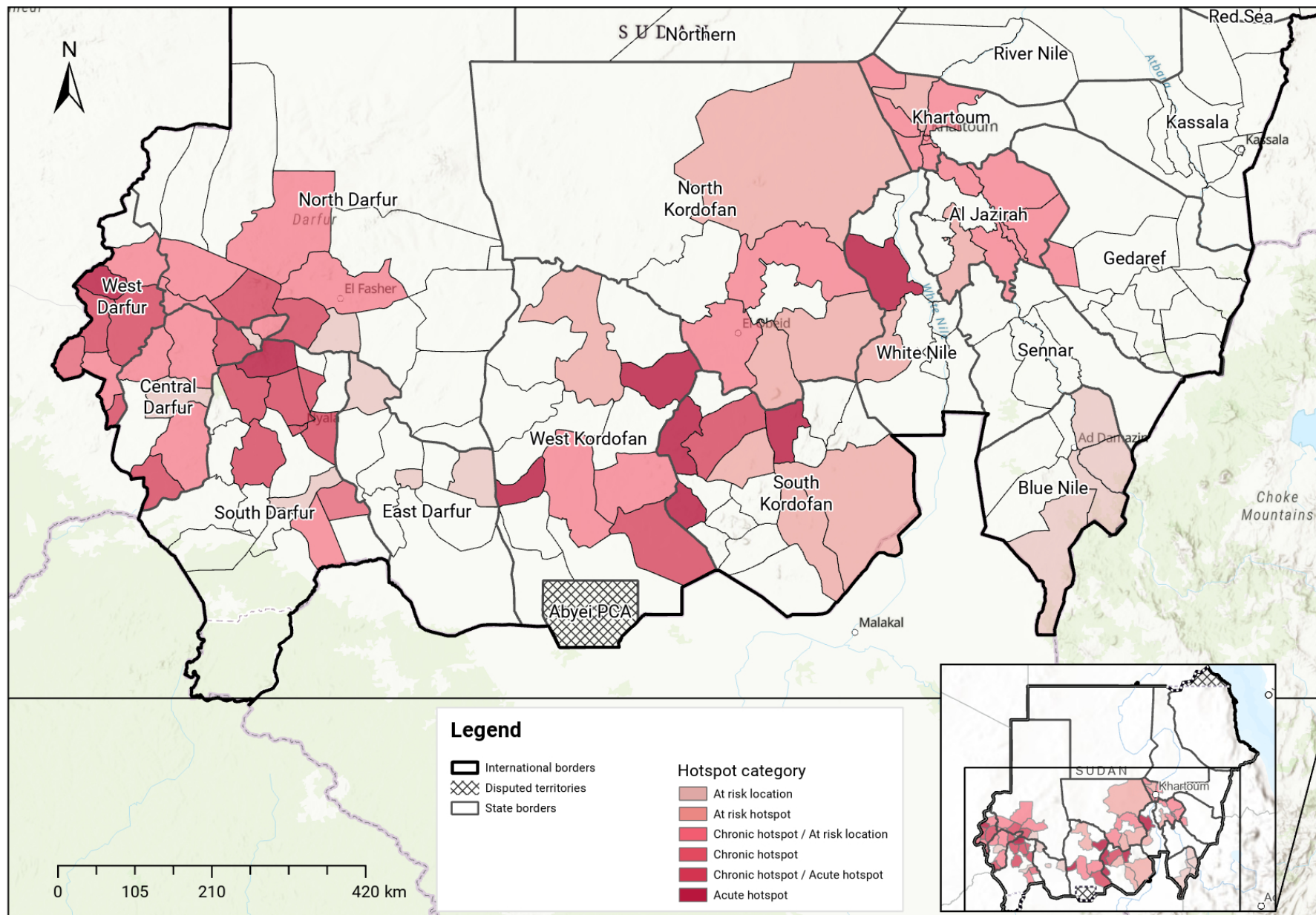
Sudan has been experiencing a communication blackout since 2 February 2024, after the shutdown of the three main telecommunication operators (Sudani, MTN, and ZAIN) (Access Now 12/02/2024; Dabanga 09/02/2024). The scale and implication of this internet shutdown further worsen the situation for the nearly 7.7 million people with protection needs in the country. Although coverage is limited and troublesome throughout the country, communications remain a critical service relied upon by both the population in need and aid responders (Access Now 09/02/2024; Shabaka 16/02/2024). Communication and internet services are critical, but it remains unclear how long the widespread communication blackout will last. These disruptions also affect the formal banking infrastructure, worsening the situation as most people rely on mobile money and digital banking to access money (FIDH 14/02/2024). Social media has also proved to be a vital tool for raising awareness, advocacy, and informing people on the move about safe routes and directions to secure areas (IJNet 11/05/2023; NLM 04/05/2023).

FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

The funding situation for the response in Sudan has been slow compared to previous years because of dwindling funding resources from donors (IFRC 16/10/2023; UN 13/02/2024). As at 19 February, Sudan's 2024 Humanitarian Response Plan was only 3.6% funded despite the growing humanitarian needs in the country. The Protection Cluster also remained underfunded at 4.7% given that the complexity and multiplicity of the crisis in Sudan is by and large a protection crisis (OCHA accessed 19/02/2024).

Despite challenges in sustaining access to crisis-affected people, community-led initiatives have been resourceful in addressing issues, including offering practical solutions to protection concerns within their neighbourhoods (HPN 11/10/2023). For instance, some initiatives have set up and resourced medical facilities to ensure continued medical access for people with chronic illnesses, those with injuries, and victims of gender-based violence, including sexual violence (TNH 02/06/2023). That said, aid organisations and the conflict-affected population are in consensus that more humanitarian response is needed, with prevailing humanitarian access constraints impeding the response needed for the magnitude of the crisis (UNHCR 17/07/2023). The conflict parties have persistently restricted aid response by creating artificial hurdles for humanitarian organisations, especially in areas requiring urgent humanitarian needs (US DOS 23/02/2024).

MAP 1. PROTECTION HOTSPOTS IN SUDAN AS AT JANUARY 2024



Source: ACAPS using data from Protection Cluster (22/01/2024)