

Sudan: the Forgotten War

A report on the most severe humanitarian emergency worldwide and the largest international displacement crisis

Geneva International Centre for Justice
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Executive Summary:

The war in Sudan constitutes one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world, with civilians overwhelmingly bearing the consequences of the violence. Satellite imagery reveals widespread destruction, including bloodshed visible on the ground. Despite the magnitude of the atrocities committed, the conflict remains insufficiently known and inadequately covered by international media.

This report situates the current war within Sudan's historical and political trajectory in order to clarify its root causes. Colonial rule entrenched deep regional and ethnic inequalities that were reinforced after independence through cycles of civil war, military coups and authoritarian governance. The thirty-year dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir consolidated systems of exclusion, repression and impunity. Several dynamics and methods employed during the Darfur genocide of 2003 are again visible in the present conflict.

The report analyses the causes and consequences of the war that erupted in April 2023, when two former allies with their respective armed groups, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), turned into rivals competing for power. This struggle has resulted in widespread war crimes, crimes against humanity and acts amounting to genocide. The fall of El Fasher in October 2025 and the current escalation of violence in Kordofan illustrate the scale and systematic nature of the atrocities committed.

The United Nations has warned that Sudan is facing the most extreme humanitarian emergency globally. The deliberate use of famine and sexual violence as weapons of war, the recruitment and trafficking of children, and the systematic targeting of civilian infrastructure point to the commission of genocidal acts. Sudan is also experiencing the world's largest displacement crisis, with more than ten million people forced to flee, many dying on the road or surviving in overcrowded camps where disease and deprivation are widespread.

The report further examines the decisive role of external actors who provide military, financial and political support to the belligerents in exchange for access to Sudanese resources, particularly gold. Although consistently denied, such foreign involvement has significantly prolonged and intensified the conflict.

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) calls for an immediate ceasefire, the protection of civilians, unhindered humanitarian access, the cessation of all external support to the warring parties, increased humanitarian assistance and funding, and accountability for crimes committed. GICJ stresses that entrenched impunity has been a central driver of violence in Sudan. Continued international inaction risks further atrocities and seriously undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the multilateral human rights system grounded in international law and international humanitarian law.



Introduction

The fall of El Fasher to the Rapid Support Forces on 26 October 2025 has intensified what is now qualified by the United Nations as the most severe humanitarian emergency worldwide and the largest international displacement crisis. Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed or injured across Sudan, with civilians, especially women and children, being the most affected.

The ongoing war in Sudan has led to famine, malnutrition, massive displacement of population, sexual violence, massive executions of civilians, ethnic cleansing and chronic insecurity.

Despite the scale of the crisis, the conflict remains insufficiently known and discussed, largely because media coverage is limited. Journalists face extreme risks when attempting to access Sudan, and the complexity of the conflict contributes to a general lack of public understanding. This article seeks to explain the root causes and the impact of the conflict in an accessible manner.

Brief History of Sudan

English colonisation

Sudan was jointly colonised by Britain and Egypt from the late 19th century, although Egyptian authority remained limited. Egypt sought to unify all regions of the Nile Valley, while Britain aimed to prevent such unification in order to preserve its own influence and to avoid the emergence of a strong and centralised Egyptian governance.

The region is often described as being divided into two main groups: northern populations, predominantly Muslim and Arab, and southern populations, largely animist or Christian and Black. This distinction, however, is an oversimplification, as Sudan's ethnic and religious realities are considerably more complex.

British colonial administration relied on a strategy of divide and rule, prioritising the northern regions while neglecting the South. The North became more integrated into global economic networks and more involved in governance structures. Both colonial and post-colonial policies reinforced the perception that the Arab and Muslim North was more legitimate in political leadership than non-Arab or non-Muslim regions. These structural inequalities generated long-term grievances and ultimately contributed to the partition of Sudan into two states in 2011: Sudan and South Sudan.

Civil wars (1955-1972) - (1983-2005)

Following independence in 1956, Sudan experienced chronic instability characterised by coups, civil wars, dictatorship and persistent power struggles.

From 1955 onwards, southern rebel groups began to mobilise, arguing that they were not represented in the new Sudanese state and demanding independence for the South. Armed conflict erupted, leading to the first civil war from 1955 to 1972. This conflict ended with a peace agreement granting greater autonomy to the South.

The second civil war, lasting from 1983 to 2005, again opposed the North and the South. It was triggered by the decision of the president in power to impose new laws aligned with Islamic *sharia*, which were unacceptable to the predominantly non-Muslim populations of southern Sudan, and by the revocation of the South's autonomy obtained after the first civil war.

Omar al-Bashir Rule (1989-2019)

In 1989, Omar al-Bashir seized power through a military coup and established a dictatorship that lasted thirty years. His regime relied on the army and Islamist networks and was marked by widespread repression, corruption, mass crimes and economic collapse.

The regime perpetuated a system of social hierarchy that privileged Arab elites concentrated in the Nile Valley while marginalising ethnic groups in peripheral regions, including the predominantly Christian and animist populations of southern Sudan.

Genocide in Darfur (2003-2006)

In 2003, protests led by marginalised and non-Arab groups in Darfur demanding greater political and economic inclusion were violently suppressed. The government of Omar al Bashir responded by deploying a paramilitary force known as the Janjaweed, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. The Masalit, Zaghawa and Fur communities were specifically targeted.

The Janjaweed carried out massacres, systematic rape, village burnings and widespread forced displacement as part of a scorched earth strategy. The Darfur conflict in the 2000s resulted in approximately 300,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly two million people.

The Janjaweed were accused by the International Criminal Court (ICC) of committing genocide and ethnic cleansing against Black African and non-Arab populations in the region. The ICC also issued its first arrest warrant against Omar al-Bashir for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

The Rapid Support Forces were officially established in 2013 and originated directly from the Janjaweed militia.

Partition of Sudan (2011)

After almost half a century of conflict between the North and the South, the civil war formally ended in 2005 with a peace agreement granting the South six years of autonomy and providing a referendum on self-determination in 2011. This process ultimately led to the independence of South Sudan.

Fall of the dictatorship (2019) and military-civilian-led government

In 2018, widespread protests erupted against Omar al-Bashir in response to severe economic deterioration and deep social discontent. Protesters demanded the end of the regime and a transition towards a democratic and civilian-led government, a movement known as the Khartoum Spring.

In 2019, al-Bashir was overthrown through a coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (regular army), and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, head of the Rapid Support Forces (paramilitary group), the former successor to the Janjaweed.

Following the fall of the dictatorship, a transitional body known as the Sovereignty Council was established, bringing together civilian, military and rebel representatives. Abdel Fattah al Burhan became president of the Council, with Hemedti as his vice president. The Council was intended to govern for thirty-nine months, after which democratic elections were to be held. This period marked the end of three decades of dictatorship and raised significant hopes for democratic change.

During this transition, the Rapid Support Forces were legalised and integrated as an official paramilitary force, effectively institutionalising actors responsible for atrocities in Darfur.

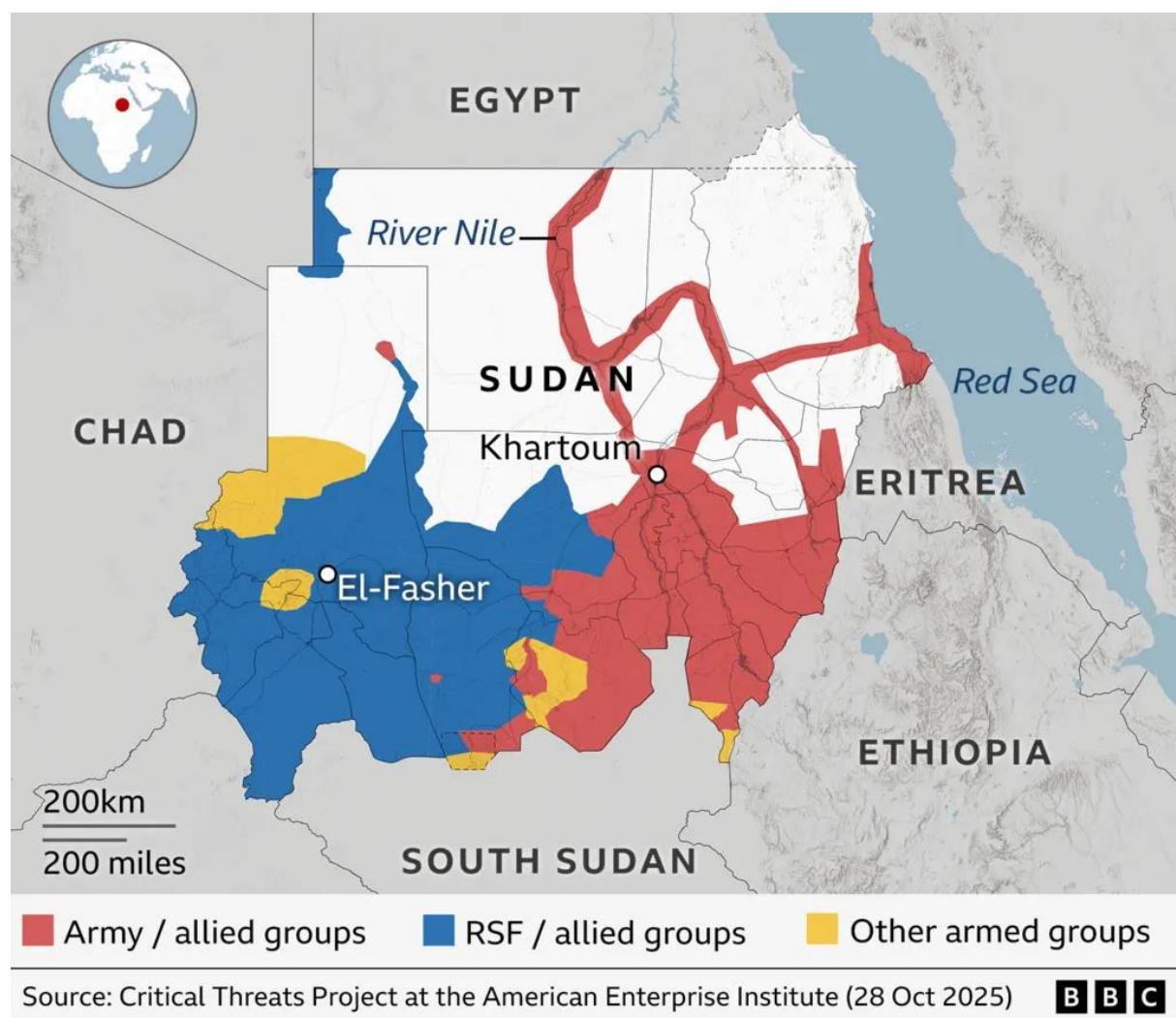
Military coup (2021)

Hopes for a democratic transition collapsed in 2021 when Burhan and Dagalo jointly carried out a coup that suspended the civilian-led process.

The ongoing war (2023-2025)

Former allies Burhan and Dagalo became rivals, fighting for power and the control of the country. One of the central causes of the war was Hemedti's refusal to integrate the Rapid Support Forces into the regular army, as demanded by Burhan.

The war erupted on 15 April 2023, when the Rapid Support Forces launched attacks against Khartoum. Hostilities rapidly spread to several regions, including Darfur, Kordofan and the Blue Nile.



The territory is virtually split in two, with a large part of the north-east under the control of the regular army, and a vast region stretching from the south-west to the centre in the hands of the FSR. Other armed groups either support one of the two main forces or remain non-aligned.

The Rapid Support Forces seek to secure Darfur as a territorial and economic base and have systematically targeted non-Arab populations perceived as hostile. Identity has once again been instrumentalised in political discourse, echoing patterns observed in the early 2000s. The destruction of El Geneina in 2023, accompanied by targeted massacres, constitutes a clear policy of ethnic cleansing carried out by the Rapid Support Forces.

Although the Rapid Support Forces bear primary responsibility for many recent atrocities, the Sudanese Armed Forces are also implicated in serious and widespread violations.

The Fall of El Fasher



El Fasher was one of the last cities in Darfur under the control of the Sudanese Armed Forces. The Rapid Support Forces now control almost all of Darfur as well as large parts of the neighbouring Kordofan region.

Prior to the fall of the city, the Rapid Support Forces imposed an eighteen-month siege that resulted in hundreds of casualties. Hundreds of thousands of civilians fled the violence, while approximately 260,000 people remained trapped inside the city, subjected to grave abuses and deprived of humanitarian assistance, as no aid was able to enter.

With such a siege, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, stated that the most serious crimes imaginable perpetrated in El Fasher were "*predictable and could have been prevented*", but that the international community didn't take any significant action. He

emphasised that the prolonged siege constituted a clear warning of the atrocities that would follow the city's collapse.

The fall of the city was accompanied by mass killings, ethnically motivated killings, summary executions, torture, human trafficking and the widespread and systematic use of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence as a weapon of war. The International Criminal Court is investigating alleged war crimes committed by the RSF during the capture. The crimes committed in El Fasher recall the massacre carried out by the Rapid Support Forces in El Geneina in 2023.

The takeover of El Fasher on 26 October 2025 by the Rapid Support Forces, together with the escalation of violence in North Darfur and the Kordofan states, has plunged Sudan into a new phase of instability. Since the end of October, more than 147,000 people have been displaced, including over 106,000 who fled El Fasher itself.

Several thousand casualties during the final assault were reported. However, as only few journalists were present on the ground during the fall of the city, it is difficult to report the exact number of civilians who lost their lives or were injured. Additionally, during the assault on El Fasher, internet access was cut, preventing communication with the exterior and documentation.

The conflict in the Kordofan: a new El Fasher to come?

Mister Volker Türk stated that: "*It is truly shocking to see history repeating itself in Kordofan so soon after the horrific events that took place in El Fasher*". Indeed, Kordofan is now facing the imminent risk of a new wave of atrocities

Since 25 October, when the FSR took control of the town of Bara in North Kordofan, the High Commissioner has recorded "*at least 269 civilian deaths as a result of air strikes, artillery fire and summary executions*". He also claims to have documented "*cases of reprisals, arbitrary detentions, abductions, sexual violence and forced recruitment, including of children*."

Many civilians have reportedly been imprisoned for 'collaborating' with opposing groups. In addition, there are growing concerns regarding the use of hateful and divisive rhetoric, which risks further fuelling the violence and exacerbating existing tensions.

The Worst Humanitarian Crisis in the World



According to Tom Fletcher, Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator: "*The Sudan is the theatre of a humanitarian emergency of appalling proportions*". More than 150,000 people have died in the conflict across the country.

Civilians face enforced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, mass killings and sexual violence, in addition to repeated attacks on infrastructure and humanitarian personnel.

Two-thirds of the population requires humanitarian assistance, whether in the form of healthcare, food or other forms of humanitarian aid. However, aid delivery is frequently blocked, and convoys are stopped at borders while civilians face famine.

The use of famine as a weapon of war

Half of Sudan's population is currently facing famine. The World Food Programme (WFP) has stated that more than 24 million people across the country are experiencing acute food insecurity.

Starvation is being deliberately employed as a method of warfare, in clear violation of international humanitarian law. Parties to the conflict have obstructed humanitarian access, destroyed food supplies and targeted livelihoods, thereby depriving civilians of the means necessary for survival.

Famine has already been confirmed in ten regions and continues to expand to new areas. Large segments of the population lack access to clean drinking water and, more broadly, to sanitation and hygiene facilities. These conditions significantly increase the risk of disease outbreaks and further compound the humanitarian catastrophe.

The massive use of sexual violence and gender based violence

The United Nations Children's Fund gave accounts of armed men rapeing and sexually assaulting children as young as one. The United Nations agency for reproductive health

(UNFPA), warns that more than 12 million women and girls – and increasingly men and boys – are at risk of facing sexual violence.

Women and girls face widespread rape, often carried out by groups of perpetrators to humiliate, terrorise and control victims, as well as to sever family bonds. Mothers are forced to choose between being assaulted themselves or having their daughters assaulted. Stigma prevents many survivors from speaking publicly about their experiences.

According to Amnesty International, the atrocities committed by the Rapid Support Forces, which include rape, gang rape and sexual slavery, constitute war crimes and possible crimes against humanity.

UN human rights experts expressed growing concern about reports of the trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and sexual slavery. In addition, many women and girls are subjected to forced pregnancies, forced marriage and abduction. These acts constitute grave violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law and contribute to the long-term physical, psychological and social harm inflicted on survivors and their communities.

The systematic targeting of civilian infrastructures

Between seventy and eighty per cent of health facilities in conflict-affected areas are no longer functioning. With the collapse of the healthcare facilities, thousands of children suffering from severe acute malnutrition are now deprived of treatment and face imminent risk of death. Diseases such as dengue fever, malaria, measles and cholera are spreading rapidly due to the collapse of health services.

Access to dignity kits, reproductive healthcare and other essential services remains extremely limited for women and girls. This lack of access exacerbates the impact of sexual and gender based violence, increases maternal mortality, and undermines the ability of survivors to recover with dignity and adequate medical support.

The education system has been similarly devastated, with seventeen million children currently deprived of access to schooling. Educational institutions have not only ceased to function but have also become sites of violence. The Rapid Support Forces have published videos showing the killing of civilians who pleaded for their lives inside schools, highlighting the deliberate targeting of spaces that should be protected under international humanitarian law.

Religious sites have also been directly targeted. On 19 September, a drone operated by the Rapid Support Forces killed thirty people in an attack on a mosque in the centre of El Fasher.

Such attacks on medical, educational and religious infrastructure demonstrate a systematic disregard for civilian life and constitute serious violations of international humanitarian law.

A new genocide in Sudan?

Many human rights organisations are accusing the RSF and allied militias of committing a genocide in the Darfur region against non-Arab communities and the Masalit group. Human

Rights Watch has stated that the scale and pattern of mass killings raise the possibility that the Rapid Support Forces intended to destroy, in whole or in part, the Masalit community.

The systematic targeting of civilians attempting to flee the violence, combined with the deliberate obstruction of access to life-saving humanitarian assistance for those who remain, further reinforces allegations of genocide and indicates an intent to inflict conditions of life calculated to bring about the physical destruction of the affected groups.

The World's Largest Displacement Crisis



Twelve million Sudanese have been forced to flee their homes in order to take refuge in safer areas. Four million have sought refuge in neighbouring States such as Egypt, Chad, South Sudan, the Central African Republic, and Ethiopia under extremely harsh conditions. Host countries face severe pressure on their existing capacities, especially as some of them are already part of the poorest countries in the world, thereby turning the war in Sudan into a serious threat to regional stability.

Families that try to flee face dangerous routes, and the ones that reach safer zones often arrive malnourished, sick and distressed. Refugees are hosted in camps that lack essential services, unable to access adequate food, shelter or medical assistance. Moreover, epidemics of diseases such as cholera and measles are rampant in refugee and internally displaced persons camps.

External Influences

A decisive factor in the persistence and intensity of the conflict is the involvement of external influences. Without such interference, the scale and duration of the conflict would have been significantly reduced.

Both the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces receive military, political and financial support from foreign States, including arms, weapon ammunition, training of soldiers and militias, often in exchange for access to Sudanese natural resources. Sudan possesses significant reserves of Arabic gum, oil, agricultural products, and gold. Darfur is particularly rich in gold and contributes significantly to Sudan's position as one of the world's major producers.

The Rapid Support Forces are primarily supported by the United Arab Emirates and Ethiopia. The RSF and the UAE have long-standing ties, with Sudanese mercenaries having participated in UAE military operations in Yemen since 2018. Beyond economic interests in gold, Sudan has become one of the theatres in the United Arab Emirates' broader confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood in the region.

In addition, components of weapons originating from European countries, including France, the United Kingdom and Hungary, have been identified in Sudan, reflecting the supply of arms to the United Arab Emirates that have ultimately reached the conflict.

The Sudanese Armed Forces receive support from many regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Russia has shifted alliances over time. It initially supported Hemedti in exchange for gold, then established cooperation with Burhan in pursuit of a naval base in Port Sudan.

Egypt and Ethiopia, at odds over the distribution of Nile water, are waging a proxy war through the two opposing camps in Sudan.

All external actors formally deny involvement, yet multiple independent reports have demonstrated their assistance.

Insufficient humanitarian funding



The lack of financing is worsening the conflict as the humanitarian intervention plan for Sudan for 2025, representing a total amount of 4.2 billion dollars, remains gravely under-financed, with only 25 % of the necessary funds reached. Such inadequate financing represents a direct threat to the continuation of the emergency operations.

Conclusion

The war in Sudan demands decisive and immediate international action. Continued inaction not only enables the perpetuation of further atrocities but also undermines the credibility of the multilateral system and exposes profound failures in the enforcement of international legal obligations.

A comprehensive and coordinated response is required, involving the United Nations, the African Union and civil society organisations, which places Sudanese actors at the centre of all efforts. Only an inclusive approach grounded in accountability, protection of civilians and respect for international law can offer a credible path towards lasting peace and stability.

Geneva International Centre for Justice position and opinion

Geneva International Centre for Justice calls for an immediate, unconditional and lasting ceasefire grounded in a sustainable peace process. The Centre further calls on all parties to the conflict to engage in an inclusive dialogue bringing together Sudan's diverse ethnic and religious groups in order to achieve a peaceful resolution and to restore a civilian-led

government. The Sudanese people deserve the democratic transition for which they mobilised in 2018.

Geneva International Centre for Justice stresses that humanitarian access must be unrestricted and that safe corridors must be established for civilians fleeing violence, in accordance with the principles of international law. In addition, humanitarian workers must be protected, as required under international humanitarian law.

The Centre strongly condemns external actors who provide arms and other forms of support to the belligerents, thereby fuelling the conflict and enabling its prolongation. The arms embargo imposed by the United Nations Security Council must be fully respected. Geneva International Centre for Justice further emphasises that Sudanese citizens have the right to benefit from their natural resources and must not be deprived of them by external powers.

Geneva International Centre for Justice strongly condemns the use of rape, sexual exploitation, forced marriage, sexual violence and abduction as weapons of war, as well as all other forms of gender based violence.

The Centre condemns all forms of arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance and calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all persons arbitrarily detained.

Geneva International Centre for Justice emphasises the importance of ensuring that internally displaced persons and refugees receive the protection and assistance to which they are entitled under international refugee law.

The Centre urges an end to all forms of attacks, threats and harassment against representatives of civil society and members of the media. The work carried out by journalists and civil society organisations is essential to documenting and denouncing human rights violations committed in Sudan.

The Centre calls upon international bodies and independent mechanisms to conduct thorough investigations into allegations of genocide in Sudan.

Geneva International Centre for Justice supports the work of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for Sudan, whose mandate is essential to documenting violations, supporting accountability efforts and advancing truth and justice for victims. The Centre urges Sudan to cooperate fully with the Fact-Finding Mission, particularly with regard to investigations into alleged atrocities committed in and around El Fasher.

GICJ advocates for the extension of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court in order to ensure accountability for grave violations of international law. The Centre stresses that the long-standing culture of impunity, particularly with regard to the Janjaweed and their successors, has enabled the continuation of atrocities. Accordingly, GICJ supports the issuance of arrest warrants against senior representatives of militias responsible for serious violations of international humanitarian law. Accountability, irrespective of rank or affiliation, is essential to breaking the recurring cycles of violence and impunity in Sudan and to preventing further abuses. Impunity must be replaced with justice.

Geneva International Centre for Justice stresses that the conflict must not result in the partition of Sudan and that the country's territorial integrity must be respected.

- **GICJ** emphasises that international law must be applied consistently and without selectivity. Sudan must not become the graveyard of international law. What is required is strong political commitment by states to protect Sudanese civilians, rather than empty political rhetoric.
- **GICJ** calls for a significant increase in humanitarian assistance to Sudan, as humanitarian programmes remain critically underfunded.

Sudanese people have the right to peace, justice and dignity.

The international community must act now to protect Sudanese civilians.

The lives of Sudanese civilians matter.

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About GICJ

Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ) is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting and reinforcing commitments to the principles and norms of human rights. GICJ is based in Geneva, Switzerland and is governed by the Swiss Civil Code and its statutes. GICJ's mission is to improve lives by tackling violations and all forms of violence and degrading or inhumane treatment through the strengthening of respect for human rights: reinforcing the independence of lawyers and judiciaries; consolidating the principles of equality and non-discrimination; ensuring the rule of law is upheld; promoting a culture of awareness of human rights; and combating impunity. GICJ collaborates with a coalition of NGOs on the ground and around the world, which provide accurate and up-to-date information on violations. GICJ also works with networks of academics, lawyers and experts who contribute their knowledge and expertise on relevant issues and cases.



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