

URGENT GLOBAL MEMO

EL FASHER IS FALLING: INTELLIGENCE, ANALYSIS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO AVERT CATASTROPHE

21 September 2024

A critical threat threshold has been breached in the city of El Fasher, Darfur, bringing serious concerns that acts of genocide and crimes against humanity are likely to occur imminently. More than a million civilian lives are at risk.

If this scenario is to be mitigated or prevented, a global diplomatic surge is needed immediately to:

- Spotlight the triple threat of armed conflict, identity-based atrocity crimes, and worsening famine;
- Increase pressure upon the backers of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) to withdraw support and facilitate a local ceasefire; and
- Demonstrate serious commitment to engage protection options and establish a protective wedge between the people and the guns.

High-Level Week of the 79th United Nations General Assembly in New York provides an opportunity for Member States to raise the ceilings of expectation and ambition of the international community to address the crisis in El Fasher. Failure to do so risks the lives of over a million people and would be an abdication of the lessons the world claimed to have learned from Rwanda in 1994 and promises pledged ten years later to *Save Darfur*.

This memo sets out the latest intelligence and analysis regarding imminent and considerable risk to human life in El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, Zamzam—the nearby camp for internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the surrounding areas. The memo provides recommendations for rapid action by states and the United Nations. It makes a plea to media organizations to call attention to this critical juncture and apply scrutiny to those who share in the collective responsibility to protect populations from atrocity crimes. While the memo largely focuses on atrocity risks committed and posed by the RSF and its enablers in El Fasher, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and allied militias have and continue to commit egregious violations of international law and human rights and urge the international community to support the prevention of and accountability for all crimes perpetrated by the SAF and supported by external actors, including, but not limited to, Egypt, Iran, and Russia.

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i. Likely Scenario and Risk Implications

Scenario: The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) take El Fasher and then attack the Zamzam IDP camp. The Joint Forces (consisting of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) groups) and associated tribes engage further in active conflict.

The RSF replicates what was seen in El Geneina in June 2023, committing deliberate identity-based violence against thousands of civilians because of their perceived ethnic, racial, gender, political, and/or other identity. Potential widespread human rights abuses include conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) and both intentional and arbitrary killing and maiming of civilians. Hundreds, if not thousands, of children become separated from caregivers and gender-sensitive care in the chaos. Violations breach thresholds of genocide and/or crimes against humanity.

Humanitarian conditions worsen in the city, in Zamzam, and across the surrounding area. Contaminated water leads to cholera outbreak, hitting young, malnourished children first and hardest. Ongoing famine and its impacts intensify.

Possible timeline: If current trajectories continue unchecked, versions of this scenario are likely to unfold within days or 2-3 weeks, with risks increasing as the rains continue to further dissipate.

Impacted civilians: 1.5 million

ii. Imminent Indicators to Watch

The following are non-sequential and non-exhaustive indicators. Individually, each would signal a serious escalation of risk; if one or more of these scenarios occur, the risk implications would be compounded.

Indicator 1: The RSF takes and holds last defensive positions before the SAF base in central El Fasher

Status: Incursions have been geolocated within the first of three defensive positions (or berms) on the east of the city beginning on or around 18th September

Indicator 2: Withdrawal, defeat, or destruction of SAF 6th Division and Joint Forces in El Fasher

Status: SAF activity has increased on the exit out of El Fasher towards Zamzam (on the B26 route) in what appears to be a digging in of defensive positioning

Indicator 3: Intensification of violence against civilian groups in and around El Fasher, including sustained artillery bombings of civilian areas

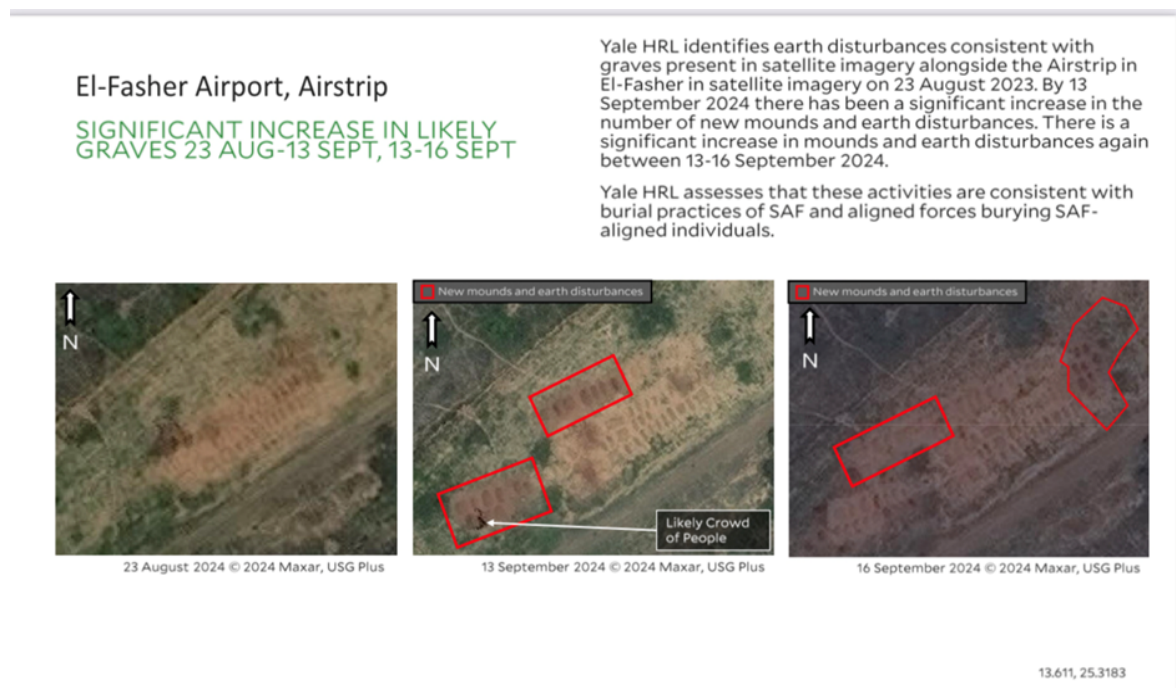
Status: An uptick in civilian movement from El Fasher to areas including Zamzam is underway, indicating an increased concern of insecurity among the civilian population

Indicator 4: Movement of the RSF on the B26 route to Zamzam from El Fasher, which would precede any assault by the RSF of Zamzam camp

Status: N/A

iii. Latest Intelligence Headlines as of 21/09/2024

- Several sources, including [media](#), have independently confirmed the RSF and SAF/Joint Forces are in close quarter combat in the city of El Fasher, appearing to be inside SAF defensive berms.
- The Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale (Yale HRL) [identified](#) SAF activity near the B26 route to Zamzam from El Fasher “consistent with defensive posture suggesting SAF see risk on their exit route out of city.”
- A number of sources indicate a large-scale civilian exodus from El Fasher, including to Zamzam.
- Yale HRL [identified](#) “significant activity in recent days consistent with mass graves in SAF/Joint Forces territory near airstrip, [which] highly likely indicates burial of significant numbers of SAF/Joint Forces.” See images below.
- Zamzam camp, which hosts approximately one million people, is preparing to be surrounded; malnutrition among the young is pervasive and the recent floods led to contamination of water supplies. According to HRL Yale, “human and animal feces in the water points at Zamzam in 8/13 locations; increasing risks of cholera.”
- Social media reports that the RSF are being pushed or held back. Ground reports say “Minawi and others have been rallying everyone as motivation, but it is definitely not won, only for today. People on the ground aware it will continue tomorrow...troops are getting exhausted by repeated attacks.”
- The weather is becoming increasingly dry, which will likely lead to a further intensification of combat due to greater mobility of troops and vehicles.



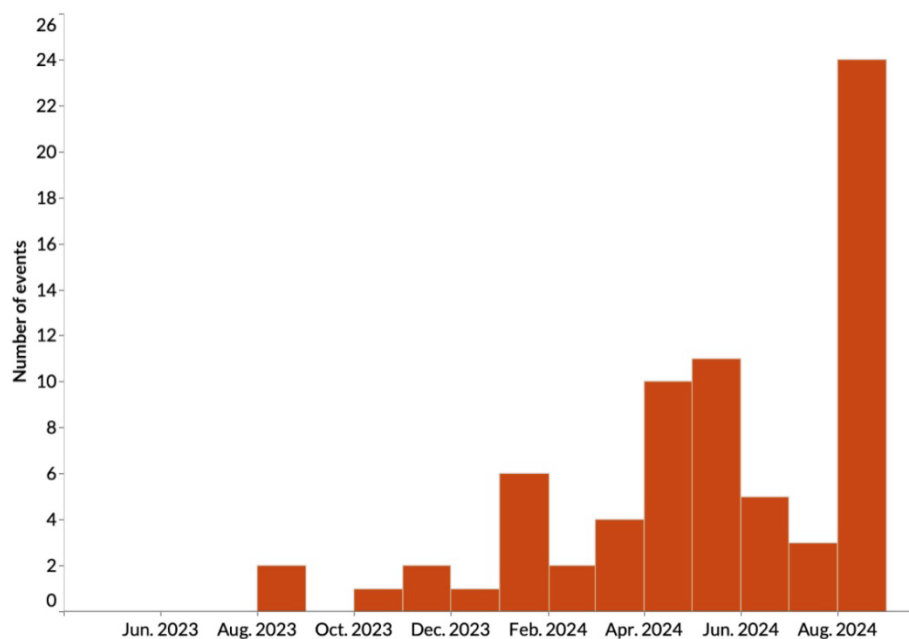
iv. Current Situation in El Fasher and Zamzam

“If we leave, we will die on the road where no one knows. We’d rather die in El Fasher where the world is watching, and people know about it.” - Civilian in El Fasher

- El Fasher has been under siege for nearly five months. The RSF strategy of siege and bombing of civilian infrastructure makes daily life for those remaining in the city extremely dangerous. Yet, the risks of leaving are often worse for many.
- The RSF has El Fasher completely surrounded with one exception—the B26 road to Zamzam. It has bisected the city along its central road, effectively choking off any movement. Major roads in and out of the area, which serve as the main conduits for commercial and military supplies, remain under RSF control.
- As a result, basic items required for survival by civilians are either non-existent (such as cash and anything but the most basic of medicines) or beyond the affordability of most people.
- The RSF have surrounded the SAF 6th Division in its garrison, increasing the likelihood that SAF is overwhelmed and rendering airstrikes against the RSF is strongest tactical option. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) [reported](#) a significant uptick in SAF airstrikes through the end of August (see graph below), and have increased dramatically throughout September.
- Local sources state that SAF personnel are barely seen on the ground anymore, although there remains a presence of the Joint Forces. Airdrops are now the only means of resupply for the SAF and Joint Forces.
- All areas of the city, including civilian objects, continue to be subjected to shelling. Only one hospital remains semi-functional and is frequently shelled by the RSF. Anyone who seeks medical attention there drastically increases their exposure to physical harm as a result.

SAF airstrikes against the RSF in Darfur

15 April 2023 - 31 August 2024



- Zamzam now houses between 500,000 and 1.2 million IDPs and refugees, including some who have been there for many years and others who have fled recent violence in Darfur.
- Zamzam is heavily associated with the Zagawa tribe, which the RSF has vowed to destroy.
- Famine has been declared in Zamzam camp and acute water diarrhea (AWD) is present (and will be officially declared as cholera).
- Zamzam residents have been unable to cultivate and harvest their crops due to ongoing offensive by Arab groups in the area.
- After the destruction of health facilities inside El Fasher, the Joint Forces (and Zagawa tribes in particular), have moved their injured soldiers into Zamzam for medical treatment. It is understood that the RSF is fully aware of this, which renders the camp a legitimate and imminent target from its perspective.
- The Zaghawa Defence Forces allegedly have equipment and weaponry stockpiled in the area. However, it is severely outmatched by the RSF's modern weaponry and battle experience and is unlikely to provide adequate resistance to the RSF.

v. Warnings of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity

The RSF breakthrough into El Fasher center will mean another major risk threshold has been breached regarding widespread and/or systematic violence against civilians in the city, Zamzam, and the surrounding area. Given the identity-based nature of [RSF violence and violent rhetoric](#), there is serious likelihood that acts of genocide and/or crimes against humanity are imminent if the current trajectory continues. Exact timelines are difficult to predict; however, there are scenarios where the RSF breaks through very quickly. We cannot rule out a more protracted fight for El Fasher; however, the continued deliberate imposition of siege, starvation, and shelling have the civilian population under acute strain and will lead to rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation and loss of life.

Several experts, organisations, and institutions have now made credible assessments regarding genocide and crimes against humanity:

- Alice Wairimu Nderitu, Under Secretary-General and Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Prevention of Genocide, [warned](#) that **“the situation today bears all the marks of risk of genocide, with strong allegations that this crime has already been committed.”**
- The Peace and Security Council of the African Union (AU) [asked](#) the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan to work with the AU Special Envoy for the Prevention of Genocide to develop proposals to address ongoing atrocities, prevent further escalation in Darfur, and protect civilians.
- The Raoul Wallenberg Centre in April [determined](#) that **the RSF had committed genocide in El Geneina and elsewhere in West Darfur.**
- Human Rights Watch [detailed](#) violations committed against the Masalit people and other non-Arab communities in West Darfur in what they described as **crimes against humanity and widespread war crimes as part of an “ethnic cleansing campaign.”**
- This month, the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan [found](#) reasonable grounds to believe that **SAF and its allied forces and the RSF and its allied militias have committed various war crimes.** The Fact-Finding Mission further found reasonable grounds to believe that the **RSF has committed the crimes against humanity of murder; torture; enslavement; rape, sexual slavery, and acts of a sexual nature of comparable gravity; persecution on the basis of intersecting ethnic and gender grounds in connection with the foregoing acts; and forcible displacement of population.**
- The United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken [determined](#) in December 2023 that the RSF and allied militias had committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing, while the SAF had committed war crimes.

History is repeating itself. The strategy of the RSF against civilians in Darfur is well-practiced and long documented; its current approach represents a continuation of the genocide perpetrated by the Janjaweed—now restyled as the RSF—that began twenty years ago. First, forces besiege a town or city, weakening the population by cutting off access and supplies and seizing control of power and water sources, before overwhelming any defences and beginning systematic violence and expulsion. The violence is explicitly identity-based; infrastructure needed to survive is taken out of commission; cultural signifiers are erased; men and boys are executed, often *en masse*; sexual violence is widespread, but not

only against women and girls; and mass displacement is encouraged and facilitated. This is a conscious political strategy to destroy a people and remove them from their land.

Different scenarios put different timelines on (1) the RSF's defeat of SAF and Joint Forces; (2) Zamzam camp reached by RSF (and possible destruction of its population); (3) starvation/famine intensifying; and (4) cholera overrunning Zamzam. However, irrespective of allegiances or sources, El Fasher will see intensification of combat and violence in the next days and weeks. So far, the trajectory is following what myriad experts and observers have feared and forewarned.

vi. Immediate Actions for States

Over the past year, there have been moments of critical juncture for the city where escalations of risk prompted rapid surges of diplomatic response from governments. These moments of surge (for example in October/November 2023 and again in May/June 2024) have slowed down the violence on the ground, bought time for people to escape, and contributed to pauses in conflict and opportunities for negotiation.

Evidence exists for the effectiveness of such diplomatic surges saving lives in other high-intensity situations. The swift and collaborative response toward Kenya in early 2008 and leverage exerted on Indonesia amid attacks on Timor Leste in 1999, are both cited as [examples](#) by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum where collective action prevented escalation. Ambassador Ivan Šimonović, former UN Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and UN Special Adviser on the Responsibility to Protect, similarly [notes](#) a range of examples where preventive diplomacy has been successful in saving lives.

All states share in the collective responsibility to help protect people from genocide and crimes against humanity. Many states hold binding treaty obligations to prevent and punish the crime of genocide. In the absence of a protection force, or in concert with it, maximum political pressure upon the RSF and its backers is urgently needed to at least achieve a temporary, localised ceasefire, allow immediate humanitarian aid access, and prevent increasingly likely mass atrocities.

The threat level and trajectory of risk facing civilians in El Fasher and Zamzam is greater than at any point since the war began. Moreover, the RSF is closer than ever to realising its objectives. This only makes mitigating, slowing, and ultimately halting the violence and its impacts harder and more pressing. Few options remain and though there is no substitute for a protective wedge between people and violence, such as a peace support operation, these mechanisms require time to establish, resource, and mobilise—time that is not available in the current context. However, a collective diplomatic surge, global illumination of the violations, violators, and their backers, and the promise and implementation of consequences could save countless lives. The following recommendations require immediate action.

To drive a diplomatic surge:

- **Heads of state should issue statements immediately, condemning—in the strongest possible terms—the violence and putting the RSF and its supporters on notice that civilians in and around El Fasher and Zamzam must be protected.** These statements should indicate a commitment to monitoring harms and reporting them to justice mechanisms, including the International Criminal Court. States should publicly communicate how they are preventing their soil and institutions from becoming a safe haven for the perpetrators, transnational networks, enablers, and profits of atrocity crimes. States must be explicit in naming the violence for what it

is; this is less a matter of using the word “genocide,” but rather the need to emphasise publicly and loudly that the RSF are seeking to destroy and displace populations based on their ethnic, racial, gender, and/or political identity. This should include naming individuals, both high-ranking and elite actors, as well as those whose behaviours can still be changed. Notably, publicly calling out the nature of the violence, its perpetrators, and supports does not confer legitimacy on the SAF and their auxiliaries, which have been committing human rights violations in El Fasher and elsewhere in Sudan since the conflict began.

- **Pressure on the UAE must be an immediate strategic priority.** Past efforts imploring and incentivising the UAE directly contributed to the RSF pausing its approach to El Fasher—this avenue of influence must be prioritised once again and with the utmost urgency. States should work together to implement a clear strategy of pressure that makes continued UAE backing of the RSF diplomatically costly and damaging. While public pressure, including “naming and shaming” is needed from some quarters, others need to engage the UAE to provide something of an “off ramp” to its support of the RSF. Naming the identity-based violence conducted by the RSF should utilise the strongest language possible in public—whether using genocide (or acts thereof), crimes against humanity, or nonlegal language. This should emphasise the intent to destroy and displace populations and contribute to the UAE’s public relations challenges relating to its support of the RSF. Likewise, the fora of the UN and AU to drive the multilateral processes of spotlight, censure, and protection should be utilised to apply further pressure to the UAE.
- **States must ensure that El Fasher is a top priority** in every diplomatic exchange until the catastrophe has been averted. While it is fully appreciated and understood that a state-wide ceasefire is needed, the time-bound nature of this impending catastrophe in El Fasher and Zamzam means that all short-term energies should be directed toward averting it.
- **States should think creatively about how they can increase the resilience of the civilian community of El Fasher to withstand atrocity crimes.** This could include by providing supplies and materiel to protect and maintain access to core services such as power and water for as long as possible; supporting civilian-led protection and medical services; supplying cameras and satellite telephones to increase telecommunication capacities and information-sharing with the outside world; and conducting a feasibility and risk assessment of enabling access for members of the diplomatic, human rights, or journalistic community willing to bear witness to events. Without sustainable, flexible, and predictable funding and bolstered support from international organisations, the lifeline provided by local front-line responders remains under constant threat.

vii. Immediate Actions for the United Nations Secretary-General and Security Council

While efforts taken by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to meet and discuss the deteriorating situation should be commended, concrete action is urgently needed to avoid catastrophe and help prevent genocide and further crimes against humanity. A conservative estimate of 1.5 million people are at imminent risk of identity-based mass atrocities. There is very little time left in which actions can be taken to prevent them. The coming days and High-Level Week at the UN will be critical for the people in El Fasher,

Darfur, and all of Sudan—and UN Member States and the UNSC have an important role to play to raise ceilings of ambition and expectation for the protection of civilians.

We urge the UN Secretary-General to use all available public platforms, fora, and levers of influence to raise attention to the dire and deteriorating situation. The UN Secretary-General—during High-Level Week and beyond—must demonstrate and communicate leadership in this moment of acute crisis, recognising the distinct role he holds formally, as well as in the eyes of the global public. To the extent practicable, the Secretary-General should visit Darfur to shine light on the violence and risks and impacts to civilians. In June, [UN Security Council Resolution 2736](#) on El Fasher requested that the Secretary-General make further recommendations for the protection of civilians in Sudan. However, he has yet to issue those recommendations, which will likely be disseminated after the city of El Fasher has fallen and systematic and/or widespread violence against civilians is underway. The Secretary-General must heed the lessons learned by the United Nations in the past, where urgent warning of identity-based mass violence was not acted upon in time, and lead a diplomatic surge for El Fasher as he did so effectively to protect people and avert catastrophe in East Timor.

The UN Secretary-General's recommendations on civilian protection must raise the depressed ceilings of ambition and expectation, giving space to Member States and other actors to take them forward. It must not be an exercise of easiest lift and most feasible outcome. The recommendations must:

- Support the findings and recommendations of the Fact-Finding Mission, including “the deployment of an independent and impartial force with a mandate to protect civilians in Sudan;”
- Outline how Member States can uphold their domestic and international obligations and responsibility to prevent and punish mass atrocity crimes;
- Identify the ways in which their implementation will be monitored and maintained as a priority; and
- Be published publicly.

In addition, the UNSC and its Members must:

- Take up offers of satellite imagery and warning briefings to ensure coherence of up-to-date intelligence, monitoring, and analysis for all Members;
- Reconvene urgently and regularly to address agreed upon mitigating actions that can be taken to avoid imminent mass atrocities;
- Allow civil society briefings at all UNSC convenings, particularly from Sudanese women, as well as atrocity prevention, civilian protection, and women, peace, and security experts;
- Receive regular briefings from the UN Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict related to the situation in Sudan;
- Extend the Fact-Finding Mission and provide it with robust resources to conduct its activities;
- Stand-up an Independent Management Advisory Committee (IMAC) to ensure that all UN entities are communicating with one another and able to coordinate response. It is essential that this integrate Emergency Response Room representation; and
- Increase pressure on the UAE to uphold the UNSC's arms embargo.

ENDS

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