

# **Sudan Crisis** Coordination Unit

Publication # 8

## **First person account: Humanitarian Situation in River Nile State, Sudan**

(Shandi, Aldamar, Atbara, Barbar)

Author: Rania Mohammed

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## SCCU publications

SCCU publications are concise and informative documents that provide an overview of Sudan's complex and evolving humanitarian situation. The SCCU publications also offer practical and evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and humanitarian responders on addressing Sudan's most pressing issues and needs.

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## Disclaimer

This report is the result of the work of the Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit (SCCU). The opinions, findings and recommendations expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Shabaka or its partners.



# The humanitarian situation in the River Nile State

The River Nile State is one of the northern states in Sudan and is located 192 km from Khartoum. The state has three major cities: Shendi, which is 300 km away from Khartoum; Al-Damer, which is the capital city and is 319 km from Khartoum, and Atbara and Berber, which are also important cities in the state. The state can be accessed through the western Nile Road that passes through Omdurman, Al Gazira, Aslang, and Shendi. However, the army controls the exit from Omdurman through the Military College, and the Rapid Support Forces control the exit from Bahri up to the Qari and Al Gili areas.

Leaving Khartoum to travel to River Nile state also carries risks. Both SAF and RSF conduct inspections on people leaving the city. However, there is a general sense the areas controlled by the army offer more security. The RSF has committed violations on the eastern Bahri road, where they have robbed people of their belongings, such as money, gold jewellery, and mobile phones. They have also forced people to abandon their cars, which they then confiscated.

## Reception of displaced people in River Nile

As people escaped from the conflict zones, they were met with compassion and solidarity by the residents of cities and villages along the road that connects Khartoum State and River Nile State. Locals offered them food, drinks, medical care, and any other assistance they could provide, including fuel for their vehicles. This was a remarkable display of humanitarian spirit and community initiative. The newcomers also received a warm welcome and support from various youth groups and community members in Al-Damer, the capital of River Nile State. They were given food, drinks, health services, and medication for chronic conditions. Moreover, the locals who hosted them in their homes or prepared facilities offered them accommodation and shelter.

The locals welcomed the newcomers housed in schools, mosques, clubs, and some homes. They also received meals and services from the locals, who acted without the involvement of any official government or foreign organisations. Only youth societies and some local organisations took part in this initiative. However, the limited assistance they could provide was insufficient to meet their needs due to the limited resources available and the disruption to markets and cash due to the conflict.

# Active parties and initiatives in the humanitarian response to the crisis

Youth groups and local initiatives established by residents in the state have organised themselves into groups and formed Emergency Response Rooms that work day and night, networking with each other across all cities in the state. They work on monitoring, following up, and mobilising to provide humanitarian support to the new arrivals outside the state due to the war. They also coordinate with initiatives and organisations targeting displaced families, for example:

- Al Hawadeth Street Initiative: Its work focuses on medical emergencies and provides medical aid in treatment and medicine. It actively contributes to treating emergency cases such as surgeries and deliveries.
- Sudanese Red Crescent: It provides in-kind assistance, medical services, ambulances, medicines and some health supplies.
- Other local organisations:
  - **Building Development Organisation** and **Nabta** are local organisations that bear the most significant burden in providing humanitarian aid, including housing shelters and designating state buildings after agreeing to terms with their owners (such as empty diaspora homes) or government agencies (such as students' accommodation).
  - There is also the presence of organisations set up by new arrivals to the state, such as the **Sudanese Females for Change organisation**, which has begun to resume its work from within the state and focuses on inventory and evaluation of urgent needs, humanitarian situations, and the possible mechanisms and means to support those arriving due to the war.
  - Furthermore, the **Sudanese Development Appeal organisation** (Nile River Office) and several initiatives are working on gaining recognition as providers of humanitarian aid to different categories of people.
  - **Damer Resistance Committees, neighbourhood committees, and youth and resistance committees in Shendi, Atbara, and Berber** work as volunteers (all genders) in collaboration with local and civil society organisations and official bodies.
  - **Atbara municipality** provided part of the municipality's buildings for housing new arrivals, such as student accommodation.

# Activities carried out by local humanitarian actors

Volunteers and local communities are the main humanitarian actors and have been providing the following services for new arrivals in the state:

- Meet them at the landport, the bus station, and the state entrance.
- Giving them meals and water at the arrival stations.
- Providing some basic medical care and first aid.
- Housing those who have no relatives or shelter in the region.
- Distributing food supplies to them.
- Hosting some of them in our families; others are accommodated in schools, clubs, mosques, and student dorms.
- Registering and counting them for further assistance from other sources.

# Challenges facing humanitarian initiatives

The situation of host communities and new arrivals is dire and urgent. They face multiple challenges that threaten their survival and well-being. Some of these challenges are:

- Lack of services to meet basic needs, including insufficient food supply, poor quality and accessibility of health care services, and shortage of shelter and housing options, which forces them to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions.
- Livelihood and employment opportunities are limited, which prevents them from earning income and supporting their families.
- The large number of daily arrivals and the lack of organisations and associations providing services.
- Poor resources and capabilities and reliance on communities' efforts and charitable donations.
- Official government efforts have been limited and ineffective. Insufficient assistance and protection from the authorities leaves arrivals vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.
- The absence of international humanitarian organisations working in the state due to the state's ongoing situation before and during the conflict.
- The type of existing organisations, most of which are in a different work sector or are used to operating in development settings.
- Reports of corruption in government departments when providing international aid came from some countries through Port Sudan, most of which did not go to people needing assistance.

# The impact of active initiatives and organisations on the humanitarian situation

Local and community initiatives have contributed significantly to the stability of the humanitarian situation despite the limited capabilities available locally. However, as the war has dragged on, the number of new arrivals to the state has increased. This has worsened the humanitarian situation, especially with their ongoing need for food, water, health and housing services. Power outages and difficulties in acquiring and transporting drinking water exacerbate these challenges.

- They asked the diaspora owners of all vacant properties for permission to host families. They also communicated with the official authorities to utilise some villages built for public housing to house families at the facilities after relying on their efforts to connect water and electricity services.
- News of initiatives to shelter arrivals has also encouraged residents affected by the war in Khartoum State to come to the state and seek refuge from the flames of armed conflict.
- Some new initiatives have been set up by new arrivals, with similar activities supporting humanitarian work as part of the institutions or organisations they worked with before the war. Some individuals volunteered to help provide support and assistance to arrivals. After settling in, some families thought about creating partnerships with the local community, creating job opportunities, and introducing new ideas and projects that were lacking due to both parties' weak economic capabilities.
- Some arrivals and their families (primarily women and children) headed north towards the Egyptian border, as the processes were easy before June. At the time, permission to enter the Republic of Egypt was granted with an emergency travel document. However, a decision was made by the Egyptian government to suspend this process. Thus, people who had been displaced began a new struggle. The Egyptian authorities initially allowed women, children, and older people to cross into its territory but prevented the rest of their families, including men and boys, from doing this. Some remained stranded for nearly two months or had to pay a large sum to obtain an entry permit.

# Opportunities to support existing initiatives and organisations

The situation in the River Nile State has become critical and extremely dangerous due to the daily influx of residents from Khartoum State. Thus, the state urgently needs to receive humanitarian support and aid. It is necessary to communicate with regional actors to determine critical priorities and to begin supporting emergency rooms and youth and financial initiatives in collaboration with organisations that are in the state, such as the Sudanese Organisation for Change and the Sudanese Development Appeal. These can facilitate institutional work processes to ensure it reach the people concerned, according to the local context in the state, the availability of agricultural land, and related areas such as animal production and small industries.

There are several opportunities to improve the situation:

1. Local initiatives have gained the trust of the local community and newcomers through their dedication to helping those affected by war. So it is important to ensure that continued support going forward.
2. These youth agencies and initiatives have become an important interface with new arrivals and a key partner in the humanitarian response. They create trust between new arrivals, the local community and those in charge of the initiatives.
3. There is scope for partnerships between the community and local organisations, other organisations from Khartoum (with the ability and potential to work in the River Nile State) and donors. Such partnerships can provide useful information about the expected support and an approximate estimate of new arrivals.
4. Without official bodies, local civil society groups also form the building blocks for reconstruction and damage repair after the war stops.
5. Atbara is becoming a critical centre for medical training. And so, efforts to train medics should be scaled in the city.



# Background

The armed conflict in Sudan between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) began on 15 April 2023 inside Khartoum State and extended to Merowe Airport in the Northern State. Subsequent clashes ensued in other parts of the country, notably the western regions of Kordofan and Darfur.

According to the latest reports from OCHA, IOM, UNHCR and MSF, the conflict in Sudan has caused massive displacement of civilians both within and outside the country. As of 19 October 2023, more than 5.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes, with 4.57 million internally displaced and 1.1 million seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The most affected states are the River Nile, South Darfur, East Darfur, Al Gazira, Northern, and North Darfur. Some displaced people have also tried to reach neighbouring countries such as Chad, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Gulf countries, but they face many challenges and risks. The humanitarian situation is dire, with attacks on health facilities, schools and civilians, food insecurity, malnutrition and disease outbreaks. The humanitarian response is severely underfunded, with only 33.5 per cent of the revised United Nations 2023 Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan appeal met as of 19 October.

The sudden movement of people from their homes to more secure regions has resulted in a crisis of unplanned resettlement for the newcomers. Grassroots efforts led by the local community of the River Nile State helped the arrivals from the affected areas despite the state's limited capacity. The struggle involved youth groups, Neighbourhood Resistance Committees (formed during the 2019 Revolution), and civil society organisations from the state and Khartoum. They organised themselves to provide water and food along the travel routes to the state, as well as medical and nutritional services to the arrivals and those who continued to other areas—the effort aimed to mitigate the impact of the humanitarian situation.

# **Sudan Crisis** Coordination Unit

## **About the SCCU**

The Sudan Crisis Coordination Unit (SCCU) aims to facilitate the coordination of resources and efforts among various groups and networks, including diaspora organisations, humanitarian aid agencies, local civil society organisations, and government agencies.

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