



Atrocities Watch Africa Monitor

May 2023

Atrocities Watch Africa (AWA) is a non-partisan, civil society organisation that provides continental leadership in matters pertaining to the prevention of mass atrocities within Africa. Our strategies and approaches are grounded in the realisation that atrocities can be prevented through various interventions, including, but not limited to, early warning mechanisms, diplomatic efforts, use of social media and new technologies, litigation, and advocacy campaigns.

This newsletter builds on our team's continuous monitoring of the region that allows us to identify deteriorating situations where atrocities may be committed as well as track ongoing situations where mass atrocities are prevalent in order to identify trends in patterns of violence and opportunities to build peace and engage national, regional, and international policymakers to contribute recommendations for the cessation of violence.

We are watching Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. This monitor will cover these countries on a rolling basis highlighting those in which significant changes have occurred in the period throughout March and April.

This month's newsletter covers:

- Burkina Faso
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- South Sudan
- Sudan

Burkina Faso:

Around 150 civilians were killed in Karma, northern Yatenga province, when a group of men in military uniform surrounded the village, opened fire and later proceeded to loot shops, homes and mosques. The perpetrators were believed to be members of the defence and security forces accompanied by paramilitary auxiliaries known as Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP).¹ A spokesperson for the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Ravina Shamdasani, indicated there was credible information that the attackers accused village residents of sheltering members of Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslim (JNIM),² a non-

¹ OCHA, "Burkina Faso: Killing of Civilians," 25 April 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/04/burkina-faso-killing-civilians>

² OCHA, "Burkina Faso: Killing of Civilians," 25 April 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/04/burkina-faso-killing-civilians>

state actor affiliated with the Islamic State, and various other non-state actors, as the massacre took place just days after an attack attributed to the group on a VDP base where eight soldiers and 32 members of the VDP were killed.³ The VDP is believed to control 40% of the country, though control has come at a heavy price, with a number of VDP members killed in fighting in 2023, and renewed calls for general mobilisation of the population to bolster the VDP.⁴ The country's prosecutor indicated that they launched an investigation into the massacre, however, they put the death toll at 60,⁵ less than half of what other reports indicated, and said that those responsible were not security forces but others wearing their uniforms.⁶

Attacks by security forces on civilians have increased since the military coup in September 2022.⁷ In November 2022, at least 50 civilians were killed in Soum Province, and on 30 December at least 28 people were killed in Nouna, in Kossi Province.⁸ More recently, a video of men in military uniform executing seven boys went viral on social media. Research by the Associated Press indicated that the perpetrators accused the boys of being JNIM members and that the killings took place just days after an attack by militants on a VDP post in February 2023.⁹ The government says they have opened investigations into human rights violations by the security forces, but the result of these investigations is yet to be determined. Conflict analysts fear that the violations will create a backlash against the junta and motivate further involvement and recruitment into Islamist groups.¹⁰

After a string of attacks from Islamist extremist groups targeting security forces, the military junta declared a "general mobilisation" to give the state "all necessary means" to combat the terrorist attacks through recruitment into the VDP. The details of the plan were not disclosed, but up to 5,000 more soldiers may be recruited and a federal state of emergency in the affected territories declared.¹¹ Authorities also issued a vague advisory giving the president "the right to requisition people, goods and services and the right to restrain certain civil liberties".¹² These measures may put civilians in an even more vulnerable situation, especially in a context where targeting civilians has been on the rise.

³ Le Monde, "Burkina Faso's surge in violence highlights limits of junta's counterterrorism strategy," 19 April 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/04/19/burkina-faso-s-surge-in-violence-highlights-limits-of-junta-s-counterterrorism-strategy_6023513_124.html

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The Guardian, "Sixty killed in Burkina Faso village by raiders 'wearing military uniforms'," 24 April 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/24/sixty-killed-in-burkina-faso-village-by-raiders-wearing-military-uniforms>

⁶ APA news, "Burkina probes army 'abuses against civilians'," 24 April 2023, <https://apanews.net/2023/04/24/burkina-probes-army-abuses-against-civilians/>

⁷ ACLED, dashboard, <https://acleddata.com/dashboard/#/dashboard>

⁸ OCHA, "Burkina Faso: Killing of Civilians," 25 April 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/04/burkina-faso-killing-civilians>

⁹ Africa News, "Troops film boys' killings in Burkina Faso," 3 April 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/03/troops-film-boys-killings-in-burkina-faso/>

¹⁰ Associated Press, "Mass killing of civilians by security forces in Burkina Faso," 25 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-human-rights-abuses-jihadis-89b8d3324a3cb0232c680757f012bc2d>

¹¹ France 24, "'General mobilisation' declared in Burkina Faso after series of terrorist attacks," 14 April 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230413-general-mobilisation-declared-in-burkina-faso-after-series-of-jihadist-attacks>

¹² France 24, "'General mobilisation' declared in Burkina Faso after series of terrorist attacks," 14 April 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230413-general-mobilisation-declared-in-burkina-faso-after-series-of-jihadist-attacks>

Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC):

The fragile ceasefire between the rebel Mouvement du 23 mars (M23) and the Congolese army holds, however, the risk of a return to fighting remains. Uganda¹³ and South Sudan¹⁴ were the last countries to send in troops as part of the East African Community's Regional Force (EACRF). Despite claims of progress, including from Uhuru Kenyatta, a key mediator to the peace process,¹⁵ very little seems to have changed as residents of areas reportedly liberated by the regional force indicate M23 is still present and collecting taxes. The situation remains volatile.¹⁶

In April, the UN Security Council was briefed on the deterioration of the situation since October 2022,¹⁷ The ongoing violence has taken a toll on the population, tensions among communities are high and hate speech continues to be a threat.¹⁸

The situation in the Ituri region remains worrying with ongoing attacks on civilians. Over 150 civilians were killed in the first two weeks of April and almost 500 since December 2022 by non-state actors, including the Cooperative for the Development of Congo (CODECO) and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF).¹⁹ There were also reported attacks on health facilities.²⁰

Tensions between Congo and Rwanda calmed, as undiplomatic exchanges between the countries decreased, but trust is at an "all time low," according to the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes region Huang Xia. The envoy called on the UN Security Council and the international community to bolster their efforts to decrease tensions.²¹ At the same time, tensions between Uganda and the DRC are also brewing. DRC locals backed by the country's police crossed into Uganda and laid claim to three villages in Zombo district.²²

¹³ France 24, "Ugandan troops join regional force in DR Congo as rebel fighters ignore retreat deadline," 31 March 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230331-ugandan-troops-join-regional-force-in-dr-congo-as-rebel-fighters-ignore-retreat-deadline>

¹⁴ The New Times, "South Sudan Deploys More Troops to DR Congo," 4 April 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202304050201.html>

¹⁵ The New Times, "DR Congo: Nairobi process making progress, says Kenyatta," 2 May 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202305030479.html>

¹⁶ Nation, "East African force fails to quell rebels in DR Congo," 27 April 2023, <https://nation.africa/africa/news/east-african-force-fails-to-quell-rebels-in-dr-congo-4214334>

¹⁷ UN News, "Congo-Kinshasa: DR Congo - Security Council Warned of 'Considerable' Deterioration in Restive East," 14 April 2023, <https://www.voanews.com/a/dozens-of-civilians-killed-in-eastern-congo-village-attack-/7051349.html>

¹⁸ UN News, "Congo-Kinshasa: 'Fragile Ceasefire' Holds in Eastern DR Congo, Security Council Hears," 19 April 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202304200050.html>

¹⁹ Africa News, "DRC: Over 150 dead in two weeks in Ituri, according to the UN," 19 April 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/19/drc-over-150-dead-in-two-weeks-in-ituri-according-to-the-un/>

²⁰ Africa News, "DRC: Over 150 dead in two weeks in Ituri, according to the UN," 19 April 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/04/19/drc-over-150-dead-in-two-weeks-in-ituri-according-to-the-un/>

²¹ UNSC, Global Community Must Bolster Efforts to Decrease Tensions in Great Lakes Region, Special Envoy Tells Security Council, Highlighting Role of Regional Peace Plans, 19 April 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/global-community-must-bolster-efforts-decrease-tensions-great-lakes-region-special-envoy-tells-security-council-highlighting-role-regional-peace-plans>

²² The East African, "DRC locals, backed by police, claim three Ugandan villages in Zombo," 25 April 2023, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/dr-congo-police-take-over-three-ugandan-villages-4212282>

South Sudan:

Impunity drives ongoing cycles of violence in South Sudan.²³ Despite most violence being framed as intercommunal, much of it is driven by the political elite over access to power and financial resources, using armed actors such as armed militias and community defence forces as proxies to weaken opposition groups.²⁴ An April 2023 report by the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan (CHRSS) identified the need to tackle impunity for serious crimes, as this is a “central driver of violence and misery faced by civilians”. In many cases, state actors are the main perpetrators. The report identified serving government officials and military officers, including Unity State Governor Joseph Monytil and Lieutenant General Thoi Chany Reat of the South Sudan People's Defence Forces, South Sudan's army and formerly the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and called for an effective investigation into extrajudicial killings committed with ample evidence, as crimes were captured on camera and posted on social media.²⁵

In its annual report, the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reported that there was an overall decrease in the number of incidents when compared to the previous year; however incidents have turned more deadly. There was a worrisome 95% increase in conflict-related sexual violence against women and girls.²⁶

South Sudanese authorities recommitted to a 24-month extension of the country's transition process. This delayed the country's elections, which were meant to take place in late 2022, until 2024.²⁷ Tensions escalated among the leading parties when President Salva Kiir, leader of the SPLA, made changes to the Cabinet which included the removal of the SPLM-In Opposition Defense Minister Angelina Teny, wife of Vice President Riek Machar, in what Machar considered a violation of the 2018 Revitalised Peace Agreement.²⁸

International response:

The United Nations Human Rights Council renewed the mandate of the CHRSS until April 2024²⁹, in a move opposed by the government of South Sudan, as well as opposition to the establishment of the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS) which it committed to in the 2015

²³ UN News, “Impunity drives cycles of ‘horrific’ crimes in South Sudan, Human Rights Council hears,” 7 March 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/03/1134257>

²⁴ Amnesty International, “South Sudan's conflicts are not just between communities,” 30 March 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/violent-conflicts-in-south-sudan-almost-always-involve-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-and-crimes-under-international-law/>

²⁵ UN News, “South Sudan: Impunity Driving Violence in South Sudan, UN Rights Commission Says,” 3 April 2023, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202304040049.html>

²⁶ UNMISS, More South Sudanese civilian victims recorded in 2022 compared to 2021, though killings, violent incidents show decrease-UN report, 17 March 2023, <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/more-south-sudanese-civilian-victims-recorded-2022-compared-2021-though-killings-violent-incidents>

²⁷ Associated Press, “South Sudan again delays its 1st election, until late 2024,” 4 August 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-africa-sudan-south-juba-4f35064ef1173a9e14f6e60f55d36b50>

²⁸ Associated Press, “South Sudan's president dismisses political rival's wife,” 4 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/south-sudan-president-0bbec07fdbdb167224d057d11184018e>

²⁹ UNHRC, Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/co-h-south-sudan/index>

and 2018 peace agreements, exacerbating impunity for perpetrators.³⁰ In May, the UN Security Council is expected to vote on a draft resolution to renew the sanctions regime which expires on 31 May.³¹

Sudan:

Fighting broke out on 15 April after weeks of tensions between the paramilitary group the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), previously allied with the Sudanese Armed Forces under the auspices of the National Intelligence and Security Services, led by General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemeti and the Deputy Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under the command of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who led the 2021 military coup and has acted as the country's president. Hemeti has been implicated in several mass atrocities committed in Darfur³², with his origins as a leader in the *Janjaweed*, there have been calls by Darfuri civil society for the International Criminal Court to open an investigation into Hemeti.³³

The fighting broke out amidst efforts to agree to the integration of the two forces in the context of an overall effort to bring back civilian rule following the 2021 coup. Both men were reluctant to lose power.³⁴

Since fighting broke out at least 550 people, including 190 children, have been killed and over 4,900 injured,³⁵ with speculation that the total number of those wounded is much higher due to the closure of several hospitals. Fighting has been mostly concentrated in heavily populated areas, with both sides vying for control over strategic locations like the airport and presidential palace in Central Khartoum.³⁶ According to ACLED, two-thirds of the fighting between SAF and RSF took place in cities of over 100,000 people, most within Khartoum state.³⁷ Both parties used explosive weapons in urban areas killing civilians and damaging critical infrastructure needed for basic services, and neither took necessary measures to minimise harm to civilians as required by international humanitarian law.³⁸ RSF has reportedly taken over civilian homes in Khartoum using them as cover from SAF, with civilians living under

³⁰ Amnesty International, "South Sudan's conflicts are not just between communities", 30 March 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/03/violent-conflicts-in-south-sudan-almost-always-involve-human-rights-violations-and-abuses-and-crimes-under-international-law/>.

³¹ Security Council Report, May 2023 Monthly Forecast - South Sudan, 30 April 2023, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2023-05/south-sudan-23.php>

³² Human Rights Watch, "Men With No Mercy: Rapid Support Forces Attacks against Civilians in Darfur, Sudan", 9 September 2015.

³³ Radio Dabanga, "Darfur displaced call on ICC to indict RSF commander Hemeti", 2018, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/darfur-displaced-call-on-icc-to-indict-rsf-commander-hemeti>.

³⁴ UN News, "Background to a crisis: In Sudan, the stakes are high for the whole of Africa," 28 April 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1136187>

³⁵ OCHA, Sudan: Clashes between SAF and RSF - Flash Update No. 10, 6 May 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-clashes-between-saf-and-rsf-flash-update-no-10-6-may-2023-enar>

³⁶ Chatam House, "Resolving Sudan's crisis means removing those fighting," 21 April 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/resolving-sudans-crisis-means-removing-those-fighting>

³⁷ ACLED, Fact Sheet: Conflict Surges in Sudan, 5 May 2023, <https://acleddata.com/2023/04/28/fact-sheet-conflict-surges-in-sudan/>

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Sudan: Explosive Weapons Harming Civilians," 4 May 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/04/sudan-explosive-weapons-harming-civilians>

constant fire. There are severe humanitarian concerns, as many are without electricity and water as critical infrastructure has been hit and there is no security for repair crews. Civilians are also lacking food as supply lines have been cut off by fighting.³⁹ There have been at least 28 attacks on health facilities including a maternity hospital,⁴⁰ and more than two thirds of all hospitals across Sudan are no longer functioning.⁴¹ There have been incidents of sexual assaults by fighters from both warring parties, at least seven cases of rape were reported in Khartoum and women human rights defenders are being targeted by former regime supporters for calling for an end to the war.⁴² Thousands of civilians have evacuated Khartoum amidst heavy gunfire⁴³, and relocated to more secure cities.⁴⁴ Several foreigners and diplomats have been evacuated by their countries of origin.⁴⁵

Although Khartoum has been the focus of reporting, fighting in other areas, including El Obeid, Kosti and White Nile State and in Darfur. Violence in Geneina, West Darfur, is especially worrying, with reported attacks from the RSF⁴⁶ in their traditional stronghold, alongside intercommunal fighting.⁴⁷ At least 180 people were killed during the last week of April. Residents have reported killings of civilians whilst fetching water and food and there have been reports of rape and gender-based violence.⁴⁸ Humanitarian facilities were looted and all hospitals and pharmacies in the area are closed,⁴⁹ and homes and at least 20 buildings and shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs) were targeted, leading to secondary displacement of thousands of IDPs.⁵⁰ Those who remain were armed by the police in order to

³⁹ Chatam House, "Resolving Sudan's crisis means removing those fighting," 21 April 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/resolving-sudans-crisis-means-removing-those-fighting>

⁴⁰ UNFPA, "Continued attacks on health facilities in Sudan deprive women of reproductive health care," 5 May 2023, <https://www.unfpa.org/press/continued-attacks-health-facilities-sudan-deprive-women-reproductive-health-care>

⁴¹ OCHA, "Sudan: Clashes between the SAF and RSF, Flash Update No. 9," 2 May 2023.

⁴² Sudanese Womens Rights Action, Joint Brief: War in Sudan: Situation of Women and WHRDs, 2 May 2023, <https://suwra.org/blog/2023/05/02/joint-brief-war-in-sudan-situation-of-women-and-whrds/>

⁴³ UN Meetings Coverage and Press Release, "As Desperate Sudanese Flee Their Embattled Nation, Security Council Urges Warring Parties to Respect Ceasefire, Reboot Negotiations, Immediately End Fighting", 25 April 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15265.doc.htm>.

⁴⁴ New York Times, "Thousands Flee to Sudan's Main Seaport, Seeking Ships to Safety", 1 May 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/world/africa/port-sudan-evacuation.html>.

⁴⁵ AP, "Foreigners airlifted out; Sudanese seek refuge from fighting", 24 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/sudan-fighting-rival-generals-foreigners-evacuated-1378805c261ca77b99effe8aa7537eb1>.

⁴⁶ Dabanga Sudan, "Nearly 200 dead in West Darfur violence: situation 'extremely dangerous,'" 1 May 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/nearly-200-confirmed-dead-in-west-darfur-violence-situation-extremely-dangerous>

⁴⁷ OHCHR, "Sudan: Plight of civilians amid hostilities," 28 April 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-briefing-notes/2023/04/sudan-plight-civilians-amid-hostilities>

⁴⁸ Dabanga Sudan, "Nearly 200 dead in West Darfur violence: situation 'extremely dangerous,'" 1 May 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/nearly-200-confirmed-dead-in-west-darfur-violence-situation-extremely-dangerous>

⁴⁹ OCHA, Sudan: Clashes between SAF and RSF - Flash Update No. 10, 6 May 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-clashes-between-saf-and-rsf-flash-update-no-10-6-may-2023-enar>

⁵⁰ Dabanga Sudan, "Nearly 200 dead in West Darfur violence: situation 'extremely dangerous,'" 1 May 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/nearly-200-confirmed-dead-in-west-darfur-violence-situation-extremely-dangerous>

be able to protect themselves from RSF attacks, however, this risks increasing violence among civilians⁵¹ and the potential for further intercommunal conflict.

Pre-negotiation talks began in Saudi Arabia the second week of May, and a declaration of principles on civilian protection was signed. Against the backdrop of several ceasefires which were declared but failed to hold,⁵² both parties to the conflict are poised to continue the conflict, there is little hope of quick progress. Sudanese activists have raised their voices against both warring parties and are insisting on a return to civilian rule without inclusion by either Burhan or Hemeti's forces. They said the two positions "express a direct interest for each of the parties to the conflict in power," while "our position necessarily favours the only one affected by this war, the Sudanese people – whom the conflicting parties are attempting to get on their side and their allies, in order to gain popular and political support."⁵³ Civilians in most cases do not support either warring side, however ongoing aggressive campaigns seek to polarise the situation as both are calling for civilians to side with them,⁵⁴ the longer fighting persists, the more likely civilians are to succumb to the ongoing efforts made by both parties seeking support and fuelling further violence. There have already been indicators of polarisation of communities in El Geneina and elsewhere in Darfur, which exist in a longstanding and prevalent environment of an existing culture of impunity.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Dabanga Sudan, "Nearly 200 dead in West Darfur violence: situation 'extremely dangerous,'" 1 May 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/nearly-200-confirmed-dead-in-west-darfur-violence-situation-extremely-dangerous>

⁵² OCHA, Sudan: Clashes between SAF and RSF - Flash Update No. 10, 6 May 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-clashes-between-saf-and-rsf-flash-update-no-10-6-may-2023-enar>

⁵³ Dabanga Sudan, "Sudan activists 'reject both warlords, call for participation in peace talks,'" 7 May 2023, <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-activists-reject-both-warlords-call-for-participation-in-peace-talks>

⁵⁴ Chatam House, "Resolving Sudan's crisis means removing those fighting," 21 April 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/04/resolving-sudans-crisis-means-removing-those-fighting>

⁵⁵ Munzoul Assal, "Dividing the divided: The April 15 war and social polarization in Sudan," *Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker*, May 2023, www.sudantransparency.org.