

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Kholood Khair UN Security Council Briefing on Women, Peace and Security 7 August 2024

President, Excellencies, civil society colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today on the impact of transitions of UN peace operations on women's rights and participation. My name is Kholood Khair and I'm the founder and director of Confluence Advisory, a think-and-do tank formerly based in Khartoum. I will focus my remarks on my country, Sudan, which I believe can offer important lessons to the Council on this topic.

Nearly two decades ago, in the face of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Darfur,¹ the Security Council made the important decision to establish the United Nations African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).² Though local rights groups reported some protection concerns during UNAMID's tenure, the mission was instrumental in providing a degree of stability in Darfur when it was clear that the government was unable, but mostly unwilling, to end the violence it wrought against the non-Arab populations there. UNAMID acted as a protective wedge between civilians and the government forces and allied militias that were targeting them.

Frankly, your Excellencies, as a Sudanese woman, I believe the timing of UNAMID's withdrawal in 2020 was a massive miscalculation, especially as it took place before any alternative national force could be set up in its stead.³ The result was a gaping protection vacuum. Consequently, violence in Darfur spiked markedly.⁴ The Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), which was seen to reward one set of political actors over another, fanned ethnic tensions in West Darfur even further.⁵ In January 2021, just a month after UNAMID's drawdown was complete, women displaced by the violence told reporters that they faced either rape or death, from violence and hunger.⁶

When the military-led transitional government finally struck a deal with JPA signatories to set up the Joint Forces (JF), Darfur's traumatized population were dismayed to find that those forces were made up, in part, of the very same groups that had been terrorizing them and displacing them from their homes, namely the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), who had led the atrocities in Darfur decades earlier.⁷ In particular, RSF members were implicated in attacks in El Geneina in December 2019 and again in January 2021, shortly after UNAMID closed some of its bases there.⁸ Throughout, women's rights activists implored the international community to let UNAMID stay.⁹ But their voices were ignored.

Similarly, the limited mandate given to the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS), and its hasty termination at the request of the de facto Sudanese authorities in December 2023,¹⁰ represented another instance where the perspectives and needs of Sudanese women were not considered by this Council. Even now, in the wake of UNITAMS' departure, despite rampant reports of sexual violence,¹¹ the UN has not established adequate monitoring and reporting arrangements.¹²

Today, with an all-out war raging across Sudan, and reports of unfolding genocide, the situation for Sudanese people is desperate. There are likely far, far more than the reported 18,000 civilians¹³ killed since the outbreak of conflict in April 2023. In El Geneina alone, up to 15,000 were killed during the RSF's siege.¹⁴ Since then, the RSF has launched similar attacks in El Fasher city,¹⁵ and Gezira¹⁶ and Sennar states¹⁷. As of July, almost 25 million people are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance,¹⁸ 10.7 million are internally displaced,¹⁹ and over half the population²⁰ face acute hunger. Yesterday, this Council heard²¹ that there is famine in North Darfur, particularly in IDP camps like Zamzam,²² which was also bombarded by the SAF.²³ Reports from the ground suggest that at least 13 other areas face famine conditions.²⁴ Obstruction of humanitarian aid and bombardment of hospitals by both parties further threaten more lives.²⁵ Unimpeded humanitarian access and protection of all humanitarian actors are essential.

Despite the urgent need, there is currently no entity that has a protection of civilians mandate in Sudan, beyond the de facto authorities, which have again proven themselves unable and unwilling to do so. This leaves the vast majority of Sudanese people entirely exposed during the ongoing conflict, and vulnerable to atrocities committed by the RSF, SAF, and allied militias.

As the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict noted following her recent visit to Chad,²⁶ this war is being waged on the bodies of women and girls.²⁷ Widespread and systematic conflict-related sexual violence is no longer limited to Darfur, but reported across the country, including in Khartoum²⁸ and Gezira.²⁹ It is clear that the RSF and the SAF have subjected women and girls from ages 9 to 60 to sexual violence, a war crime, and neither party has taken meaningful steps to prevent its forces from committing rape, attacking health care workers,³⁰ nor investigating such crimes.³¹ The deliberate use of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape, gang rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriage, chiefly by the RSF,³² compounded by atrocities such as looting, torture, forced disappearances, and forced labor, aims to terrorize the population into submission. Further, recent reports have emerged that women in the city of Omdurman are being coerced into sex with soldiers from the Sudanese army as the only way to access food or other necessary goods.³³ We are confronting a serious protection crisis and an epidemic of gender-based violence across the country.

For nearly 25 years, the Security Council has pledged its commitment to the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda and to uphold women's rights in all conflicts and crises.³⁴ Yet, what we are witnessing in Sudan today is a blatant violation of these obligations, and a key contributing factor is the lack of a robust protection of civilians mission.

There is currently no body in-country to adequately monitor human rights, no body to effectively protect civilians, and no body to sufficiently support women, who have so far been almost entirely excluded from participating in any aspect of resolving the current crisis, despite being on the frontlines of the response. There were no minimum conditions established prior to the termination of first UNAMID, then UNITAMS, to mitigate the harms to women and girls or to ensure that there were adequate resources to address their needs. And so, women and marginalized groups are paying the price of this protection vacuum.

In order to address the urgent protection crisis in Sudan, I offer the following recommendations:

- First: While the international community's efforts to secure a ceasefire are critical, the need of the hour is to prevent genocide³⁵ and save lives. A complementary diplomatic track must be established separate to ceasefire talks that is focused on addressing violence against civilians, with targeted measures for the protection of women and girls, including from conflict-related sexual violence. Concerningly, UN-led mediation efforts have thus far failed to implement the UN's own long-standing guidance on addressing conflict-related sexual violence in negotiating ceasefires and peace agreements.³⁶
- Second: The physical protection of civilians, including women and girls, must be paramount to international action. In line with Resolution 2736 (2024),³⁷ the UN Secretariat must, alongside the AU,³⁸ urgently identify options for civilian protection, and while these options are being developed, must do all it can to protect civilians from atrocity crimes, including through tried and tested community protection initiatives to monitor any commitments by the warring parties not to target civilians, conduct rapid investigations and contribute to peace negotiations.
- Third: Women's rights must be prioritized in response to the current crisis. Expanding the arms embargo across the country,³⁹ and adding conflict-related sexual violence as a stand-alone designation criterion for targeted individual sanctions, would address the fact that the flow of arms is exposing women and girls to horrific forms of gender-based violence.⁴⁰ The Darfur sanctions regime, which was adopted decades ago, should be updated to better reflect the progress we've seen in other contexts in using sanctions to hold perpetrators of sexual violence accountable. Finally, it is critical, in accordance with Resolution 2736, that the full, equal, meaningful and safe participation of women is ensured, not as an addendum to the main talks but as central to them, by Personal Envoy for Sudan Lamamra, the African Union, the League of Arab States, and any other actors working to advance a peace process.

Additionally, the grave situation in Sudan offers important lessons for drawdowns, transitions and terminations in other contexts where women's lives are at stake. The Security Council must do much more to implement Resolution 2594 (2021)⁴¹ on transitions in other situations on its agenda, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq and Somalia. Most importantly, it must ensure that there are no protection gaps between a hasty withdrawal and a new mission, or termination and handover to government authorities. Assurances that relevant authorities have taken up a protection mandate are a must before any peace operation fully withdraws, and the protection of women's rights and of civilians must be essential in any handover, including by clearly identifying benchmarks for protection, collecting reliable data on conflict-related sexual violence,⁴² and inculcating WPS norms into legal frameworks, before withdrawal. Integrating gender and human rights expertise, as well as meaningful consultation with women and civil society organizations, at all stages of transition planning is essential.

Excellencies,

It is at moments of transition that the UN often serves its highest purpose, by providing basic needs and security for civilians at risk. Though the pursuit of a ceasefire in Sudan is necessary, a ceasefire alone will not save lives. The best way to accomplish this is through a mission to protect civilians. 20 years ago, this Council saw the war in Sudan for what it was: a war on civilians, and chose to prioritize saving lives. I urge you to do so once more, before it is too late.

Thank you.

¹ International Criminal Court, "Situation in Darfur, Sudan," <https://www.icc-cpi.int/darfur>.

² UN Security Council Resolution 1769 (2007), undocs.org/s/res/1769.

³ Human Rights Watch, "Sudan: UN/AU Plan for Darfur Falls Short," 16 March 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/16/sudan-un/au-plan-darfur-falls-short>.

⁴ Just two weeks after the departure of UNAMID, inter-communal violence near El Geneina killed up to 150 people and displaced 50,000. See UN News, "UN chief calls for protection of civilians as violence spikes in Sudan's West Darfur," 18 January 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1082352>; Human Rights Watch, "Deadly Darfur Attack Just Days After Last Peacekeepers Leave," 22 January 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/22/deadly-darfur-attack-just-days-after-last-peacekeepers-leave>.

⁵ Final report of the Panel of Experts on Sudan, S/2021/40, ¶23-28, 13 January 2021, undocs.org/s/2021/40; see also Philip Kleinfeld and Mohammed Amin, "Holdout rebels, sidelined victims, and other hurdles to peace in Darfur," The New Humanitarian, 6 April 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2021/4/6/sudans-peace-deal-finds-resistance-in-darfur>.

⁶ Nafisa Eltahir and Khalid Abdelaziz, "Darfur displaced fearful as U.N. peacekeepers hand over to local forces," Reuters, 13 January 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN29I1WV/>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Sudan's Planned Joint Force Threatens Rights-Abiding Transition," 21 June 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/21/sudans-planned-joint-force-threatens-rights-abiding-transition>;

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⁸ Human Rights Watch, "'The Massalit Will Not Come Home': Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity in El Geneina, West Darfur, Sudan," pp. 22-26, 9 May 2024, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2024/05/sudan0524web_0.pdf; see also Philip Kleinfeld and Mohammed Amin, "What's behind the rising violence in Sudan's Darfur?" The New Humanitarian, 8 April 2021, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2021/4/8/whats-behind-the-rising-violence-in-sudans-darfur>.

⁹ See Niemat Ahmadi, "Pulling Peacekeepers From Darfur Will Be a Murderous Mistake," PassBlue, 27 May 2020, <https://www.passblue.com/2020/05/27/pulling-peacekeepers-from-darfur-will-be-a-murderous-mistake/>.

¹⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 2715 (2023), [undocs.org/S/RES/2715\(2023\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2715(2023)).

¹¹ See Conflict-related sexual violence: Report of the Secretary General, S/2024/292, ¶65, 4 April 2024, undocs.org/s/2024/292; "Statement by Ms. Niemat Ahmadi at the UN Security Council Open Debate on Conflict Related Sexual Violence," 23 April 2024, <https://www.womenpeacesecurity.org/resource/statement-UNSC-CRSV-open-debate-ahmadi/>.

¹² Human Rights Watch, "'Khartoum is Not Safe for Women': Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Sudan's Capital," p.11, 28 July 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/07/28/khartoum-not-safe-women/sexual-violence-against-women-and-girls-sudans-capital>.

¹³ ACLED, "Sudan: The RSF marches on Sennar and West Kordofan," 12 July 2024, <https://acleddata.com/2024/07/12/sudan-situation-update-july-2024-the-rsf-marches-on-sennar-and-west-kordofan/>.

¹⁴ Final report of the Panel of Experts on Sudan, S/2024/65, ¶54, 15 January 2024, undocs.org/s/2024/65.

¹⁵ Security Council Press Statement on Sudan, 27 April 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15686.doc.htm>.

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³⁹ Amnesty International, “Sudan: Constant flow of arms fuelling relentless civilian suffering in conflict - new investigation,” 25 July 2024, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/07/sudan-constant-flow-of-arms-fuelling-relentless-civilian-suffering-in-conflict-new-investigation/>.

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⁴¹ UN Security Council Resolution 2594 (2021), [undocs.org/S/RES/2594\(2021\)](https://undocs.org/S/RES/2594(2021)).

⁴² Human Rights Watch, “‘Khartoum is Not Safe for Women’: Sexual Violence against Women and Girls in Sudan’s Capital,” p.11.