



Date: 27/08/2025

Webinar: Siege and Starvation in El-Fasher – Mercenaries and War Crimes in Sudan

On Tuesday, 26 August 2025, Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK) convened a [webinar](#) on Sudan's ongoing civil war, with particular focus on the siege of El-Fasher, the last state capital in Darfur held by the army. The discussion shed light on the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the blockade—famine conditions, soaring food prices, and widespread hunger—while also addressing the role of external interventions in fuelling the conflict. In particular, the webinar examined Sudanese government accusations that the United Arab Emirates has recruited and financed foreign mercenaries, including Colombians, to fight alongside the RSF, deepening the crisis and contributing to war crimes. The event aimed to expose these realities, highlight civilian suffering, and explore mechanisms for accountability and peace.

The webinar brought together a distinguished panel of speakers with deep expertise on Sudan and the wider region. Participants included Endre Stiansen, Former Norwegian Ambassador to Sudan and current Special Envoy to the Horn of Africa; Timothy Michael Carney, Former U.S. Ambassador to Sudan; Adama Gaye, Former ECOWAS Director of Communications; Patson Malisa, International Relations Advisor; Martin Plaut, Former BBC Africa Editor; Aicha Elbasri, Researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha and Former UNAMID Spokeswoman; and Leni Kienzle, World Food Programme Spokesperson in Sudan. Each speaker contributed unique insights on the humanitarian, political, and international dimensions of the conflict.

In his contribution, Ambassador Timothy Carney underscored the gravity of the crimes unfolding in Sudan. He described what was happening as ethnic cleansing, murder, rape, and unrestrained violence, all of which, he stressed, demanded accountability. He argued that



these crimes could not be ignored and must form the basis for international action to protect civilians and hold perpetrators responsible.

Carney then turned to the dire humanitarian situation in El-Fasher, pointing to the severe risks faced by aid convoys, including deadly attacks where trucks had been burned and lives lost. Drawing on his past knowledge of Sudan, he raised the idea of adapting solutions used during previous conflicts, such as WFP air-drops of food supplies, and suggested that locations like El-Fasher's stadium could be considered for such operations. He warned, however, that these efforts carried serious risks to civilians and could expose aircraft to RSF fire.

Turning to external involvement, Carney highlighted the role of external actors in prolonging the conflict. Carney pointed specifically to the United Arab Emirates, noting that senior Emirati figures had aligned themselves with Hemedti and the RSF, motivated either by access to gold or anticipated influence over Port Sudan. He called this a grave miscalculation and insisted that it was the responsibility of the Arab and Muslim world to confront the UAE over its role. For Carney, confronting both the internal perpetrators and their external backers was essential to finding any meaningful solution to Sudan's crisis.

In his speech, Ambassador Endre Stiansen explained that his participation in the webinar reflected the urgency of drawing attention to Sudan's tragedy, particularly the situation in Darfur. Speaking from his current role as Norway's special envoy to the Horn of Africa, he stressed that Sudan and South Sudan had been priority countries for his government for historical reasons, and that the conflict was an issue he was working on every day. He emphasised that nothing meaningful in terms of access or humanitarian aid could be achieved as long as the war continued, underlining that stopping the war must be the first priority. He also noted that this was not an accidental conflict but a deliberate war, one that had produced the largest displacement crisis in the world and left more people starving in Sudan than anywhere else today.

Stiansen underlined that the famine and mass atrocities unfolding across Sudan, including killings, rape, looting, torture, and other abuses against civilians, were man-made and preventable. He pointed out that famine conditions were spreading rapidly, and people were dying daily in Darfur, including El-Fasher. Norway, he said, had been clear from the outset: there must be an immediate ceasefire and an inclusive political process leading to a democratic transition if Sudan was to avoid repeating decades-long wars such as the one in the South. He also emphasised that every Sudanese civilian had the same right to



humanitarian assistance wherever they were, and that the United Nations should be able to establish permanent presences in Darfur to deliver aid at scale.

He further condemned the deliberate obstruction of aid by armed groups, making clear that all actors bore a responsibility to protect civilians and ensure humanitarian access. He denounced the repeated attacks on humanitarian convoys, including the World Food Programme convoy attacked most recently near Malit, and earlier incidents during the summer. He reaffirmed Norway's commitment to speaking out against the weaponisation of food and called on the RSF to immediately implement UN Security Council Resolution 2736 and lift the siege of El-Fasher. For Stiansen, there could be no impunity for violations of international humanitarian law, and accountability had to include those financing and supporting mercenary activity, which he said was unacceptable and must be addressed.

Finally, Stiansen insisted on the importance of renewing the mandate of the UN Fact-Finding Mission for at least two years at the upcoming Human Rights Council session in October, stressing that an independent mechanism was vital to collect evidence, investigate crimes, and deter further atrocities. He explained that stopping the flow of arms into Sudan, achieving a ceasefire, and moving towards a political settlement were all possible if there was sufficient will. He concluded by urging participants not to lose hope, stressing that the people of Sudan, Darfur, and El-Fasher had not given up, and therefore the international community must not give up either.

In her contribution, Aicha Elbasri stressed that the crisis in El-Fasher and Darfur could only be understood within the broader Sudanese and regional context. She underlined that both the SAF and the RSF had committed massacres of civilians and targeted humanitarian aid and aid workers, even though the RSF bore the main responsibility for the siege and starvation. She warned that the crisis must also be seen against the backdrop of the looming danger of state disintegration, with the RSF seeking to establish a parallel authority while national sovereignty continued to erode.

Her second point was that the El-Fasher crisis reflected a wider breakdown of multilateralism in an international order dominated by great power rivalry. She argued that the UN and the Security Council had lost much of their weight, leaving Sudan far down the global priority list. As a result, international intervention seemed ideal in theory but unrealistic in practice, as the UN had been reduced to a limited humanitarian role dependent on the will of major powers.



Thirdly, she noted that mediation initiatives such as the Jeddah Talks and IGAD had failed to deliver a lasting ceasefire. She added that the Troika—UK, US, and Norway—had lost relevance, especially after deep US aid cuts. Even recent efforts, such as the London conference on Sudan, had been unable to secure a joint statement or agreement due to divisions among stakeholders.

Her fourth point focused on identifying the key sponsors of the war. She explained that the SAF had received backing from states including Egypt, Iran, and Turkey, while the RSF was mainly supported by the UAE, Libya, and networks across the Sahel. She stressed that Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in particular held decisive financial, political, and military leverage over the conflict.

Finally, Elbasri argued that the only power with the capacity to pressure these regional actors to act was the United States. She pointed to recent initiatives such as the Quad for Sudan, which had brought together the US with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as a potential basis to build on. In her view, the Trump administration could mobilise these actors to pressure both the SAF and RSF into reaching a deal that guaranteed a civilian government. She concluded that while this was difficult, it was not impossible, and such a course was the only way to save El-Fasher, Darfur, and Sudan from collapse.

Adama Gaye recalled his past encounters with Sudanese leaders and reflected on how the international community had once paid attention to conflicts in Sudan, contrasting this with today's silence despite far greater suffering. He argued that the first and most urgent task was to raise momentum and global awareness about Sudan. In his view, African conflicts should not be outsourced to distant capitals but must be owned by Africa itself, with the African Union placing Sudan at the centre of its agenda. He noted that the AU had pledged in its Agenda 2063 to silence the guns by 2020, yet Sudan now stood as one of the starkest examples of failure, alongside crises in the DRC and Rwanda.

Gaye further stressed that the conflict in Sudan required engagement from all relevant stakeholders, both regional and international. He pointed out that Arab countries, the United States, and China had all historically played significant roles in Sudan and could again be mobilised. He cited the example of the Darfur crisis in 2008, when global civil society threatened to boycott the Beijing Olympics to pressure China. Today, he said, in the era of the internet and social media, civil society, influencers, and African voices had an even greater opportunity to raise Sudan onto the global platform. He praised countries like Norway for their



consistent support and called for stronger cooperation between African actors, civil society, and international partners to ensure Sudan was not sidelined.

Finally, Gaye argued that the Sudanese conflict could not be separated from broader African challenges around the rule of law, democracy, and governance. He criticised leaders who sought to dominate and silence alternative voices, recalling his own encounter with former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, whom he described as unwilling to allow critical perspectives. He concluded that Sudan's crisis must be addressed through genuine African ownership, inclusive debate, and active involvement of both civil society and regional organisations. For him, Africa must speak loudly, clearly, and decisively about its own conflicts rather than waiting for outside powers to impose solutions.

In her contribution, Leni Kienzle gave an overview of the catastrophic humanitarian situation across Sudan. She stated that according to the last Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) assessment issued in December 2024, at least 25 million people were facing acute hunger. Since then, the government had withdrawn from the IPC process, meaning there had been no updated assessment and the real numbers were likely far higher. She explained that famine had already been confirmed around El-Fasher, beginning in Zamzam Camp, and that conditions inside the city itself were very likely famine-level today. Reports from El-Fasher described people dying of hunger and surviving on "ombars," a peanut shell by-product normally used as animal feed, which was now being sold and consumed as food.

Kienzle described the collapse of coping mechanisms in El-Fasher, noting that community kitchens had largely stopped functioning and that it had been nearly impossible to bring food or nutrition supplies into the city. She recounted that a convoy bound for El-Fasher on 3 June was attacked just 80 kilometres outside the city, with five humanitarian staff killed and several trucks destroyed. More recently, another convoy heading to Malit was also attacked and three trucks were destroyed. These incidents highlighted, she said, that humanitarian workers were operating under direct threat and facing deliberate obstruction.

She concluded by stressing the urgent need for a humanitarian pause and the immediate lifting of the siege on El-Fasher so that assistance could reach those in desperate need. She noted that a WFP convoy was ready to move from Nyala, around 300 kilometres away, but that while the Sudanese Armed Forces and the national Humanitarian Aid Commission had given clearances, the RSF had yet to grant approval. Kienzle also raised alarm about Qadougli in South Kordofan, which was under siege and facing similar conditions but had received far



less attention. She emphasised that both El-Fasher and Qadougli required urgent, unimpeded humanitarian access to prevent further loss of life.

In his contribution, Martin Plaut began by recognising the efforts of those working for peace in Sudan but cautioned against unrealistic optimism. He argued that the often-repeated idea that “Africa must solve its own problems” was not supported by evidence, pointing to the example of the African Standby Brigades. Despite large amounts of money and training invested in these forces, they had never been effectively deployed when needed. For Plaut, this demonstrated that the African Union could not, on its own, provide a solution to Sudan’s war. He also dismissed the likelihood of serious engagement from the Trump administration, noting its tolerance of atrocities in Gaza and Ukraine, and stressed that Sudan’s conflict was being prolonged by powerful external actors such as the UAE.

Plaut highlighted the structural divide between populations along the Nile and those in the periphery as a root cause of the conflict, linking it to the origins of the RSF in brigades supported by Muammar Gaddafi, with lasting influence in Chad and Libya. He stressed that General Haftar played a significant role in supporting the RSF, alongside the UAE, which continued to channel support through various means, even via Uganda. He also underscored the involvement of Russia through the Wagner Group and its successor structures, with Sudanese gold being funneled to Moscow to finance the war in Ukraine. These external entanglements, he argued, were critical drivers of the conflict and obstacles to peace.

Plaut concluded on a pessimistic note, warning that without addressing these underlying realities, the conflict in Sudan was unlikely to be resolved. He pointed to the international community’s acceptance of mass atrocities elsewhere, such as the war in Tigray where hundreds of thousands died with little intervention, as an indicator of what Sudan could expect. He agreed with Aicha Elbasri that President Trump was the only figure with the leverage to pressure key actors, but he expressed deep skepticism about Trump’s willingness to act, given his disdainful view of African countries and his susceptibility to Emirati influence. Plaut warned that the most likely outcome was a continuation of suffering, starvation, and mass death, with little urgency from the international community to change course.

In his contribution, Patson Malisa joined the call of progressive voices demanding urgent relief for the crisis in El-Fasher and Sudan at large. He described the situation as one where decency and humanity had become distant anomalies, and stressed the need to restore the prospect of peaceful dialogue and dignified life for the Sudanese people. Highlighting the



immense toll on innocent women and children, he underlined that every life lost was one too many. He condemned the deprivation of humanitarian access to the displaced and vulnerable, arguing that such actions violated international law, human rights conventions, and norms designed to prevent ethnic cleansing.

Malisa emphasised that the participation of foreign actors through armed sponsorship and mercenary interventions had escalated Sudan's war into an international atrocity. In this context, he insisted that quiet diplomacy could not substitute for urgent action to save lives. He called on all members of the multilateral community to ensure the conflict in Sudan was treated as intolerable and to make clear that perpetrators of war crimes were under international scrutiny. He urged for greater peer-to-peer dialogue at the political level, combined with the engagement of civil society and testimony from those affected, facilitated through Sudan's membership in bodies such as the UN, the African Union, and IGAD.

He concluded by urging that all available instruments be activated to instigate peace, provide humanitarian relief, and ensure accountability for victims. He reminded participants that Sudan, by virtue of its geography and resources, remained a key member of the international community, and that a stable Sudan was more beneficial for its partners than one fragmented by war. Stressing the importance of balance between despair and hope, Malisa warned against reducing the crisis to politics or geopolitics. He closed with a poignant reminder that "it's people, it's humans, it's children, it's women."

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK