

# SUDAN CONFLICT OBSERVATORY

SIRBA, WEST DARFUR, 24 JULY– 30 JULY, 2023

REPORT 008 | 2 AUGUST 2023

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# METHODOLOGY

Yale SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
*Humanitarian Research Lab*

The Yale Humanitarian Research Lab's data fusion methodologies combine remote sensing analysis with open-source data to assess and geolocate events. Yale HRL uses remote sensing data including moderate and very high resolution (VHR) satellite imagery, NASA thermal detection data, as well as open source social media, local news reporting, multimedia, and other verified reports. When necessary, sources are redacted for protection purposes; a redacted source list is available to authorized users.

The conflict in Sudan is marked by a lack of data generally. This includes limited remote sensing data including moderate and VHR satellite imagery and open source data, including social media. The lack of open source multimedia may be attributed partially to the widespread power and telecommunications blackouts across the region. This means that (a) many events are unreported or under-reported, and (b) where reports of events exist there may not be sufficient data at this time to corroborate or assess alleged events.

The map herein shows approximate locations – to the highest spatial resolution possible across sources – to where airstrikes have been reported.

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## **Terms**

- NASA FIRMS | NASA Fire Information for Resource Management System
- Reported | Based on credible, verified media reporting

# KEY FINDINGS

- The Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and aligned forces attacked and razed Sirba beginning on approximately 24 July 2023, trapped civilians in Sirba, and reportedly razed Sirba over the course of at least six days through at least 30 July 2023.
- An estimated 4463 structures, representing at least 86% percent of structures identified in the town are assessed to have been destroyed as of 29 July 2023.
- Hundreds of civilians have been reportedly killed by RSF and aligned forces' violence and thousands of civilians have been forced to flee as a result of the attack.
- The confirmed destruction of Sirba raises the count of towns that the Sudan Conflict Observatory has visually confirmed as destroyed by RSF and aligned forces to at least 27 towns across Darfur.

# BACKGROUND & FINDINGS

Sirba has been the locus point for attacks on civilians in previous violence in Darfur during the 2003-2005 genocide perpetrated by the Janjaweed. The destruction of Sirba, West Darfur in the week of 24 July 2023 continues a pattern of violence perpetrated by the Janjaweed and affiliated militias towards the ethnic tribes living in the Sirba Locality. An estimated 196,000 people live in Sirba locality, the ethnic groups predominately in West Darfur are the Rizeigat (the Arab tribes) and the Masalit.<sup>i</sup> Other African ethnic tribal groups in West Darfur include the Borgo, Dajo, Erenga (also spelled as Aranga), Fur, Gimir and Zaghawa.<sup>ii</sup>

## Historical Patterns of Violence in Sirba since 2003

The United Nations' Commission of Inquiry on Darfur 2005 report found that government forces and militias conducted indiscriminate attacks throughout Darfur, including killings of civilians, torture, enforced disappearance, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement.<sup>iii</sup> The vast majority of victims in Darfur, documented in this investigation were from the Fur, Zaghawa, Massalit, Jebel, Aranga, and other tribes.<sup>iv</sup> In August 2006, the UN Security Council passed resolution 1706 to send UN peacekeepers in Darfur to take over from the AU.<sup>v</sup> In 2007, The Janjaweed militia threatened to attack three villages in West Darfur (Bir Dageeg, Sirba, and Abu Suruj) as retribution for suspected support for "anti-government forces".<sup>vi</sup>

On 31 December 2020, the joint-United Nations Africa Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) peacekeeping force ended its mandate. For 13 years the peacekeeping

force was tasked to protect civilians, support mediation, conflict resolution and stabilization activities, and to ensure humanitarian aid access.<sup>vii</sup>

## Attacks on Human security in Sirba Town starting July 2023

Since the start of the conflict on 15 April 2023, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), in Sirba reported an increase in violent attacks towards civilians by armed actors.<sup>viii</sup> As of 12 May 2023, IDPs in Sirba reported an alarming increase in food prices, complete lack of medicines and a prolonged closure of markets.<sup>ix</sup> IDPs reported that RSF began the siege of Sirba and Kereinik, Habila and Foro Baranga, as of 20 June 2023. According to Radio Dabanga, over 100,000 people have fled to the Chadian border by foot including young children.<sup>x</sup> Sirba is 74.3 kilometers by road from the Sudan-Chad border. By foot, it is an estimate 15 hours to clear the distance, not taking into account health and ability of people including elderly, disabled people, or children, security threats, or environmental conditions.

Between 24 and 26 July 2023, the RSF and aligned forces reportedly attacked and seized control and began the siege of Sirba town. RSF and aligned forces allegedly prevented civilians from leaving Sirba town.<sup>xi</sup> Survivor testimonies<sup>7</sup> from those who managed to flee to Chad<sup>7</sup> recounted to Radio Dabanga that the RSF attacked Sirba and continued to systematically kill, loot and burn homes across Sirba town.

i. <https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/West%20Darfur%20Peacebuilding%20Assessment%20-%20June%202021.pdf>, archived at <https://perma.cc/LJ28-TRSM>  
ii. <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/card/3TsWE0UuJG/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/NF4F-QP4G>  
iii. <https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/West%20Darfur%20Peacebuilding%20Assessment%20-%20June%202021.pdf>, archived at <https://perma.cc/LJ28-TRSM>  
iv. <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/report-of-the-international-commission-of-inquiry-on-darfur-to-the-united-nations-secretary-general/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/TZV5-9TBK>  
v. <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/report-of-the-international-commission-of-inquiry-on-darfur-to-the-united-nations-secretary-general/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/TZV5-9TBK>  
vi. <https://press.un.org/en/2006/sc8821.doc.htm>, archived at <https://perma.cc/87YA-JM5B>

vii. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-three-villages-west-darfur-bir-dageeg-sirba-and-abu-suruj-fear-safety>, archived at <https://perma.cc/HB88-KZ8N>  
viii. [https://unamid.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unamid\\_infographic.pdf](https://unamid.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unamid_infographic.pdf), archived at <https://perma.cc/C35U-EXK3>;  
<https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14587.doc.htm#:~:text=The%20African%20Union%20United%20Nations,15%2Dmember%20organ%20for%20the>, archived at <https://perma.cc/8VZA-G2TH>  
ix. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/armed-motor-bandits-seriously-injure-displaced-victims-in-west-darfur>, archived at <https://perma.cc/7DFK-VRJX>  
x. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/heavy-fighting-in-north-darfur-capital-amidst-alarming-increase-in-food-prices>, archived at <https://perma.cc/CH99-RYC9>  
xi. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/more-than-5000-reportedly-killed-in-el-geneina-genocide>, archived at <https://perma.cc/7MZP-KN5U>

# FINDINGS

Based on available eyewitness accounts, the RSF and aligned forces allegedly attacked and razed Sirba over the course of at least 6 days through at least 30 July 2023.<sup>xii</sup> Thermal detections by NASA VIIRS corroborates these accounts: the first fire across Sirba town was detected on July 27th 2023 and VIIRS thermal detection carried into the following day.

In the attacks, RSF and aligned forces reportedly targeted and killed local leaders across Sirba and Abu Suruj towns.<sup>xiii</sup> Markets and civilian houses were all reportedly razed by the RSF and aligned forces who attacked the town, reportedly with some type of heavy weaponry. The Darfur Bar Association reports RSF attacked with 127 four-wheel drive vehicles, however imagery analysis cannot corroborate that claim at this time.<sup>xiv</sup> There are also reports of RSF-perpetrated SGBV attacks on young women and girls in Sirba.<sup>xv</sup> Reports also indicate that RSF and aligned forces have also attacked the neighboring Abu Suruj town, which includes Abu Suruj IDP camp.<sup>xvi</sup> An initial death toll reported by the Darfur Bar Association on 31 July estimates that at least 200 people have been killed and more than a thousand injured in Sirba and Abu Suruj camp area.<sup>xvii</sup> The exact number of those killed remains unknown as reporting continues to emerge of fighting in Sirba as well as reports of dead bodies lying on the streets.<sup>xviii</sup> Approximately 5000 civilians have reportedly fled to seek refuge in Chad and other areas in West Darfur.<sup>xix</sup> Civilians, particularly the elderly and those with disabilities, were reportedly left behind as civilians were attacked as they tried to flee the town.<sup>xx</sup>

- xii. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/tragic-stories-from-sirba-as-violence-west-darfur-spreads> archived at <https://perma.cc/6PNV-32HU>
- xiii. <https://twitter.com/3ngraibNews/status/1685935899199111168> archived at <https://perma.cc/CAR2-UTF3>
- xiv. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/army-accused-of-allowing-violence-to-engulf-sirba-in-west-darfur>, archived at <https://perma.cc/38M9-767E>
- xv. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/tragic-stories-from-sirba-as-violence-west-darfur-spreads> archived at <https://perma.cc/6PNV-32HU>
- xvi. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-war-rsf-seize-sirba-in-west-darfur-heavy-battles-in-nyala-and-khartoum>, archived at <https://perma.cc/2E7N-RR68>
- xvii. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/army-accused-of-allowing-violence-to-engulf-sirba-in-west-darfur>, archived at <https://perma.cc/38M9-767E>
- xviii. <https://sudantribune.net/article275541/> archived at <https://perma.cc/23ZN-7EKL>
- xix. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/tragic-stories-from-sirba-as-violence-west-darfur-spreads> archived at <https://perma.cc/6PNV-32HU>
- xx. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/tragic-stories-from-sirba-as-violence-west-darfur-spreads> archived at <https://perma.cc/7R4B-XXRR>

## Damage Assessment in Sirba Town As of 29 July 2023

Conflict Observatory assess that at least 4463 structures out of approximately 5200 structures have been destroyed based on satellite imagery analysis. At least 86 percent of Sirba town's structures have been destroyed. The confirmed destruction of Sirba raises the count of towns that the Sudan Conflict Observatory has visually confirmed as destroyed to at least 27 towns across Darfur.

The assessment of damaged structures counts relied on Google's Open Building Dataset which uses a machine learning process to identify building footprints and places a polygon around the identified structure. This allows CO analysts to conduct a methodological assessment of how many structures were damaged in the attacks. The damage to Sirba town is near-total. CO analysts typically conduct these assessments by documenting and assessing the number of structures damaged; Sirba town appears to be so systematically destroyed that it was more effective for CO analysts to count the structures that remain intact in overhead imagery.

## Food, Water and Human Security Status in West Darfur

The Sirba attack is occurring in the context of mounting evidence of widespread and extreme food insecurity. The current conflict has created significant disruptions in food supply and farming, which employs 65% of Sudan's population sector. The looting of supplies, the limiting of normal banking credit operations (specifically the centralized Agriculture Bank), and rising prices due to numerous conflict related challenges and black-market sales have led to delays in planting and getting seeds.<sup>xxi</sup> West Darfur and Sirba are particularly at risk of widespread and extreme food insecurity. Locals living in displaced camp in Sirba reported to Radio Dabanga rising food costs and dwindling supplies as early as May.<sup>xxii</sup>

- xxi. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/fighting-sudan-leaves-farmers-struggling-get-crops-planted-2023-07-17/>, archived at <https://perma.cc/KF2T-67VZ>
- xxii. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/heavy-fighting-in-north-darfur-capital-amidst-alarming-increase-in-food-prices>, archived at <https://perma.cc/CPF3-BJDA>

# Damage to Sirba Town is Near Total

AT LEAST 4,463 STRUCTURES IN SIRBA TOWN WERE DESTROYED OVER TWO DAYS

Based on satellite imagery analysis, at least 4,463 out of approximately 5,200 structures in Sirba town were destroyed.

This indicates at least 86% of the town was razed by RSF and aligned forces between 27 and 29 July 2023, rendering it near-uninhabitable.

## Targeting

A lack of connecting burns indicate perpetrators attacked Sirba town likely going door-to-door, with white ash at the center of burned tukul structures indicating roofing was first set on fire.



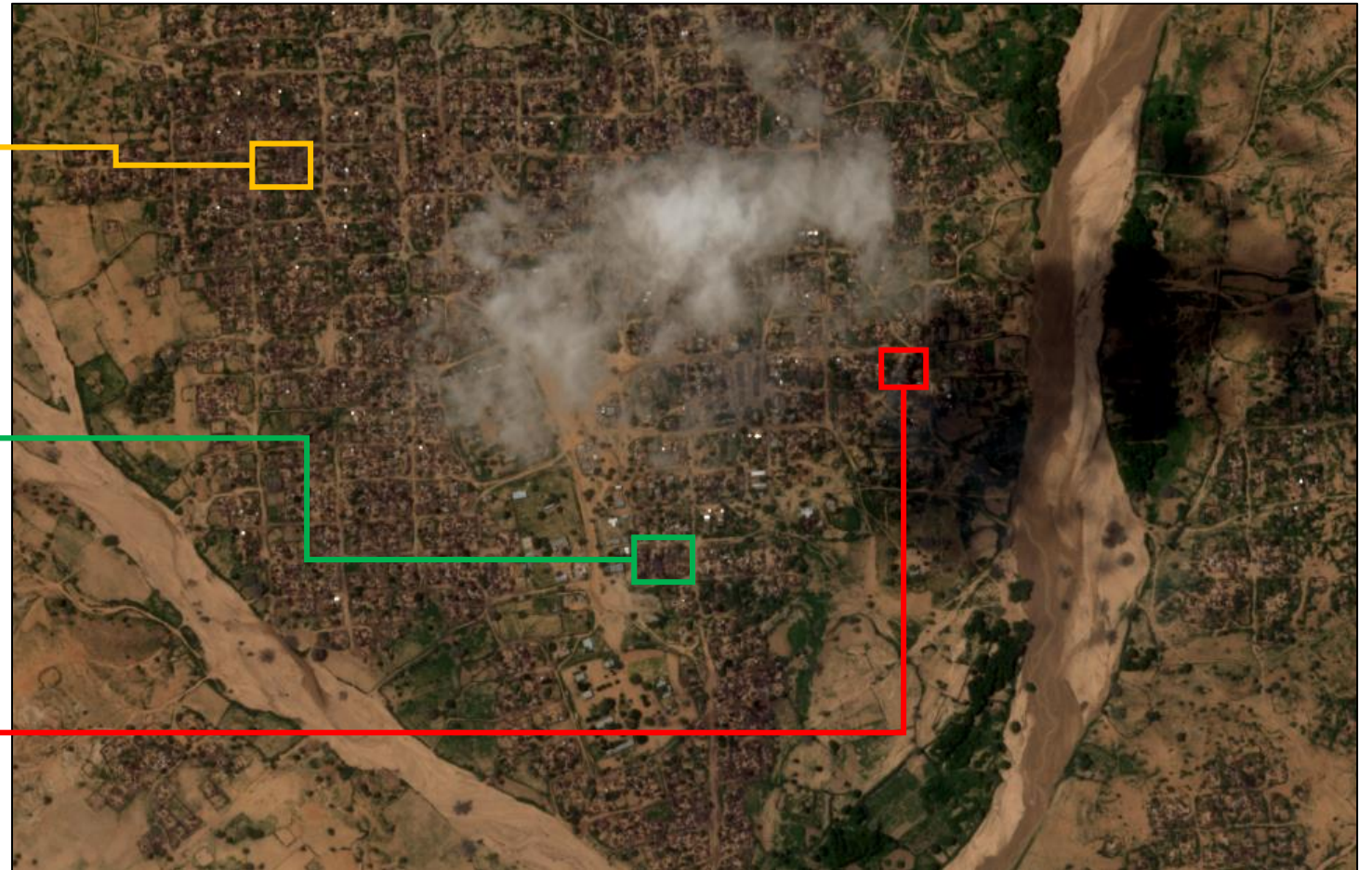
## Sirba Market

Burn scar patterns indicate multiple structures to have been destroyed at the market.



## Civilian Dwellings

An ongoing fire with a smoke emanation is observed at a likely civilian dwelling.



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