

SUDAN Conflict Observatory

CONFLICT UPDATE WITH FOCUS ON VIOLENCE AND
HUMANITARIAN ISSUES IN GEZIRA STATE

DECEMBER 2023 - JANUARY 2024

Scope Note and Methodology

This report was produced as part of the Sudan Conflict Observatory, with the support of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, United States Department of State. Its analysis was completed by the Conflict Observatory's prime contractor, an independent, leading not-for-profit organization performing scientific research in the public interest, and was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings, and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State or the United States government.

The report provides a summary of recent events in the conflict in Sudan and its impact on civilians, including developments since the last public SCO report. It is not meant to be a comprehensive or exhaustive product detailing all military operations, including but not limited to crimes committed against civilians.

Of note, a recent lack of commercially-available overhead satellite imagery has precluded a more fulsome analysis of the events detailed in this report.

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Executive Summary

This report highlights recent developments in the conflict in Sudan, demonstrating a larger trend of human rights violations, specifically associated with fighting in Gezira State.

- The report is not meant to be an exhaustive account of all military and humanitarian activity in Sudan since December 2023, but rather seeks to demonstrate how the civil war in Sudan is becoming more complex, with multiple actors now involved in several localized clashes, which increasingly have tribal and ethnic undertones. This dynamic will likely compound humanitarian concerns and complicate resuming much-needed assistance.
- As of mid-December 2023, the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) took control of the Gezira State capital, Wad Medani – Sudan’s so-called “second city” and a key economic center – after the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) withdrew from their positions. ¹ The resulting violence from RSF’s seizure and the subsequent human displacement has significant negative implications for the economic wellbeing of the country, access to healthcare, humanitarian aid deliveries, and food availability.
- The fall of Wad Medani has triggered ethnic mobilization across areas under SAF control, casting doubt on the SAF’s ability to protect these regions and increasing the complexity of the conflict by drawing in more actors. The SAF has now been forced to go on the offensive to attempt to take back territory and maintain relevance, increasing the likelihood of civilian harm. Additionally, SAF’s reliance on aerial bombardment and heavy artillery fire increases the prospects for civilian casualties, as many of these attacks occur in densely populated urban areas. ²

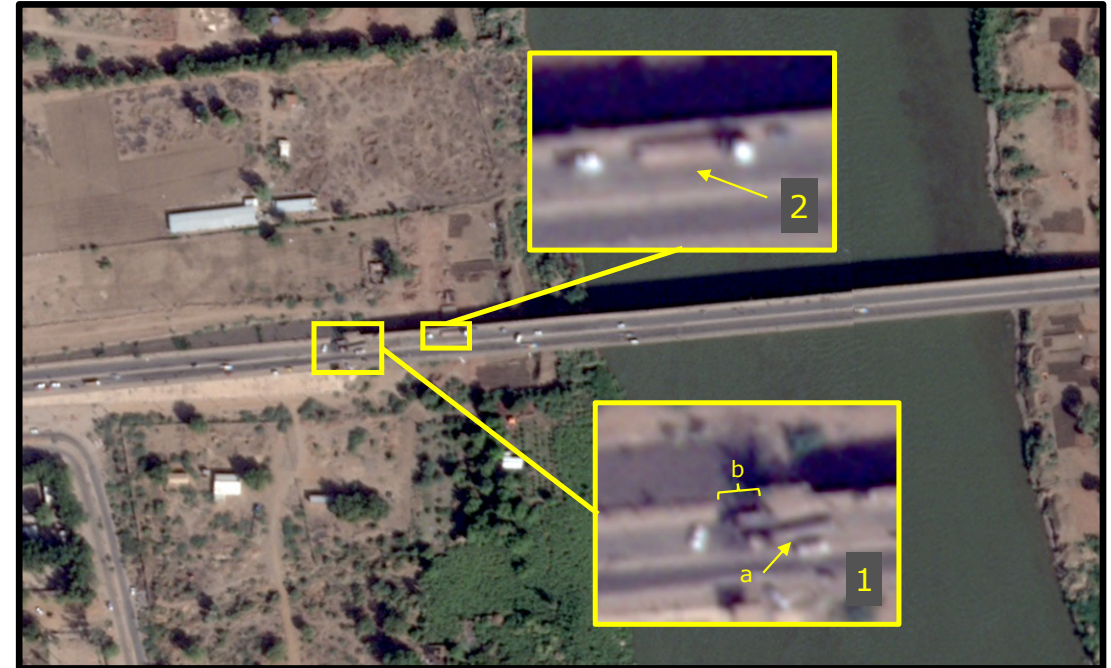


Military Developments: In and Around Wad Medani, Gezira State

Early on 19 December 2023, Wad Medani fell to the RSF in an unexpected and swift strategic development.^{5, 6, 7}

- The RSF had begun pushing toward Wad Medani since mid-December 2023, making a concerted push to take the city by 16 December.⁸
- On 18 December, SAF troops began withdrawing from Gezira state — Wad Medani, Hantoub, El Hasahisa, and El Kamlin — into Sennar state. They removed shipping containers they had previously placed as obstacles on the Hantoub Bridge, the main entry point to the city, allowing easier access for the RSF to overtake the city.^{8, 9}
- By the afternoon of 18 December, the RSF had crossed the Hantoub Bridge and was posting videos on social media from inside the SAF 1st Infantry Division Headquarters.^{10, 11, 12}
 - Local reports speculated the SAF commander of the Wad Medani garrison ordered his soldiers to abandon their positions across the Hantoub Bridge — possibly prearranged with local RSF command — and withdraw without a fight. This left the RSF to take Wad Medani relatively unopposed, sparing the city physical damage and human costs associated with an urban battle.¹
 - While there was reportedly minimal physical damage in Wad Medani, there was significant looting and numerous internally displaced persons (IDPs) leaving the city.¹
- On 27 December, RSF actors attacked a village in Gezira's Janub locality, resulting in four civilian deaths, the UN reports.¹³
- In early January 2024, there were reports that SAF launched multiple airstrikes in Wad Medani, including near RSF military headquarters and a central market, according to local media and Wad Medani resistance committees, but this was not verified via commercial imagery.⁷
- Further RSF–SAF clashes in local markets and on the main road between Gezira's El Kubra and Janub localities generated significant displacement during December and January.¹⁶

After taking Wad Medani, the RSF took control of other strategically important towns, including Managel, Rufa'aa, El-Hasahisa, and El Hosh, without a fight. They then expanded west to White Nile state and south to Sennar state. During these operations, RSF allegedly attacked residents, per local reporting.^{1, 14}



23 December 2023 | © 2024 Planet PBC, SkySat.

The Hantoub Bridge serves as a primary entry point to Wad Medani. Shipping containers, which were previously observed as barriers to restricting movement across the bridge, were removed according to imagery from 23 December.

Inset 1: **a.** Shipping container and **b.** damage to the bridge's railing

Inset 2: Shipping containers removed from roadway to the side of the bridge

Military Developments: Across Sudan

SAF and other armed groups have responded to RSF attempts to take territory in Khartoum, Gedaref, Blue Nile, White Nile, and South Kordofan states after the fall of Wad Medani. Key events include:

- After the RSF attempted to expand into the city of Dilling in South Kordofan state, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement - North (SPLM-N) seized the city on 7 January, reportedly in coordination with SAF, according to Dilling residents.¹⁷
- After the RSF allegedly seized the broader El Geteina area in White Nile state, the SAF conducted an aerial bombardment on 14 January which resulted in seven deaths, according to a local news report.¹⁸
- Also on 14 January, a SAF force confronted the RSF on the outskirts of El Faw in Gedaref, forcing the RSF to return to Gezira. The security situation in Gedaref has been tentative since the RSF took control of Wad Medani in neighboring Gezira state on 18 December.¹⁹

In Darfur, violence against civilians persisted following the RSF's takeover of four out of five Darfuri state capitals, largely due to RSF raids and SAF airstrikes.^{21, 22}

- In late December and through January, the SAF launched bombing raids on Nyala, killing dozens. The Sudanese rights group Emergency Lawyers denounced the December bombing as "indiscriminate," and the SAF reportedly used barrel bombs, according to residents.²³
- Concerns about an RSF assault on El Fasher city, the capital of North Darfur state, prompted mobilization among Darfur rebel groups and ethnic militias to defend the city.¹



RSF Soldiers after alleged seizure of Wad Kebeish, White Nile State¹⁸

Humanitarian Crisis

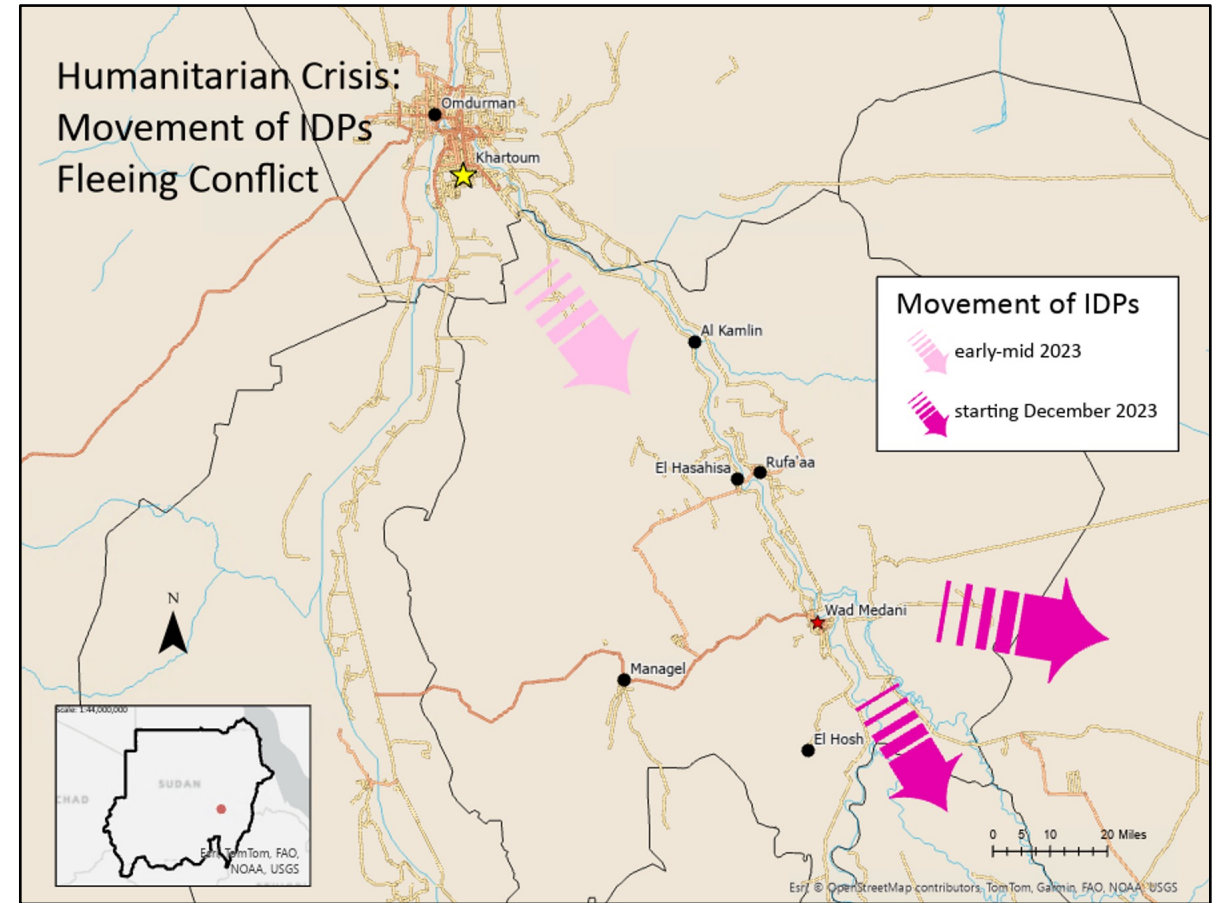
The precise number of individuals affected by recent RSF and SAF attacks in Gezira remains unknown due to high levels of insecurity hindering humanitarian access and reporting. Despite these constraints, limited humanitarian activities have continued in the state.

IDPs:

- In April 2023, Wad Medani emerged as a critical humanitarian hub, hosting hundreds of thousands of IDPs escaping the conflict in Khartoum. It served as the initial destination for those leaving the capital before seeking refuge in other countries or Sudanese states.²⁶ As a result of RSF's takeover of Wad Medani and its surroundings, an estimated 250,000-300,000 residents fled to Sennar and Gedaref, exacerbating the humanitarian crises in these cities. Many of those displaced from Wad Medani had already been displaced from Khartoum.^{24, 25}
- In December alone, amid RSF advances in several states, at least 200,000 people are reported to have fled Gezira, Sennar, and White Nile states, a significant portion of whom were already displaced from Khartoum and other regions in Sudan.²⁶

Healthcare:

- After many health services shut down in Khartoum, Wad Medani became the only other city to offer specialized treatments. As of 19 December, violence caused Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to suspend all activities and evacuate staff from Wad Medani, leaving behind a population with even less access to basic medical services.²⁸
- As of 18 January 2024, limited numbers of healthcare professionals have been allowed back into Wad Medani, according to the MSF.



Early reports estimated over 500,000 people fled the greater Wad Medani area in the first three weeks after the RSF takeover in mid-December 2023.³² Many IDPs who had fled from Khartoum to Wad Medani (depicted by light magenta arrow) at the beginning of the conflict have been re-displaced since the RSF takeover of Wad Medani in December (depicted with darker magenta arrows.)

Humanitarian Crisis (Cont.):

Food:

- In addition, all food factories in Wad Medani have stopped operations completely after being occupied and looted by RSF fighters. All raw materials and finished food products, including wheat flour, sugar, tea, and fuel for the factories were looted. Thousands of workers have lost their jobs and livelihoods and were forced to flee the city to seek safety in other places. ²⁷
- RSF soldiers have also looted humanitarian supplies. On 28 December 2023, World Food Programme (WFP) publicly condemned the theft of enough food to feed 1.5 million people for a month from its warehouse in the city by RSF soldiers. UNICEF and MSF reported that their stocks were looted. Many humanitarian agencies relocated their staff from Wad Medani to Kosti, and from there to South Sudan.

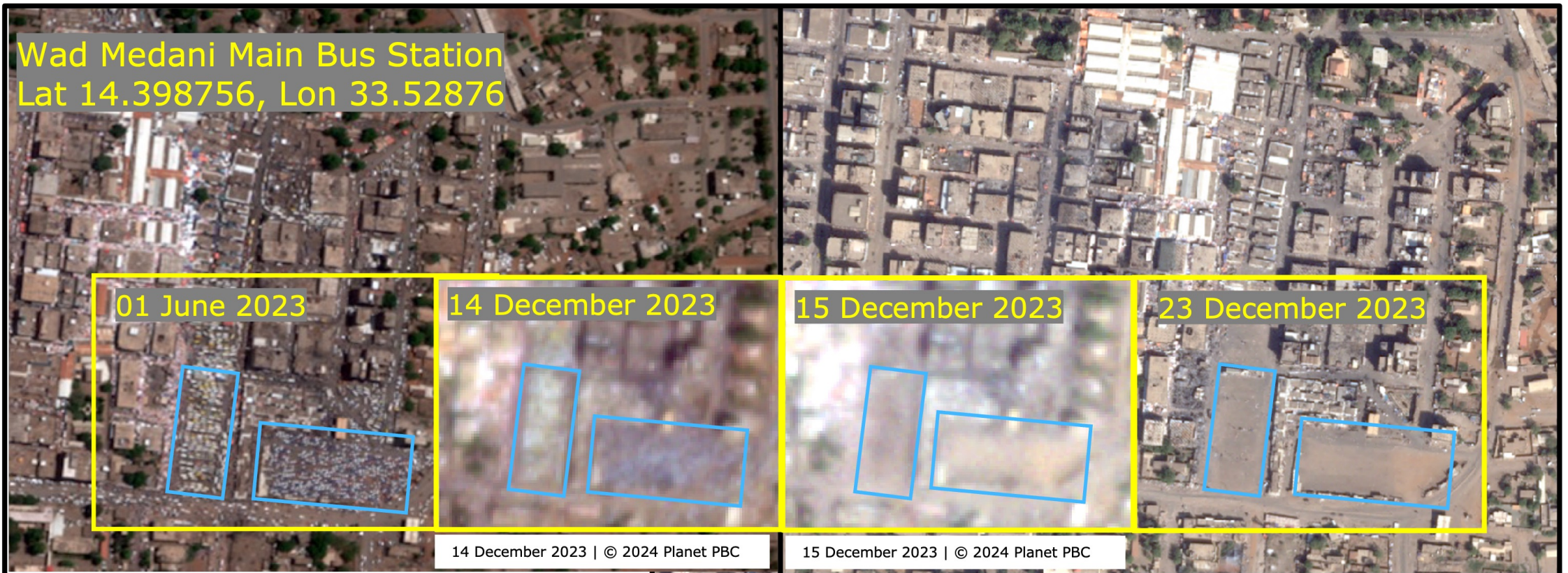


16 December 2023 | © Planet Labs PBC, SkySat.



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Commercial activity at the Wad Medani Central Market, outlined in yellow, on the Saturdays before and after the RSF took control of the city. Both images were captured at approximately 0930 local time. Note the lack of vehicles present in the 23 December image



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Timeline showing a drastic decrease in the number of buses and vehicles at the Wad Medani main bus station between 14 December and 15 December, as highlighted in the blue boxes, indicating a probable outflux of displaced persons from the city coinciding with the RSF's advance. Images from 14 December and 15 December were both captured around 0930 local time and the image from 23 December was captured around 0900 local.

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