



Darfur 20 Years Later: The Same Crimes, the Same Victims, the Same International Neglect

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Abstract

The renewed war in Sudan since 2023 has intensified long-standing patterns of racialized violence rooted in colonial hierarchies that privileged Arab-identifying groups while marginalizing African communities, particularly in Darfur. These structures have enabled successive governments and armed actors – currently the SAF and RSF - to perpetrate systematic atrocities including mass killings, sexual violence, forced displacement, and land dispossession targeting African populations. The current campaign, echoing earlier Janjaweed atrocities, constitutes ethnic cleansing and seemingly meets the legal criteria for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. The violence in Darfur is not episodic but structurally racialized, rooted in colonial hierarchies, and reproduced by contemporary state and militia actors. International mechanisms have failed to provide protection or accountability, underscoring the need to confront the entrenched racial order driving the violence in Sudan.

Key words: Darfur, Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide, Racialized Violence, ICC, Rome Statute

Introduction

The war that erupted in Sudan in April 2023 between the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) has unleashed world's worst current humanitarian crisis.¹ For the first time, a war in Sudan reaches all corners of the country. More than 13 million people have been displaced and roughly 150,000 killed since April 2023.² The conflict is commonly described as a power struggle between two generals or another proxy battlefield for regional actors. However, these framings hide another painful reality: African communities in Darfur

¹ United Nations Office at Geneva, 'Sudan 'most devastating humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world' - UN experts' (11 February 2025) UN Geneva <https://www.ungeneva.org/en/news-media/news/2025/02/103375/sudan-most-devastating-humanitarian-and-displacement-crisis-world> accessed 8 December 2025; 'Sudan scene of world's worst humanitarian crisis' — African Union' Al Jazeera (11 February 2025) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/2/11/sudan-scene-of-worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis-african-union> accessed 8 December 2025; 'World's worst humanitarian crisis looms as Sudan war nears year-mark, says WFP' News24 (7 March 2024) <https://www.news24.com/world/africa/worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis-looms-as-sudan-war-nears-year-mark-says-wfp-20240307> accessed 8 December 2025.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Sudan - UNHCR' (n.d.) <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/sudan/> accessed 22 November 2025



are being targeted in systematic, ethnically driven attacks that amount to ethnic cleansing and may meet the legal thresholds of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes under Articles 6, 7, and 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC). To understand why the violence has taken this form - and why it keeps returning - we must look at the deeper structures of racial hierarchy embedded in Sudan's political history.

Colonial Origins of Sudan's Racial Hierarchy

The violence unfolding in Darfur is not new. It has roots in the racial order that was established during British-Egyptian colonial rule (1898–1956). Colonial administrators explicitly favoured certain northern Arab-identifying populations, granting them political and economic advantages while marginalizing Sudan's non-Arab communities.³ As historian Sharkey notes, this produced a political elite that imagined Sudan as an “Arab Muslim” nation centred around Khartoum.⁴

Darfur was annexed to Sudan relatively late in 1916 and incorporated on deeply unequal terms. These colonial structures did not disappear at independence but became embedded in postcolonial governance. Darfur's distance from the colonial centre and its ethnic diversity meant that it received little state investment and almost no meaningful political representation. Arabic-speaking groups increasingly adopted “Arab” as an identity linked to authority and land rights, while African groups were cast as rural, backward, or less “civilized.” Quijano's idea of the “coloniality of power” helps explain how these hierarchies outlived colonialism itself.⁵ His theory argues that colonial systems of racial, social, and economic hierarchy persist long after formal colonial rule, shaping global and local power structures. By independence in 1956, Sudan was already structured around a racialized centre and a marginalized periphery. Darfur's current suffering cannot be separated from this earlier system.

Darfur and the Racialized Logic of Sudanese Governance

These colonial hierarchies were not dismantled after independence - they were reproduced by every Sudanese government following. Darfur, distant from Khartoum and home to dozens of

³ Warburg GR, 'The Turco-Egyptian Sudan: A recent historiographical controversy' (1991) 31(2) *Welt des Islams* 193 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1571242> accessed 8 December 2025

⁴ Sharkey HJ, 'Arab identity and ideology in Sudan: The politics of language, ethnicity, and race' (2008) 107(426) *African Affairs* 21 <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adm068> accessed 8 December 2025.

⁵ Quijano A, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America' (2002) 1(3) *Nepantla: Views from South* 533



ethnic groups, became an arena where racial categories were continually weaponized for political gain.

Extensive research by Flint and de Waal shows how the former Sudanese regime of Omar al-Bashir (ruled from 1993-2019) exploited local tensions by arming Arab militias, undermining traditional land tenure systems, and withdrawing state protection from African farming communities.⁶ Violence became both a political strategy and a tool for reshaping land ownership.

Tensions over land and resources had long existed in the region, but state policy transformed these disputes into racialized conflict. In the early 2000s, Arab Janjaweed militias - acting at the government's request - attacked hundreds of African villages because of supposed rebellion. When the international community urged the government to halt the violence, it responded with indifference, even as it aggressively cracked down on African groups who tried to defend themselves.

A Return to Ethnic Cleansing: Darfur Since 2023

The war that began in 2023 has essentially revived the early 2000s atrocities. The RSF - the rebranded Janjaweed - has once again targeted African groups such as the Masalit, Fur, and Zaghawa through systematic killings, mass rape, forced displacement, and the complete destruction of villages. Major human rights organizations describe these attacks as an organized campaign of ethnic cleansing.⁷ While the Janjaweed initially operated under government command, the RSF continued committing atrocities for its own benefit, expanding its reach beyond Darfur (its place of origin) and pushing toward Khartoum in a bid to seize power over the entire country.

The pattern in these atrocities is unmistakable. For example, in November 2023, RSF forces carried out a massacre in El Geneina that killed up to 15,000 people, overwhelmingly members

⁶ Flint J and de Waal A, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (2nd edn, Zed Books 2008)

⁷ E.g., Amnesty International, *Sudan: Ethnic cleansing in West Darfur* (AFR 54/9201/2025) (2024) <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2124113/AFR5492012025ENGLISH.pdf> accessed 8 December 2025; Human Rights Watch, 'Sudan: Ethnic cleansing in West Darfur' (9 May 2024) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/09/sudan-ethnic-cleansing-west-darfur> accessed 8 December 2025; United Nations Human Rights Council, *Situation of human rights in the Sudan: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/HRC/55/52)* (2024) <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2124824/n2442101.pdf> accessed 8 December 2025



of African communities.⁸ In April 2025, an attack on the Zamzam displacement camp forced thousands to flee once again. Survivors consistently recount that RSF fighters singled out people based on ethnic identity, dialect, tribal markers, or even physical appearance. Sexual violence is also being used in explicitly racialized ways. [Testimonies](#) of rape victims describe RSF fighters shouting that their children “shall be Arab,” reflecting an intent to erase African identity through forced assimilation.⁹ Amnesty International’s reports further document mass rapes, the destruction of property, and killings targeting African communities across West Darfur.

These atrocities are not merely about political control. They are intertwined with the political economy of land and resource extraction - especially gold, agriculture, and cross-border trade networks.¹⁰ Clearing African populations from strategic land directly benefits both RSF and SAF power brokers. This way ethnic cleansing becomes profitable.

Racism as a Strategic Weapon

Racism in Sudan’s continuing wars is not only an underlying factor, but a political strategy – whether for the ideological purposes or for gaining power over the land. Under Bashir’s regime, Arab militias were institutionalized and empowered by government policies to target Darfur’s African populations. State policies altered land tenure systems by weakening traditional tribal administration and redistributing land to favor Arab communities. These measures racialized governance, making African communities politically and socially vulnerable, while framing them as obstacles to territorial and resource control.¹¹

This racialized state apparatus escalated into mass atrocities between 2003 and 2008. In [Darfur](#), the Janjaweed and later the RSF mobilized fighters along racial lines, recruiting supporters by portraying African communities as threats or outsiders.¹² African communities attempted self-

⁸ Reuters, 'Ethnic killings in one Sudan city left up to 15,000 dead: UN report' (19 January 2024) <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethnic-killings-one-sudan-city-left-up-15000-dead-un-report-2024-01-19/accessed 8 December 2025>

⁹ Shaheen K, 'We will make you have Arab babies': Fears of genocide amid torture in Sudan's Darfur' *The Guardian* (3 November 2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/nov/03/we-will-make-you-have-arab-babies-fears-of-genocide-amid-and-torture-in-sudans-darfur> accessed 8 December 2025

¹⁰ Patey LA, 'Crude days ahead? Oil and the resource curse in Sudan' (2010) 109(437) *African Affairs* 617 <https://doi.org/10.1093/afaf/adq017> accessed 8 December 2025

¹¹ Flint J and de Waal A, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (2nd edn, Zed Books 2008)

¹² United Nations Security Council, *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan* (S/2025/239) (2025) <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2124824/n2442101.pdf> accessed 8 December 2025; United Nations, *Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General* (S/2005/60) (2005) <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2005/60> accessed 8 December 2025.



defense, but these efforts were criminalized by the state, further consolidating control over land and resources. In this context, mass killings and displacement were not chaotic but followed a structured racial logic cultivated over decades, where violence, territorial domination, and identity politics reinforced one another.

The SAF and the Reproduction of Racial Violence

Although the RSF is responsible for much of the current ethnic cleansing, the SAF also committed substantial harm. Even as it positions itself as the national army defending Sudan, it too has engaged in racialized violence - particularly in the areas it retakes from the RSF.

For example, after regaining control of parts of Al Gezira State, [SAF-aligned forces](#) reportedly targeted predominantly Black communities such as the Kanabi, a group with long histories of marginalization and discrimination.¹³ Reports describe ethnically motivated killings, profiling at checkpoints, and the seizure of land vacated by displaced African communities.

Thus, it could be argued that the SAF inherited the racial hierarchy built under the Bashir regime and never dismantled it. Practices like the alleged “[law of strange faces](#)” - profiling and detaining Black Sudanese on suspicion of collaboration - underline the persistence of racial anxieties within state institutions.¹⁴

The Limits of Legal Categories

International law draws careful distinctions between ethnic cleansing, genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Ethnic cleansing itself is not a distinct crime but a descriptive term, defined by the UN as the attempt to render an area ethnically homogeneous through forced removal and violence.¹⁵ As mentioned above, the RSF targets various African groups to systematically erase the African presence in Darfur. Thus, the RSF’s actions clearly meet this description.

¹³ Al Jazeera, 'Sudan's army accused of ethnic killings after recapturing strategic city' (23 January 2025) <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2025/1/23/sudans-army-accused-of-ethnic-killings-after-recapturing-strategic-city> accessed 8 December 2025; Reuters, 'Sudan's army condemns ethnically targeted killings of civilians in El Gezira' (14 January 2025) <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-army-condemns-ethnically-targeted-killings-civilians-el-gezira-2025-01-14/> accessed 8 December 2025.

¹⁴ Phillips B, 'Sudan's law of strange faces: Brad Phillips on two encounters' in TCowen (host), *Conversations with Tyler* (podcast, 15 May 2024) <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/sudans-law-of-strange-faces-brad-phillips-on-two/id1396065126?i=1000703757736> accessed 8 December 2025.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Final report of the Panel of Experts on the Sudan* (S/2025/239) (2025) <https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2124824/n2442101.pdf> accessed 8 December 2025.



Whether the violence constitutes genocide is debated. Interestingly, Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State did testify for the U.S. Senate in 2005 that “genocide has been committed in Darfur,” but with no further international result.¹⁶ Like the 1948 Genocide Convention, Article 6 of the Rome Statute states that genocide is the intentional effort to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. It can be carried out through acts such as killing members of the group, causing them serious physical or mental harm, creating conditions meant to bring about their destruction, preventing births, or forcibly transferring children.

On the available evidence, there is a strong argument that the current campaign satisfies these elements, even if the ICC has not yet issued a genocide conviction. ICC has earlier treated genocide only as a *possible* charge in Darfur but it has not yet issued a final verdict that legally confirms genocide. In 2009, the ICC did issue an arrest warrant for Bashir, charging him with genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes (though yet without success as he was never captured to come to trial). The first [verdict](#) in a Darfur-related ICC trial was for a militia leader, Ali Muhammad Ali Abd-Al-Rahman. He was convicted this year of war crimes (satisfying article 8 of the Rome statute) and crimes against humanity (article 7), but not genocide.¹⁷

Thus, Darfur also exposes the limits of legal categories. Racialized state violence in Sudan is not confined to one moment: it is a long continuum of displacement, selective killing, and political exclusion. Genocide law, focused on discrete events and demonstrable intent, struggles to capture structural, historically rooted forms of racial domination. As scholars like Banaji et al. (2021) argue, systemic racism operates through institutions and norms that do not always require overt hatred or explicit statements of intent. The UN’s 2005 Commission of Inquiry recognized this complexity, noting that the crimes in Darfur were “no less serious and heinous than genocide” even when intent was difficult to prove. Two decades later, the violence has only intensified.

The Failure of International Responsibility

¹⁶ Colin L Powell, *The Crisis in Darfur* (Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 9 September 2004) <https://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/36042.htm> accessed 8 December 2025.

¹⁷ International Center for Transitional Justice, *The Conviction of Abd-Al-Rahman and What It Means for Victims Amid Ongoing Atrocities in Sudan* (ICTJ, 11 April 2025) <https://www.ictj.org/latest-news/conviction-abd-al-rahman-and-what-it-means-victims-amid-ongoing-atrocities-sudan> accessed 8 December 2025.



Despite two decades of warnings, international responses to the atrocities in Darfur have been fragmented and largely ineffective. The ICC's indictments of al-Bashir and other officials remain symbolically important but have not translated into actual accountability or deterrence. In Sudan, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was adopted partly in response to the earlier Darfur crisis, yet it has failed in practice to protect populations from renewed ethnic cleansing. R2P, a global commitment endorsed by the UN in 2005, asserts that states must safeguard populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

The gap between international legal frameworks and political action reveals a hard truth: without sustained political will and a readiness to confront the racialized hierarchies embedded in state and international institutions, legal norms alone cannot prevent mass violence. R2P's failure in Darfur is thus not merely a breakdown of implementation but a reflection of its inability to contend with the racialized logics that determine which lives are protected - and which are allowed to be destroyed.

Conclusion: Naming the Violence and Addressing Its Roots

The violence in Darfur is not a series of isolated events but the predictable outcome of a century-long racial order shaped by both colonial and postcolonial governance. Racism is not peripheral to this history; it is the structural foundation that enables cycles of displacement, targeted attacks, and systemic marginalization.

Darfur's repeated crises persist because the racial hierarchies that sustain them remain intact. Any durable resolution must confront these structures head-on: without dismantling the racialized systems of power, humanitarian interventions and peace negotiations will continue to address symptoms rather than root causes. The international community must act decisively to break this cycle and uphold justice, ensuring that Darfur's African communities are no longer trapped in recurring patterns of violence and exclusion. Each concrete measure proposed or left unsaid - whether legal, economic, or territorial - matters only insofar as it strikes at the racialized architecture of power that has long rendered these communities vulnerable. Without such structural transformation, meaningful peace in Sudan will remain impossible.



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