

Central Sudan: Residents of Aljazeera State suffer at the hands of RSF and allied militia



Fetis village in Aljazeera State.

Introduction

Aljazeera State is located in Central Sudan, south of Khartoum, and is the second most populated State after Khartoum (before the armed conflict) in Sudan hosting approximately 5,000,000 residents. Wad Madani, the capital of Aljazeera state is comprised of at least 7 urban areas namely; Alhasahisa, Almangil, Wad Rawah, Rufaa, Alkamlien, Alqurashi 24, and Um Alqura where less than 20% of the population reside. The other 80% live in rural areas (villages) and depend on agriculture as the main source of income. Aljazeera State hosts some of the biggest agricultural projects in Sudan supervised by the commissioner. The cotton project for instance was established by the British during the colonial period and it was designed with an irrigation system to produce up to 65% of the cotton in Sudan and also feed the Lancashire cotton factory in Britain. According to local authorities, Aljazeera state currently hosts approximately 4 million IDPs most of whom are from Khartoum and River Nile States. Wad Madani quickly became the operation hub for the humanitarians who fled from Khartoum State following the outbreak of the armed conflict in Sudan on 15 April 2023. Aljazeera state remained relatively peaceful until December 2023 when residents reported incidents of violations by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militia. The situation has since made a turn for the worse.

Incidents of attacks in Aljazeera

On 13 December 2023, RSF launched an attack on Aljazeera State on suspicion that the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) were mobilizing their troops and Islamic Jihadists also known as Albara Ibn Malik militia to seize the state. The RSF troops attacked Aljazeera

from the southern direction slowly advancing until they reached Wad Madan on 18 December 2023, and completely took control of Aljazeera state without any resistance from SAF who had earlier withdrawn from Wad Madani and relocated to Senar State as confirmed by the SAF command in Aljazeera later in a released statement explaining their withdrawal.

Although RSF deployed small groups of approximately nine men led by an officer at several checkpoints on the way to the different villages in Aljazeera, there have still been attacks on civilians by allied militia and other rogue RSF members. For example, a group of approximately four armed men dressed in RSF uniform and some in plain clothes arrived at Aljazeera riding on motorcycles disguised as military intelligence, patrolled several villages before leaving. The group later returned in bigger numbers riding on motorcycles and military vehicles and violated civilians.

On 6 February 2024, a group of armed RSF members launched an attack on the localities in Alhasahisa city including Wad AlBalila, Um Dwana, Um Mliha, Abu Telih, and Fetis killing and injuring several residents. The following morning, several residents of Fetis village moved to the checkpoint established by RSF to confront the RSF commander about the attacks. The commander however, dismissed the complaints and instead referred them to the RSF office in Alhasahisa.

In another incident, three young men were gruesomely killed by RSF. The men were beaten with sticks and later strangled to death. One of the bodies was found without arms.

Attacks on Fetis Village

On 6 February 2024, groups of armed RSF officers arrived in Fetis village. The groups rode around firing in the air to disperse the youth that had established roadblocks and formed self-defense groups. The youth divided themselves into groups of 15-20 people armed with sticks and stones patrolling the village and ready to counter attacks by RSF. The youth also alerted the residents about any raid by RSF and encouraged them to protect their homes against raids/attacks. This tactic minimized the number of attacks by RSF on Fetis village until 14 February 2024 when RSF fully attacked the village. They however were met with resistance from approximately 200 youth armed with sticks. Unfortunately, the youth group was intimidated by guns thus conceded defeat.

On 15 February 2024, four armed RSF officers riding on motorcycles arrived in Fetis village on a brief spying mission for a few hours. Later that day, at around noon approximately 90 armed RSF officers arrived in the village on motorcycles and land cruiser vehicles. The sight of this increased tension among the residents.

Mr. Moner Sidig, aged 30 years old, and the youth group were shot while on a rooftop of a building monitoring the situation. Mr. Sadiq died on the spot while several youths sustained injuries. The RSF group then left the village following the exodus of residents to other safer areas.

On 16 February 2024, a group of armed RSF arrived in approximately 90 motorcycles and Landcruiser vehicles in Fetis village and marched in the streets firing in the air. The group was armed with automatic guns, pistols, and knives which they used to threaten the residents in the village before proceeding to raid the market. While on their way to the market, the group assaulted civilians, beating them with sticks, lashes, and gun butts including everyone they met on their way, traders and customers. They broke into shops and looted items such as sugar, onions, lentils, wheat, maize flour, and livestock. They also destroyed a lot of property causing traders immense losses and ordered them to leave the market. After the raid, other groups took advantage and looted what was left in the market.

At around 11:00 am the same day, the group moved to residential areas where they robbed residents of their property including money, cell phones, and gold at gunpoint. The raiders threatened the occupants with death and abduction forcing them into compliance. Those who resisted were assaulted and those caught fleeing were searched and robbed of personal belongings.

During the last week of March 2024, Mr. Mohamed Mubarak a 32-year-old resident of Fetis village in Aljazeera state was shot on the foot by an RSF member at his home. Mr. Mubarak's home was raided by a group of RSF officers who at gunpoint demanded for his Dal harvest. After the perpetrators had left, Mr. Mubarak was transferred to Almangil hospital where he is currently admitted.

On 19 February 2024, an armed masked man dressed in plain clothes raided a house belonging to the family of a 22-year-old female in Fetis village. The lady was forced on gunpoint to leave her family's house and taken to an abandoned house in the neighborhood. Fortunately, she managed to escape unharmed and run into group of mourners on their way to the cemetery. The lady's family and other residents proceeded to a checkpoint established by RSF to report the incident and one of the officers promised to arrest the violator.

The raiding of the private residences in Fetis village

RSF raided the house of a SAF officer where they found his uniform and gun that were hidden. Although the SAF officer was not at home, the other occupants especially his son were assaulted.

In a separate incident, a group of RSF members raided the house of a 69-year-old woman who was living with her two daughters. The mother was put at gunpoint and demanded money and gold which she said she did not have. They threatened to kill one of her daughters if she did not heed their demands.

On 6 February 2024, a group of RSF officers raided Mr. Nizar Awad's home located in Fetis village. Although Mr. Nizar was not around (as he was working abroad), the group threatened and assaulted his relatives who were living in the house until they complied and handed over the car keys. They then used the vehicle to leave the village.

Testimonies

One witness testified to ACJPS that *"A group of RSF officers raided our house and asked for my uncle who had luckily just escaped through the back door. RSF recruited some residents as spies and informants. These informants are mostly ex-convicts who recently escaped from prison following the outbreak of the armed conflict. I know two of them i.e Abu Zibab and another Gigize..."*

"On 16 February 2024, at around 08:00 p.m., a group of approximately 15 armed RSF officers raided my cousin's home where my extended family was staying, majority of who were female. They demanded money and gold but we told them we were peasant farmers and neither had money nor gold. They took the male family members outside the house to their commander and did not return. A few hours later, another group raided the house and asked why we were still awake. We responded and told them that we usually sleep after the Isha prayers at 9:00 pm. One of the officers insulted us and called us wives of Bulda Umgash referring to SAF. They moved to the next house belonging to another male cousin and his wife. He was badly beaten and attempted to rape his wife but fortunately, she managed to escape..." another victim narrated

"On 16 April 2023, a day after the outbreak of the war in Khartoum, my family and I decided to leave Khartoum for our village in Aljazeera State. This was because the Sudanese Air Forces air bombed RSF bases located in residential areas thus affecting civilians and their property. Although Aljazeera was safe at the beginning of the conflict, the situation has since changed and we are running for our lives", a victim narrated

A resident of Fetis village testified and told ACJPS *"On 16 February 2024, our village was raided and looted. Items targeted included hospital equipment and medicines, Solar panels, and food while the Internet and the power supply were cut off",*

A witness informed ACJPS that one morning, two of his cousins returned home badly beaten up. They were allegedly attacked and beaten by the RSF members who took them to a mosque where they were hidden for several hours before being rescued.

The Impact/effects of the attacks

Shortly after RSF had captured Aljazeera State, there was a new wave of displacements with the residents of Alhasahisa fleeing to Wad Madani while those from Aljazeera fled to East, South East, and Central Sudan, and other neighboring countries.

On 18 February 2024, thousands of residents from Fetis village fled the area due to the insecurity. Most of them crossed through plantations belonging to the Dal company to go to the nearby villages of Meliha and Abu Telih, and others went to Almnagil town. During the exodus, some residents sustained injuries to their feet and legs from thorns and stones, and because they were unable to move, they stayed and hid in the plantations. One young female succumbed to Diabetes and another successfully fled to Egypt where she received medical attention.

One female survivor testified to ACJPS that *"when we reached the Imdeana village on 16 February 2024, we went to one of our relative's homes for refuge and we were informed that although RSF is present in the village, they do not attack civilians. However, that same night, we heard gunshots and the following morning we were informed that a group of RSF members attacked one of the neighbors and killed brothers while the mother survived with injuries. The boys were killed while trying to resist the RSF from entering their house. The following night, a woman came running into our house saying that their house had been raided by RSF, and her husband was beaten. A few moments later, our house was also raided by armed RSF members but they were targeting the vehicles that were parked in the compound. I was lucky enough to grab some of my belongings from my car before they arrived.....,"*

"RSF officers raided the house where we were being hosted in Imdeana_village. They beat up one female occupant who was approximately 34 years old and demanded money and gold. When she told them that she did not have any of the items demanded, they pointed a gun at her head and threatened to kill her. The other officer moved me to the next room and I managed to escape. When he saw me running, he tried to shoot at me but I escaped unharmed and reached Almnagil town at 3:30 am through a wheat plantation where I found several civilians hiding.....," another victim testified

Why the attacks on civilians?

The situation in Aljazeera State especially the villages in Alhasahisa continued to enjoy peace even after the eruption of conflict in Sudan. For many Sudanese citizens, Aljazeera was a safe haven until 18 December 2023, when RSF first attacked civilians, raided their homes, and looted property. This was bound to happen as the armed conflict continues to escalate in Sudan and the warring parties fight for territories.

Mr. Khalil (not real name) an advocate and a human rights defender, and a member of a Nomad group from Darfur told ACJPS that *"RSF capturing and controlling Aljazeera state has encouraged the Arab militia to join and actively participate in the armed conflict in support of RSF in Aljazeera state....,"*

Ms. Huda, a human rights defender originally from Aljazeera spoke to ACJPS and said *"Aljazeera stayed peaceful for such a long time because the RSF were still studying the geography of the state. Additionally, the residents took measures to make it difficult for RSF to access the villages by opening the water channels in the plantations in Udam, Um Meliha, Um Duana, and Abu Telih villages although this may lead to over-irrigation thus destroying the plants. The residents also formed youth groups and also equipped themselves to resist attacks especially when RSF started patrolling the villages....,"* Ms. Huda added since the RSF seized Aljazeera, the Internet services were suspended for seven days and restored briefly before completely shutting down on 6 February 2024. This encouraged the RSF to start violating the civilians.

Mr. Mahmoud an advocate and a human rights defender from Elgenina in West Darfur said that *"it is true that RSF captured and took control of Aljazeera State in December 2023, but they were quite disciplined and followed their commander's orders until February 2024 when the allied Arab militias riding on motorcycles and driving Landcruiser vehicles with private number plates came to Aljazeera from Darfur to steal and loot civilian property with total disregard for RSF orders. This led them to conflict with the RSF troops in the state and also encouraged other RSF members to engage in the raids....,"*

Other developments

Nyala town, South Darfur State

From mid-January 2024 to March 2024, several RSF members returned to Nyala with large amounts of money, private vehicles, furniture, agricultural products, and electrical appliances machines. Mr. Mustafa, a trader in the Elgenina market in Nyala told ACJPS that *"during the period between January to February 2024, the traders witnessed the use of the Sudanese currency notes especially the 100 and 200 pounds mostly with the stamp of the central bank branch in Wad Madani, the capital of Aljazeera State. Men dressed in RSF uniform came to the market and bought large quantities of food before moving to unknown locations East Nyala....,"*

Mr. Mohammed a dealer in agricultural machines in Nyala testified and told ACJPS that *"during the last week of December 2023 and January 2024, approximately 200 agricultural machines were brought to the market by RSF members. The machines were stolen from the Aljazeera state and they included Tractors, Wheat Harvesters, and Millers, and they were sold very cheaply compared to the market prices. For example,*

on 25 March 2024, some RSF members brought two tractors and they were selling them at 5 million Sudanese Pounds whereas the actual market price is between 20 to 22 million Sudanese Pounds. However, people are not willing to buy the machinery for fear of future legal consequences....," He added that the vehicles looted from Aljazeera were mostly big and medium trucks compared to those brought from Khartoum at the beginning of the conflict.

Mr. Hassan, a car dealer witnessed a transaction where a Nissan truck that normally goes for between 140 to 150 Sudanese pounds was sold at 15 Sudanese pounds, and a Toyota Hilux car was sold at 4 million Sudanese Pounds which was way below the market price of 11 to 13 million Sudanese Pounds. He added that in the period between January and March 2024, there were approximately 15 vehicles brought to the market per day.

Elgenina, West Darfur State

During the last week of March 2024, at least 23 private cars and tractors arrived in Elgenina from Aljazeera State. The vehicles passed through RSF checkpoints into Elgenina without any hinderances. On 1 March 2024, two Landcruiser vehicles loaded with unknown items arrived in Elgenina.

Recommendations

ACJPS reiterates its call to the;

- √ The international community to prioritize the protection of civilians by deploying resources to ensure the protection of civilians in Sudan and assist with independent and impartial investigations of human rights violations to ensure accountability.
- √ Sudanese authorities to officially and publicly condemn unlawful killings and injuring of innocent civilians and make it clear that these acts are prohibited, and perpetrators will be held to account. Additionally, authorities must immediately prioritize the protection of civilians in all states across Sudan.
- √ The warring parties to respect citizens' right to life and property as guaranteed by the Constitutional Declaration and international treaties to which Sudan is a party.