

Sudan: a health catastrophe ignored

Sudan's women and children are paying the highest price for a war the world barely acknowledges. 12 million people have been displaced by conflict and more than half are children—many are malnourished, separated from their families, or traumatised. Pregnant women are forced to give birth without skilled attendants, sterile equipment, or access to emergency obstetric care. Gender-based violence is surging: reports from Amnesty International and UNICEF document the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war, including against girls aged as young as 1 year. Survivors face deep stigma and almost no access to mental health support. The impacts of war on women and children are well known. *The Lancet's* BRANCH Series showed that in conflict settings, maternal, newborn, and child health services are among the first to collapse and the last to be restored. In Sudan, this collapse is accelerating, with a devastating long-term toll.

Behind this catastrophe lies a brutal conflict now in its third year. Since April, 2023, a power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—marked by widespread violence and allegations of ethnic cleansing—has killed more than 150 000 people according to some estimates. In a conflict where front lines shift and governing legitimacy is fiercely contested, health systems—and the people they serve—are caught in the crossfire.

Sudan's health system is deliberately being targeted. Fewer than 30% of health facilities remain functional. Hospitals have been looted, bombed, or militarised. An attack on Al-Mujlad Hospital in West Kordofan killed more than 40 people, many of them health workers and children. In the first half of 2025, nearly 1000 people were killed in 38 attacks on health facilities, ambulances, and medical convoys. Medical warehouses have been ransacked, including supplies of therapeutics for severely malnourished children. Health-care workers face violence, arrest, and assassination threats, forcing many to flee. The health system has become a battlefield—in direct violation of medical neutrality and humanitarian law—leaving millions without access to the most basic care.

This destruction has triggered a large-scale public health emergency. Cholera, measles, and malaria are spreading rapidly. Since the cholera outbreak began in July, 2024, more than 83 000 cases and 2100 deaths have been reported, with transmission

ongoing. Hunger is deepening: nearly 20 million people are facing acute food insecurity (Integrated Food Security Phase Classification [IPC] Phase 3 or above), including 8·7 million in IPC Phase 4 (emergency) or IPC Phase 5 (catastrophe). WHO and UNICEF estimate that 880 000 children missed their diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis vaccines last year, with immunisation coverage falling to levels unseen in four decades. As Sudan's health infrastructure unravels, the risk of disease spillover and wider regional destabilisation grows.

Yet, the global response has been gravely inadequate. Only 23% of the UN's US\$4·16 billion Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan for Sudan has been funded—an alarming shortfall given that nearly 26 million people urgently require assistance. Front-line agencies continue to provide care under near-impossible conditions and severe funding constraints. In 2024, the USA—primarily through USAID—accounted for 44% of all humanitarian funding for Sudan. But cuts to US global health funding have left essential programmes unfunded and operation pipelines stalled. Justice, too, has failed. The International Criminal Court remains largely on the sidelines, constrained by a narrow mandate and political barriers. Behind the silence of global media, donor fatigue, and failed accountability lies a deeper injustice: a global health architecture that systematically sidelines crises like Sudan's—protracted, African, and politically inconvenient.

The world has looked away as hospitals are bombed, children starve, and civilians endure rape, ethnic cleansing, and what many now recognise as genocide. Sudan has been sidelined, allowing preventable deaths to mount and its health system to disintegrate. How can this situation be changed? At the London Sudan Conference in April, 2025, hosted by the UK, the African Union, the EU, France, and Germany, attendees promised to support efforts to find a peaceful resolution, reject external interference, and support transition to a civilian-led government, pledging £813 million. However, on July 26, a coalition led by the RSF declared a rival government, directly challenging the SAF-led authorities in Khartoum, further eroding the already fragile prospects for peace. It will take sustained commitment and attention from the international community to deescalate hostilities, help safeguard health, and uphold justice, dignity, and the belief that Sudanese lives are not expendable. ■ *The Lancet*



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For the **Amnesty International** report see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr54/9201/2025/en/>

For the **UNICEF** report see <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/children-young-one-reported-among-survivors-rape-during-sudans-violent-conflict>

For **The Lancet's BRANCH Series** see <https://www.thelancet.com/series-do/conflict-health>

For more on **ethnic cleansing allegations** see <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjel2nn22z9o>

For more on the **humanitarian and displacement crisis** see <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/for-gotten-and-neglected-war-torn-sudan-has-become-worlds-leading-displacement-crisis>

For more on **attacks on health facilities** see <https://www.savethechildren.net/news/sudan-sharp-rise-attacks-healthcare-after-two-years-conflict-1000-people-killed-year>

For more on the **cholera outbreak** see <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/sudan/sudan-cholera-operational-update-3-july-2025>

For the **latest IPC report** see https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Alert_Sudan_July2025.pdf

For more on **immunisation coverage** see <https://www.unicef.org/mena/press-releases/childhood-immunization-sudan-sinks-its-lowest-almost-40-years>

For more on the **UN humanitarian appeal** see <https://humanitarianaction.info/plan/1220/financials#page-title>

For more on **USAID's role in Sudan** see <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/humanitarian-system-struggles-fill-us-void-sudan-worlds-story?id=123483196#>