

Testimony of Sarah Charles
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Before the
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
May 10, 2023

Introduction

Chairman Menendez, Ranking Member Risch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Sudan and the U.S. Agency for International Development's (USAID) response.

It has been less than one month since hostilities between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) erupted, but the impact on the people of Sudan has already been devastating—exacerbating an already severe national food security crisis. Ongoing violence has led to the death of hundreds of people, injury to thousands, destruction of critical infrastructure, and disruption of service delivery of any kind. As people took shelter from bombardment and bullets, they depleted their food stocks, medicine supplies, money reserves, and other resources, leading to rising hunger levels and deteriorating health for many. Attacks against humanitarian staff and the looting of humanitarian assets forced many of our partners to temporarily suspend hundreds of life-saving humanitarian programs and evacuate their staff—impacting the millions of people who relied on these programs to meet their basic needs.

Until the violence comes to an end and the humanitarian community is able to safely resume operations, the crisis in Sudan will continue to rapidly deteriorate. This is why we urge the SAF and RSF to commit to a permanent ceasefire, unfettered humanitarian access, and the principled delivery of humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations across the country.

Humanitarian Needs

Before the conflict, almost 16 million people in Sudan—more than one-third of the population—required humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs; of those, 10 million required food assistance. Because humanitarian staff have not been able to safely move around Sudan to conduct needs assessments, we do not know the full extent to which humanitarian conditions have worsened since April 15. However, we predict that ongoing shortages of food, safe drinking water, medicine, and fuel, coupled with limited access to basic services and care have significantly increased vulnerability for many people, particularly in Khartoum and the surrounding areas.

The data we have been able to obtain from inside Sudan are grim: an estimated 70 percent of hospitals across conflict-affected areas of Sudan are not operational, cutting off critical care for people caught in the conflict. In addition to dwindling medical supplies, infrastructure damage, and unreliable access to power, medical facilities and personnel have also been devastated by at least 25 unconscionable attacks since the conflict began.

Further, the World Food Program (WFP) estimates that the number of acutely food insecure people across Sudan is expected to increase to a total of more than 19 million in the next three to six months if the current conflict continues; the highest increases are expected in West Darfur, West Kordofan, Blue Nile, Red Sea, and North Darfur. WFP also estimates that nearly 1.3 million people did not receive food assistance in April because of the conflict. While WFP resumed operations in Sudan on May 1, millions of people are in danger of not receiving assistance if fighting continues.

The conflict has also led to widespread displacement: since April 15, more than 700,000 people have been internally displaced across Sudan, and more than 170,000 people have crossed into neighboring countries according to the International Organization for Migration. The UN estimates that as many as 860,000 refugees and returnees could flee into neighboring countries as the conflict progresses, meaning that the ramifications of this conflict do not end at Sudan's borders—they stretch out into the region, compounding existing humanitarian needs across several countries.

USAID is also concerned by reports of protection violations, including gender-based violence (GBV) against women and girls, particularly among those displaced by violence who are seeking shelter and safety. The UN reports more than 3 million women and girls are at risk of GBV in Sudan, including due to the conflict-related disruption of health and protection services.

USAID's Response

The UN's Humanitarian Response Plan for Sudan requested \$1.7 billion to support 12.5 million of the most vulnerable people in 2023, but as of May 9, it was less than 16 percent funded. The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Sudan, providing more than \$162.5 million in humanitarian assistance from USAID to date in Fiscal Year 2023. And while the operating context has changed, USAID's commitment to providing humanitarian assistance to the people of Sudan has not, and we stand by them through this difficult time and will work to address rising humanitarian needs caused by the conflict, in partnership with humanitarian actors and other donors.

On April 23, USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced the deployment of a Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) to the region to lead and coordinate the U.S. Government's humanitarian response in Sudan. Composed of disaster experts from USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, the DART is currently based in Nairobi, Kenya, and is working with the international community and our partners to identify priority needs and scale up urgently needed assistance to communities affected by conflict in Sudan, as the security situation allows. USAID also activated a Washington, D.C.-based Response Management Team to support the DART in leading and coordinating USAID programs and the broader U.S. government humanitarian response.

While many of USAID's humanitarian programs in Sudan are temporarily suspended, USAID's long-standing humanitarian partners with strong national networks in health, nutrition, protection, agriculture, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) are operating with extremely limited capacity and using dwindling prepositioned supplies in pockets of Gedaref, Blue Nile, White Nile, South and West Kordofans, Khartoum, and the Greater Darfur region. Since April 15, they have relied on national staff to continue life-saving activities, many of whom have also been forced to shelter in place or evacuate their homes due to violence. Since the beginning of the conflict, national staff, neighborhood committees, and other civil society organizations have shown tremendous bravery responding to needs in their communities amid incredible risk and uncertainty.

In just one example, one USAID partner has been dispatching a network of midwives across Khartoum to manage obstetric emergencies and support home births in the midst of airstrikes, gunfire, and rubble. Their staff have also provided critical health care services and distributed supplies to support safe births for women and girls affected by the conflict. Their bravery and commitment to the humanitarian mandate has helped save lives and bring new life into the world in otherwise grim circumstances.

Despite incremental progress, the insecure operating environment, lack of access to safely deliver assistance, dwindling supply levels, inaccessibility of cash, and unreliable electricity and telecommunications services will impair their ability to sustain this limited delivery of assistance in the coming weeks. These factors will also continue to hinder the broader humanitarian community's ability to resume normal operations in the short term.

Looking Forward

The United States continues to urge both the SAF and RSF to take in consideration the interests of the Sudanese nation and its people and actively engage in the talks towards a ceasefire and end to the conflict in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Ending the conflict will help reduce

suffering among the people of Sudan and allow for life-saving humanitarian assistance to reach those in affected areas.

Amid ongoing attacks on aid workers and assets, USAID is also keenly focused on ensuring the safety and security of our humanitarian staff and partners in country and continues to prioritize this issue in conversations with all key stakeholders. To date, fighting has resulted in the tragic deaths of at least six USAID partner staff and injuries to others. Armed actors have raided humanitarian housing compounds, offices, and warehouses around the country, and looted food and humanitarian supplies, including relief items, equipment, and vehicles, raising international humanitarian law concerns.

USAID is working closely with our colleagues at the Department of State and the UN to advocate for increased humanitarian access and the scaling up of humanitarian operations in Sudan, including by exploring overland routes and air bridges from neighboring countries and within Sudan to facilitate the safe passage of goods and personnel. However, these plans will only succeed if the SAF and RSF commit to upholding international humanitarian law and respect humanitarian personnel and assets. To fully take advantage of any opening of humanitarian access, we are also asking the UN to support a robust scale up for the response, and in particular to support local responders.

In order to further facilitate humanitarian operations, USAID is asking the government entities in Sudan and its neighboring countries to decrease administrative and bureaucratic barriers that limit relief organizations' ability to respond to this crisis at scale—for example, by expediting border and customs procedures for quick clearances for all humanitarian goods, issuing visa waivers for humanitarian workers deploying to support the response, and waiving the bureaucratic requirements issued by the Sudanese Humanitarian Aid Commission (HAC) in order to fast-track humanitarian activities. For many years, the HAC imposed strict terms of engagement with populations in need, which has chronically hampered humanitarian action and delayed life-saving assistance in Sudan. These restrictions were egregious before, and are all the more so now.

USAID is working closely with its partners to respond now, even as we assess additional humanitarian needs arising from the conflict and resulting widespread displacement. While assessments are ongoing to determine these needs, we are working with partners to use existing programs and resources to scale up and pivot emergency programming where conditions allow. For example, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has—in collaboration with WFP—been providing fuel to maintain the central medical cold chain in Sudan, which preserves millions of vaccines and insulin doses. Similarly, BHA staff in Sudan's neighboring countries are

working with existing partners to pivot humanitarian programs in response to the influx of returnees and refugees. For example, humanitarian organizations are moving in-kind food, health commodities, shelter support, and WASH supplies in areas of South Sudan with heightened displacement.

Conclusion

This conflict is a culmination of decades of impunity for crimes committed across Sudan—impunity that has affected our own staff, when the murderer of USAID employees John Granville and Abdelrahman Abbas Rahama, who were killed in Khartoum in 2008, was released from prison in January. The Sudanese people have been demanding an end to injustice and impunity for decades, and we stand with them.

The humanitarian crisis in Sudan will continue to worsen if humanitarian access and the provision of assistance to millions of vulnerable people continue to be limited by the ongoing conflict. USAID is committed to the resumption of humanitarian operations when it is safe for our partners to do so and will continue to work with all stakeholders in support of this goal. We owe it to children such as Saleema, who receives treatment for acute malnutrition from one of our partners so that she can grow to be healthy and strong, and we owe it to the more than 50,000 children in Sudan who have lost access to this life-saving treatment due to violence. By seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict and commitments from those involved to uphold humanitarian principles, the humanitarian community can restart life-saving nutrition, food assistance, health, protection, and other programs across Sudan. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify; I look forward to your questions.