

Nicole Widdersheim Deputy Washington Director,

Human Rights Watch House Committee on Foreign Affairs December 11 th, 2025

Hearing: “Stopping the Bloodshed: U.S. Response to Crimes Against Humanity in Sudan”

Good afternoon.

Thank you for holding a briefing on the horrific ongoing crisis in Sudan and for inviting Human Rights Watch to participate today, the day after International Human Rights Day. Human Rights Watch, an international NGO that works in over 90 countries, documents human rights violations and advocates for an end to those violations. Our research methodology is based on a broad range of sources, including direct interviews, field-based documentation, and verification of social media and geospatial information. To ensure our independence, we do not take any government funding. We have worked on Sudan for decades.

Prior to joining Human Rights Watch, I served as the Africa Director for the Sudans and Central Africa in the National Security Council during the first Trump Administration. Before that, I lived and worked in Sudan for 7 years, serving with USAID in Darfur during from 2005-2007, when the Bush Administration and US congress declared the events there a genocide. I was working in Darfur when Congressman Smith visited in 2005 and recall traveling to Mukjar, the scene of one of the worst killing events by the Janjaweed. I remember how the people lined the road from the landing strip to the town center to welcome a member of Congress, so grateful he travelled all that way to hear directly from them. I am so disappointed that, twenty years later, Sudan is still witnessing killing and atrocities on that scale today but without the same activism, action and empathy of the US government and congress.

April 2026 will mark three years since a brutal war broke out in Sudan. This conflict has primarily been a war of abuse and atrocities on civilians by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). Multiple Human Rights Watch investigations illustrate Sudan’s nationwide human rights crisis. This October, in Darfur, the RSF carried out mass atrocities in El Fasher, after an 18-month-long siege on a city, which was once a vibrant place that hosted many of the survivors of previous campaigns of attacks. El Fasher was the last city controlled by the SAF and their allies in Darfur. The RSF’s takeover of the city resulted in the massacres that RSF fighters filming themselves committing, killing civilians and unarmed fighters, including children.

Human Rights Watch has previously documented similar atrocities by the RSF two years earlier in El Geneina, and Ardamata, where the RSF committed extrajudicial killings, rape, pillaging, as part of a campaign of ethnic cleansing against ethnic-Massalit and other non-

Arab people in 2023. Human Rights Watch concluded that the RSF had carried out crimes against humanity and widespread war crimes as part of campaign to commit ethnic cleansing. The context and the widespread, ethnically targeted nature of the killings, also raise the possibility that the killings were acts of genocide.

The list of civilian targeting and suffering is unrelenting and spreading across the country. In South Kordofan, RSF and allied militias committed war crimes against Nuba civilians with killings, gang rapes and the holding of women and girls in the context of sexual slavery, destruction of homes, and displacing tens of thousands people. In Khartoum, women and girls have faced widespread sexual violence—rape, gang rape, forced marriage, and child marriage—primarily at the hands of RSF fighters, with survivors denied medical care and justice. These abuses amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have also committed serious violations, notably indiscriminate airstrikes in Nyala, South Darfur, that killed and injured scores of civilians and destroyed hospitals and homes. Both warring parties are deliberately targeting civilians, cutting them off from food, engaging in sexual violence, and displacing them. The army and their allies have transformed areas under their control into mass detention sites, subjecting civilians to widespread detention and abuse, often purely on the basis of their political or ethnic identity or for having merely lived under RSF control.

These are forces that have continued to benefit from widespread impunity. These are forces who know they can get away with filming themselves perpetrating crimes. Right now, civilians in the Kordofan region are at imminent risk of further atrocities. The international community failed to listen to the warnings, heed the lessons of the violence from 2004-2013 in Darfur, and the coup of 2021. Civilians in Sudan, starting with civilians in western Sudan, need the US government to support ongoing documentation efforts and push for a civilian protection mission to prevent further harm in North Darfur, where thousands are still unaccounted for, and in Kordofan.

Sudan should not be viewed as an endless cycle of atrocities, and this suffering should not be normalized. I urge you today to take tangible steps in support of Sudanese civil society, starting with the local responders on the ground. The international response to this crisis has been—let me be honest—pathetic. Cycles of limited, energized and uncoordinated activities by the US government over two administrations have produced failed, isolated efforts. The African Union has been both sidelined from these diplomatic efforts like the Jeddah process and recent “Quad” (US, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE) and have also “admired” the crisis in numerous PSC meetings and discussions over the last two and half years, failing to protect civilians or hold the parties accountable. Efforts at the bilateral, regional and international level have routinely cut out civilian leadership, failed to stem the

violence or protect civilians, nor get the massive amount of life-saving assistance needed into the country.

There has been little communication from the current administration with human rights community on the strategy on Sudan. From the outside it appears that the Quad does not have a clear strategy for stopping the attacks and human rights violations on the civilian population nor protecting them from the warring actors. The UN humanitarian chief Tom Fletcher recently visited parts of Sudan and has demanded unfettered access for humanitarian assistance, above all to the most isolated and in need. And presently, the African Union has yet to use the full weight of its mandate to respond to the crisis. In Addis Ababa, the AU Peace and Security Council should urgently move from expressions of “deep concern” to concrete actions that confront the actors fueling and financing this war. Countries in the region supplying arms, providing political cover, or enabling the RSF and SAF to continue attacking civilians should stop. The PSC should adopt time-bound decisions, including activating the AU sanctions framework against individuals and states facilitating the violence, mandate transparent reporting on external support to the warring parties, and direct the Commission to accelerate implementation of its Sudan Humanitarian and Security Response Plan. The AU’s continued silence on those enabling the conflict is undermining its credibility and costing lives; decisive action from Addis is urgently needed to protect civilians and restore regional leadership in ending this war.

The United States government is a major actor in this situation and can do much more than it has. The U.S. Congress has played a monumental role in the past, exposing atrocity crimes, elevating the Sudanese civilian voice and survivor needs, appropriating life-saving assistance, pushing Republican and Democratic administrations alike to hold perpetrators accountable as well as guiding and overseeing US foreign policy for the country. Sadly, in my 27 years working on Sudan and South Sudan crises, I have never seen the US congress so unengaged on the region. Yes, public condemnations can signal to the perpetrators that the US is watching, but social media posts and press releases are simply not enough. There is so much more you can do to help the Sudanese people in their pursuit to survive, be safe from violence, and work toward a civilian-led, rights-respecting democratic Sudan.

We urge the United States to:

- 1) Nominate the congressionally required Presidential U.S Special Envoy for Sudan. Require that this official works with the Sudanese people, remains transparent and uncorrupted by personal or private interests of conflict, and regularly briefs and updates the Congress and the public.

2) Clearly communicate to the Administration that Congress supports deployment of a UN Security Council-mandated mission to protect civilians and ensure humanitarian aid is delivered. It can start small, deploying where civilians in need of urgent protection are gathering, but it needs to start as soon as possible. History has shown that a small contingent of well-trained and well-equipped troops can do a lot of good in a short period where civilians are under immediate risk.

3) Call on all countries to comply with the UN Security Council arms embargo and for the parties to the conflict to allow humanitarian access. Specifically call on US allies stop violating the UN Arms Embargo on Darfur and cease actions that enable more targeting of civilians by the parties to the conflict.

4) Insist that the Trump Administration put Sudanese civilians first in all US-led or support efforts to bring an end to violence against civilians. A deal between the two parties in the conflict alone has failed before, the only hope for a safe and rights-respecting Sudan is independent civilian government.

5) Authorize and appropriate robust US funding to respond to the massive humanitarian crisis in Sudan and in particular increase the assistance to the Sudanese Emergency Response Committees. These local human rights organizations and other local civilian actors working night and day to save their country. Specifically appropriate resources to also fund survivor-centered medical and psychosocial support, and reparations programs victims of sexual violence, torture, ethnic cleansing. Support US funding programs that aim to seek justice and accountability for survivors. Pay the UN in full for what the US owes, for the regular and peacekeeping budgets and other important UN programs that require voluntary funding.

6) Impose targeted sanctions—including asset freezes and travel bans—on RSF and SAF leaders responsible for abuses. The US has issued some sanctions, but more is needed to press the actors to stop targeting civilians.

7) Push the Administration to reinstate temporary protective status and refugee resettlement for Sudanese civilians fleeing persecution and human rights violations, including ethnic cleansing.

8) Support the UN-Factfinding Mission and encourage other countries and the parties to the conflict to do the same.

9) Recall its support across administrations for the critical work of the International Criminal Court in Sudan and call for the rescission of US ICC-related sanctions that threaten to undermine the court's work globally. In October, ICC judges handed down a landmark conviction of a former Janjaweed leader for 27 counts of war crimes and crimes

against humanity committed in Darfur in 2002-2003. The court's Office of the Prosecutor has ongoing investigations of today's atrocities in the region. Without justice there will only be further generations of victims. The US should support the ICC's work, including the expansion of the court's mandate across Sudan, and it should play an active role in seeking a comprehensive approach to accountability in Sudan.

10) Consider drafting legislation that combines these recommendations to assist and guide the administration policy and approach to the crisis.

Congress can play a pivotal role in ensuring that the US government's policy is clear, with coordinated measures that prioritize protection of civilians, justice, and humanitarian relief with concerted engagement and pressure on the parties to the conflict. With this approach, you can help break the cycle of mass atrocities and help the Sudanese people begin to recover, be safer and hopefully have a viable chance to govern their own country