



# أتر **Atar**

**Sudan in Perspective**

Issue 17, Monday, November 25, 2024

## **Children of Sudan: Chronicles**

Artwork by: Obada Gabir

## Marhaba!


This is the 17<sup>th</sup> issue of Atar English magazine from Sudan Facts Center for Journalism. It comes to you on Mondays after every two weeks.

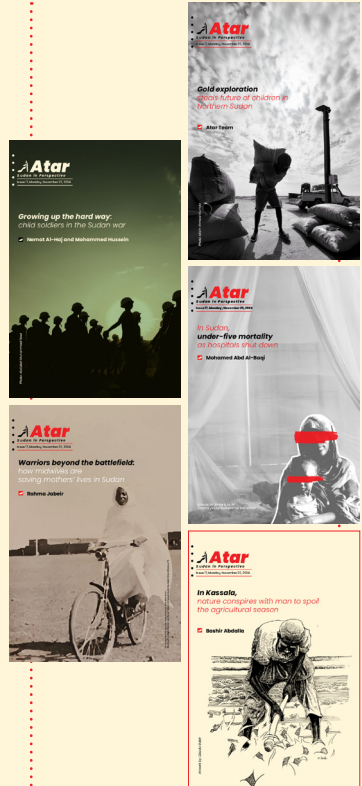
In this feature, we explore the various dimensions of how the war has impacted Sudanese children. It examines how they have been forced into conscription and exploitative labour depriving them of the fundamental rights to a childhood enjoyed by their peers across the globe.

Nemat and Mohammed shed light on how conscription has stolen the springtime of childhood. Another report by the Atar team delves into how dreams of gold have shaped the imaginations of children, both before and after the war. Meanwhile, Mohamed Abdel-Baqi addresses the harrowing reality of children under five dying due to the collapse of Sudan's healthcare infrastructure.

In today's Sudan, midwives are unsung warriors playing a pivotal role amidst the war. With the absence of specialists, well-equipped health facilities, and any meaningful financial support, these women traverse darkness and vast distances to save expectant mothers enduring difficult labours. This chapter of their story is poignantly narrated by Rahma Jabir.

In the fertile lands of Kassala, once a symbol of agricultural prosperity, farmers' dreams are fading amidst fuel shortages and growing insecurity. What was once a vibrant economic artery now faces impending collapse, leaving residents on the brink of famine and threatening food security across the region, Bashir Abdalla writes from Kassala.

Atar Editorial Team 



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**Sudan in Perspective**

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• **Atar**

• *Sudan in Perspective*

• Issue 17, Monday, November 25, 2024

## ***Growing up the hard way: child soldiers in the Sudan war***

■ **Nemat Al-Haj and Mohammed Hussein**

Photo: Abdullrahman Muhammad Nour

A photograph showing the silhouettes of a line of child soldiers against a bright, hazy sunset sky. The children are wearing helmets and some are holding hands, suggesting they are marching or standing in formation. The overall tone is somber and evocative.

Five years have passed since the Sudanese educational system began to falter. The faltering started with the early protests of the December Revolution, followed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers' strikes due to insufficient pay, and finally, the April 15 war, now in its 19th month.

An estimated 19 million children are out of the educational system, with approximately 6.5 million children unable to access schools. The war has displaced four million children, marking the largest wave of displacement globally, as schools have turned into sheltering homes for the displaced. Save the Children estimated that 5.8 million children under 18 years have been displaced by the war in Sudan, including 2.8 million under five years or at the pre-school stage.

The deteriorating economic situation and the lack of education are major factors contributing to the prevalence of child recruitment into the armies and militias in Sudan. With the loss of income sources from agriculture, livestock, and trade, and the disruption of state institutions, national organisations ceased their operations, some international organisations evacuated staff, while others ended their work, and private-sector companies closed their doors. This left most Sudanese citizens without jobs, relying on savings or support from expatriate relatives. Facing these challenges, some families

resorted to recruiting their children for various reasons, most of which are financial, while others are moral.

The exact number of child soldiers within the warring forces in Sudan is difficult to determine due to a lack of sources and the denial by these forces of recruiting children. However, the reality is evident through videos circulating on social media, showing the presence of child soldiers.

*The exact number of child soldiers within the warring forces in Sudan is difficult to determine due to a lack of sources and the denial by these forces of recruiting children.*

After the onset of the April 15 2023 war, the Sudanese government announced that approximately 8,000 child soldiers were within the ranks of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). A military source in the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) told Atar that the actual number of children within the RSF exceeds this figure, especially after the mobilisation call, with tribal authorities pushing children into the conflict. This includes children from outside Sudan who joined as mercenaries.

The military source added that the participation of children in the RSF is evident to all, as attested by residents of areas traversed by these forces. Captured

individuals have discussed their motivations for participating in the war, with many citing revenge after losing fathers or brothers killed by the SAF and its allies, or due to casualties caused by SAF airstrikes targeting RSF positions.

The [Darfur Bar Association](#) expressed deep concern over the involvement of children from both sides of the conflict in military operations in the Al-Shajara neighbourhood of Khartoum at the end of August 2023. Sudanese social media was flooded with [images](#) of underage children in military attire during training at a “Popular Resistance” camp, affiliated to SAF.

A witness from Dar As-Salam locality in North Darfur reported seeing a mobilised RSF group arriving from Ad-Deain through the Khazan Jadid to Al-Fashir, including many children under 16. She mentioned speaking to one of them, who asked her for the location of a public restroom and revealed that he was participating in the war, considering it a “war of existence.” He explained that men are capable of reclaiming their stolen rights from the “remnants” of the previous regime and asserted that he, too, is a man, responsible for supporting his kin in the battle.

With deep sorrow, Amal shared with *Atar* the story of her 16-year-old brother, who chose to stay behind to guard their home when the family decided to

*Darfur Bar Association expressed deep concern over the involvement of children from both sides of the conflict in military operations in the Al-Shajara neighbourhood of Khartoum at the end of August 2023.*



International law prohibits the recruitment of children into any military force, granting them general and special protection as vulnerable individuals and civilians not involved in hostilities. Article 14 of [the 2007 SAF Act](#) explicitly stipulates that the recruitment age must not be less than 18, a provision also applicable to the RSF by virtue of its legal inclusion under the armed forces. The law emphasizes protecting children affected by armed conflicts and includes provisions in the second chapter of the third section addressing crimes committed by combatants during military operations, including child recruitment. These protections are reiterated in the 1991 Sudanese Penal Code, the 2010 Child Act, and all related conventions and agreements. ♦

flee the Kafouri neighbourhood amid escalating clashes. Later, neighbours who remained in the area informed them that members of the RSF, relatives of the family, had moved into the now-empty home with him. They pressured him to join the “mobilization” to avenge those killed since the war began, exploiting his ability to drive and his knowledge of the city’s streets. He later lost his life in an airstrike targeting an RSF convoy.

Tribal calls to arms are another factor driving children into the ranks of the RSF. For instance, Ali Yagoub, the RSF commander of operations in North Darfur, called on several Arab tribes to mobilise in support of the RSF.

Money, however, is not always the strongest incentive for recruitment into the RSF in the April war. Children who spoke to *Atar* described how they were drawn into the conflict after becoming addicted to drugs. RSF commanders reportedly supply drugs to the point of addiction and then leverage this dependency.

“Once we become addicted, they tell us that if we want the money to buy drugs, or even the drugs themselves, we must board the truck. Since we have no money, we comply, and they give us drugs during the journey to the war zones,” one child said.

After the battle that claimed Ali Yagoub’s life, 45 mobilised RSF fighters, including a notable number of children,

*Tribal calls to arms are another factor driving children into the ranks of the RSF.*

returned to a village in the Kalimendo locality and headed toward Khazan Jadid. One of them shared with a Red Crescent worker in the area how the RSF had gathered 1,000 fighters, many of them children, to fight in Al-Fashir.

“They brought us from various places and assembled us in Al-Fashir near the solar power station east of the city. We were not armed or paid any money, only given 50,000 Sudanese pounds to meet basic needs. They promised that if we fought for them, we would receive one billion Sudanese pounds, and two billion after returning from the battles. Yet, some of us did not even receive the money for basic needs. They divided us into groups, and each day they sent 100 of us to Al-Fashir, but none returned. We had no phones, and for those who did, there was no network to help them communicate. We didn’t know what happened to those who were sent. When we asked, they told us the fighters were happy and settled in their positions, and that we would join them soon if we remained strong,” he recounted, adding:

“During this entire period, none of us were armed, not even those sent to Al-Fashir. They shared one weapon between three people, claiming we would capture more arms during the fighting. We ate and drank while waiting for our

turn to go to Al-Fashir. But after 600 of us had been sent without returning, and with intensified airstrikes, we panicked and fled in different directions. Some went to Wad Kouta, others to Dar As-Salam, while we returned to our families and never went back.”

A military source from the Joint Forces admitted to Atar that children are present in their ranks but denied their involvement in combat. He said that their tasks were limited to cleaning, cooking, loading ammunition, assisting medics, or running errands between positions. He justified their recruitment as a form of help or a way for children to stay close to their fathers or brothers, adding that traditional tribal systems (hawakir) do not prohibit such practices.

A political source within the Joint Forces shed light on the fate of child combatants captured from opposing forces.

“We don’t use the term prisoner in our war against the RSF. According to the Geneva Convention, a prisoner is a soldier from a regular army captured by the enemy, with specific rights and procedures. As for RSF members in our custody, we refer to them as captives because they belong to an irregular force, and many are prison escapees or foreign mercenaries” the source told Atar.

He further explained that child captives are treated according to internation-

*“There are foreign children among RSF, whom we consider criminals. We hand them over to the police and notify their respective countries. Since the start of the war, we have captured over 1,000 children on various fronts. There is no exchange of captives with the RSF, especially not children,” the Joint Forces source said.*

al humanitarian law and Sudan’s 1991 Penal Code. They are separated from adult captives, and the authorities coordinate with UNICEF and the Red Cross to develop psychological, behavioural, and rehabilitative programmes for them. These efforts aim to address the root causes of child recruitment and reintegrate them into society as productive individuals.

“Yes, there are foreign children among them, whom we consider criminals. We hand them over to the police and notify their respective countries. Since the start of the war, we have captured over 1,000 children on various fronts. There is no exchange of captives with the RSF, especially not children,” the source added.

“We do not issue calls for mobilisation. All recruits come to us voluntarily, and we select those who meet the age requirements. Most of them join when the Joint Forces enter their areas, riding along with soldiers and requesting



to enlist. These individuals are primarily from tribes that have suffered abuses by the RSF. As for children under 18 taken as prisoners, we separate them from adults. Generally, we release the children but detain the adults. This is our approach, whereas the RSF's treatment of prisoners is visible to all, as they document it themselves," an officer in the Joint Forces responsible for prisoners told *Atar*.

"We adhere to our laws, which set 18 as the minimum recruitment age. Our forces are bound by and committed to these regulations. Prior to the war on April 15, 2023, we conducted audits of our rosters in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF, and the National Council for Child Welfare, under the supervision of our Human Rights and International Law Department. It was confirmed that our ranks were free of anyone under 18. We also issue periodic orders from the RSF commander prohibiting the recruitment of children," Mohammed Al-Mukhtar Al-Nour, an advisor to the RSF commander, told *Atar*.

"Following the start of the war, we captured large numbers of children fighting for the army and armed movements. We returned them to their families through the Red Cross in Khartoum, El-Genena, Nyala, Zalingei, and other locations. Furthermore, we have not

*Eyewitnesses in Dar As-Salam locality reported to Atar that a local chief sent 90 children to join the RSF after one of their community members was promoted to assistant rank and given responsibility for the area following his involvement in the Battle of Al-Fashir.*

opened recruitment since April 15. New recruits undergo thorough assessments, including age and physical readiness, in line with our regulations," Mohammed added.

A source close to the leadership of a tribe involved in the conflict told *Atar* that the RSF pays substantial sums to tribal leaderships, requiring them to provide a quota of fighters. This leadership compels tribe members to send their sons for recruitment in exchange for protection. Some tribal leaders mandate that each household send one son to fight; if that son is killed, they are required to send another.

Eyewitnesses in Dar As-Salam locality reported to *Atar* that a local chief sent 90 children to join the RSF after one of their community members was promoted to assistant rank and given responsibility for the area following his involvement in the Battle of Al-Fashir.

A field researcher, who requested anonymity and has worked with multi-

ple organisations in South Kordofan, accused the Sudan People's Liberation Army-North (SPLA-N), an Al-Hilu faction, of recruiting children in areas under its control.

When *Atar* presented these allegations to Chattigo Amoja Delman, from the SPLA-N/ Al-Hilu, he categorically denied them, saying:

“These allegations are baseless. International and regional human rights organisations have repeatedly refuted such claims. Furthermore, international reports have commended the SPLA-N for respecting human rights principles.”

“We have large, professional, and well-trained forces capable of leading initiatives so we do not need to recruit children. Since its founding, the SPLA-N's motto has been Education during Liberation. Our children belong in classrooms, not on battlefields. The generation cur-

rently administering civilian governance in our areas of control was educated entirely during wartime and in our territories,” Dalmann added.

The field researcher, however, emphasised the importance of considering historical context when discussing child recruitment in South Kordofan.

“The first memory for most children in these areas is taking shelter with their families in caves to escape aerial bombardment. Schools are scarce, lack basic infrastructure, and teachers are unpaid. As a result, taking up arms becomes an inevitable outcome. Children often begin as porters, cooks, or messengers between camps before eventually becoming fighters,” she noted.



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# Atar

**Sudan in Perspective**

Issue 17, Monday, November 25, 2024

## **Gold exploration** *steals future of children in* **Northern Sudan**


 **Atar Team**

Photo: Islam Ahmad Alimada



As the school day neared its end and boredom crept into the classroom, Ahmed Oud Al-Leil busied himself sketching a Toyota Hilux on the final pages of his notebook. Ahmed, with remarkable skill, coloured the car vibrantly and inscribed one of the common phrases seen on vehicles in Barbar. When a shadow fell over his drawing, he looked up and saw *Atar's* correspondent, who surprised him by asking from the classroom window.

"What model is it?"

"The latest model," Ahmed promptly replied.

A teacher in Barbar, in River Nile State, who spoke to *Atar* on condition of anonymity, revealed that most students dream of wealth and owning four-wheel-drive vehicles, a symbol of success from working in artisanal gold mining. This aspiration, however, casts a shadow over education, as school desks gradually empty each year. Many students abandon their studies before completing the academic year, and schools become desolate as children approach high school.

"We have often spoken to parents, urging them to keep their young children away from the mines to safeguard their educational future," the teacher said.

He added that the number of stu-

*A teacher in Barbar, in River Nile State, who spoke to Atar on condition of anonymity, revealed that most students dream of wealth and owning four-wheel-drive vehicles, a symbol of success from working in artisanal gold mining.*

dents who drop out of school for mining work has been growing for over a decade. While some students leave temporarily during holidays, others leave permanently, often with the encouragement of their families, eager for the lure of the money from the gold mines.

*"When registering for first grade, we typically enroll 50 to 80 students, but dropout rates spike from grades six to eight, leaving only about 20 students. In some schools in northern Al-Bawga, you might find just five students in a class,"*

Another teacher from a nearby village said that at the start of each week, she inspects students' notebooks, punishing anyone who has doodled Toyota Hilux trucks. These vehicles symbolize their dreams, fueled by the idea of earning enough in the gold mines to own one.

"When registering for first grade, we

typically enroll 50 to 80 students, but dropout rates spike from grades six to eight, leaving only about 20 students. In some schools in northern Al-Bawga, you might find just five students in a class,” she said.

According to the teacher, recent statistics for this year’s Sudanese Certificate Exams at her school revealed that about 50 students from areas affected by the war initially registered. However, most of them later withdrew to work at the Al-Ebidiya gold mills, reducing the number to 15. Only one student from the village completed the registration process.

“The war, and the resulting poverty and hardship, have exacerbated dropout rates. In previous years, mining was primarily limited to local students following their fathers into the trade. Now, the war’s circumstances have pushed some displaced individuals into the same fate,” she lamented.

Outside a high school in Barbar, Rayan Osama stood with her schoolbag in one hand and a small cooling box in the other.

“I came here from Khartoum with my father and brother after my mother passed away. Due to home and family obligations, I cannot work. Currently, I am preparing for the Sudanese Certificate Exams while contributing to my family’s income by selling homemade ice cream to my schoolmates,” She shared her story with *Atar* correspondent

Rayan said her father had to leave



Since the outbreak of the war on April 15, 2023, Barbar (311 kilometers from Khartoum) and Abu Hamad (538 kilometers from Khartoum) have become more of transit points to Egypt and other Sudanese states than places of permanent residence, despite their natural advantages.

For centuries, the city of Barbar served as a strategic crossroad linking Sudanese cities by land and hosting trade caravans. It later became a railway hub, connected to Egypt by road, playing a key role in the transportation of imported goods. On the Barbar-Abu Hamad route, customs stations were established at Al-Ibidiyya and Abu Hamad. By the end of the first decade of this century, attention turned to the desert of the Nile River State following the discovery of abundant gold deposits. This drew interest to areas stretching from northern Al-Bawga in the west to northeast Al-Ebidiyya, as well as the outskirts of Abu Hamad. These areas witnessed rapid urbanisation around thousands of mills spread between Abu Hamad and GabGaba. These mills, tasked with grinding rocks extracted from gold wells, became central to the dreams of those hoping to transform their lives. ♦

several jobs in Barbar after being **plagued by suspicions**, while her younger brother joined friends in gold mining at Wadi Halfa after finishing his middle school exams.

Fourteen-year-old Ahmed Al-Zein works in local gold mills, accompanied by four friends of the same age.

“Physical endurance is one of the requirements for working in crushers. Some workers are even younger than me but have the strength to handle the labour,” he told *Atar*.

Since the outbreak of war, Barbar has seen an influx of displaced people and bustling commercial activity. The city’s markets have experienced unprecedented supply and demand, with an influx of goods of varying quality. The once-stagnant old market has expanded, and even weekly village markets have come alive. However, this boom has been accompanied by soaring prices for housing and food, with costs doubling almost daily due to increased demand.

Despite the efforts of local and international organisations, such as the Red Crescent, to provide services, and the work of youth volunteers offering meals in certain neighbourhoods and sheltering houses, the challenges remain severe. Local solidarity efforts between residents and displaced individuals have offered

some respite but are far from sufficient.

Displaced individuals face mounting burdens, from soaring rents and living costs to the uncertain future of their children. These pressures have driven many,

*“Physical endurance is one of the requirements for working in crushers. Some workers are even younger than me but have the strength to handle the labour.”*

*14-year-old Ahmed Al-Zein*

young and old, to join the search for gold in the region’s valleys, particularly in areas like Jabal Al-Rijl, Al-Banjim, and sites west of the Nile such as Al-Hajja-jjiya, Al-Sangir, Abu Khalg, Al-Anj, Nasb Al-Hisan, Al-Ma’gal, Gabgaba, Wadi Al-Ashar, Umm Qamar, and others. The war has turned these areas into destinations for youth, children, and even former workers and employees whose liveli-

*“Near Libya Market in western Omdurman, an RSF soldier tried to recruit me. When I refused, he attempted to force me. Terrified, I called my father, who urged me to join him at the Dar-Mali gold mills to earn money and build a better life”.*

*12-year-old Mohammed Al-Ghali*

hoods were disrupted.

On a journey from Atbara to Al-Ebidiya, amidst the clamour of night-time checkpoints and passengers' chatter, *Atar's* correspondent encountered 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Ghali traveling alone.

"I came before the war from Naivasha, west of Omdurman, where I had lived with my aunt after leaving the Zamzam refugee camp in North Darfur with my mother. Near Libya Market in western Omdurman, I encountered a soldier from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) who tried to recruit me. When I refused, he attempted to force me. Terrified, I called my father, who urged me to join him at the Dar Mali mills to earn money and build a better life," he shared his story.

Mohammed recounted his hardships with the RSF to the passengers, one of whom offered him a place to stay for the

night and arranged for his transport to his father at the gold mine.

While the search for gold may fulfill some dreams for these young miners, it leaves indelible scars on their childhood. The horrors of war and the hardships of the mills have stolen their innocence and consumed their present and future. Instead of advancing through the stages of education, the children now camp in the deserts of displacement, throwing their tender bodies into the harsh embrace of nature. In their quest for a glimmer of gold among the rocks, their years are lost to the grinding wheels of war, bulldozers, and mills, or swallowed whole by the very wells they hoped would bring them prosperity.



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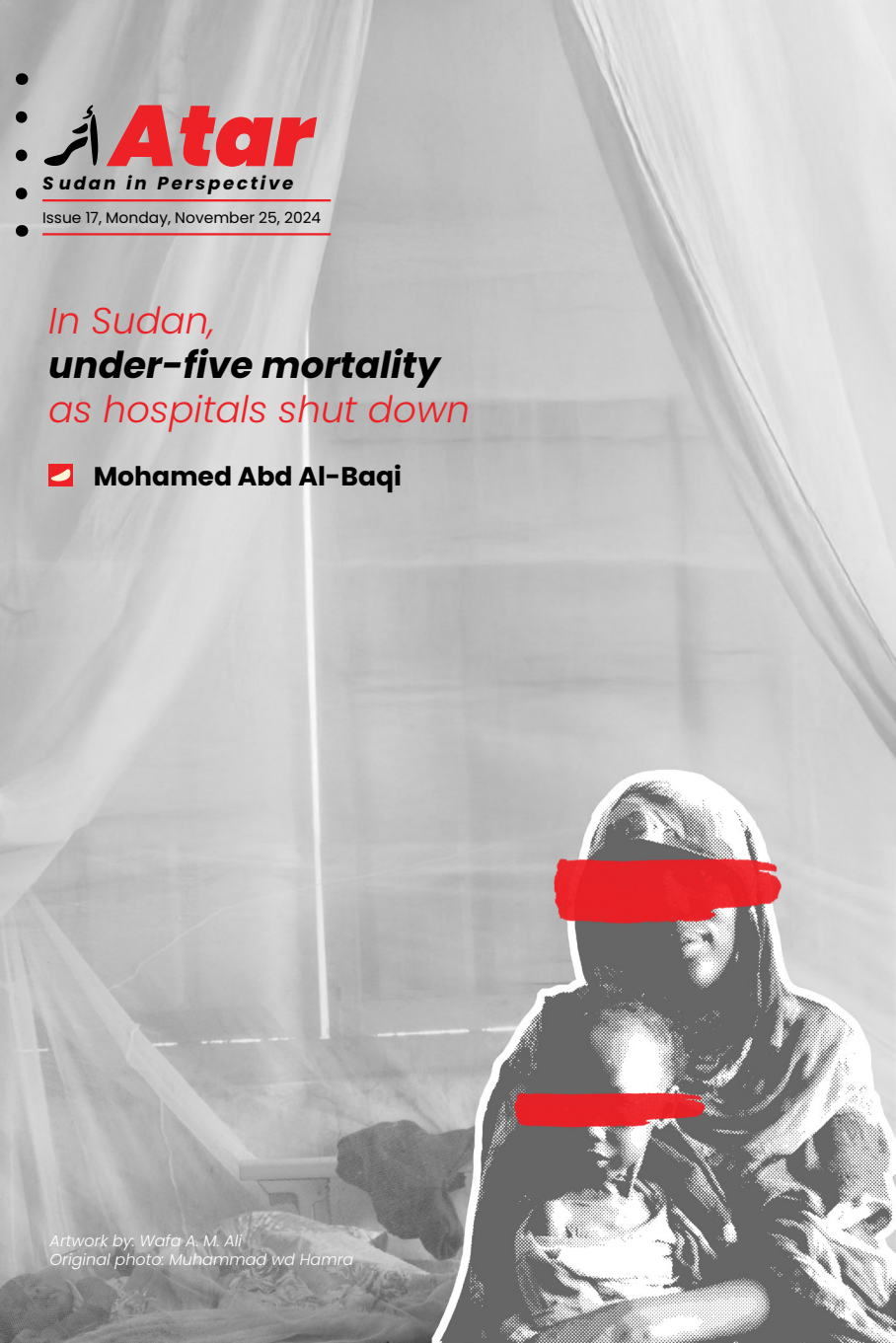
● **Sudan in Perspective**

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*In Sudan,*  
**under-five mortality**  
*as hospitals shut down*

🚩 **Mohamed Abd Al-Baqi**

Artwork by: Wafa A. M. Ali  
Original photo: Muhammad wd Hamra





In November last year, scalding water from a tea preparation pot spilled on 18-month-old Yousuf Fadl As-Seed, causing severe burns to his back and lower abdomen. Unable to receive the necessary treatment due to the shutdown of hospitals and healthcare centres in areas under Rapid Support Forces (RSF) control in North Kordofan State, Yousuf succumbed to his wounds after 45 days of struggling with his injuries.

Yousuf's family, originally residing in the town of Wad Ashana, in Umm Rawaba locality, North Kordofan state, was displaced to a nearby village following the RSF's incursion into the town in early October 2023.

Between October 2023 and September 2024, seven children under the age of five from the same village where Yousuf's family had sought refuge passed away due to various illnesses. The surviving children have not received any form of medical care or routine vaccinations.

Ibrahim Yousuf, a displaced father of six children, three of which are under five and currently living in Al-Obaidab village near Wad Ashana, says none of his children have had access to healthcare or vaccination doses since their arrival in June 2023.

"Since the RSF seized control of Umm Rawaba in August 2023, official institutions have vanished. Hospitals have closed their doors, and doctors and other

healthcare professionals have fled villages and towns seeking safety in distant displacement camps or in neighbouring countries. This has deprived children of even the most basic healthcare services or vaccinations," Ibrahim told *Atar*.

Similarly, Fadl As-Seed, Yousuf's father, recalled that his son needed urgent medical attention. Yet, the family was forced to rely on traditional remedies until the child ultimately died.

The humanitarian crisis is similarly stark in the Umbadda locality of Khartoum State, parts of which are under RSF control. Five children, aged between one and three, died in Block 2 of Dar Al-Salam, west of Libya Market. The causes of death included waterborne diarrhea (three cases), malaria (one case), and pneumonia (one case).

Eissa Adam, the uncle of one of the

*Between October 2023 and September 2024, seven under-five in a village in North Kordofan passed away due to various illnesses. The surviving children have not received any form of medical care or routine vaccinations.*

deceased children, told *Atar* that healthcare services in Umbadda are virtually non-existent.

"Hospitals have shut down, and doctors have fled areas of intense fighting.

The few medical centres that remain open charge exorbitant fees for consultations, and families are unable to afford medications due to their soaring prices,” he said.

During the war, Al-Bulk Children’s Hospital in Karari locality remained the only facility functioning regularly. However, its proximity to the fierce battlefield initially kept the number of visits low. This changed when the intensity of fighting shifted toward the Salha area, south of the Engineers Corps, leading to an increase in child patients. Today, Al-Bulk Hospital serves as the primary referral centre for children in Karari, a locality that experienced relatively few military attacks by the RSF during the war.

Between June 2023 and July 2024, about 500 children under the age of one were treated at Al-Bulk Hospital, according to Federal Health Minister Haitham Ibrahim. Mr Ibrahim told *Atar* that the nearby Al-Naw Hospital’s paediatric unit received approximately 800 cases of children under one year during the same period.

Due to the shutdown of public hospitals and the lack of formal monitoring mechanisms, no documented statistics exist about the condition of children in areas under the control of the RSF.

“The healthcare system has completely collapsed in regions like Al-Jazirah, Kordofan, Darfur, and large parts

*Between June 2023 and July 2024, about 500 under- one were treated at Al-Balak Hospital, and about 800 at Al-No Hospital, both in Karari locality, according to Federal Health Minister Haitham Ibrahim.*



The outbreak of war in mid-April last year brought operations to a halt at Sudan’s most renowned paediatric hospitals, including public, charitable, and private facilities. By June 2023, children’s hospitals in Khartoum State had closed their doors to young patients, overwhelmed by escalating violence, intensifying military clashes, and widespread insecurity.

Dr Ahmed Abdalla, a specialist at Mohammed Al-Amin Hamid Hospital in Omdurman, told *Atar* that at least six paediatric hospitals across Khartoum and Omdurman ceased operations during the first week of the war. These include Gaafar Ibn Ouf Paediatric Hospital, the Swedish Children’s Hospital, the paediatric unit of Khartoum Hospital, Mohammed Al-Amin Hospital in Omdurman, and the paediatric unit at Omdurman Teaching Hospital. ♦

of Khartoum State. There are no statistics or even basic knowledge about what is happening to citizens and children in these areas,” Hiba Omar, the chairperson of the preparatory committee for the Doctors’ Syndicate, told *Atar*.

Hiba attributed the collapse of healthcare in RSF-controlled areas to two main factors: The difficulty of transporting medications, medical supplies, and routine vaccines, and the mass exodus of doctors fleeing gross violations committed against them by RSF forces.

In North Darfur, the only children’s hospital in the capital, Al-Fashir, ceased operations. Last May, MSF [reported](#) that an airstrike near Babiker Nahar Children’s Hospital caused the collapse of the intensive care unit roof, resulting in the deaths of two children receiving treatment and one medical staff member, along with other injuries.

Medical sources in Al-Fashir revealed that Babiker Nahar Hospital had shut down after RSF forces took control of the surrounding area.

The situation is no better in eastern Sudan. Dr Mudathir Ahmed, Medical Director of Tokar Hospital in Red Sea State, told *Atar* that the region has seen a steady increase in diseases among children under five, including waterborne diarrhea, malaria, and malnutrition. He noted a noticeable rise in child mortality during the conflict.

*According to testimonies obtained by Atar, registering and tracking children and newborns has become exceedingly difficult.*



In a report issued last July, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) [stated](#) that approximately 70 to 80 per cent of hospitals in conflict-affected areas were no longer operational, and more than 65 per cent of the population lacked access to healthcare.

The organisation detailed in its report, covering all of Sudan’s states, that children constituted 16 per cent of war casualties treated at Bashair Public Hospital in southern Khartoum during the conflict. ♦

According to testimonies obtained by *Atar*, registering and tracking children and newborns has become exceedingly difficult. A source from the Omdurman Statistics Centre said the Ministry of Health's statistical operations have been significantly hindered by logistical challenges, including the closure of statistical offices in several hospitals and the shutdown of major maternity hospitals. This has deprived the ministry of accurate birth records.

In contrast, Sudan's Minister of Health, Haitham Ibrahim, reported that between May 2023 and July 2024, more than 500,000 children were born in government-controlled areas, with approximately 1,100 infants under one year dying during the same period.

The number of neonatal care units in Khartoum State has dwindled, from 16 before the war to just one at Al-Bulk Hospital in Omdurman. The Ministry of Health also reported losing several neonatal care units across the states, which previously totaled around 39 nationwide. Ibrahim said the neonatal unit at Al-Bulk Hospital, originally equipped with 12

*Al-Hawi, who remained at his family home in As-Sahafa, central Khartoum, for 16 months during the conflict, told Atar that children in his neighbourhood, including his four children under five, received no healthcare or routine vaccinations during that time.*

beds, has doubled its capacity in recent months and is now fully operational.

During the war, children under five faced severe shortages of routine vaccinations across all Sudanese states.

Suleiman Al-Hawi, who remained at his family home in As-Sahafa, central Khartoum, for 16 months during the conflict, told *Atar* that children in his neighbourhood, including his four children under five, received no healthcare or routine vaccinations during that time. One of his children, now 11 months old, is yet to receive any immunization.



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# **Warriors beyond the battlefield:** *how midwives are saving mothers' lives in Sudan*

 **Rahma Jabeir**



Siti Batul rides her bicycle, Omdurman ca. 1925-1935. From: *Khartoum at Night: Fashion and Body Politics in Imperial Sudan* by Marie Grace Brown, p. 75.

Sudan has long suffered from a **healthcare crisis** characterised by a chronic shortage of medicines, limited access to medical care within hospitals, and subpar health services. The situation worsened significantly after the outbreak of war, which **destroyed** numerous hospitals and health centres across various states, forcing them to shut down.

This has severely restricted access to essential medical services, particularly for emergencies such as accidents, injuries, and childbirth. Both men and women, whether in active conflict zones or relatively safe areas, now endure skyrocketing healthcare costs and deteriorating services.

Sudanese women, however, face an especially harrowing ordeal.

Those in conflict zones or displaced within Sudan, or forced to seek refuge abroad, experience compounding hardships. These range from various forms of violence to horrific crimes such as rape, which have been reported in all states affected by direct clashes between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In addition, women grapple with the challenges of pregnancy and childbirth under these dire conditions.

Amid such turmoil, skilled midwives emerge as unsung warriors, fighting battles far removed from the frontlines.

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The United Nations **reports** a disturbingly high rate of maternal and neonatal deaths in Sudan over the past six years. A key factor is the shortage of skilled midwives and inadequate prenatal care. The maternal mortality ratio is estimated at 295 deaths per 100,000 live births. Many of these deaths occur during home deliveries conducted without trained midwives or due to a lack of emergency obstetric care in healthcare facilities. ◆

## Local expertises amid challenges

Midwives play a pivotal role during wartime, particularly in the absence of specialists, well-equipped health centres, and reliable income sources. Across much of Sudan, women prefer to give birth at home with the assistance of a midwife rather than risking inadequate care in hospitals.

Mrs R (pseudonym), a midwife who currently resides in Al-Gadarif in eastern Sudan, reflects on her training at the Midwifery Training School. Speaking to *Atar*, R said the Ministry of Health ensured midwives were prepared to act swiftly and wisely in any situation. Their curriculum covered routine prenatal care, handling complex pregnancies, managing miscarriages, and addressing complications requiring immediate intervention.

She says all midwives are capable of managing difficult situations, each according to her effort, knowledge, and experience. R emphasises that midwives can also provide the necessary medical tools to address emergencies effectively.

Despite their extensive training, midwives sometimes face cases requiring specialised medical intervention, especially with first-time mothers or those who experience complications during or after childbirth.

Mrs A (another pseudonym), a midwife in Nyala, western Sudan, recalled a particularly dire

case where a mother's life was at risk. Lacking a specialist, A had to deliver the baby herself under challenging conditions. While she managed to save the mother, a feat she described as miraculous, she couldn't save the baby.

"Most deliveries I handle occur in the dead of the night. Often, I have to stay overnight because of the intense fighting and risk of stray bullets. I have delivered 15 babies under heavy fire, sometimes for

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no payment," Mrs A told *Atar*.

However, midwives' skills and resilience alone are not always enough. With widespread displacement due to war, some areas have been left without any midwives.

Mrs R was called to assist with a delivery in a rural area outside Al-Gadarif. The region lacked not only doctors but even a single midwife after the one serving there fled due to the war and the suspension of monthly salaries. The area is

*"I have delivered 15 babies under heavy fire, sometimes for no payment," Mrs A told Atar.*

remote, with unpaved roads further hindered by the rainy season, making access nearly impossible. A small health centre staffed by an assistant medical officer serves as the community's sole healthcare option. Without laboratory facilities or oversight from qualified doctors, diagnoses and treatments rely solely on the assistant's discretion.

"This region has not been directly affected by the war, as it is not a battleground. But imagine the plight of women in displacement camps or active conflict zones," Mrs R said.

Women face not only the absence of hospitals and doctors but also a dire lack of midwives and transportation. The looting and fuel shortages caused by RSF attacks have compounded these difficulties, leaving women stranded without access to medical care.

### Childbirth amid displacement

Another woman, Mrs M, recounted the story of her relative who referred to as J for privacy reasons, who sustained a severe head injury and heavy bleeding while four months pregnant. Fleeing an RSF attack on their area in Al-Geneina, West Darfur, the family left J and other patients behind because they couldn't move. RSF forces later stormed the hospital, murdering patients and subjecting J to sexual violence. They even attempted a forced delivery, despite her being only five months

pregnant. After resisting, with the help of her mother, J was eventually released, and they began their journey to Adré in Chad as refugees.

In Adré, J spent four months in hospital until she gave birth. She suffered complete paralysis and frequent fainting spells. Her story is one among countless harrowing experiences of women in Al-Geneina, where [human rights reports](#) have described the violence as amounting to ethnic cleansing and systematic displacement by RSF forces.

Meanwhile, in Al-Gadarif's Al-Tadamun camp, displaced from Khartoum, Rabha, a midwife, shared the story of a woman who gave birth a day before clashes erupted in Sinnar between SAF and RSF. Forced to walk 413 kilometers to Al-Gadarif, the woman suffered severe haemorrhaging without medical care until she reached Al-Gadarif, where she received basic first aid. Another woman delivered her baby mid-journey and continues to endure complications.

Amid these challenges, [grassroots initiatives](#) have emerged to address women's health needs, such as providing re-

*"We began in December, distributing reusable cloth pads in Kassala. We are planning to expand to Sinnar and Al-Gadarif." Marwa, a member of the One Million Sustainable Pads initiative, told Atar.*



usable sanitary pads, contraceptives, and maternity supplies.

“We began in December, distributing reusable cloth pads in Kassala. We are planning to expand to Sinnar and Al-Gadarif.” Marwa, a member of the [One Million Sustainable Pads](#) initiative, told *Atar*.

The initiative also conducts health awareness campaigns and distributes supplies in refugee camps in Uganda and Chad.

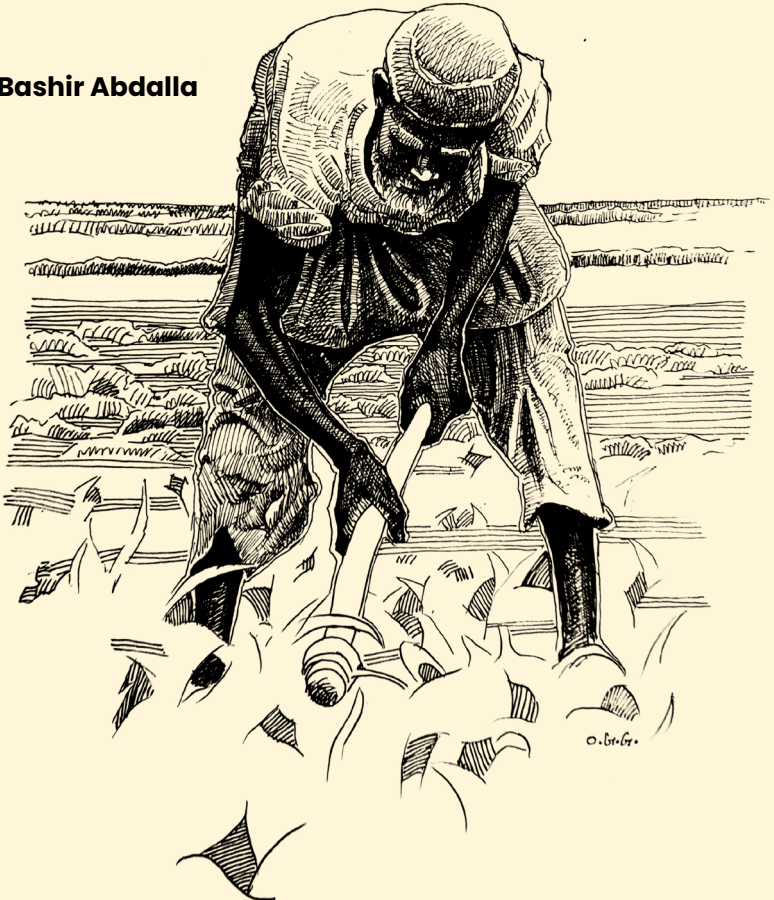
While such efforts offer vital relief, they only address narrow aspects of the broader health crisis. Access to skilled midwives and healthcare facilities remains an unresolved issue, leaving countless women vulnerable.



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**In Kassala,**  
*nature conspires with man to spoil  
the agricultural season*

 **Bashir Abdalla**



**M**ohammed Sarour, a farmer in Kassala State, is well-versed in all the requirements for successfully cultivating onions. Since the beginning of the season, he has cultivated over 300 feddans (acres), investing in premium fertilizers, applying top-tier herbicides, and sourcing the finest seeds from abroad using hard currency.

However, this year's rainy season brought unexpected challenges: The cultivated land was flooded, and the crop was lost due to torrential rains, the heaviest the state has witnessed in over five years. Onions cannot tolerate excess water. To salvage what remained, Sarour says he accepted his losses and decided to halt his agricultural project this year, perhaps resuming once the overall situation in the country stabilises.

Kassala State, located in eastern Sudan, is renowned for its fertile soil, diverse crops, and strategic geography, making it a vital region that contributes significantly to Sudan's agricultural economy. It has, however, not escaped the repercussions of the war, despite being spared from direct bombings or clashes so far. The state has received hundreds of thousands of people fleeing the horrors of armed conflicts in Al-Jazirah, Sinnar, and Khartoum, states that have borne the raw brunt of war.

Furthermore, Kassala, like other states in Sudan, is experiencing an exceptionally heavy rain season this year. Rainfall levels have reached 118 millimetres,



Kassala State produces a variety of crops, including sorghum, wheat, sesame, millet, cotton, legumes such as fava beans, lentils, and chickpeas, as well as vegetables and fruits like tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers, potatoes, onions, mangoes, guavas, lemons, and bananas. Farmers in Kassala rely on various irrigation methods, including: flood irrigation via canals from permanent rivers like Atbara and Gash, essential for projects such as New Halfa, which produces year-round, seasonal rain irrigation, the most common method, well irrigation, used in areas facing water scarcity, drip irrigation, a modern system that conserves water and enhances efficiency, though its application remains limited in the state. ♦

an unprecedented figure in recent years. Farmers rely on the flood irrigation of the Gash River, essential for the Gash Agricultural Project, which once sufficed for the state's local consumption and even produced surplus.

The aftermath of the April 15 war has led to a severe labour shortage, soaring prices for fuel, fertilizers, seeds, and pesticides, as well as rising production costs. Additionally, floods and heavy rains have destroyed many farms and agricultural infrastructure, negatively affecting farming, harvesting, and production while complicating the delivery of agricultural products to markets. As a result, this year's agricultural season in Kassala faces the threat of failure. From the outset, many farmers refrained from participating in the season out of fear that the war might escalate. Those who did begin preparations were unable to cultivate their usual areas.

Unlike Sarour, farmer Hamid Younis chose not to take significant risks this year. He decided to cultivate only 15 feddans instead of the 350 feddans he used to farm in the past, fearing a repeat of last year's failed season, when the insurance company failed to compensate him.

Despite reducing the cultivated area, Younis says the costs were astronomical. A single barrel of diesel cost 700,000 Su-

danese pounds. Security breakdowns in many agricultural project areas led to fuel thefts from camps, either secretly or forcibly. Rugged roads, exacerbated by rains and floods from the Ethiopian highlands, hindered the security authorities' ability

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to pursue the offenders, unlike in previous seasons. This year also saw the spread of pests such as gnats and various bacteria, with no pest control or pesticide efforts in place. Furthermore, many cultivated areas were ruined by rainwater and floods, leading to crop decay.

As a result, even the 15 feddans culti-

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ated by Younis remain at risk of failure.

Floods and torrential rains inundated many rain-fed agricultural projects. Even

flood-irrigated projects, such as New Halfa and its surrounding areas, face risks of canal breaches and accompanying floods due to the increased rainfall levels.

Many farmers complained of a severe shortage of improved seeds. The cessation of seed imports this year forced them to use untreated local seeds, leading to the spread of harmful weeds and the gnats' pest in sesame crops. Accessibility challenges to agricultural lands further prevented the spraying of pesticides, whose prices have surged due to their scarcity.

The war has also caused numerous private sector agricultural companies, such as CTC, to cease operations. CTC closed its offices in most Sudanese states, including Kassala, since late last year. According to an employee, the company had supported production inputs and agricultural project needs up to the harvest stage. With its withdrawal and that of similar companies, technical challenges have worsened, alongside natural factors.

Experts have predicted consequences threatening this season, warning of a severe shortage in meeting local demand, especially with increasing demand and the continued arrival of large numbers of displaced people seeking safety in the state, especially in recent weeks from villages east of Al-Jazirah State.

Atar obtained the prices of major crops produced in the state, which have risen significantly compared to previous

years. The price of a sack of sesame is now 250,000 Sudanese pounds, up from 100,000 last year. Sorghum now costs 170,000 pounds per sack, compared to 40,000 pounds last year. Wheat is priced

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at 160,000 pounds compared to last year's peak of 50,000 pounds, while millet costs 100,000 pounds per sack, up from 25,000 pounds the previous year. Notably, these prices increased during the agricultural season, before the harvest, and most market offerings come from the previous season's production.

Speaking to Atar about the main challenges since the armed conflict began, a former director of an agricultural company that suspended operations explained that their company relocated its headquarters from Khartoum to Al-Jazirah State to resume activities. However, after Rapid Support Forces overran Al-Jazirah and before arrangements could be finalised to move to a safer state, the sharp rise in the dollar exchange rate and increased production input costs made it unsustainable for the company to continue operations.

"Continuing operations became a

risk to the company's capital during the war, as was evident in the 2023 season. Thus, the company chose to suspend activities nationwide and laid off most of its employees, engineers, and workers," the former director told *Atar*.

A source from the state's Ministry of Agriculture told *Atar* that the ministry is doing its best to support the agricultural season. However, the overall instability has created several obstacles, particularly in rehabilitating infrastructure, roads, and addressing the high costs of imported production inputs such as seeds, fer-

tilizers, pesticides, and modern plowing and harvesting technologies.

While some banks have not stopped financing agricultural projects, farmers' reluctance is justified, according to the government source. The skyrocketing cost of fuel, a cornerstone of agricultural operations from clearing to plowing and harvesting, further exacerbates the challenges.



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