

# Movements, challenges and intentions of refugees and migrants in Eastern Sudan during the conflict in 2023

On April 15th, 2023, conflict erupted in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), internally displacing over 6 million and forcing more almost 1.5 million to flee to neighbouring countries.<sup>1</sup> Among the displaced are a large number of refugees and migrants who were hosted, settled in or transiting Sudan. Sudan was a major refugee and migrant-hosting country prior to the start of the conflict, with over 1.1 million refugees and asylum seekers,<sup>2</sup> and an estimated 1.2 million migrants.<sup>3</sup> This group may face particular vulnerabilities as they are once more forced to move and seek refuge elsewhere. This snapshot examines refugees and migrants' movements as a result of the conflict, the main challenges encountered while trying to find safety and the protection abuses faced. It focuses mainly on Ethiopians and Eritreans who fled to eastern Sudan.

## Key findings

- The majority of respondents (79%) have moved since the start of the conflict, with most (74%) fleeing Khartoum.
- 72% of respondents faced difficulties in moving vulnerable family members (pregnant women, elderly, people with disabilities, children, to name a few) while seeking refuge.
- In Gedaref, most respondents have housing (62/63) and healthcare (58/63) needs. In Port Sudan access to basic needs such as water (22/26), food (22/26), cash (22/26) and healthcare (22/26) are the most frequently cited challenges.
- Port Sudan and Gedaref are not perceived as safe places: 47/63 described feeling unsafe in Port Sudan, and 25/26 in Gedaref. Respondents in Kassala State more often described feeling somewhat safe (17/30).

- Since the start of the conflict, the majority have experienced and/or witnessed robbery (81%) and death (77%). Adults aged 25 or older more often faced bribery/extortion (75/86), while youth more often faced detention (33/66) and kidnapping (32/66).
- While the majority aspire to reach North America or Europe, over the next three months, respondents are split between those intending to leave Sudan (54%) and those outlining they will stay (46%).

## Data and profiles

This snapshot draws upon 152 surveys collected in July and August 2023, 3-4 months after the outbreak of conflict in Sudan. All respondents were refugees or migrants who were in Sudan when the conflict started. The dataset comprises 42 interviews conducted with respondents interviewed before conflict broke out, in Khartoum (n=23) and Kassala State (n=19) (Kassala city (n=16) and Shagarab refugee camps (n=3)), and re-interviewed after the conflict started,<sup>4</sup> as well as 110 interviews with respondents interviewed after the conflict began, in Gedaref (n=61), Port Sudan (n=26), Kassala State (n=11) (Kassala city (n=6) and, Shagarab refugee camps (n=5)) and other locations (n=12).<sup>5</sup> Both groups of respondents were asked the same set of questions. All interviews were carried out via phone by enumerators based in Port Sudan, Kassala State and Gedaref. For this reason, the results describe the experiences of refugees and migrants who have sought refuge in eastern Sudan.

59% of respondents are men and 41% are women. 43% of respondents are youth (18-24 years of age) and 57% are aged 25 or older. Respondents are mainly from Ethiopia (37%), Eritrea (36%), but also Central African Republic (CAR) (14%), Chad (8%), Niger (4%) and

1 UNHCR (2024). [Sudan Situation – Operational Data Portal](#). Accessed in January 2024

2 UNHCR (2023). [Sudan-Data Portal \(Accessed on 9 October 2023\)](#).

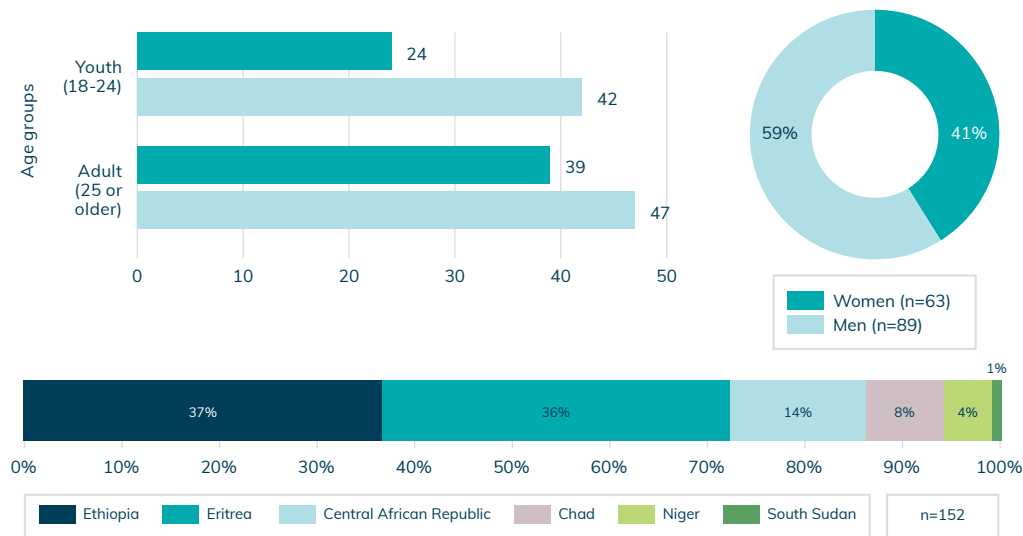
3 EU (2020). [First steps taken to protect migrant domestic workers in the Sudan](#).

4 As will be outlined in the next section, most (n=30) were still in Sudan, specifically in Kassala State (n= 19) (Kassala city (n=16), Shagarab refugee camps (n=3)), Khartoum (n=6), Gedaref (n=2) or other locations (n=3) while 12 had moved to other countries, specifically Chad (n=5), Ethiopia (n=4), Libya (n=1), Central African Republic (n=1) and Egypt (n=1).

5 Other locations included Sennar (n=3), Wad Madani (n=3), Atbara (n=2), Singa (n=1), Um-Gargour Camp (n=1), and other unspecified locations in Sudan (n=2).

South Sudan (1%). A majority of Ethiopian respondents were 25 or older (48/56), as were Eritreans (33/54), while all respondents from CAR were youth (22/22), as were 7 out of 12 Chadians.

**Figure 1. Sample: gender, age and nationality distribution**



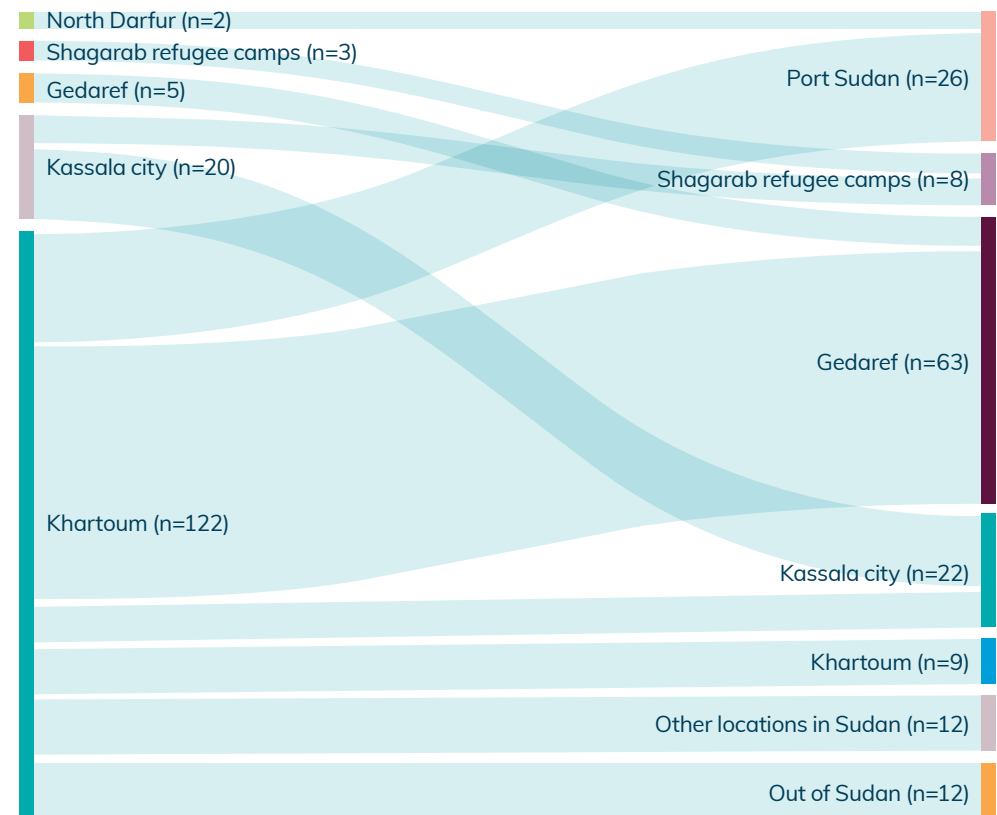
## Most respondents in Gedaref and Port Sudan have fled from Khartoum

Since the start of the conflict, the majority of respondents (79%) had moved from their former areas of residence in Sudan to either eastern Sudan or neighboring countries. 12 respondents had left Sudan: 5 were in Chad, 4 in Ethiopia,<sup>6</sup> 1 in Egypt, 1 in Libya and 1 in CAR. The remaining 140 respondents moved to different locations within Sudan, with the majority in Gedaref (44%), followed by Port Sudan (19%) and Kassala State (16%). Before the conflict began, 80% of respondents were in Khartoum. Others were in Kassala State (13%) and other locations (7%). Among those who were in Kassala State prior to the conflict, the majority were Eritrean (17/20).

As shown in Figure 2, many refugees and migrants interviewed in Gedaref and Port Sudan had fled Khartoum when the conflict started (58/63 respondents interviewed in Gedaref

and 24/26 of those in Port Sudan). All 9 respondents interviewed in Khartoum had been living there before the conflict began. Most of those who were in Kassala State had not moved since conflict broke out (15/22) while others had arrived from Khartoum (7/22).

**Figure 2. Movements between start of conflict and time of interview (n=152)**



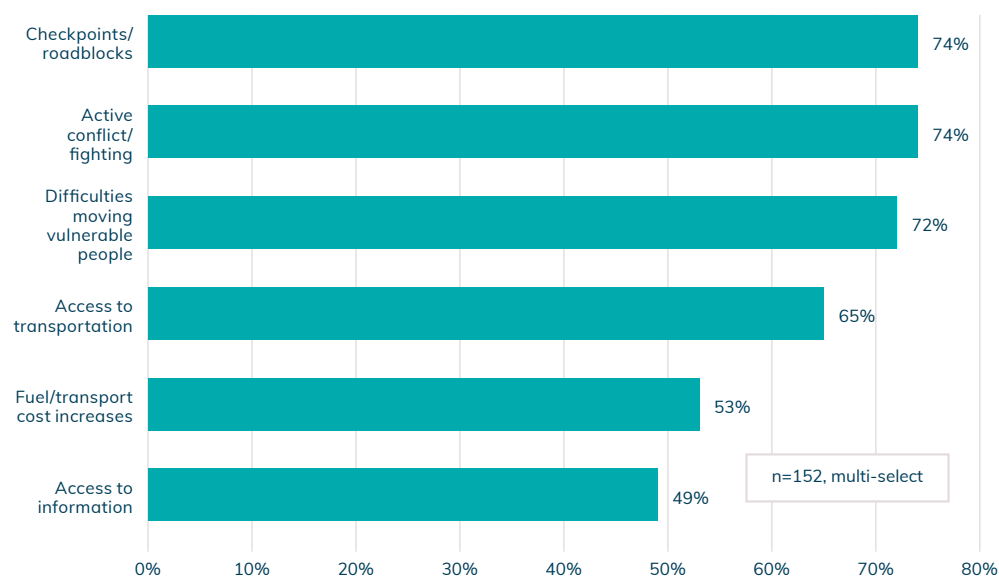
## Checkpoints, fighting and difficulties moving vulnerable family members are main obstacles in seeking safety

Respondents faced multiple challenges in seeking safety, with a majority citing five: active conflict/fighting (74%), checkpoints/roadblocks (74%), difficulties moving vulnerable people (pregnant women, elderly, people with disability, children, to name a few) (72%), access to transportation (65%) and fuel/transport cost increases (53%). Respondents over the age

<sup>6</sup> Among the 5 respondents who moved to Chad, 2 were Chadian nationals, 2 were Nigerien and 1 was Central African. Of the 4 respondents who moved to Ethiopia, 2 were Ethiopians and 2 were Eritreans.

of 25 more often cited difficulties moving vulnerable people (76/86) compared to youth (34/66), presumably because they were responsible for the safety of their entire families. In terms of transportation and fuel, skyrocketing prices have been widely reported as a key obstacle impeding flight.<sup>7</sup> It is possible that the costs of transportation and fuel prevented people from fleeing longer distances or continuing journeys interrupted by the conflict. More generally, the data show that respondents faced multiple barriers to their movements when attempting to find safe locations. There were no observable differences in the challenges expressed by surveyed women versus men.

**Figure 3. What were the main challenges in leaving the location you were in when the conflict started?**



## Ethiopians and Eritreans have greater access to information on safe locations

69% of respondents reported having access to information about safe locations when the conflict broke out. A majority of Eritreans (44/54) and Ethiopians (47/56) had access to such information, compared to a minority of Central Africans (8/22) and Chadians (2/12).

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR (2023). [Sudan Emergency UNHCR Supplementary Appeal - May to October 2023 \(Revised June 2023\)](#).

This could stem from the greater support networks that Ethiopians and Eritreans have in eastern Sudan due to the presence of larger co-national communities close to borders with their countries of origin.

Among those who did access information on safe locations, different age groups cited different sources of information: youth mostly mentioned other refugees and migrants (15/35) and locals they met during their journeys (12/35), while respondents over the age of 25, who were predominantly Ethiopian and Eritrean (potentially again linked to the value of personal networks) most often mentioned friends and family in country of origin (59/70). Protection actors should therefore consider how different social networks could be better leveraged to disseminate information about assistance and safety and strengthened in the case of Central Africans and Chadians.

## In Gedaref, housing and healthcare are major concerns; in Port Sudan, it is access to food and water

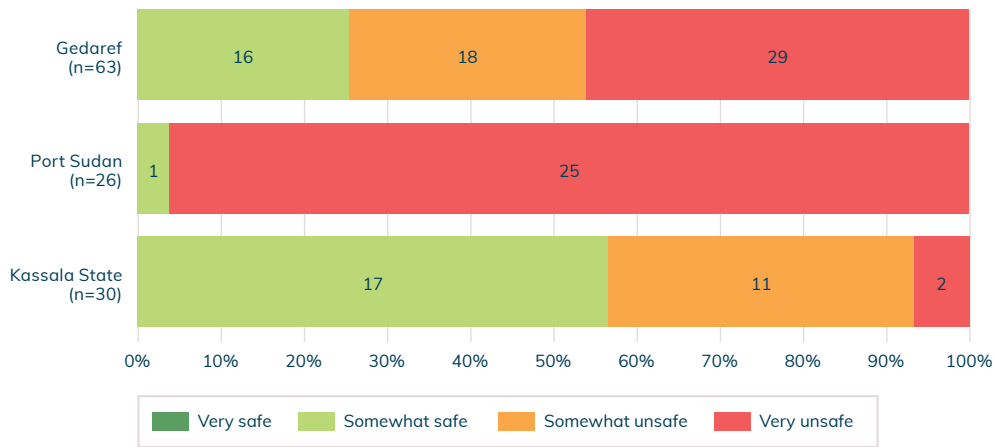
In their current locations, respondents commonly expressed challenges related to access to cash (75%), healthcare (71%) and housing (71%). A vast majority of respondents in Gedaref (n=63) identified housing (62) and healthcare (58) as the main challenges, while in Port Sudan (n=26), food (22), water (22), cash (22) and healthcare (22) were top concerns. In Kassala State (n=22), most respondents cited cash (21). There were no observable differences in the challenges and needs expressed by surveyed women versus men.

## Port Sudan and Gedaref considered unsafe

Overall, 66% of respondents felt unsafe in their current location. 47 out of 63 respondents in Gedaref felt unsafe, as did close to all those in Port Sudan (25/26). In Kassala State,<sup>8</sup> where most respondents had been since before the outbreak of conflict, respondents felt somewhat safe (17/29). Safety did not appear to vary by gender or age.

<sup>8</sup> Including Kassala city and Shagarab refugee camps

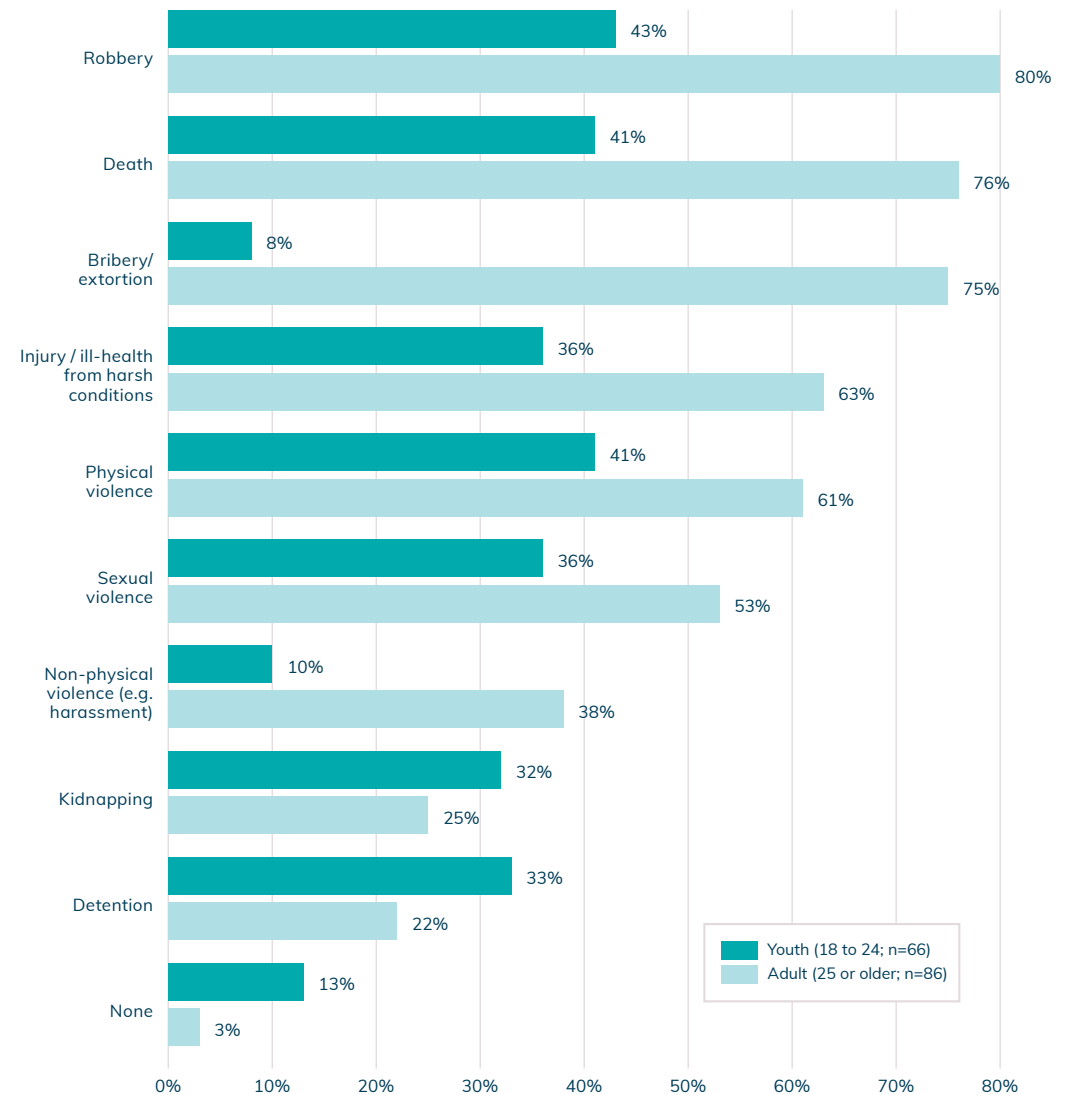
**Figure 4. To what extent do you feel safe in your current location? (in locations with 20+ respondents)**



## Most respondents experienced or witnessed robbery, violence and death during the outbreak of conflict

Most respondents (89%) had experienced or witnessed abuses during the outbreak of conflict. 81% had experienced or witnessed robbery, 77% death and 67% physical violence. While no major differences were observed between women and men respondents, differences can be observed in Figure 5 in the types of protection incidents experienced/witnessed by youth and adults aged 25 and older. Whereas most older respondents had experienced/witnessed bribery/extortion (75/86), this was the case only for 8/66 youth. Youth, most of whom were from CAR and Chad, more commonly reported detention (33/66 vs. 22/86) and kidnapping (32/66 vs. 25/86). Kidnapping and detention have been well documented in Sudan,<sup>9</sup> and if the conflict continues, we may see an increase in arbitrary detention for ransom as well as trafficking in persons as parties to the conflict and aligned militias seek to raise funds for their war efforts.<sup>10</sup> Further research is needed to explore increases in such dynamics and the profiles of those most vulnerable.

**Figure 5. Have you witnessed or experienced abuses since April 15th?**



9 US Department of State (2022). [2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Sudan](#).

10 The Guardian (2023). [‘I saw many bodies’: having escaped one conflict, Tigray refugees face new terrors](#).

## While the majority aspire to reach North America or Europe, over the next three months respondents are split between those intending to leave Sudan and those outlining they will stay

Almost all respondents outlined that they had not reached the end of their overall journey (99%) and that their final destinations were Canada (49%), Europe (26%), Australia (9%), Egypt (5%), the United States (4%) or other locations (6%).

Short-term onward movement intentions over the next three months were split among respondents in Sudan (n=140): 54% wanted to move to another country and 46% intended to stay in Sudan. Those reporting intentions to move out of Sudan (n=74) mentioned intentions to move to Egypt (38/74), followed by Europe (10), Uganda (7), Canada (5) and South Sudan (4), among others. Most respondents who intended to stay in Sudan for the next three months mentioned they would stay at their current location (60/65), while some intended to move to other safe locations in Sudan (5/65). It was more common for youth respondents in Sudan to express intentions to move internationally (41/61) than it was for those aged 25 and over (33/79).

Ethiopians and Eritreans more often outlined intentions to stay in Sudan (33/54 and 31/52) over the next three months; in contrast, all respondents from other countries mentioned wanting to leave (34/34). For many Eritreans, returning to their country of origin is not an option and would likely incur high protection risks and detention upon arrival. Reports have described Eritreans near the border allegedly being captured and/or kidnapped by the Eritrean authorities or by human traffickers.<sup>11</sup> Ethiopians, some of whom had fled war in Tigray and Northern Ethiopia, now find themselves 'between two wars' and may fear to return home.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, as of August 2023, conflict erupted in the Amhara region of Ethiopia,<sup>13</sup> further impeding returns to that region as well as safe crossing into Ethiopia. Finally, it is important to highlight that of those who intended to stay in Sudan (n=63), many did so even if outlining that they did not feel safe in current location (29/63), suggesting limited alternatives.

11 Al-Jazeera (2023). [Eritrean refugees caught between crisis at home, Sudan conflict](#).

12 VOA (2023). [Caught Between Two Wars: Sudan's Ethiopian Refugees](#).

13 ACLED (2023). [Crisis in Ethiopia's Amhara Region](#).



### 4Mi data collection

[4Mi](#) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in East and Southern Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Europe, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at:

[www.mixedmigration.org/4mi](http://www.mixedmigration.org/4mi)