

JACK DENTON

They fled a massacre. Now the city that gave them refuge may be next

A campaign of violence is spreading from town to town in Sudan's brutal civil war and El Obeid, now home to 700,000 people, is close to being surrounded



An injured Sudanese woman who fled El Fasher at a camp in Darfur state

MOHAMMED BAKRY/AP

Jack Denton, Nairobi

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hen the internet is down in El Obeid, Fatima worries that drones will hit those who gather to find a connection via satellite. When the internet is

▼ ▼ up, it is even harder to ignore that the Sudanese civil war is now at her doorstep, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) are inching closer.

“Every day on social media they issue threats, saying they will capture the city, kill civilians, leave no one alive, loot people’s belongings — which they call ‘spoils’ — and rape women,” the 25-year-old volunteer aid worker said.

Fatima says she sees as many as 20 drones overhead each day and that strikes on civilian buildings are increasing. One of her relatives was recently killed.



Debris from drones has been found in El Obeid

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Fuel and water supplies are dwindling and medication that Fatima's mother relies upon is absent from markets. The government narrowly holds the lifeline road from the east, but many trucks do not make it through.

Fareed al-Homaid, spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation in Sudan, said: "Many people have endured months of displacement, uncertainty and repeated disruptions to essential services, making it increasingly difficult to access safe water, healthcare and other basic needs."

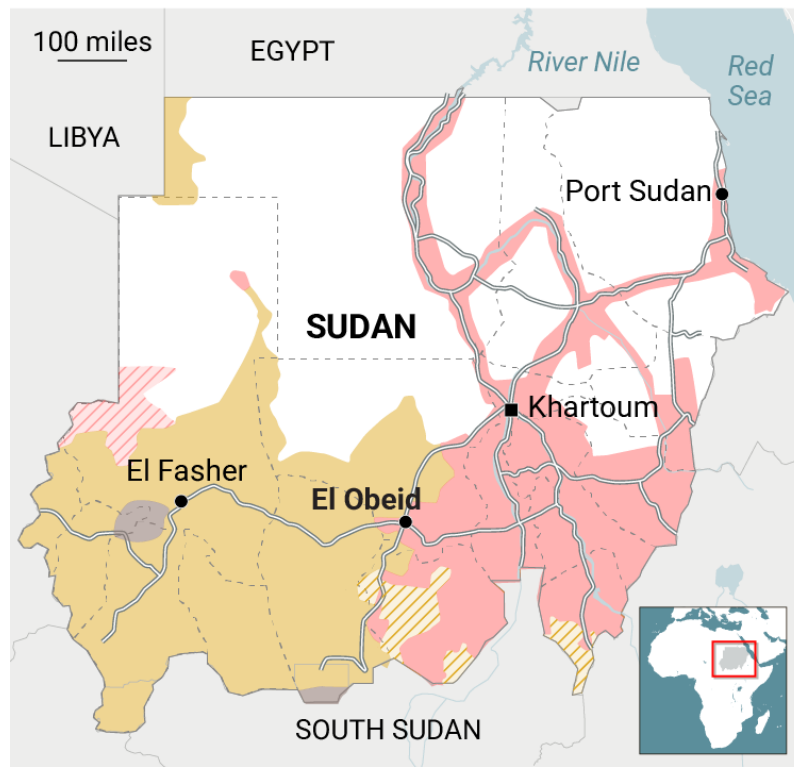
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One of Sudan's largest cities, El Obeid is the heart of the Kordofan region that has emerged as a key battleground [between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces \(SAF\)](#).

The city, held by the SAF, is home to about 500,000 residents and as many as 200,000 people displaced by civil war since April 2023.

Areas of control

- SAF (Sudanese Armed Forces)
- RSF (Rapid Support Forces)
- Other groups
- Pro-SAF rebels
- Pro-RSF rebels



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times

Source: Critical Threats Project; Liam Karr; Michael DeAngelo

The RSF have massed fighters around El Obeid since early June, suggesting that a ground assault is coming.

Ahmed Soliman, a senior research fellow at Chatham House focused on the Horn of Africa, said: “It is envisaged that there will be an escalation over the coming weeks. That’s the real worry, given the pattern of atrocities that the RSF has repeated in El Fasher, in El Geneina and other places.”



Displaced families from southern Kordofan in El Obeid in January

REUTERSEB SIDDIG/REUTERS

The RSF's takeover of El Fasher in North Darfur last October bore "hallmarks of genocide", the United Nations said in February. According to Amnesty International, the RSF committed crimes against humanity in El Fasher, including murder, sexual violence, torture and slavery.

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Residents of El Obeid fear a similar fate.

“I have seen some of the atrocities that took place in El Fasher,” Fatima said. “Everyone is worried that the same scenario of massacres, killings, displacement and rape could happen here.”

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Battle for a strategic city

Sudan’s oil riches lie in the Kordofan region, where El Obeid sits. It also serves as a strategic crossroads between the western Darfur region, held by the RSF, and the capital, Khartoum, retaken by the SAF in March last year.

“It’s hard to overestimate the significance of El Obeid for the army and for the country as the whole,” said Joseph Tucker, senior analyst for the Horn of Africa at Crisis Group and a former US state department official. “Its fall would really allow the RSF to consolidate control and further partition the country.”

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- [**Why Kordofan matters: the next flashpoint in Sudan's brutal civil war**](#)

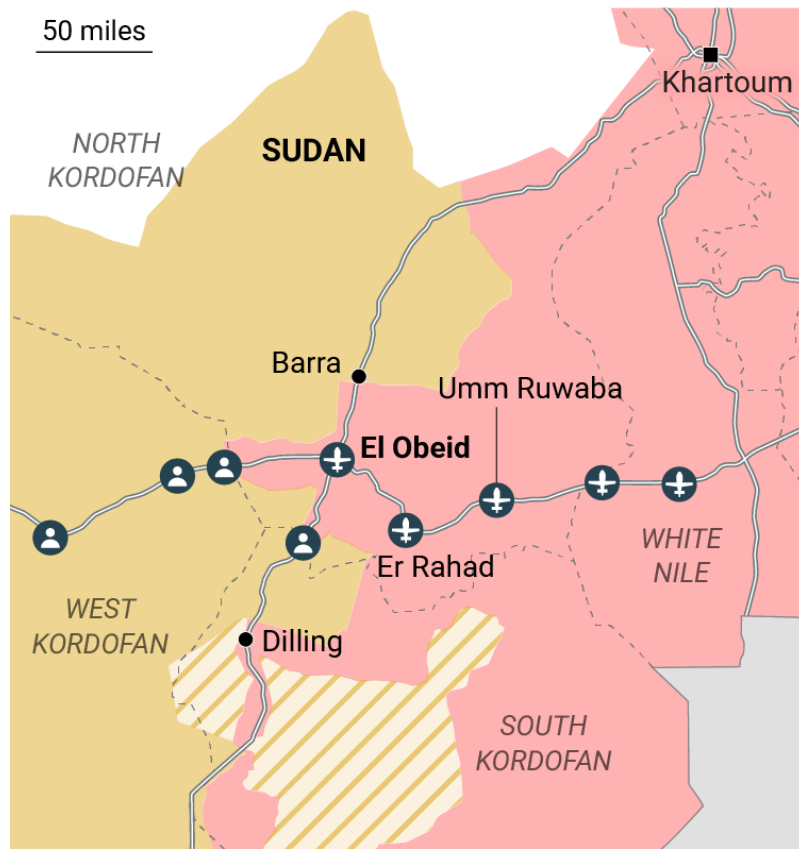
In recent months the SAF have retaken the towns of Barra and Dilling, to the north and south of El Obeid, but the RSF maintains sway across the region. Recent drone strikes have successfully targeted the SAF, including ammunition stores.

“If the RSF is successful in taking El Obeid it would be a strategic coup,” Soliman said. “I’m not sure they will be able to, but what seems to be very clear is their continued ability to amass resources, logistics and arms ... The SAF will put a lot of resources and effort into the protection of El Obeid, because it’s so close to their own power base.”

Pressure around El Obeid

SAF RSF Pro-RSF rebels Other groups

RSF drone strike Redeployment



Graphic by The Times and Sunday Times

Source: Critical Threats Project; Michael DeAngelo; Liam Karr; Angus Muldoon; Sudan Tribune.

El Obeid is home to one of the SAF's major infantry divisions, with the government army launching aerial strikes against the RSF and digging in to protect the city.



Queues for aid at al-Mohayra camp near El Obeid this week

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The SAF has recently built 51 kilometres of fortifications, including trenches, around El Obeid, according to the Humanitarian Research Lab at Yale University's School of Public Health.

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“I believe that the RSF will continue to escalate the siege. I think it’s likely they’ll increase drone attacks. I would imagine they will increase troop movements and reinforcements,” Tucker said. “I think they would first start probing certain areas before they would take on a major offensive.”



Civilians in crisis

Sudan has become the world’s worst humanitarian crisis since the forces of the SAF’s General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and fighters loyal to the RSF’s General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo [began waging civil war in 2023](#). The two are locked in a struggle for power, with the RSF, a spin-off of the Janjaweed militia that committed genocide in Darfur in the early 2000s, battling for control of the whole country, including its huge gold reserves and Red Sea coastline.



A rally in support of the SAF in Darfur on Tuesday

EBRAHIM HAMID/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Both sides have been accused of [atrocities against civilians](#). About 30 million people — two thirds of the population — require humanitarian assistance, according to UN estimates.

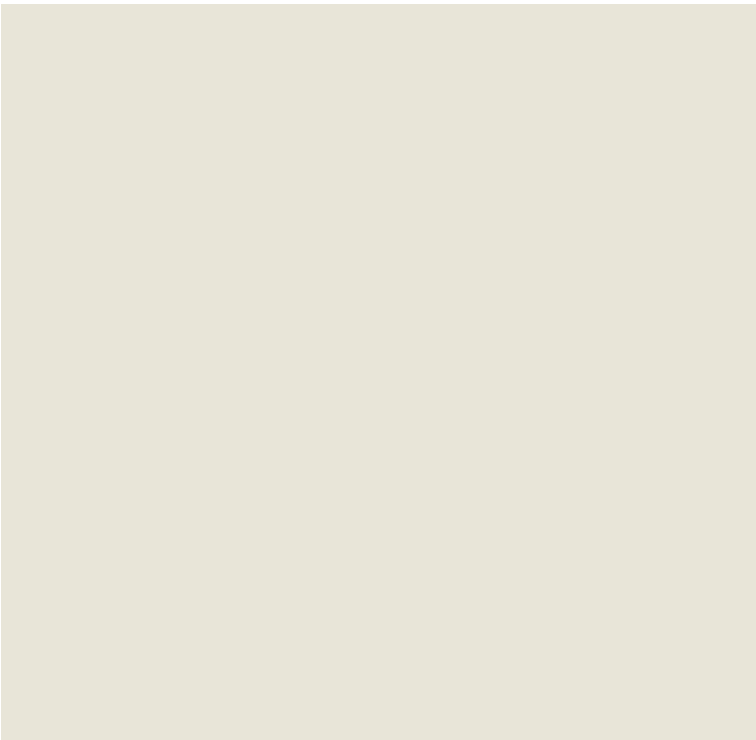
“This war is one which has been fought against the Sudanese people,” Soliman said. “The targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure is a way of instilling fear in the population and to ensure control of those territories.”

Attacks on fuel stations in El Obeid have caused prices to soar, with one jerrycan of fuel costing 280,000 Sudanese pounds, or £350, according to Fatima. Drone strikes have destroyed hospitals as well as roads, she said, making it difficult to distribute food and encouraging looting.

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Observed conflict damage to fuel stations in El Obeid

- Berm
- Damage observed May 25-June 25, 2026
- Damage observed Feb 19-Mar 17, 2026



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The worst fear of many is a repeat of [the RSF's takeover of El Fasher](#), when at least 6,000 people were killed in three days, according to UN estimates. Some experts put the death toll closer to 70,000.

“It is entirely possible that the atrocities that happened in El Geneina and El Fasher could be repeated in El Obeid,” Tucker said.



A ticking clock

The UN is scheduled to hold a debate on the situation in El Obeid on Friday, but there is concern that diplomatic pressure will be ineffective in ending the civil war.

Tucker said that while peace efforts have focused on a nationwide truce, local truces may be more attainable. However, [the role of the United Arab Emirates](#) — and its links to western peacemakers — remains a sticking point in any peace negotiations.

“The UAE remains the RSF’s key patron, providing critical financial, military and logistical support. The UAE denies allegations regarding its support to the RSF,” Tucker said.

Abu Dhabi, which has interests in Sudan’s vast gold reserves, is widely accused of backing the RSF, but its allies, including the British government, have been hesitant to apply pressure.

Nathaniel Raymond, head of Yale’s Humanitarian Research Lab, told parliament last month that the [UK failed to act on repeated warnings](#) about El Fasher because its foreign policy had been “captured” by the UAE.

Smoke is seen in El Fasher after RSF attacks last year

VANTOR/EPA

A lack of co-operation between western parties has also been a stumbling block in peace efforts.

The United States, which co-hosted a peace conference on Sudan in April in Berlin, needs to be backed up by the European Union as well as other western countries including Britain and Norway, Soliman said. This coalition should engage with regional powers that have their own stake in the war: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

“Pressure from them is the only way that we’re going to prevent atrocities from happening,” Soliman said. “That requires a firm collective message with punitive measures on the table ... the clock is very much ticking.”

In El Obeid, residents are left in the dark, both metaphorically and literally. Power stations have been bombed, leaving the city black for many nights at a time, Fatima said.

Families last week at al-Rahmaniyah camp for displaced people near El Obeid

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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She described paralysing fear over the prospect of trying to evacuate a city that has already swelled with people displaced by conflict. Many are all too aware of the capacity of the RSF to commit atrocities, she said, including in nearby Barra, where widespread killing and rape was reported.

“There is constant fear that El Obeid will become the next battlefield,” she said.

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