HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: The situation in Sudan, HC 438

Tuesday 26 November 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Monica Harding; Laura Kyrke-Smith; Noah Law; Alice Macdonald; Brian Mathew; David Mundell; David Reed; Sam Rushworth; David Taylor.

Questions 1 - 40

Witnesses

I: Claire San Filippo, Emergency Co-ordinator, Médecins Sans Frontières; Alsanosi Adam, Co-ordinator, Emergency Response Rooms; and Will Carter, Country Director, Sudan, Norwegian Refugee Council.

II: Dr Eva Khair, Director, Sudan Transnational Consortium; Dame Rosalind Marsden, Associate Fellow, Chatham House; and Dr Kate Ferguson, Co-executive Director, Protection Approaches.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Claire San Filippo, Alsanosi Adam and Will Carter.

Q1 **Chair:** I would like to start this session of the International Development Committee where we are focusing on the current humanitarian situation in Sudan. Thank you so much to the witnesses for coming both in person and virtually. Can you introduce yourselves? I will start with Claire.

Claire San Filippo: Good afternoon. Thank you very much, Chair. I am Claire San Filippo, Doctors Without Borders and I work as the emergency co-ordinator for the Sudan and Chad operations.

Alsanosi Adam: Thank you so much. My name is Alsanosi Adam. I work for the Cash Consortium of Sudan as the operational strategy lead and I also work for the Emergency Response Rooms as the external communication co-ordinator with the Localisation Co-ordination Council.

Will Carter: I am Will Carter. I am the country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council in Sudan. We are an independent NGO and I have headed the Sudan mission for the last four years.

Q2 **Sam Rushworth:** The first question is to Ms Filippo. Could you explain to us the current humanitarian situation on the ground?

Claire San Filippo: Unfortunately today Sudan faces one of the most devastating crises that the world has seen in decades. In a country that hosted 49 million people before the war, today more than half face acute hunger according to the United Nations. The conflict has fuelled the largest displacement crisis in the world—over 11 million people—and that means one in five people in Sudan have been forced to flee their homes. These numbers are what you would call sobering in my opinion. They are just unfathomable, but behind the numbers are people and that is what I would like to talk to you about.

Last month, when I was in eastern Chad at the border with Sudan, I met numerous women and some of them described their harrowing journey marked by violence, fear and deprivation. Nadia, one of them, arrived from Al-Fasher in North Darfur—which as you know is currently besieged—with her three children and she told me in no uncertain terms, "Everywhere there is war—everywhere killings, bombings, shootings." She lost eight relatives to the war. Everyone is starving. There is no food; there is no water; children die.

Virtually all the refugees who arrive at that border crossing, Tina, are women and children. Many pregnant women and many children are malnourished and they have to rely on the generosity of others along the way. I saw their jerry cans and you could usually see them with brown water in, sometimes with algae. That is just one illustration of the obscene violence and multiple health crises that the country is witnessing.

In Sudan, the health system has virtually collapsed. According to the World Health Organisation, 70% to 80% of the health facilities are not operating at full capacity in the areas most affected by the war. People's access to healthcare has been dramatically affected by insecurity, critical shortages of medical staff and supplies, and increased cost of services and transportation, not to mention widespread obstruction and the looting of medical supplies that the warring parties have been committing since the beginning of the war.

What we see on the ground are multiple health crises and I would like to focus on just five. First, people continue every single day to die due to violence and violence-related injuries. In just one hospital that we support, Al-Bashair in the south of Khartoum, we have treated over 4,200 violent trauma injuries since the beginning of the year. That is 13 per day and one in six is a child under 15. We had an 18-month-old baby rushed into the emergency room after a stray bullet struck him while he was napping in his family home. Those are the common types of injury that we continue to see.

Secondly, conflict-related sexual violence is shockingly pervasive but medical care to respond thereto barely exists today. Let me share the horrific testimony of a South Sudanese refugee stranded in Nyala in South Darfur in a displacement camp. What she told us will make your heart break. She said, "I was living in South Sudan but at the time we arrived in Nyala, the war broke out and we just were trapped. I am here with my children and I came to Kalma camp. There is nowhere for me to get a job, so I went from my home to beg for something to take to my children and on the way back, I was walking. It was dark. Three men appeared. They asked me where I was going and they wanted money, but I explained that I was just a beggar, then they raped me. They held me strongly and they laid me down on the ground and they raped me. I don't remember anything. I woke up later on the ground and it was so humiliating for me, so painful. I talked to someone and they directed me to a women's clinic. I got some medicine but I feel so sad. I feel destroyed." This is just one testimony—a horrific one—but one example of sexual violence that we know is pervasive in the conflict.

Q3 **Chair:** Claire, we have been told in past sessions that what is happening in Sudan is a war on women. Would you agree or disagree with that?

Claire San Filippo: Unfortunately, violence against civilians is pervasive during the conflict. We see that there is no respect under international humanitarian law or international human rights law and we really see that everyone is at risk. Women and girls are at particular risk of sexual and gender-based violence. What we see in our clinics is only the tip of the iceberg because there are a lot of obstacles for women: stigma, fear of retaliation, lack of knowledge about care. Women are definitely at risk in this conflict and it is important to flag that right now as we are, as you know, doing the 16 days of activism to fight violence against women.

Q4 **Sam Rushworth:** Alsanosi, I want to ask the same question but I am

also interested to know about the current humanitarian access for aid and whether there are any blockages.

Claire San Filippo: Absolutely. These are only some of the crises that we are witnessing—

Chair: Sorry, Claire, I think Sam directed that to Alsanosi.

Claire San Filippo: My apologies; I did not hear that.

Alsanosi Adam: No problem. Thank you, Claire, for your information on this. For us as Emergency Response Rooms, we do not have an access problem. We are the grassroot first responders. We are from these neighbourhoods—we are from these areas—so we are there. We are organising to help our people. Maybe for international organisations and the UN there are a lot of access issues, especially to move massive amounts of food and medicine across the country, across borders and across the line. We have seen that in multiple areas.

To add to what Claire has said on the situation on the ground, I just came out of a meeting where in Gezira we are losing a person every three hours because of a cholera outbreak. In the hospitals, there are no doctors inside these hospitals because the hospital simply does not have water, electricity or any form of medication that can be used to save somebody's life. Doctors are sitting in their houses because there is nothing there. We know there are a lot of medical supplies sitting somewhere in Port Sudan awaiting clearance to be transported across the country.

Just a personal story, two months ago my aunt passed away in a hospital from a treatable disease just because the hospital did not have the necessary medication to give to the people. This is what we are left with: we are left with just buildings. The access issue for organisations and for aid to reach the hard-to-reach states such as White Nile, the Kordofans, and the Darfurs is creating a very tough situation on the ground.

In Gezira recently we had also another cholera outbreak—and that was not even a month ago—where 66 people died in a single day from cholera. As the Emergency Response Rooms we were trying to respond to this, but unfortunately there is no funding for mutual aid. Medical aid is held to a higher standard and it must be MSF or the WHO, but both organisations do not have access to these areas and we have reached out and they cannot do anything in these areas because they must get access from the authorities to reach them.

In the meantime we did what we could with the resources that we had, with the amount of funding and the mutual aid that we moved around to purchase simple things such as IVs—whatever the doctors needed to hydrate these patients and get them to a state where they could maybe not die. We lost 66 people on that day. This is what we are dealing with. Half of the population live under really harsh conditions. About 11.5

million IDPs are in really hard conditions, even in the safer areas, so this is what we are dealing with.

Q5 **Sam Rushworth:** Just checking that I understand, what you are saying is that unlike some of the larger NGOs, as a local organisation you are able to reach and access areas freely but essentially you lack medical supplies—you greatly lack the resources that you would need—and people are dying due to a lack of basic medical supplies that are being blocked from getting through to you.

Alsanosi Adam: Absolutely. We activate networks of people who are within these areas who want to help but they can only do what they can with what they have. With a lack of medical supplies, doctors cannot do anything. There is a lack of adequate funding. We simply cannot move. There have been different modalities of supporting mutual aid and the Emergency Response Rooms on the ground, but these have limited funding so there is a huge need to provide supply inside the country, whether it is cross-border or cross-line, to go to these hospitals so that people can do the work that they need to do.

Q6 **Sam Rushworth:** I would appreciate also getting Will and Claire's perspective on this as some of those larger NGOs working on the ground.

Will Carter: To build on Alsanosi's answer, there is some fantastic work done by Sudanese people outside of the formal aid system. One of the good news stories in what is otherwise a pretty miserable catastrophe in Sudan is just how local groups, especially those led by Emergency Response Rooms, and other community-led and youth-led action have provided critical services such as communal kitchens, collective shelters and emergency health continuity in some very difficult parts of the country.

It is not without risk, though, and many of them have faced extreme safety and security risks as well. That does not stop them from delivering but it is an aspect where we need to work together diplomatically in terms of how to provide safety and security support for frontline responders, including from the Emergency Response Rooms. That is something I think the UK can do much more of at a diplomatic and a programmatic level.

To your question on access challenges, this is a system that has been set up in the Government of Sudan to thwart aid efforts over the years. It started in the Bashir era under the Humanitarian Aid Commission, which was meant to thwart and divert humanitarian relief. Today we still face immense challenges with bureaucratic and administrative impediments from authorities in Port Sudan and other authorities that control territories in the country.

You will probably have seen some of the higher-level negotiations about whether cross-border access points from Chad or other places can be used to help with the famine response efforts in places such as Darfur. It

is hugely politicised and very problematic, but not insurmountable. We have at the moment a UN-led system that continues to be paralysed by a piece of paper—using those bureaucratic impediments when, on the ground, there is not anything militarily stopping aid from flowing to this response.

There is a security issue. This is one of the most dangerous areas—one of the most dangerous countries—in the world for aid workers to go, behind places such as Gaza and Palestine, of course. We have in the tens of aid workers being killed since this conflict began. There are infrastructural limitations. Sudan is a context where the capital city and all the ministries, telecommunications, banking, manufacturing and fuel supplies were crippled when the capital city became a war zone.

To get aid across this expansive country from Port Sudan to West Darfur is perhaps a 2,000 km drive through multiple lines of control. It is just a huge logistical challenge to move there. Bureaucratic impediments, insecurity and logistics have stymied a lot of the international response and so far we have Emergency Response Rooms and community and youth-led action working in some pretty hard places. We have excellent NGOs, such as our colleagues at MSF and in other NGOs such as our own. On Friday I was in Darfur, and earlier in the week in Port Sudan, and in the last few months I also have seen the situation in Khartoum and the good work that Emergency Response Rooms do there.

Q7 **Chair:** Will, what is it like out there?

Will Carter: It is a terrible situation in many parts.

Q8 **Chair:** We know that, but describe it to us. To be brutal about it, we know all the statistics. We have heard all the reports. From your point of view going there—I know you have been to various places around the world—what is it actually like?

Will Carter: When I was in Khartoum, there was artillery being fired and I saw communal kitchens still working to stop families from dying. In some ways it is terrifying for people and in some ways it has been normalised, but every day someone is dying there. Life is really on the line. It is incredibly intense and stressful in many parts and there are some brutal, awful atrocities happening in different parts of the country, including in Khartoum, not least to mention sexual violence. It is a pretty terrible and terrifying place. As aid workers, we are trying to push there but it has been infuriatingly slow to get the system to move and to scale up in places that are just about accessible, but where there is not a response on the ground.

Q9 **Chair:** How organised is the violence? We had a briefing yesterday from a journalist who had been working out there and we heard that little kids are going round terrorising. Is it armed forces in the way that we would expect them?

Will Carter: There is an urban warfare element to what is happening in Khartoum. There are air strikes and artillery happening but, yes, the social fabric of the country seems to be pulling apart at the seams. There is an increased sense of desperation with such low access to food, as well as increasing criminality and increasing lawlessness. It is a scary place. Well, "scary" is an understatement because people have been raped, tortured, disappeared and abused—in a capital city, not least in this huge country. It is an awful situation.

Q10 **Monica Harding:** I have a question. I know that famine has been declared in one region but there are 40 more on the brink of famine. Can you give us any more information on that? You also talked about aid workers being killed and under threat. Do you have any figures on that or can you give us any more colour on that, please?

Will Carter: There is a catastrophic food crisis in many parts of the country. There is not a good enough health observation system to get all the data that is required to formally determine or declare a famine in different parts but there is enough. Particularly in the largest IDP or displaced persons settlement in Darfur, Zamzam camp, that was announced by the IPC system in August, but there are other areas where there are people in catastrophic phases of hunger and that is as of now.

We will go through a weak harvest system and will be again into another lean season in six months or so. It was already in a very difficult place. We cannot say precisely how many million people are at risk of catastrophic hunger but it is going to grow. There may be slight ups and downs but the trend line has not abated despite some of the efforts that are at play.

I should also say that our observation is a lot of the food systems—marketplaces, farms and farming infrastructure—have been disrupted or destroyed by the conflict, sometimes intentionally, and aid is being blocked from areas. It is not just that there is a famine in different parts; there is a starvation strategy being waged. I think the UK has also put a lot of effort into stopping this as a weapon of war and the restriction and deliberate deprivation of food getting into places. It is something that also needs to be diplomatically unblocked.

Claire San Filippo: Could I jump in about malnutrition and to complement another answer about workers?

I could not agree more with what has just been said. What we are seeing is that malnutrition is reaching terrifying levels in many areas of the conflict. We have seen that where we work in Zamzam camp, so in North Darfur, and in parts of Nyala and South Darfur. One out of three children screened face an acute malnutrition level. To give a reference, that is twice over the World Health Organisation's emergency threshold, so this is really terrifying. In Khartoum in just a few weeks we have seen over 4,000 children who were screened for malnutrition and 35% were

severely acutely malnourished. The situation in terms of malnutrition in the country is one of the worst that we are currently seeing.

The second point I wanted to make is to complement what Will was saying about violence and about the question of health workers. Violence remains a key challenge for the humanitarian response because health facilities and healthcare workers have been affected, including those supported by Doctors Without Borders and many others.

We have seen health facilities that have been looted, occupied and shelled. In Al-Fasher we have had health facilities shelled 12 times. Healthcare workers continue to be intimidated, harassed and assaulted; some have been killed. In Khartoum in Al-Bashair Hospital, where we work with the Emergency Response Rooms, local volunteers and staff work under extremely difficult circumstances. We have just had to suspend non-critical activities for over a week because a patient was killed by a soldier inside the hospital.

Health facilities, which should be safe places for people to reach and have access to care, are absolutely not protected. This is a key concern beyond, of course, what Will has mentioned and is very important—the fact that the warring parties continue to deliberately block, divert or restrict access to lifesaving aid. That is choking a scale-up of the humanitarian response.

I think there is also a critical lack of response and scale-up by the international community at large and that is a failure. I think the UK has a role to play to ensure that the response is scaled up, and to call the UN to scale up the response, particularly in Darfur.

Q11 **Laura Kyrke-Smith:** Thank you, Claire. I think we will want to come back to those points. I want to go back to the Emergency Response Rooms; we have heard some references to them and the vital work that they are doing. Alsanosi, could you take a step back and set out for us how they work, who runs them, how many there are, and what the operating model looks like?

Alsanosi Adam: We started in the second week when this war started from Khartoum, in Al Giref. It is a small neighbourhood and the idea was really simple. It is our neighbourhood. We know that more than 90% of the people who live there are working day to day and in two weeks they would not have anything left to use. That is when the idea of this first communal kitchen started and the idea is simple. You bring it to the school and then people cook food and everybody will come together, share a meal and just check on each other and make sure that people are all right.

Eventually it became a very important thing and then it started in other places across Omdurman and Bahri, and then gradually all these small bases started to pop up. Then there was a need to co-ordinate this effort, so we brought everybody together online through WhatsApp. We know

people who are in the neighbourhood and we brought people together into a sort of co-ordination and we talked about how we were going to govern this work. We created a charter. We have representatives and executive officers who do the work—the communication, services, medical office, communal kitchens and all of that.

With the war expanding across Sudan there was a need for us to also expand across Sudan, so from Khartoum we went to Gezira, Sennar and now we work pretty much in all the states across Sudan, very autonomously with this idea of voluntarism, this culture of mutual aid and connecting communities together. Since this war started, if you know Sudan, there is the 1% and the 99%. The majority of people are just working class and they need this kind of effort.

The members of the Emergency Response Rooms are the people from within these neighbourhoods. Nobody will go from his neighbourhood to serve in another neighbourhood. You are there; you co-ordinate. What can you do? What can you give to the community? If you are a doctor, you enlist in the medical office. If you can fix things, you go to the services. If you can co-ordinate and arrange, you do logistics and finance and stuff like that.

There are single donations from individuals from the region's diaspora and organisations, and now there are all these modalities of funding. The funding will go straight into the base of the Emergency Response Rooms and they will design the service they want to do themselves. If they want to do a community kitchen, if they want to do food baskets, if they want to purchase some diabetic medication and give it to those who need it—whatever they need to do they do it.

The services we offer come from the design of the community. Right now we have women in Response Rooms who cater to women's needs, because usually they are forgotten when something happens. Women are usually forgotten in the design of things, so we created that to make sure that they are at the centre of this response.

We have child-friendly spaces where children will come while they are waiting for food to be served or cooked. They play and share. There will be somebody who will teach them something here or there. This sense of cohesion brought people together in a good way.

Q12 **Laura Kyrke-Smith:** It sounds like they are not receiving a lot of international funding. Can you set out for us what difference more support for the Emergency Response Rooms could make?

Alsanosi Adam: There is funding right now, but it needs to be scaled up so that we can cover all these areas. Usually now, because we have limited funding, it has to be split and divided across all these units and the people have to prioritise. Either they get quality food for three or four days or they get just food, which is usually a single source food for a month. That is what people end up doing. Sometimes we have discussed

this in meetings, "All right. We have $5,000. Should we get just rice for a month or should we get lentils and beans and stuff that will only last us for three or five days?" That is where there are issues.

We need to increase the amount of funding that we give to the units on the ground so that they can do these interventions. We have a list of 10 different services that we would like to do, but because of the lack of funding we are literally jumping from area to area trying to provide the basic needs, which is food right now.

Q13 **Chair:** Alsanosi, I think the work that your group manages to do is quite remarkable. We would be very interested if you wanted to write to us with the other 10 things that you could be doing. That would be incredibly interesting for us. Will, are you trying to come in on this point?

Will Carter: Just to briefly add that I have seen at first hand, and many staff have seen, the fantastic work that community-led action, including ERRs do. They barely get 1% of the overall humanitarian funds that are dedicated to Sudan. We give everything that we have flexibly that we can to them. So far that has been maybe $3 million, and their absorbative capacity is much greater.

There should be funding for a much more diverse aid response. The local capacities that are already voluntarily at play have, to be honest, bankrupted the diaspora that have been partly supporting them when Governments should have been. That is something that should be corrected and improved.

Q14 **Alice Macdonald:** Picking up on those points and moving on to the aid delivery and the UK's package in particular, you have outlined some of the mechanisms where aid can be delivered and make the most impact, such as the Emergency Response Rooms.

Will, building on your point, are there other mechanisms you would point to? We have talked about cash transfers and using mobile money transfers. How sustainable are those mechanisms? Are they working?

Building on that—maybe you can do two questions together, because I know we are a bit short on time—the UK has just announced a doubling of its aid package for Sudan. How have you seen that being used? Is it being used in the best possible way, and do you see that being delivered in a way that is going to make the most impact in future? Do you have any recommendations or thoughts around that?

Will Carter: The traditional response is not generally working right now. There are trucks being blocked from getting to places and, to be honest, what the UN is largely trying to deliver is being scuppered and blocked. You do have some great work done by some NGOs, and of course the social movements and civil society there, and that is certainly something that should be further invested in.

To credit the FCDO, it has begun to invest more in cash-based approaches including with NGOs. Much more can be done on this. It is not an easy response but it is an important and scalable way, so much more can be done through cash and using market systems.

Last week I was in Darfur. One of our responses is to work with bakeries, and instead of us lining up 100,000 families for food aid we are trying to support the market system. The UK having the thought leadership and technical experience to support these things I think is an area that can be leveraged.

I would like to see more of the aid work being coupled with diplomacy. We need diplomatic breakthroughs to get aid to where it needs to get to. I would recommend that this Committee work with the Foreign Affairs Committee to push on that. I know that the Foreign Secretary was quite passionate in the Security Council recently, but we need to continue that pressure to keep all access routes open. Yes: cash and markets, support with local partners, and different types of aid response, including with mobile systems and e-vouchers, would be important.

Q15 **Alice Macdonald:** That is an important point on diplomacy, which I know we will pick up on. Claire, can I get your reflections? My other question is how do you see—this might be one to follow-up later—the UK's package of support and the programmes it is delivering compared with some of the other countries perhaps in the EU that are making contributions?

Claire San Filippo: I could not speak too much about that as MSF, but what I can tell you is that it is very important to look at that in terms of how insufficient the response currently is. I want to give one statistic that I think is quite telling. You know that the border crossing point between Chad and Sudan was opened for another three months by the Sudanese authorities, even though they do not control that border crossing, but that allowed the UN to make the decision to use the border crossing.

On average there were only three trucks per day that crossed from Chad into Sudan. To give you a point of reference, we considered that we would need 13 trucks per day to feed only the people in Zamzam camp. That is one camp in one town in one of the five Darfur states—roughly up to half a million people, but there are 10 million people in Darfur. It is important—I can speak a bit more about it politically—politically for the UK to push the UN to scale up its response in Sudan and in the neighbouring countries because of the staggering needs that we see.

Q16 **Alice Macdonald:** We heard just before that 700 lorries have come in today. Are you feeling that things might be improving with that kind of announcement, or not really?

Claire San Filippo: Seven hundred is definitely much better than 300 in almost three months, but it is still a drop in the ocean given the needs in terms of malnutrition and health. There is an urgent need to scale up but also to have a bigger, greater UN presence in Port Sudan and in both of

the areas controlled by the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces to facilitate access for staff and supplies for others.

It is also important for the UK to continue to make sure that humanitarian funding for Sudan is protected; it is great to hear that it has increased. I would definitely second the point about making sure that the funding is flexible and goes to local responders, and also goes to the neighbouring countries, such as Chad and South Sudan, which are also bearing the brunt of the crisis in Sudan.

Q17 **Alice Macdonald:** Thank you. I have one final question for Alsanosi. Is there anything you want to add in terms of how the response could be scaled up to you? That would be helpful. In terms of all the people you are working with, what is their feeling at the moment? Obviously they are doing a lot to deliver lifesaving work, but are people hopeful that this might change for the better? How are people you are working with feeling?

Alsanosi Adam: The longer this war continues, the harder the situation is going to be on the ground, and the harder it will be on the people. It has been 16 to 17 months up to now and our life suddenly changed overnight. We are trying to sell hope to the people, to those who remain—the 25 million who still remain across Sudan.

We can do services and we can meet for seven or eight hours a night. We can do all that. It is just that the longer this war continues, the longer this suffering continues. I urge and echo what Will Carter said. There is also a need for diplomacy to find a solution to this war. Stop the war; maybe order a ceasefire so that humanitarian aid can reach those who need it.

What we are telling you is maybe 10% of what is happening on the ground. Most of it is not being reported because of the lack of connectivity and because of other protection constraints and stuff like that. The situation is way worse than what we are telling you. We have constant meetings strategising how we can support and do better, and we have seen the spirit of giving within the volunteers of the Emergency Response Rooms.

We cannot do this for a really long time. Some people will have fatigue and get burned out. They will go and others will come to take their place. It just continues: from one single Emergency Response Room to 700 across the country and state level councils that govern the work of the Emergency Response Rooms through the Localisation Co-ordination Council, which has 16 local organisations plus four INGOs as observers and 10 state representatives and more joining every single day. The movement is continuing. The support and the response are continuing. We need more advocacy. We need more protection for our people on the ground. Definitely we know that cash works and it is fast, it is agile, and it is adaptive. The people usually solve their problems—whatever

happens on the ground they can design and solve it, but they cannot do it without—

Chair: Thank you. Let me pause you there because we literally have one minute and I have other Committee members who want to get in with their questions. Can I ask members to be brief, please?

Q18 **David Mundell:** Claire, I think you were about to touch on what effects this crisis is having on the region and indeed globally.

Claire San Filippo: Importantly, what we are seeing now is a regional crisis with far-reaching implications both for the people displaced out of Sudan and the communities that are hosting them. Just to touch on South Sudan and Chad, South Sudan as you know before the war was a country facing a humanitarian crisis with 75% of the population depending on aid.

Now almost 900,000 have crossed from Sudan into South Sudan, so that is a 7% population increase and the sheer amount of additional people exacerbates the challenges that already existed. Many people arrive injured and acutely malnourished. We are very much present in South Sudan and once people arrive they face a very difficult situation with little food, water or shelter and transit centres that are overcrowded and provide limited access to services.

What we are particularly concerned about is the lack of access to water, sanitation and hygiene facilities in these transit centres. The result of that is that cholera is spreading. Since the end of October, the South Sudanese Minister of Health has declared a cholera outbreak in Renk county, South Sudan, and we have seen hundreds of cases in Renk and in Malakal, which is located 300 km away from Renk. With people moving in South Sudan from Renk and then possibly onwards to Malakal and then across up to the Nile states and other parts of South Sudan, the cholera outbreak obviously poses a risk of spreading way beyond these two locations and that is of serious concern.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to have to stop you there.

Q19 **David Mundell:** Is there anything more that the UK could be doing to support these other countries neighbouring Sudan?

Will Carter: Yes. We are pleased to see the doubling of the aid package and I think it can be used to even better effect, but there is a regional crisis growing with the refugee movements and onward migration. I think that this is a critically underfunded crisis. I want to see how the UK is supporting or pushing for other member states in the UN system to also mobilise similar resources in the coming year, because we are facing a cliff edge, and not just for Sudan. When I was in Chad last week, people were moving because they do not have enough food in the place they have just sought safety in—they are moving to Libya and onwards.

There is much more resource mobilisation and support that could be done, not only from the UK but to encourage everyone else to step up now. There could be greater investment in regional leadership of this crisis. The UN system has not been able to stand up and look at a coherent response to what is happening across seven or eight different counties, so I think there are some key roles that the UK can and should play.

Claire San Filippo: I absolutely agree with everything that has been said. Just to continue to urge yourselves and the UK Government to keep Sudan and the regional crisis on top of the political agenda and make sure that the UK Government are using their influence—including as the penholder on Sudan on the UN Security Council—to engage with the warring parties in Sudan and, very importantly, the states with influence on both sides, to cease all attacks on civilians, respect their obligations under international humanitarian law, and grant immediate unhindered humanitarian access. This, plus urging the United Nations to find ways to immediately scale up its response, both in Sudan and in the region, and making sure that funding is flexible, as we have discussed, would definitely be tremendously helpful.

David Mundell: We are trying, I can assure you of that, which is why we are having this session today.

Q20 **David Reed:** I am mindful of time, so building on David's last question, what sort of principles and areas of focus should guide any future Sudan strategy? If you can give a few broad themes, with time in mind.

Claire San Filippo: Looking at the conflict, the protection of civilians and civilian structures is absolutely key. At the same time it is also very important for humanitarian actors that the discussion on ceasefire and ending the conflict is not a condition for humanitarian access. Unhindered humanitarian access to deliver critical humanitarian aid through all possible routes—both across borders and across frontlines—needs to be a top priority.

Another issue is the immediate and unconditional lifting of all blockades and bureaucratic administrative impediments pertaining to humanitarian access. I do realise, when we talk about administrative and bureaucratic impediments, it sounds like a civil kind of obstacle—as if someone has misplaced a stamp. But we are really talking about systematic and deliberate obstructions by the warring parties, particularly to prevent moving supplies from the areas under their control into the areas that are controlled by their opponents in the conflict, but also within the areas that they control. I think that is a key principle to look at.

The last one I would like to flag is in respect of our obligations under international humanitarian law and the fulfilment of the commitments under the Geneva agreement.

David Reed: Fantastic. Thanks, Claire.

Will Carter: The UK's doubling of aid should be placed where it matters. It should be structured in a sense of going to actors that are operationally present.

We are 19 months in, and the UN has not reopened bases in Darfur, in Khartoum, in Kordofan and in some of the worst conflict-affected areas. We have MSF there. We have Emergency Response Rooms. We have other NGOs, but I think the aid should really go to where it counts at the right time. There should be leadership from the donor communities—especially led from the UK side—accepting the right level of risk. It is about having that risk appetite to do the right thing, despite the complexity and challenge that is there, because so many lives are at stake at this point in time.

I agree on Claire's point about the protection of civilians. The UK is the penholder at the Security Council. There must be a careful approach in foreign policy strategy, and that includes how you deal with some of the regional powers at play. Some of them are allies of the UK and they are on different sides of this internationalised, internal arms conflict, and we have to have a much stronger voice on this topic. I am very happy that the Foreign Secretary has put Sudan as a priority. I think it needs to be followed through now on how firm it is going to be on some of these allies that are perpetuating this war.

Alsanosi Adam: I am just echoing what Will said. I think we really need a breakthrough in the political field because that will affect the way we can do this humanitarian aid on the ground. Right now we have four different areas of control in Sudan. It is proving difficult every single day, but people are pushing.

Also, on the issue of risk appetite, we need to find a way to support mutual aid groups on the ground because they are the ones doing the work right now. They are doing the heavy lifting. They are the ones who are there and are very neutral across all of these areas, even in the Nuba mountains, Jebel Marra and Darfur. I think the funding needs to go to where it will count most and give value for the funding that goes there.

I think we need to advocate more for the protection of frontline responders. The Emergency Response Rooms and mutual aid workers on the ground, their protection needs to be strongly advocated for within both the SAF, RSF and other areas of control as well.

Q21 **Brian Mathew:** I have a further question: have any other countries' responses worked well that the UK could learn from?

Will Carter: To be frank, I have not seen a strong approach from the humanitarian donor community. I do think the UK still has the thought leadership on it and I am glad that there is a bit more resource.

The US has tried to double down on support for local responders in a more meaningful way, but it is still insufficient. I believe the US is also

investing in alternative or complementary models of aids outside of the UN system or complementary to it, including alternative pipelines for food and medical supplies to get into difficult parts of the country.

The EU has invested even more than the UK into cash and voucher-based assistance as a scalable modality, but I look at the US, the EU and the UK as perhaps three of the main leaders in the donor community. There is a bit of learning to do but I think we need a bit of leadership within good humanitarian donor practice to make ground on as well.

Chair: Witnesses, thank you so much for the evidence that you have given. I am sorry that I whizzed you along a little bit. We would like to have spoken to all of you all day, but we have other witnesses. Could you please share with your colleagues our gratitude for all that you are doing under the toughest of circumstances? We do admire what you are trying to do, and we are just sorry that you are in this situation. We will keep on trying to shine a spotlight and we will keep on highlighting the good work that you are all doing. Thank you very much.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Eva Khair, Dame Rosalind Marsden and Dr Kate Ferguson.

Q22 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Eva, could you introduce yourself and the organisation you are here representing, please?

Dr Khair: Thank you, Chair. Honourable members, colleagues, my name is Dr Eva Khair. I am the director of the Sudan Transnational Consortium, a body of civil society Sudanese activists, as well as other allies, coming together to work internationally on the crisis.

Chair: Thank you so much. Dr Ferguson.

Dr Ferguson: I am Dr Kate Ferguson. I am the co-executive director at Protection Approaches. We have spent the last 10 years working to strengthen UK contributions to the prevention of identity-based violence and specifically mass atrocity crimes.

Chair: Thank you. Dame Rosalind, your CV entered the room before you. Which hat would you like to wear for this Committee session?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: I am an associate fellow at Chatham House attached to the Africa programme. I am a former British and then European Union diplomat and I have been working on Sudan since around 2007.

Chair: Lovely. You are very welcome. Thank you so much for joining us, all panellists.

Q23 **Noah Law:** Hi, Dr Khair. First, I want to hear from you a bit more about the make-up of Sudanese civil society, both prior to the war and now in the role that it plays in the response to the crisis.

Dr Khair: The first thing to do is possibly to step back and talk on the context in which Sudanese civil society has been organised in the last generation—the last 30 years or so, and even slightly earlier. In a country where health and education enjoyed less than 2% of the national budget, that paints a picture as to what extent civil society has offered that social system safety net: civic education, democracy, human rights. All of that has really lain with civil society.

One of the issues that we have at the moment is that we are in a situation where that is not really recognised. Sudanese civil society is not at the forefront of engagement, both increasingly with the international humanitarian system, and certainly not with, let's say, international bodies, countries, diplomatic processes, mediation and so on.

Sudanese civil society has for a long time consisted of various groups and collectives. That includes national NGOs, grassroots collectives, structures around universities, unions and bodies, and collectives that deal with any emergency that comes up, such as floods, outbreaks and even things like community organising for funerals.

When I say "Sudanese civil society" I really do take a very broad definition of what that is. Sudanese civil society is absolutely global. It is not defined by borders. My colleague in the LCC and ERRs and I are Sudanese civil society. That is part of the point that it is not just in Sudan. It is not just the displaced. It is at the borders. It is in the near abroad and it is in the diaspora, so it is a slightly broader definition than we normally take.

Q24 **Noah Law:** Why is it important that they play a part in this response? I am also keen to hear from Dame Rosalind on this.

Dr Khair: Since the outbreak of this war, we have obviously seen the emergence of these mutual aid networks, and that has been a critical humanitarian lifeline for provision of services, anything from—as you have heard from the previous panel—health, wash services, shelter, soup kitchens, documentation, human rights monitoring, and of course also in the comms, media and journalism.

There is a lot that has been taken on by Sudanese civil society because there is this historic pattern of state oppression, kleptocracy and state abandonment. That has meant that Sudanese civil society over many, many years has proliferated to take up that space and I would say, arguably, to do the role of the state.

Q25 **Noah Law:** Rosalind, can I bring you in on this? How do you see that role?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: To build on what Dr Eva has said, I think that Sudanese civil society, and the Sudanese diaspora in the UK, should be seen as a very important asset, for example, for the FCDO, because they are a very large and influential group, and they can shed light on what is going on in the country.

There are human rights activists here among, for example, Sudanese doctors. The Sudanese civil society groups are very active on the humanitarian front and all these groups can really make a useful input, I think, into British policymaking.

Also, to give an example, I know that there is a very large group of Sudanese doctors in this country working in the national health system, many as consultants. I know some of them are quite keen to go and volunteer to help Sudanese refugees in need of medical assistance in the border areas of Sudan, in Chad or on the Egyptian border. I think they encountered some difficulties in managing to deploy as part of an emergency medical team. These are the sorts of issues where a structured engagement with the Sudanese diaspora would be really useful.

Then I want to mention one particular group of Sudanese civil society and political actors who the UK has been supporting, which is the co-ordination of democratic civilian forces, known as Tagadum. They do not represent all these civilians, as they would readily acknowledge, but they are probably at the moment the most active and visible group that has a political vision on how they think the war could be brought to an end and democratic governance supported. They are prioritising humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilians at the moment, which I think is welcome. I think they would also offer advice and experience on the structure and the mediation process from which I think—as Dr Eva mentioned—Sudanese civil society has been largely excluded.

But UK support to Sudanese civil society certainly should not be limited to a group like Tagadum. We heard in the previous session about the importance of the Emergency Response Rooms, but there are also many other very active Sudanese civil society groups working on human rights, documenting violations, developing options on the protection of civilians, and working on peacebuilding at the local level. All of these groups can make a very important contribution to easing the suffering of civilians on the ground. It is very important that the UK—the British office in Addis Ababa and the Sudan team in London—are in touch with as many of these as possible.

Q26 **Noah Law:** That brings me to my next question. Could you describe how the UK Government have been, in your view, Dr Khair, engaging with these kinds of groups and how you think they could perhaps go further?

Dr Khair: The first thing to say is that the Sudan war is both a foreign policy and a domestic issue. That is really important to get, I think, and we really need cross-Government working, understanding and engagement with the Sudanese community in the UK and broader Sudanese civil society.

On the foreign policy side, things were better before the war in the development stream. Things were better when we had DFID. Things were better when there was a dedicated envoy. The change across all of those

spheres has really seen a tumbling, not in just my opinion but those of our networks and our colleagues who are right now on the ground doing the brunt of this work. It is a real detachment and, as Dame Rosalind says, we do need to see more steps. If there is will, that is welcome and absolutely encouraged, but it might be a resourcing and a strategising piece that would help to unlock some of that engagement.

On the domestic side, I am by no means an expert on domestic policy and how the Home Office might run in relation to that, but I think some of the discontent for Sudanese civil society is that we do not see Ukraine-like schemes for Sudanese. There are no homes for Sudanese on the gov.uk website. There is no family reunification—even momentarily—to allow people to come in and to be supported by their relatives, instead of people trying to support people in Sudan on a border somewhere or in a second country.

When it comes to new arrivals—migrants, accompanied and unaccompanied minors—that is a whole body of work that our colleagues are fantastic at documenting, and it is just travesty after travesty. There is some local engagement, city to city, but not necessarily at the national level so I think there is a lot of work to do there.

Q27 **Chair:** Dr Eva, the UK pulled out of Sudan in 1957, I think it was. Do we have a special responsibility when things like this are happening?

Dr Khair: It depends on how you look at more recent engagement than that, rather than going back to 1956. For example, when we had the Khartoum Process, which was the EU and the UK—we were all friends back then—designing a migration control or border control or outsourced border force in the desert, that put money into the hands of one of the current belligerents of the conflict. So absolutely, there is a responsibility.

Besides that, with any war happening on this scale—the largest, the biggest, the worst; all of the superlatives—I would find it strange to imagine that the UK, a well-known multilateral actor with the kind of moral and, I suppose, rights-based rhetoric that we enjoy, would look away. So even if it was not on behalf of Sudanese civil society, a particular type of stakeholder, I think we would not look away.

Q28 **Chair:** Are we stepping up and not looking away?

Dr Khair: We are looking, and we are doing, but maybe a little bit behind the scenes. I know there will be questions on the diplomatic engagement—my colleagues, certainly Dame Rosalind, can speak to that very well—and in terms of surging and being not back-of-the-room diplomats but actually at the forefront, we have seen some very welcome moves in the past month with the UK's UNSC presidency. There has been a lot of action and a lot more engagement and meaningful talk.

Regardless of what happens, we need to see, for example, with the work of the current incumbent of the envoy, to see that engagement in multilateral fora with Sudanese civil society wherever we are. We need

those engagements not just to be social and visible but to actually have meaningful policy change as well.

Q29 **Brian Mathew:** At this point can I bring in Dr Ferguson? What is your assessment of the FCDO's capacity for this kind of engagement? We have had many constructive suggestions.

Dr Ferguson: In terms of the diaspora and civil society?

Brian Mathew: Yes. Where could improvements be made?

Dr Ferguson: One of the big challenges—and this is an FCDO structural challenge, this is not particular to the Sudan team or the geographic—is that there tends not to be an emphasis placed on creating a formal structure where civil society can engage with the Foreign Office. In part, this was deconstructed and dismantled under the last Government, and it starts right at the top.

One of the first things that the Labour Government could do is to reconstitute the human rights advisory board, which William Hague set up, which advised the Foreign Secretary at the highest level to ensure that human rights were integral to the Foreign Secretary's consideration of a number of issues.

Then you come down and you start thinking about particular crises. Of course I am biased; I am a human rights activist on the outside, so I would say this, but I do find it difficult to understand how with a crisis as enormous as Sudan—that is, as Eva says, the biggest protection crisis, the biggest everything—it is unfathomable that there is no mechanism by which the Foreign Office is able to regularly reach into Sudanese expertise in the civil realm to draw on their expertise and knowledge.

We know that people who are most proximate or closer to the challenges that need addressing have answers that others do not. It is also a challenge of civil society writ large. I will say that my organisation and a huddle of us have been working actually extremely constructively, and with very positive results, with the Sudan team at the Foreign Office and other Departments. It is not that there is an unwillingness to work. I really do think that it is an issue of capacity and perhaps of how engaging with civil society is understood.

Again, not to blame everything on the last Government, but there were repeated Ministers who denigrated the role of charities, of human rights and of expertise. That broke a lot of trust, I think, coupled with the fact that there is no formal mechanism—in the US, for example, the Sudan envoy meets monthly online with civil society. I am not suggesting that is a perfect model, but it is an example of demonstrating a willingness to engage.

There are also examples that we can use from the Foreign Office's own best practice. When the FCDO did its own internal lessons learned following the genocide in Myanmar in Rakhine, it realised that it had

missed a trick, similar to Sudan, where the warnings from those who knew, who were most proximate, were not filtered through and did not inform policy. It is that difference. It is not just listening; it is making sure the knowledge is informing policy development.

Q30 **Chair:** Dr Kate, can I push you a bit on that because you worked with this Committee in the last Parliament on trust prevention and we used what happened in Myanmar and in Bosnia as examples of what should happen. There is meant to be an atrocity team. I know that the CSSF that was going to Sudan was cut, but we still have the atrocity prevention team. When we were in Bosnia as a Committee, we had one of the mothers say, "The simplest way to discover when atrocities are happening is follow the movement of people"—the 11.6 million internally displaced people. What did you see the FCDO doing when those people started moving?

Dr Ferguson: In Sudan? I do not think I am probably the best person to fairly ask but I think that in London, at that particular period, as I have said in front of other Committee hearings on Sudan, I do not think that those warnings were necessarily appropriately heeded. I do not think that the Foreign Office on the whole has the means of receiving that kind of warning.

The warning systems that exist within the Foreign Office tend to be based on things that are treated as quantitative work rather than qualitative. How people feel is not necessarily as easy to pass up the chain of command to trigger a response, and that is a fundamental problem that the new atrocity prevention group, which sits within Whitehall within the Office for Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation, is looking at. It has been tasked with thinking about how that can be rectified.

Q31 **Chair:** This is not about 11.6 million people feeling bad. This is about that number of people physically moving from their homes.

Dr Ferguson: Of course, and that is feeding into the Government's analysis. They are better abreast than I am of those kinds of movements, for sure. To me, the gap that has been frequently missed—and not only on Sudan—is the nature of the violence. I was sitting in on the session prior to this, which was really an extraordinary insight into the humanitarian consequences of what is happening.

I think it is worthwhile us stepping back to remember that there are at least two forms of crisis taking place in Sudan. One is the armed conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the RSF and their varied support networks. There is also, particularly but not only in Darfur, a deliberate strategy of identity-based violence that breaches, I would say, the level of crimes against humanity and genocide, which is seeking to remove—in whole or in part—populations, which requires a distinct response to the armed conflict. That is what holds an opportunity to draw on Sudanese expertise, both on the ground and in the UK, and everywhere else in the world, in terms of what can be done to assist the

immediate protection of those civilians at risk from both forms of violence, as well as the humanitarian consequences, which are themselves being weaponised as tools of war and identity-based violence.

That is the gap, and it is not necessarily just the scale that needs to resonate because I think the Foreign Office is well aware of the scale. It is more: can our Government benefit by creating better channels of communication and expertise that draw on civilian and civic knowledge, both in the UK and elsewhere, towards policy development? That is the gap that exists in our Foreign Office at the moment; not just on Sudan but on a number of protection crises where it is no one's job to develop those policy options. It is civil society that can help.

Chair: Let me pause you there. I have Sam, David and Brian who all want to come in.

Q32 **Sam Rushworth:** I want to ask about identity-based violence and to what extent in Sudan we are seeing violence that is distinctly identity-based as opposed to political. To what degree are there resistance and peace movements at a grassroots level that could be better supported?

Dr Ferguson: From your own work, you will well know the long histories in Sudan of identity-based violence and also of political conflict, and the fact that these are not always easy to separate. One has to recognise and differentiate between situations of armed conflict when you have hierarchal and recognised armed combatants that are engaged within that framework, and violence that is deliberately targeted towards civilian populations. That is distinct from just looking at violations.

We can look at individual incidents to determine whether they are violations of international law, international humanitarian law and so on, but what is very important is that we recognise that distinct pathology of violence that targets people because of their real or perceived identity. That is happening in Darfur by the same perpetrating structure that committed the same kind of violence, just less effectively, 20 years ago against the same population groups. That requires a different kind of response from conflict prevention.

While we in this room may well all have views on the efforts towards a ceasefire that is essentially focusing on the armed actors in the conflict to halt that situation, that will never resolve a different typology of violence that is seeking to advance—largely but not only—RSF aims within Darfur towards cleansing certain geographic areas of people. That is the bit that requires a different focus and that is actually where I think the UK has shown important leadership at moments, and where I am grateful to this Committee in past sessions on Sudan for focusing on what can be done and maximising that.

Dr Khair: As to the ethnic driving forces, which are slightly distinct from bygone haphazard fire or the conflict related violence, those drivers are that this is an unfinished war in certain parts of the country that started a

long time ago, and in other parts there is an increasing polarisation. The longer it goes on, we are seeing people becoming completely disenchanted with the revolution, losing hope and wishing for the better days of living under a dictatorship—all sorts of concerning features.

When it comes to how we know that there is a difference in the violence on the ground between that which is just bullets and guns and that which is targeted, everybody is potentially a conflict actor because we are all armed with telephones. Social media is a massive part of this problem of incitement, misinformation, disinformation and harm. In terms of engaging as the UK, civil society has been at work since Covid on misinformation around health.

There is apparatus that has been already working that has now switched to dealing with this kind of incitement and working with the big social media platforms. I heard recently that two of the most prolific inciters of hatred and conflict that is ethnically driven live not in Sudan but in western countries. That is something that we can hardly say is a problem of "over there". So I think being savvy as to who is operating online, who has reached the UK and further afield, that should be some of the work of foreign policy, but really tapping into the domestic concerns up to and including the MET office and others.

Q33 **David Reed:** Dr Eva, was that Sudanese citizens in the west, or western actors?

Dr Khair: Sudanese. I could not speak to their citizenship but they are Sudanese. They are part of the society and they are propagating hate speech.

Q34 **David Reed:** On which platforms is this propagating?

Dr Khair: Every one you can name; every single one. Youth are not the only people who use social media. Where I have worked in Africa and other parts of the world, WhatsApp is the email service and there is Telegram, Facebook, Instagram. Everything that is able to transmit information is essentially a potential platform for abuse.

Q35 **David Mundell:** Perhaps this question is for you, Dame Rosalind. We have discussed the impact on Sudan's neighbours but the one neighbour we have not talked about is Egypt. The main news story in the UK today is about British tourists being in Egypt, not that distant from where a conflict is taking place. What is the role of Egypt in these circumstances?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: Egypt—like some of Sudan's other neighbours—has been receiving huge numbers of Sudanese refugees, and that has come at a very difficult time for Egypt because of its own quite severe economic problems. Some of the Sudanese refugees who are in Egypt have been encountering quite serious problems in terms of their own livelihoods, getting access to education for their children and so on. There are quite a lot of issues there.

On the broader political picture, Egypt I think is widely perceived as basically supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces and the authorities in Port Sudan. For Egypt, Sudan has always been seen as a very important national security concern because obviously it has a very long southern border with Egypt. Broadly speaking, I think it would like to see the Sudanese Armed Forces be the sort of lead state institution in the country. They have a strong historical link with the Sudanese Armed Forces. At the same time, for historical reasons, I think Egypt also feels that it ought to be playing probably the leading role in the future efforts to decide the future of Sudan. They have—like certain other regional countries—also been seeking to play a prominent role in the mediation process.

Q36 **Brian Mathew:** Five years ago there seemed to be a real chance for a peaceful, democratic way forward in Sudan. There seemed to be a flowering of something, which so many of us felt was exciting. Then that bird flew. Hopefully one day we will get back to that, but in the meantime we are where we are and there is this God awful civil war happening.

From what we heard yesterday, the situation seems in some ways to be better under the Sudanese Army controlled areas than it is under the RSF, which seems to be terrible. I do not know if that is true or not but that was the reflection that we heard. But even if that is the case, civil wars are often the most awful conflicts that can go on and on. Is there any semblance of a thought that if the Egyptians are backing one particular side then maybe what needs to happen is one side—hopefully the better side—needs to win and then start again?

Dr Khair: Of course Dame Rosalind must absolutely weigh in, but if I may make a few comments to begin with: there is no better side. All are oppressing; all are raping, looting and causing atrocity violence. The SAF—which, let us say, is not the Government; it is essentially the last man standing from the previous Administration—is bombing hospitals. It is doing whatever it can to attack civilian infrastructure as long as it gets the other man—as long as it gets the other side.

In terms of protecting civilians, a declaration was signed last year in Jeddah and we have not seen any meaningful progress towards implementing that. There is rhetoric around one public, one army—the united front of civilians with the army—but I unfortunately have not seen that play out on the ground. The recent defection that we saw from the RSF commander back to the Sudanese Army created absolute havoc and crimes against humanity in Gezira state. That was a perfect moment for the army to step in and show that they are defenders of the peace and defenders of their territory. Instead they spent a week or longer raving on social media about having their man back, while the rest of us were treated to atrocities on social media.

Where was that protection? Where was that responsibility? This is the same apparatus that was responsible for state abandonment for a generation. Have they changed overnight? I do not think so. This is not a

happy accident. It is a tactic of the war to ensure that people see how terrible the RSF are—"We are the better option." What we must not do is play into that. We need to be very careful about it.

On the phrase "civil war", it is not a civil war; it is a war against civilians. It is an anti-revolutionary war; it is payback for you daring to dream about democracy, about human rights, about any kind of progress.

To your point, Chair, about the role of the UK and other actors. First of all, they banished the youth who were at the frontlines and said, "No, no, you don't understand politics. Stand down. Stand aside," and asked for military guarantors to the transition period. So absolutely the UK is involved in this; we are threaded through it and it is a war against civilians. Any non-civilian actor must be addressed as, unfortunately, the enemy.

Q37 **Chair:** Powerful. Dame Rosalind, what do you think?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: I could not agree more with what Dr Eva has said. There are two points I want to stress. First of all, do not underestimate the role of the Islamists and the hardliners from the Bashir regime and the deep state that they created over three decades. After the Sudanese Army and the Rapid Support Forces conducted a coup against the civilian transitional Government in October 2021, those old regime elements have come back into force and are now playing a very dominating role in Port Sudan. Do not be tempted to take sides with either of the warring parties. If you want to take sides, the UK must take sides—as I think it is—with the civilians who led the revolution and who are committed to the goals of the revolution: freedom, peace and justice.

Perhaps to elaborate very briefly, given the mass atrocities that the Rapid Support Forces have committed on the ground—and obviously we have heard about the ethnically targeted killing, burning of villages, sexual violence, looting and so on—I doubt if any western Government would contemplate siding with the RSF after that record. Equally, as Dr Eva said, there have been very many atrocities committed by the other side as well.

The Sudanese Armed Forces are working with Islamist shadow brigades like the Al Bara Ibn Malik brigade and others from the old regime, and both the RSF and the SAF are products of the Bashir regime. So we are not talking about a national army that is a non-partisan state institution with a mandate to protect civilians. It has been heavily politicised, particularly since 1989, and its military strategy so far has been largely to sit in its garrisons and defend them rather than protecting civilians.

It is absolutely true that when the Rapid Support Forces claim to be protecting democracy or to be fighting the old regime that there is no foundation to this because clearly, if you are committing mass atrocities, this disqualifies you on the first count, and there are also members of the old regime inside the Rapid Support Forces. What we can see is that the

Sudanese Islamic movement—headed by Ali Karti and leaders of the old regime who are indicted by the International Criminal Court, such as former President Omar al-Bashir—are supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces.

I think the idea that if the SAF were to win an outright victory, we would have a period of stability in which we could talk about a return to civilian rule could not be further from the truth. What we would see is a return to the Bashir regime mark 2 set on revenge, and I think we would no doubt witness a mass campaign of arrests and executions against the forces of the revolution. This would not just be the political actors but also the Emergency Response Rooms and so forth.

Chair: Dame Rosalind, I will stop you there because we are straying into speculation and we are also going into the Foreign Affairs Committee's territory.

Q38 **Monica Harding:** Dame Rosalind, I want to turn to our role as penholder on the UN Security Council and the opportunities that that presents for us in the UK for a diplomatic response.

Dame Rosalind Marsden: The UK has used its position as penholder as an opportunity to raise the profile of the Sudan crisis. It has called for the cessation of hostilities, the protection of civilians and the scaling up of humanitarian assistance, and it has condemned violence against civilians and external interference that has been fuelling the conflict. It has also tried to use its position as penholder to ask the UN secretariat to do some serious preparatory work on options for monitoring and verification mechanisms for the protection of civilians, but because the UN Security Council has for a long time been so divided on Sudan it has not been easy, as we know, to get resolutions through.

It took almost a year into the war before the UK got the first resolution adopted, which called for a ceasefire during Ramadan. We know that did not work. Then there was a second resolution in June this year urging the Rapid Support Forces to lift the siege of Al-Fasher, and that had no impact either. This was largely because the resolutions did not provide for any effective implementation mechanisms. As there were no consequences for the conflict parties, they basically shrugged them off. We have also seen a lot of international statements of condemnation, but unless backed up by concrete measures and the threat of real consequences, there has not been much change.

The draft resolution that was co-sponsored by the UK in Sierra Leone and vetoed by the Russians last week would have been, had it been adopted, a significant step forward because it was asking the Secretary-General to develop an implementation mechanism to ensure compliance with the Jeddah declaration of commitment to protect the civilians of Sudan, which were commitments made by the two parties in May 2023 that had been completely violated by both sides. Of course the Russian veto was obviously very disappointing and has set an unfortunate precedent,

leaving the council rather hamstrung at the moment in its attempts to deal with the Sudan crisis.

Today I understand that Russia was expected to go before the UN General Assembly to explain why it used the veto and it is hoped that members of the UN General Assembly will encourage members of the Security Council—including the United States who hold the council presidency next month—to return to the issue of the protection of civilians and try to press again for a robust mechanism.

Dr Ferguson: Could I come in on that please? I always agree with everything that Rosalind says so this is "yes, and". I think actually there have been moments of real leadership that the UK has shown in holding the pen on Sudan. The challenge is now: how can that momentum be kept up? We and others were working in very constructive contact with the FCDO around May when a number of us were extremely worried about the intensification of violence in and around Al-Fasher, as we remain. I think the only reason that city has not yet fallen is in part because of the leadership and diplomatic moments of surge that have come.

We know that when that diplomatic surge came in May—I will give credit to then Minister Andrew Mitchell for his role in doing this—we know that the fighting in Al-Fasher paused for a period. The RSF stopped for a little moment. They also paused in June when the resolution that the UK secured regarding the protection of civilians in Al-Fasher was adopted.

That did not necessarily prevent the whole trajectory of what is still happening there, and that city and nearby Zamzam are absolutely in peril, but in those days people were able to leave and diplomats were bought more time. That was in part massively because of UK leadership stepping up; they raised their ambitions. There was some hesitancy about going for a protection of civilians resolution but they did it.

I think the challenge is seeing the prevention of these enormous crimes not as a single act but as the building of momentum, and where the UK has sometimes not been where I would perhaps like it to be is when that momentum has not been there. It is fantastic to see David Lammy and the Security Council robustly calling out Russia for what it is doing, and I very much hope that signals a greater commitment to consistent momentum because that is how it can live up to that penship. That is how it can take it forward, and not only in the Security Council but actually in the spaces outside.

So the fact that the UK holds penship for both Sudan and the protection of civilians and that they, unlike other actors that are very involved in the pursuit of peace in Sudan, are not involved or invited to the Jeddah process or the ALPS—the fact that they sit outside those ceasefire efforts—gives the UK a unique opportunity to take a leading role outside of the council on the protection of civilians and on atrocity prevention, which is one of the three priorities that the UK has in its Sudan strategy.

That gives the UK an opportunity to be engaging with the African Union and to be supporting the special envoy of the African Union on the prevention of genocide and other mass atrocity crimes—give them a new budget line. That is not anywhere close to the big programmatic needs on the humanitarian level; that is nothing close to the political scale of the challenge of getting a protection of civilians force on the ground, which is needed. Resource the African Union to be doing this work and work together in that way, and those creative avenues towards upholding that responsibility could have a real impact on the ground, as well as in that trajectory over the next few months and years.

Q39 **David Taylor:** Building on that, Kate, you talked about the work in the UN but you also went into some detail about the things we can do outside the UN. Can you talk a bit about the work we could do with some of our allies to put some pressure on them to play a less harmful role?

Dr Ferguson: That is a good question. If the Government is choosing to prioritise Sudan a bit differently, and if the Foreign Secretary is alive to this challenge—which we very much hope is true—it does not just sit with the Sudan team to do that. That prioritisation needs to be integrated into a whole of FCDO strategy. Sudan needs to become a top three diplomatic issue on every single brief, and the different geographics, the different Ministers and the different ambassadors need to know what those lines are.

What we need to be looking at here is mapping the architectures of the violence that is being enabled from all sides. David Lammy was quite right to call out Russia's behaviour on the continent and in Sudan. There are numerous networks of state and non-state military, economic, communications and political architectures—networks, whatever you want to call them—where the UK could map and track those points of leverage and condemnation. There will be few influential states within the MENA region, within the continent of Africa and also within Europe, where there are not some things that they could be doing differently to prioritise that response.

The last thing I will say is there needs to be a special focus on those backers that are not upholding the Security Council arms embargo on Darfur, which does need to be expanded for the whole country. If we are talking about the protection of civilians and an end to this violence, we need to be hitting the phones to the UAE to say, "Can you please ask the RSF to step down?" and then to be doing the same for those that are engaging and backing the SAF. Again, the UK could be stepping forward to do that and a revision of the Sudan strategy, for example, could embed that.

The last thing is David Lammy's excellent relationships within the Commonwealth, and I think that is an untapped space. There is also looking towards the African Union and African partners to explore the leadership and collaborative problem-solving that is distinct around the protection of civilians and atrocity crimes, as opposed to getting involved

in internal conflicts and civil war, which is another reason why we want to be careful of the kind of problems with that labelling.

Q40 **David Reed:** Lots has been mentioned already around what could be done in terms of a future Sudan strategy, but is there anything else that anyone wants to bring in?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: I have several things. On the protection of civilians, one way forward in advance of achieving some sort of cessation of hostilities—which obviously we should be pushing hard for—is to consider setting up a protection of civilians co-ordination mechanism that could provide support to local de-escalation and ceasefire initiatives and early warning mechanisms, including by mapping credible local initiatives and learning lessons from what has worked in some parts of the country on the ground. This is something the UK could consider, perhaps by looking at working with Sudanese civil society groups that still have networks in the country, and with any interested international partners.

On other aspects—given its close historical and people-to-people links with Sudan and the expertise in this country on the subject—it is important that the UK is playing an active role in the peace process; not of course in terms of launching some sort of unilateral UK mediation initiative, but playing a more active and visible role as part of a core group of key international and regional actors.

The UK could start to do this by trying to revitalise important diplomatic mechanisms, which in the past have been very active on the Sudan file—like the Troika, the group that we are joined with the United States and Norway. The UK could also encourage the UN Secretary-General's personal envoy, Ramtane Lamamra, to promote better co-ordination of the regional and international mediation efforts. At the moment there has been a multiplicity of unco-ordinated and competing mediation initiatives, which have created space for forum shopping by the parties of the conflict.

Also I encourage international partners to listen and consult the democratic civilians who have experience on these issues over quite a long period of time. It would also be valuable, if the UN Security Council seems to be for the time a bit deadlocked, to pay more diplomatic attention to the African Union. Kate rightly mentioned the Foreign Secretary's links with the Commonwealth; the African Union hitherto has not played a particularly effective role. It tried to put itself forward as a co-ordinating mechanism but that has not worked out until now.

However, the current AU leadership is nearing the end of its term so we will wait to see what might change early next year. But where there is a deadlock in the UN Security Council it is sometimes the case that if the African Union Peace and Security Council can adopt a resolution—for example, advocating for a robust protection of civilians mechanism—then this puts greater pressure on anyone in the UN Security Council not to use a veto against what the African Union itself has recommended.

In addition, as has already been mentioned, the UK could consider doing more to persuade some of the regional countries—Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and others—that everyone will lose out in terms of their economic and security interests if this war continues. This will require perhaps greater political engagement at a ministerial level, raising Sudan higher up the agenda in their discussions with their counterparts from those countries, as well as perhaps having more expert-level discussions to see whether it is possible to reach more of a mutual understanding of what the conflict dynamics are. A final point on this—

Chair: Briefly please.

Dame Rosalind Marsden: It is very important to see more high-level political attention given to the Sudan crisis. We are very pleased to see the Prime Minister mentioning it in his speech at the UN General Assembly, and obviously the fact that the Foreign Secretary chaired the Security Council during our presidency. More high-level political attention will also generate more international media attention, thereby creating a virtuous circle.

Chair: Thank you very much.

Dr Ferguson: I have definitely got a couple of suggestions. I know time is tight so I will—

Chair: If you could bring new points to us, not ones we have already heard, please.

Dr Ferguson: Sure. One is very specific, which is in line with what this Committee has regularly asked for. I suggest you reiterate and re-up those requests regarding the atrocity prevention capabilities, especially around this structural gap that is still there about whose job it is to be developing prevention and protection options. I think that could do an awful lot just by looking at whose job it is. In the last session, Will said it is about aid as well as diplomacy, and the diplomacy bit is cheaper but it still does need human resource, so the overstretch and demand of the team—at least from our view—needs some greater support and that OCSM team, which essentially this Committee has been such a supporter of, needs to be boosted.

The second thing I will say is much more high altitude. This came to light from the Foreign Secretary's remarks in the Security Council last week regarding that veto. Whether it is Sudan, whether it is Gaza, whether it is Ukraine, it is becoming so evident that the deliberate manipulation and inconsistent application of international rules and the rules-based system; their weaponisation by those who are accused of double standards or in fact are upholding double standards; and the perpetration of atrocity crimes have become a cornerstone of malign modern statecraft.

However, despite that being so evident in the challenges that the UK faces, the UK Government currently confronts that challenge in the

margins. But to actually recognise the dire threat that is facing the rules-based system, and recognise just how essential the weaponisation and committing of atrocity crimes are in that furtherance, you need to have that commitment right at the heart of our foreign policy, which means No. 10, the Security Council and the Foreign Secretary getting the advice on that. Currently that does not yet exist, so that is my very specific top line.

Dr Khair: Dame Rosalind spoke very well about the diplomatic engagement side. I think we do need to look over the pond and be very aware of the timelines there. We have a changing Government, a changing Administration and a US envoy who is about to retire mid-Q1, so there will not be anybody in until Q3. That is a long time in a war. We need the UK's envoy to be ready not just to take over at that point but to already be doing some of that handover in the meantime and to meaningfully pull up on that.

In terms of the civil society space, we need to see HMG engaging civil society and having an open door policy to learning from civil society allies and Sudanese civil society wherever we are, and to work in partnership. As David Lammy says, there is an approach to work in partnership with African countries. We would like to see that in play and one of the ways that can be done is through a diaspora engagement framework. There is not one in the UK. That is something that needs to be looked at. We have many colleagues, including in Kate's organisation and others, who have fed into the Government on that basis.

Recognition and support of Sudanese civil society is crucial. Recognition and protection of the ERRs, mutual aid groups and local responders is absolutely critical. They need to be seen as humanitarian responders wearing blue vests, or whatever colour, as we always see on television. That needs to be sacrosanct. There must be funding—flexible, sustained funding—for local groups.

The key piece to this—the diaspora action, the civil society action, the humanitarian assistance piece—is localisation. That is firmly within this Government's remit. When it comes to ceasefire, that should be about local ceasefires, sub-national peacebuilding, protecting local actors, and flexing and funding local actors, including their networks outside and those of us who work within them.

Chair: Ladies, you have been incredibly powerful witnesses. Thank you so much for sharing your experience and thoughts, we do deeply appreciate it.