



 Sudan

# The cost of inaction



Three years of conflict have decimated essential facilities such as hospitals, preventing people from accessing health care.



# Protecting humanity to preserve the future

“The horrors inflicted on civilians in Sudan should never be seen as inevitable consequences of war. Much of the suffering over the last years could have been prevented had the laws of war been followed.”

This statement from ICRC president Mirjana Spoljaric points to an important reality: much civilian suffering is preventable and not linked to military gain. Her observation was delivered on the second anniversary of the conflict in Sudan in April 2025 and one year on, it remains as relevant now as it was then. The humanitarian consequences of the conflict have not abated, and civilians continue to be indiscriminately punished across the country.

Communities in Sudan face mounting hardships as the fighting spreads and the front lines shift. Civilians are repeatedly caught up in attacks on towns and neighbourhoods while trying to go about their daily lives and regain some sense of stability. The increased use of advanced weapon systems such as drones has turned essential infrastructure, markets and hospitals into targets. Safety and security remain painfully elusive for civilians in Sudan, and the scale of the crisis is immense: more than 11 million people have been displaced, including 4 million who have fled the country in search of safety. Meanwhile, for many in Sudan, access to essential services such as water and medical care remains a daily struggle. While comprehensive data on the total number of victims remains limited, the level of human suffering in Sudan makes it one of the world’s most devastating armed conflicts.

The patterns of harm observed in Sudan continue to reflect a collective failure to uphold the rules of war. Also known as international humanitarian law (IHL), these rules set clear limits on how war is conducted and provide protection for those who are not or no longer taking part in hostilities. Failure to observe them is reflected not only on the battlefield but also in narratives that downplay the protection owed to civilians or normalize violence against them. Compliance with IHL remains essential to preserving life and reducing harm.

In Sudan, protecting civilians is not just about responding to violence. It also means preventing further hardship, maintaining essential services and ensuring that people can access health care, remain connected to their families and live with dignity throughout the conflict. These are vital humanitarian actions that help to sustain life and limit the long-term consequences of war. Only political action can bring an end to the conflict. But IHL can help to bring a degree of humanity to war and contribute to a sustainable peace – one that goes beyond a mere pause in the fighting.

This report focuses on three areas where civilian protection is urgently needed and concrete action can be taken: safeguarding the critical infrastructure needed for essential services; helping people who have been separated from their loved ones, gone missing or been detained, while ensuring the dead are treated with dignity; and preventing and responding to sexual violence. In each of these areas, we are addressing immediate humanitarian concerns while also seeking to make a lasting impact for individuals, families and communities.



The ICRC and the Sudanese Red Crescent (SRCS) are working to protect civilians and support access to essential services, guided by IHL and our humanitarian principles. In 2025 alone, the ICRC supported some 3.9 million people across Sudan. Keeping family members in contact remains a critical priority: in 2025, over 62,000 contacts were facilitated in partnership with the SRCS, and since the conflict began, we have received more than 8,300 requests from people seeking to locate missing relatives. The human cost of the fighting remains stark: trained SRCS volunteers recovered the remains of more than 4,500 people in 2025 and arranged burials to provide dignity to the dead and answers for their families. Such efforts rely heavily on local communities, who play a central role in meeting families' needs and maintaining support networks across the country. Protecting these communities will help to safeguard the country's collective resilience during and after the war.

This report does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of the conflict. Rather, it highlights how our work helps to preserve life, dignity and the conditions that allow people to survive. Ultimately, the choices of those engaged in the hostilities or otherwise perpetuating the conflict will make the greatest difference. Compliance with the rules of war, restraint in the conduct of hostilities and the protection of essential services are not abstract concepts: they are decisions taken every day that determine whether human suffering deepens or lessens, whether communities fracture or endure, and whether the means of recovery are preserved or lost.

Hundreds of displaced families have arrived in Tawila town, North Darfur. They fled the hostilities and violence in Al Fasher, seeking shelter and safety.



Doctors at the ICRC-supported Atbara Hospital receive war-wounded patients from Khartoum and other areas.





# Essential services: the foundations of civilian life

The consequences of the conflict in Sudan are most visible in places where essential services have ceased to function. Destruction, disruption and damage to essential infrastructure (health facilities, water systems, electricity networks and communications equipment) have left millions without access to the services they need to survive.

Damage to civilian infrastructure triggers a cascade of knock-on effects across essential services, leaving people in even greater need. When hospitals are damaged or forced to close, for example, the wounded and sick – including people with chronic conditions – are left without care. When water systems fail, there is increased risk of an outbreak of cholera and other water-borne diseases. When electricity is disrupted, life-saving services such as surgery, intensive care and running water are compromised. These systems are the foundations upon which civilian life depends and a vital component of collective resilience.

The impacts of such disruptions are both immediate and cumulative. As services deteriorate, people are forced to make increasingly difficult choices. They may have to travel long distances to seek care, exposing themselves to sexual violence and unexploded ordnance. They may be forced to drink water from unsafe sources or forego medical treatment. Over time, these pressures erode community coping mechanisms and disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups (women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities) while increasing the number of people in need of help.

**In 2025, the ICRC supported some 3.9 million people across Sudan.**

- **More than 3.3 million people** gained improved access to safe water.
- **More than 154,000 people** received emergency care through ICRC-supported hospitals.
- **Around 35,000 people** received surgical care, **more than 22,000** of them for weapon wounds.
- **More than 310,000 people** received aid in response to outbreaks of cholera, malaria and other diseases.
- **More than 4,000 people** received rehabilitative care such as physiotherapy and prosthetics.
- **Around 1,300 people** were trained in first aid, including SRCS volunteers and weapon bearers.



M. Kama/ICRC

ICRC surgeon Dr Maurice Ilboudo performs surgery on a wounded patient.

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In three weeks we had to do more than 300 surgeries, with a daily average of six or seven. So as a surgeon, I have seen some very complicated cases and faced some very sad stories. I remember this lady arriving at the hospital carrying her bag and her injured nine-year-old boy, the rest of whose family was killed in the battle of Al Fasher. Unfortunately, the medical decision was to amputate. The look in his mother's eyes is something I will never forget.

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— Dr Maurice Ilboudo, ICRC surgeon




The collapse of essential infrastructure has consequences beyond human suffering. It also incurs significant long-term costs, including environmental damage in the form of pollution and ecosystem degradation. Disrupted water, health and energy systems also weaken the local and regional economy, which in turn affects livelihoods and increases the resources required to recover and rebuild. The health-related impacts are particularly profound: weapon wounds can result in permanent disabilities that require sustained support if people are to reintegrate into society; mental health conditions, though often invisible, can have lasting effects and require early identification and care; and health systems operating under extreme strain struggle to maintain services despite the best efforts of what staff remain. The longer such systems remain dysfunctional, the more complex and costly it becomes to restore them. Protecting these services now is not only a legal and humanitarian obligation but also a practical step towards rebuilding in the future.

Sudanese communities – alongside front-line service providers including health-care workers, technicians and local authorities – play a critical role in keeping vital services functioning, often under extremely challenging conditions. Health-care workers continue to treat patients amid supply shortages and the threat of attack. Technicians and local authorities work to repair damaged systems where possible. Civilians adapt to the disruptions by paying out of pocket at significant personal cost to meet their basic needs. All do their best to preserve life and dignity under tremendous pressure.

IHL clearly states that essential services and facilities indispensable to the survival of civilians must be protected. Health facilities, water installations and other essential infrastructure must not be attacked or used for military purposes. Ensuring access to essential services is a legal obligation as well as a humanitarian imperative.

When the critical infrastructure needed for essential services is protected and maintained, the fabric of civilian life can be preserved. Communities can endure, the long-term consequences of the conflict are reduced and the economic, social, environmental and institutional costs of recovery are limited. Safeguarding essential services thus helps to preserve the conditions for future recovery.



Om Omar, a mother of three, waits for news of her missing husband.

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[My children] haven't forgotten their father. They always ask me about him, all the time and on special occasions, especially Eid. My eldest son cries and asks me about him. Life is difficult. During the release of detainees, the children waited to see their father on television. We tried to overcome our worries and searched the lists of missing people and detainees on social media. We hope that he will return to his home and children to ease our worries ... We hope to hear good news about him and find out where he is, whether he is detained or not, or find someone who can tell us where he is.

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— Om Omar, wife of a missing husband



# Reconnecting families and preserving human dignity

Countless Sudanese people are living in terrible uncertainty, not knowing what has happened to their loved ones. Some of the missing became separated from their families when fleeing the fighting, others have been detained or went missing during the hostilities. For those left behind, simply not knowing is a profound torture.

Without knowing whether their loved ones are dead or alive, people cannot find closure and move forward. The uncertainty affects not only individuals but entire families and communities.

Unresolved missing persons cases have long-term as well as immediate humanitarian impacts. In Sudan, the scale of the issue only continues to grow. As of late March 2026, the ICRC and the SRCS are handling more than 11,000 cases, including some that date from before the current conflict, both within Sudan and abroad. Cases have increased over 40% since the end of 2024.

Likewise, the number of human remains recovered underscores the magnitude of the conflict; over 20,000 bodies have been recovered and buried in Khartoum alone. When the whereabouts of missing persons are not clarified in a timely and credible manner, the issue can persist for years or even decades. It often becomes a key part of post-conflict processes and shapes demands for truth, justice and accountability. Unresolved cases risk deepening societal divisions, adding to grievances and complicating efforts towards reconciliation and recovery. Addressing the issue early is thus not only a humanitarian priority but also an essential step in reducing long-term tensions.

People go missing for many reasons. Some are separated from their families while fleeing violence. Others are detained without their relatives being informed. Many are believed to have died during hostilities or along displacement routes without their remains being recovered or identified. The various possibilities are often interconnected and require a coordinated humanitarian response.

To address these challenges, the ICRC and the SRCS are working to reconnect missing people with their families. Through tracing services, phone calls and other means of communication, families can restore contact and obtain information about their missing loved ones. Such activities are often the first steps in reducing uncertainty and restoring a sense of connection.

## Actions to trace missing people and restore contact

- **More than 8,300 requests** to help locate missing people in Sudan and abroad received between April 2023 and end-March 2026.
- **Some 1,100 cases** have been resolved; the search for others continues.
- **Around 600 new requests** registered in 2024 and **more than 1,100** in 2025.
- **More than 62,000 people** put in contact with relatives in 2025 via a free phone service facilitated by the ICRC and the SRCS.
- **More than 14,000 people** received access to Wi-Fi from the SRCS in 2025, with ICRC support.
- **More than 8,600 people** received mobile phone recharges to stay in contact with relatives.

Significant efforts are also required to address cases where people are presumed dead. In many parts of Sudan, human remains are not systematically recovered, identified or documented. In some cases, they are buried without proper records, making future identification difficult or impossible. The absence of structured systems for managing the dead increases the risk that cases remain unsolved indefinitely.

Addressing those challenges requires a coordinated and sustained approach. Across Sudan, the ICRC and the SRCS are working together to ensure burial practices are safe and dignified. Meanwhile, the ICRC is also supporting the enhancement of national forensic science and medico-legal capacities towards the establishment of a sustainable national mechanism for the search, recovery, documentation and identification of the dead. These efforts are designed to preserve the possibility of identification over time and support the transition to national ownership of such activities.

## Forensic activities

- **Eight SRCS branches, 19 hospitals** and numerous communities supplied with materials for dignified burials, including more than **11,000 body bags**, since the start of the conflict.
- **Two morgues** rehabilitated and **eight more** equipped with essential materials in 2025.
- Capacity-building on safe and dignified burials and management of remains provided to more than **940 individuals**, including forensic doctors, police officers, civil defense operators and health service staff.
- Training on safe and dignified burials provided to **343 SRCS volunteers** since April 2023.
- **More than 4,500 bodies** recovered and buried by trained volunteers in 2025.

Detention is a critical dimension when it comes to missing people. Publicly available reports continue to highlight serious concerns regarding the treatment and conditions of detainees, including overcrowding, lack of food, water and medical care, and insufficient safeguards for detainees' dignity and physical safety.

The ICRC is in dialogue with all those engaged in the hostilities in hopes of securing access to all people detained in relation to the conflict. We also discuss detention conditions and provide essential support, including for detainee contact with family members and the management of mortal remains. The ICRC also works to strengthen the traceability of people who have been arrested or killed to ensure, where possible, that their families are informed.

While access to detention facilities is currently too limited for the ICRC to carry out its usual activities in a sustained manner, we continue to engage in dialogue with the aim of securing regular visits to places of detention, locating missing people, upholding minimum standards for detention conditions and facilitating contact with loved ones outside. As a neutral intermediary, the ICRC can also support humanitarian arrangements related to detainees, including facilitation of their transfer, release or return to their families when agreed upon by all sides.

Many relatives of missing people are themselves proactive in the search for answers: they seek out information, share details and support one another. They remain determined to preserve family bonds despite the conflict.

IHL requires concrete steps be taken to stop people from going missing, clarify the whereabouts of those who do go missing and inform families accordingly. Detainees must also be treated humanely, and the dead must be handled with dignity. Meeting these obligations is essential to prevent further suffering.

Families need answers to begin moving forward. Persistent uncertainty has enduring consequences that shape individual lives and strain communities, leaving lingering doubts for generations to come. Clarifying what has happened to missing people, keeping families in contact and ensuring dignity in death are not just humanitarian imperatives; they are also essential for maintaining trust, preserving social cohesion and ensuring that the current conflict does not drive unrest long into the future.



ICRC-led workshop on wartime sexual violence, stigma and support for survivors.

A. Omer/ICRC

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I left home with my younger sister to find water. The road we knew so well had become a trail of checkpoints and unseen dangers. In just a few moments, everything changed. I was held at gunpoint and brutally assaulted. My body came home wounded, but my soul returned carrying the weight of silence and fear. I know I am the victim. I am not guilty. And yet, I am terrified that silence will be my fate – that I will spend the rest of my life hiding in the shadow of fear. They ask us, ‘Why did you go out? Why were you alone?’ as if the fault lies in our footsteps, not in the crime. So many of us choose silence, not because we have nothing to say, but because we are afraid of being blamed for surviving

— Maryam, sexual violence survivor

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# Confronting the enduring harms of sexual violence

Sexual violence has been one of the most severe and deeply painful consequences of the conflict in Sudan. Its effects extend far beyond immediate physical harm, with lasting psychological, social and economic impacts for survivors, their families and communities.

Survivors of sexual violence face stigma, isolation and barriers to health care. Fear of reprisals, lack of safe spaces and limited availability of services all contribute to significant underreporting of the problem, also exacerbated by social pressures and narratives that discourage reporting, shift blame onto survivors and normalize such violence. As a result, many survivors suffer in silence, without support.

Long-term consequences include health complications, psychological trauma and exclusion. The impacts can even extend across generations, affecting survivors' families and social structures in profound ways.

Responding to sexual violence requires a careful, survivor-centred approach that prioritizes dignity, confidentiality and access to care. The ICRC is working with the SRCS and other partners to improve access to medical and psychosocial services while engaging with the authorities and communities to reduce stigma and raise awareness about what support is available while helping to develop it further.

Alongside these efforts, communities themselves can play an important role in supporting survivors and reversing stigma. Providing care, maintaining confidentiality and fostering acceptance are essential for survivors to seek help and begin to recover.

IHL strictly prohibits sexual violence in all circumstances. Such acts are serious violations that cause profound harm to individuals and communities. Preventing sexual violence and ensuring access to care for survivors are essential to protecting human dignity.

Addressing sexual violence is not just about responding to harm but also preventing such acts in the first place. Doing so is critical to limit the lasting impact of conflict on individuals and preserve the social fabric of communities affected by the violence.



ICRC and SRCS teams interview people with missing loved ones in Port Sudan, 2025.



# Conclusion

Three years into the conflict in Sudan, civilians continue to suffer immense and unrelenting hardship. Such suffering must not be considered an inevitable consequence of war. Much of the harm presented in this report reflects the erosion of rules intended to govern how war is fought. When the law is respected, suffering can be reduced. When it is ignored, suffering increases far beyond what is necessary or proportionate.

At stake is not only life in the present but also the systems that will allow life to go on after the conflict. Across Sudan, weakened essential services, unresolved missing persons cases, sexual violence and loss of dignity are tearing the social fabric apart. These harms are not confined to moments of violence; they are reinforced by narratives that normalize violence, diminish the suffering of others and erode a sense of shared humanity. They deepen over time, undermining trust, fragmenting communities and increasing the efforts required in future to rebuild.

In this sense, our work to protect victims of armed conflict goes beyond our emergency humanitarian response. We are also striving to make recovery possible once the violence subsides. By safeguarding dignity, relationships and essential systems, such work limits the long-term damage to society. IHL and humanitarian action alone cannot end the conflict or replace political solutions, but they can play a critical role in shaping the conditions for restoring stability and ensuring the path forward is not defined by loss alone.

Such work is particularly urgent in a fragmented conflict with multiple front lines involving numerous armed actors. The cost of inaction is rapidly growing, a cost Sudan can ill afford. The longer IHL is disregarded, the more difficult it becomes to restore services, clarify the whereabouts of missing people, address trauma and rebuild trust among people and institutions.

In the meantime, people throughout Sudan continue to uphold humanity in quiet yet concrete ways. Health-care workers continue to provide care. Families continue to search for their missing relatives and maintain contact when they are forced to separate. Communities continue to support survivors, adapt to disruptions and preserve life and dignity. Through such actions, they help to sustain a society under extreme strain.

The future is not shaped by political pacts and formal negotiations alone. It is also shaped by how hostilities are conducted from day to day: whether civilians are spared, essential services protected, detainees treated with humanity, and missing people found and – where possible – reunited with their loved ones. For all that to happen, humanitarian workers must be able to reach those in need.

While political outcomes remain uncertain, choices can be made now to reduce harm. The first steps must be to exercise restraint, comply with rules that limit violence, protect civilians and sustain civilian life. Doing so will help to preserve the human and social foundations upon which the future depends.

# Call to action

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## Reaffirm and apply the limits of war in practice

Ensure that the conduct of hostilities reflects constant care for civilians, including through restraint in the use of weapons, precautions in operations and the protection of infrastructure indispensable to survival. These principles were reaffirmed in the Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan, adopted in May 2023. Implementing them will require sustained investment in training and the integration of IHL into operational planning, command responsibility and the conduct of military operations.

All states, including those who sustain or have influence over the conflict, have an obligation to promote IHL by encouraging and supporting those engaged in hostilities to comply with its rules in practice.

The ICRC continues to support these efforts by engaging in confidential dialogue with those involved in the hostilities, promoting IHL and providing practical guidance on its implementation.

## Take concrete steps to reduce harm and protect dignity

Ensure safe and confidential access to services for survivors of sexual violence, work with communities to reduce stigma and barriers to reporting, and help to prevent sexual violence by enforcing clear prohibitions on such acts. Ensure humane treatment of all detainees by upholding fundamental safeguards, improving detention conditions and enabling regular contact with family members. Enable families to obtain information about missing relatives by maintaining traceability of those arrested, detained or killed, and by establishing mechanisms to clarify their situation and whereabouts. Guarantee safe and sustained access to essential services and humanitarian assistance by protecting essential infrastructure, facilitating access to relevant areas by humanitarian organizations and avoiding disruptions to systems indispensable to civilians' survival.

The ICRC and the SRCS provide support to essential services, help to restore contact between family members and engage with all sides to help address these issues in a practical and sustained manner.

## Preserve space for humanitarian action and dialogue

Preserve and expand humanitarian spaces by ensuring that organizations have safe, timely and unimpeded access to people in need. Maintain channels for neutral, practical engagement that allow for the identification and implementation of measures to reduce suffering. Humanitarian action must remain delinked from political processes and should not be made conditional on the state of negotiations; it must be upheld at all times and complement broader efforts towards peace and stability.

As a neutral intermediary, with the agreement of all sides, the ICRC facilitates humanitarian arrangements, supports dialogue on issues of common concern and helps to create the conditions for tangible measures that reduce harm.

## Act to prevent further erosion of humanity amid conflict

Reject dehumanizing practices and narratives by promoting language and conduct that recognize the dignity of all people affected by conflict. Avoid discourse that justifies, normalizes or obscures violations of the rules of war. Support efforts that increase practical compliance with IHL, including training, engagement and consistent messaging on the limits placed on violence. People who have the power to shape public discourse or who wield influence over those involved in the hostilities have a role to play in promoting actions and narratives that respect humanity and the law.

Through its on-the-ground presence, engagement and principled approach, the ICRC promotes respect for humanity and the laws that protect it, even in the most challenging environments.



The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been on the front line for humanity since 1863, working to preserve human dignity and relieve human suffering whenever war or armed violence strikes.

Present in over 90 countries worldwide, we act resolutely to provide humanitarian assistance to whoever needs it most, regardless of race, religion, gender or politics. In collaboration with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners around the world, we do everything we can to deliver life-saving aid across front lines, reconnect families and locate missing people. We press authorities to give us access to detainees and strive to improve their living conditions.





We actively engage with the authorities and armed forces on all sides, urging them to fulfil their duty under the Geneva Conventions to protect those who don't fight from harm, including in the digital sphere. We hold sensitive discussions, often bilaterally and in confidence, aiming to prevent further harm and help all sides better comply with international humanitarian law.

In the darkest of times, we stand up for our shared humanity by promoting the rules of war and rallying the world to call on those with the authority to do so to enforce them effectively.

Cover photo: Women in search of missing family members in Port Sudan, 2025.  
Credit: M. Eissa/ICRC



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