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Protecting First Responders: Challenges and Recommendations

Image courtesy of Shabaka Sudan Programme

Summary

Sudan's war began in April 2023 and has created a massive humanitarian crisis. Millions face hunger, displacement, and violence.
Traditional aid groups struggle to reach people, however, due to access restrictions and funding shortages.

Stepping into the gap: first responders

A network of local volunteers, community groups, and individuals – known as first responders – play a critical role, providing essential services such as food, healthcare, and community support to those affected by the conflict. These groups encompass the Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs), established at the onset of the conflict, among other structured efforts. Nonetheless, due to their frontline role and other factors, these responders are confronted with distinct protection issues, facing threats to their safety and wellbeing. Dozens have been killed or injured, and many have been arrested, detained, interrogated, or mistreated by the warring parties.

This report is based on qualitative research, including key informant interviews (KIIs) with over 30 first-responder representatives and donors from April–June 2024. Fieldwork was conducted in Nairobi and Kampala, complemented by a questionnaire distributed to 21 responders across Sudan. The study also involved a review of academic literature and human rights documents to validate reported cases of harassment and attacks on first responders.

Challenges faced by first responders

Sudanese first responders lack the recognition and legal protections enjoyed by traditional aid workers. Despite providing essential life-saving services, first responders are not officially counted or valued similarly to individuals working with registered organisations (national and international). There is a growing call within humanitarian and human rights circles to extend support and protection to these individuals, recognising that their safety is paramount and any harm they face violates human rights and humanitarian principles.

Despite their vital work, first responders face significant risks. Their freedom to operate is inconsistent, with some local contexts allowing relative autonomy and others imposing severe restrictions. Multiple factors influence these conditions, including community relations, individual personalities, conflict proximity, repression levels, and social media presence. Both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) have been implicated in the abuse of first responders, including harassment, arbitrary arrest, interrogation, and sexual abuse.

Summary

Below are the key risks facing frontline responders:

- Killing: first responders have died in bombings, shelling, shootings, and other violent attacks. In some cases, armed actors have deliberately targeted first responders.
- Restrictions on first responders and civil society: authorities in SAF and RSF-controlled areas monitor and restrict activity. SAF authorities have issued restrictive decrees in several states and imposed states of emergency.
- Arrest and detention: in many cases, authorities arrest and detain first responders for hours, days, or longer without legal basis, subjecting them to beatings and serious abuse. Authorities may harass, arrest, or detain based on a person's ethnicity or profile as a political activist, human rights defender, or resistance committee member.
- Harassment and threats: authorities harass and question first responders about their resources and motivations, accusing them of being spies or supporters of the enemy.
- Sexual abuse: female responders are subjected to sexual harassment and abuse.

This report offers recommendations for first responders, international aid groups, human rights organisations, and local responders.

Key Recommendations for improved protection

- **First responders: develop strategies for engaging with authorities to increase transparency.**
- **International aid groups & donors: recognise first responders as aid workers, advocate for their safety, and include them in data collection on attacks. Funding and training for communication, security, and protection strategies should also be provided.**
- **Human rights organisations: document abuses against first responders and report to international bodies.**
- **Local responders: improve communication systems to report incidents effectively; seek training in incident monitoring, security risk mitigation, and emergency support mechanisms; and plan for emergency evacuation, safe housing, and access to psychological support.**

Introduction

Sudan's humanitarian crisis, unfolding since war erupted in April 2023, has become ever more dire. On 31 May 2024, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals warned: "time is running out for millions of people in Sudan who are at imminent risk of famine, displaced from their lands, living under bombardments, and cut off from humanitarian assistance." (IASC, 2024) At least 18 million people face acute hunger in Sudan, including 3.6 million acutely malnourished children (UN News, 2024).

Still, the humanitarian response is hampered by access restrictions and insufficient funding, as the warring sides restrict access and obstruct and divert aid. The main humanitarian agencies, including the WFP, IOM, and INGOs, only reach a small percentage of those in need. In the absence of an agreement on humanitarian access corridors, and given extreme funding shortfalls, traditional aid agencies cannot reach the vast majority of people in need.

In Sudan, networks of dedicated volunteers are providing essential services. These include ERRs, which were established with the onset of the conflict, among other structured efforts (Shabaka, 2023b; Shabaka, 2024b). Nonetheless, due to their frontline roles and various other factors, these responders are confronted with distinct protection issues, facing threats to their safety and wellbeing. Dozens have been killed or injured, and many have been arrested, detained, interrogated, or mistreated by the warring parties.

The concept of "protection" can be interpreted in many ways. It can mean safeguards against physical harm and human rights violations for specific individuals or, more generally, assistance with essential services such as food, water, and healthcare. Within the scope of this study, first responders used the term "protection" to refer to protection from violence, harassment, imprisonment, and other human rights abuses by armed groups or official entities.

This report describes some of the protection challenges faced by first responders, suggesting ways that both they and their supporters might mitigate those risks and improve the response to incidents of abuse. This issue should concern the broader humanitarian and human rights communities, as such incidents violate international human rights and humanitarian law, including provisions protecting humanitarian aid workers.

Notably, most first responders are not affiliated with national or international organisations. As such, first responders may lack the resources, experience, and expertise to mitigate harm or respond effectively to incidents using advocacy (Shabaka, 2023b).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 **INTRODUCTION**

Summary 1
Introduction 3

2 **METHODOLOGY**

Methodology 4
A Global and Cross Cutting Issue 4
Context of Localisation 7
Situation Update 9

3 **PROTECTION CHALLENGES**

Protection Challenges Summary 10
Killings 11
Arrest and Detention 12
Harrasment and threats 13
Ethnic Identities 14
Sexual Abuse 15
Online Targeting 16
Restrictions on Civil Society 17

4 **STRATEGIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

First responder strategies 18
Protection under international law 19
Recommendations 20

5 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Bibliography 21

Methodology

The research carried out for this report is primarily qualitative. Between April–June, Shabaka interviewed over 30 representatives of first responder groups, national and international organisations involved with first responders, and donors seeking to fund first responders. Interviews were conducted over the phone and in person in Nairobi and Kampala.

In addition, Shabaka obtained questionnaire responses – on protection challenges for first responders – from 21 individuals across Sudan, predominantly River Nile, Kassala, Gedaref, Khartoum, and South Kordofan states. Shabaka also reviewed scholarly articles, human rights reports, and media reports on harassment, detention, and attacks on first responders, corroborating when possible.

A global and cross-cutting issue

"Aid workers" are defined as the employees and associated personnel of not-for-profit aid groups (local, national, and international) that provide material and/or technical assistance in humanitarian contexts. This includes both emergency relief and multi-mandated (relief and development) organisations: NGOs, the International Movement of the Red Cross/Red Crescent, donor agencies and all the UN agencies belonging to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (IASC) plus UNRWA. The aid worker definition encompasses all staff and volunteers working for these aid groups, and does not include UN peacekeeping personnel, human rights workers, election monitors or purely political, religious, or advocacy organisations. (AWSD, n.d. a)

The surge in violence targeting humanitarian aid workers worldwide has reached a critical point. In 2023, at least 260 aid workers died in conflict zones, a 120% increase from 2022, and the first quarter of 2024 has seen 60 more fatalities than the same period in 2023. These increases point to the gravity of the problem and the urgent need for measures to protect those assisting others in crises, including in Sudan (Yang, 2023).

There is limited data on attacks on first responders in Sudan, as the definition of an aid worker is restricted to someone on staff or the "associated personnel" of an aid organisation. Humanitarian monitoring projects, such as the Aid Worker Security Database, cull information from open sources, aid agencies, and consortia of operational organisations. Sudanese first responders – volunteers, concerned citizens, activists, and community members – may or may not be affiliated with an organisation feeding information into such monitoring systems. Moreover, given the dangerous and fluid contexts in which they work, Sudanese first responders may not feel safe to publicly post or share information on incidents.

A global and cross-cutting issue

International and National Organisations involved in the Sudan response	Number
UN	15
INGO	33
ICRC	8
NRCS and IFRC	2
NNGO	18
Other	1
Responders affected by the conflict	
Nationals killed	29
Nationals wounded	33
Nationals kidnapped	9
Total national staff	71
Internationals killed	0
Internationals wounded	4
Internationals kidnapped	0
Total international staff	4
Total number of responders affected by the conflict	75

Source: (AWSD, n.d. b)

A global and cross-cutting issue

The gaps in the data collection systems underscore the grey zone in which Sudanese first responders operate. Despite their critical work, they may not be recognised as aid workers if not linked to an official aid organisation. Yet there is little doubt that Sudanese first responders are aid workers, providing life-saving aid, often at the behest of more established organisations and donors, in extremely risky environments. It is true that some first responders wear multiple hats and work across sectors. This versatility may increase their vulnerability, but strategies exist to lessen the dangers. Importantly, no evidence suggests that first responders cannot function as humanitarians and uphold core humanitarian principles (Robillard, Atim, and Maxwell, 2021).

Sudanese first responders seek recognition. Like the communities they serve, first responders bear the brunt of the war and work to provide critical services under unimaginable circumstances. Still, they are not considered "aid workers", operating in a grey zone without the same legal protections, but are relied on to provide life-saving aid. Many of the first responders we spoke to seek to not just be counted in data collection, but be valued for the work they do. They seek the same support and behind-the-scenes lobbying that other aid workers receive when they come under threat of attack.

In this briefing, we recognise that protecting first responders is a topic of interest for humanitarian and human rights communities. The humanitarian community is concerned with the welfare of all humanitarian aid workers, and donors and organisations that support Sudan's first responders may feel an additional obligation or duty of care. The issue is also of concern to the broader human rights community, as any attack on or abuse of first responders violates human rights and humanitarian laws.

In addition, specialised organisations such as those dedicated to protecting human rights defenders (HRDs) would also be concerned, insofar as many first responders meet the definition of HRDs. UN special mandates – such as the Special Rapporteur on Children in Armed Conflict or the Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict – might also be concerned with the protection of first responders, particularly as women and youth responders face specific threats or attacks.

Context of localisation

The humanitarian community had already been discussing the localisation of humanitarian aid for several years when the war erupted in Sudan. The discussion had been contentious, however, as localisation implies a potentially radical change to power dynamics in the humanitarian space. As an authoritative report on the subject explains: "There is a spectrum of views on whether localisation should be about making existing international systems more inclusive of local actors, or whether it requires a fundamental transformation of the system to adapt to diverse local realities" (Robillard, Atim, and Maxwell, 2021).

Given the gravity of the crisis in Sudan, localisation has become more urgent than ever. Sudanese first responders have won wide acclaim for their brave and inspiring work, but they deserve far more support and the ability to retain agency in decision-making. Ideally, donors and international organisations can directly support local groups, including first responders, who may or may not be formally registered, and empower them to deliver aid according to their own agendas (Shabaka, 2024a).

Since the start of 2024, some progress has been made in the form of traditional donors pledging millions to the Sudan crisis as part of their commitment to localisation. First responders and their allies have established the Localisation Council to manage and coordinate pooled funding for ERRs in Khartoum state and Darfur region, helping to raise the profile of ERRs in humanitarian and donor communities (Shabaka, forthcoming). While NNGOs and INGOs have direct links to local initiatives, many also opt to participate in the Localisation Council's efforts to coordinate assistance (Interview respondent, May 2024).

However, more than one year into the crisis and despite promises, only minimal assistance from traditional donors has arrived. For example, the Khartoum state ERR has received only approximately USD 1,000,000 to assist millions of people for over a year, and other mutual aid groups serving large populations have received little or no funding, relying entirely on community and diaspora contributions (Interview respondent, May 2024). In early 2024, the UN Sudan Humanitarian Fund allocated a segment of aid to be distributed by INGOs, but subsequent funding has not yet materialised, although designated or promised.

Context of localisation

According to donors and international organisations, donors' bureaucratic complexities and rigid structures often hinder the process of localising aid, particularly stringent accountability systems. Furthermore, localisation brings complex issues around duty of care – the ethical responsibility to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all individuals involved in humanitarian efforts – to the forefront. How can donors relax their systems and uphold core humanitarian principles of impartiality, neutrality, and independence, and "do no harm"?

Critics argue that the current approach is paternalistic, suggesting a dynamic in which the donor assumes a position of authority over the recipient, potentially undermining the autonomy and expertise of local frontline responders. These responders are acutely conscious of the significant risks they face, including political, social, and environmental threats that can arise in volatile contexts. The challenge lies in striking a balance between providing necessary support and respecting the capabilities and insights of local actors.

In reimagining the localisation framework, it is essential to consider how international support can be structured to empower local entities, allowing them to lead their own development and humanitarian initiatives. This would entail a shift towards more equitable partnerships, transparent communication, and shared decision-making processes (Fast & Bennett, 2020). By doing so, the international community can contribute to building resilience and self-sufficiency, which are critical to sustaining long-term recovery and growth in regions affected by the crisis.

One area in which donors can support first responders and take steps to mitigate risks is through strategic management of financial support, specifically cash transfers. Those involved in distributing funds must be cognisant of the inherent risks, especially when disbursements are made to individual recipients, and develop safeguards aimed at minimising such risk. As Shabaka has recommended elsewhere, donors should adopt stringent verification processes, ensuring transparency in the flow of funds and maintaining rigorous oversight to prevent misuse or misappropriation of resources. By fostering a culture of accountability and vigilance, donors can contribute to the overall resilience of locally-driven humanitarian ecosystems (Shabaka, 2023a).

Situation Update
1st June – 5th July 2024

Body

Source: (ACLED, 2024)

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

The protection challenges that first responders face depend on the local context, which varies considerably across Sudan. First responders can operate relatively freely in some areas, while they are highly restricted in others. First responders' ability to operate not only depends on who is in control, the RSF or SAF, as serious abuses are reported in areas under the control of both parties. First responders' relations in the community and profiles (including on social media), alongside the other personalities involved, proximity to the conflict, and levels of repression in the area, are also factors.

Both the SAF and RSF have subjected first responders to various abuses, including harassment (physical and online), arrest and detention, interrogation, and sexual abuse. Human rights organisations and the media have reported on such incidents occurring in areas under the control of both parties (e.g. ACJPS, 2024b; Aljazeera, 2024).

The types of protection concerns can broadly be categorised as follows:

Killings:
First responders have died in bombings, shelling, shootings, and other violent attacks. In some cases, armed actors have deliberately targeted first responders.

Restrictions on first responders and civil society:
Authorities in both SAF and RSF-controlled areas monitor and restrict activity. SAF authorities have issued restrictive decrees in several states and imposed states of emergency.

Arrest and detention:
In many cases, authorities arrest and detain first responders for hours, days, or longer with no legal basis, subjecting them to beatings and serious abuse. Authorities may harass, arrest, or detain based on a person's ethnicity or profile as a political activist, HRD, or resistance committee member.

Harassment and threats:
Authorities harass and question first responders about their resources and motivations, accusing them of being spies or supporters of the enemy.

Sexual abuse:
Female responders are subjected to sexual harassment and abuse.

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Killings

Dozens of people have died as a result of being caught in crossfire, deliberately targeted, or killed by explosives. ERR sources estimate that over 20 volunteers have been killed in attacks, including eight killed in an RSF attack on a community kitchen in El Fasher on 11 June 2024 (Radio Dabanga, 2024b). Around the same time, the RSF also stormed one of the town's main hospitals, opening fire and stealing an ambulance.

In early June, the RSF also carried out a large-scale attack on the town of Wad al Nura in Al Gazira state, killing Dr Mohamed Bilal Jumaa in the local hospital, who was preparing to assist in delivery (CFJ, 2024). Later in June, the RSF attacked El Fasher's maternity hospital, killing a pharmacist inside.

The UN's Humanitarian Coordinator condemned the attack, tweeting that Amna Ahmed Bakhit was "killed on the job, prescribing and administering medicine to women, men and children in a place that should have been safe" (Nkweta-Salami, 2024).

Other reported incidents include:

- In January 2024, the RSF killed an ERR volunteer in the Alban El Jadeed hospital in Sharq El Nil (East Nile), and SAF soldiers assassinated Dr Abdel Moneim Banga Abdel Hafeez for allegedly supporting the RSF (Sudan Tribune, 2024a).
- In March, following its takeover, the SAF killed two volunteers in Omdurman (Neshad, 2024).
- In April, the RSF attacked a mosque on Tuti Island, Khartoum, killing ERR volunteer Hossam Awad Muhammad Khalifa and injuring seven mosque worshipers during Eid prayers (Khartoum Local Emergency Room, 2024). In the same month, the SAF detained and tortured to death lawyer and politician Salah Tyeb Musa in Al Gazira state (Emergency Lawyers, 2024).
- In May, the RSF assassinated a medical worker in a town near Wad Madani, in Al Gazira state (Sudan Tribune, 2024b). On 30 May, the RSF killed an employee of a local organisation at Sakaly IDP camp in Nyala, South Darfur (Interview respondent in Nyala, May 2024). and, in the same month, medical volunteer Zaher Hamad was killed by shelling in the Mamoura area of Khartoum (Interview respondent, in Khartoum, May 2024)
- In early June, media reported the death of a volunteer, Abdelrahman Al Hadi Adlan, while in RSF custody following his arrest in Kebkabiya, North Darfur (Al Hadath Al Sudani, 2024).

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Arrest and Detention

Rights groups and media have documented numerous cases of arrest and detention of volunteers, activists, religious leaders, and HRDs across Sudan since the beginning of the war (ACJPS, 2024a). It is difficult to generalise reasons for arrest, as they vary across regions and contexts, and reasons are not always given.

In many cases, authorities target anti-war activists. For example, in Blue Nile state in August 2023, a group of women were arrested for protesting the war (Sudan Tribune, 2023). In December 2023, a first responder in Kassala was arrested for engaging in anti-war activities. "I was accused of espionage for the Rapid Support Forces, baseless accusations aimed at intimidating me and dissuading us from continuing our peaceful activities", he recalled (Questionnaire respondent, June 2024). The interrogators also questioned him about the ERR's funding and work.

In other examples, authorities targeted the Resistance Committees (RCs) – groups that spearheaded Sudan's 2018 revolution, which brought down Omar El-Bashir in 2019 – as they are known to stand against military rule and seen as political activists. "Most of the volunteers face security risks. I was arrested more than once because I am one of the actors in the revolution and the process of change", explained one first responder in South Kordofan (Interview respondent, June 2024).

Since the beginning of 2024, the media has reported that authorities in Sennar, Gedaref, and White Nile states have been arresting volunteers due to their affiliation with RCs, political parties, anti-war campaigns, or for documenting human rights abuses (Sudan Tribune, 2024c; Radio Dabanga, 2024a, 2024d). In May, the RSF arrested 17 community kitchen volunteers in Khartoum as well as detained ERR members in Um Beda and Omdurman, holding one ransom (El Balal, 2024; Sudan Tribune, 2024b). The RSF have also raided first responder spaces and detained volunteers for questioning, releasing them under pressure from the community (Questionnaire respondent, May 2024).

First responders have also been arrested travelling to or from meetings outside Sudan, such as the founding of the "Tagaddum" (or "progress", an acronym for the alliance of democratic and civilian forces) conference in Addis Ababa in late May 2024.

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Harrasment and Threats

Many first responders said they received threats of arrest or even death by phone or on social media. The motivation for their harassment being suspicion of political motivations, accusations of corruption, or general antipathy toward first responder groups. For example, volunteers left Omdurman after being threatened by the pro-army militia because they were known pro-democracy activists (Neshad, 2024).

Non-physical harassment can have a massive impact on first responders' work. "These harassments and threats not only affected my psyche but also my ability to perform my humanitarian tasks. The threat of arrest and murder puts my life and the lives of my colleagues at constant risk, making it difficult for us to provide the necessary services that people need in the difficult circumstances we live in", one first responder in Kassala reported (Questionnaire respondent, May 2024).

Another first responder from Kassala added: "These harassments and threats have greatly affected my personal and professional life, increasing the tension and anxiety I live with. However, they have also strengthened my determination and resolve to continue providing psychological and social health services to the Sudanese community, which is in dire need of them in these critical times." (Questionnaire respondent, May 2024)

Responders' personal profiles also have implications in terms of the targeting they face.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity can be a trigger for arrest, harassment, and other abuses. For example, when the RSF and allied Arab militia fought against armed Massalit groups in West Darfur, beginning in April 2023, they also carried out large-scale attacks on Massalit civilians based on ethnicity. The UN and rights groups have characterised the violence as crimes against humanity and possible genocide.

Attacks, threats, and abuses based on ethnicity have spread. In El Fasher, North Darfur, the RSF is fighting SAF and allied groups. Several monitoring organisations have raised concerns that the RSF will begin targeting ethnic Zaghawa communities, as Zaghawas dominate the armed groups aligned with the army and some community leaders have reportedly declared war against the RSF (Radio Dabanga, 2024c).

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Ethnicity

Many rights groups have drawn attention to the racial slurs and online hate speech accompanying the deepening polarisation of Sudanese society (Rights for Peace, 2024). In February 2024, for example, the Darfur Bar Association reported that authorities in Atbara, River Nile state, had arrested Inaam Ahmed Khairy and Salma Hassan due to their membership in the Misseriya tribe, an ethnic group associated with the RSF (Saleh, 2024).

As one first responder working in Al Gazira stated in May 2024: "First responders from the Ja'alin tribe are being attacked by the Rapid Support Forces under the pretext of supporting the army, while those who belong to the tribes of western Sudan are subjected to assault and arrest by the army under the pretext of affiliation and intelligence with the Rapid Support Forces" (Questionnaire respondent, Gezira, May 2024).

Sexual Abuse

International, regional, and national groups have documented and condemned sexual violence against civilians by both warring parties (SRSG-SVC, 2024; OCHA, 2024b). The RSF's abuses have been widely reported, including "sexual slavery, trafficking, rape, and acts tantamount to enforced disappearances, which in some cases may have been racially, ethnically and politically motivated" (OHCHR, 2023). Female ERR members, especially in Khartoum, have reported the rape of their colleagues by the RSF.

Sexual abuse is one of female first responders' top protection concerns. The Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa documented over 170 cases of sexual violence by the warring sides, emphasising the RSF's use of rape as a weapon of war and population control (SIHA, 2024). The SAF has also been implicated in sexual violence against first responders. In October 2023, for example, soldiers detained a health volunteer in Omdurman for two weeks, depriving her of food and subjecting her to threats of sexual violence and forced disappearance (Interview respondent, May 2024).

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Online Targeting

Social media can be helpful or harmful depending on various factors. Most ERRs have Facebook pages where they report on their activities, call for support, and list their sources of support. First responders told us this transparency strategy has helped build trust with authorities, particularly in RSF areas.

Despite security risks, many first responders post incidents of arrest or disappearance as a form of advocacy or to help find missing people (Khartoum Local Emergency Rooms Facebook post, 27 May 2024). The Khartoum ERR has a website and posts interviews with released detainees, showcasing their resilience and celebrating their work (ERR Khartoum State, n.d.). First responders have also created new monitoring rooms to monitor various human rights issues and incidents (e.g. East Nile Human Rights Watch, n.d.).

However, social media posts can also be a pretext for arrest, as first responders have been arrested after posting material deemed sensitive by the authorities. One young man from Khartoum, a former RC member, said military intelligence arrested him because he had been posting about bombings in his area.

Another ERR member from Atbara explained: "Many activists face targeted attacks on their social media profiles due to their activities, which are often viewed as opposing the security authorities. These actions can lead to heightened scrutiny, online harassment, and potential legal consequences, underlining the risks faced by those who publicly challenge or critique the status quo" (Questionnaire respondent, May 2024)

Another first responder noted: "I was informed that the security authorities are searching for me because I published video clips showing the brutal treatment the security authorities inflicted while evacuating displaced people from the schools where they were staying" (Questionnaire respondent in Atbara, May 2024).

The RSF also monitors social media. In Central Darfur, one humanitarian observed, "You have to be careful what you post online", as he described how the RSF had arrested one aid worker in the state for posting about US sanctions on an RSF deputy commander (Interview respondent in Zalingei, June 2024).

Protection challenges facing frontline responders

Restrictions on civil society and/or civic space

In SAF-controlled areas, authorities have targeted first responders by imposing various restrictions on civil society, such as a federal decree to dissolve local committees and volunteer groups (Radio Dabanga, 2024e). The decree – issued in January 2024 after the RSF took over Wad Madani and large parts of Al Gazira state – echoed similarly restrictive measures imposed by governors in River Nile, Northern, Gedaref, Sennar, White Nile, and North Kordofan states.

In addition, in February 2024, General Al Burhan endorsed amendments to the general intelligence service law, granting officials broad powers of detention and legitimising practices already in play. Such powers contravene human rights law and contribute to an environment of fear and repression (SHRM, 2024). Sudanese rights groups have expressed concern over "ongoing reports about the closure of the civic space, attacks on freedom of expression, rising militarisation and continuous disruption and shutdown of communication" (ISHR, 2024).

The authorities also require all humanitarian organisations to register with the Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC) and adhere to its rules. As one mutual aid group assisting displaced people from Al Gezira said, "We also face administrative obstacles imposed by the army and government institutions as we try to provide assistance to the displaced, such as shelter centres" (Questionnaire respondent in SAF-controlled area, May 2024).

In RSF-controlled areas, authorities set up an HAC equivalent, the Sudanese Agency for Relief and Humanitarian Operations (SARHO), to register all initiatives, even if previously registered with the HAC. Some groups told Shabaka that they faced challenges registering, sometimes because authorities thought their work was sensitive (Shabaka, 2024a).

Authorities in both SAF and RSF-controlled areas routinely restrict movement, especially in areas where the two sides are in closer proximity. "It is difficult to move through military checkpoints. We are sometimes detained under the pretext of verifying our identities", explained a first responder in Al Gazira state. "We were subjected to a beating by the Rapid Support Forces while we were trying to evacuate those stranded [...] These risks and challenges make our work as first responders in conflict areas a challenging task that requires great courage and dedication" (Questionnaire respondent, May 2024).

First responder strategies to address protection concerns

Most of the first responders we interviewed highlighted the importance of leveraging established relationships within the community, often including local authorities, to handle incidents effectively.

These connections are crucial to facilitating the resolution of cases, especially when advocating for a colleague's release.

First responders said they often use online platforms to post information about incidents and pressure authorities. Further, first responders also collaborate with community members and humanitarian organisations active in their area to exert collective pressure on authorities, underscoring the community's solidarity in addressing challenges.

By uniting their voices, first responders can more effectively communicate the urgency and legitimacy of their requests, thereby increasing the likelihood of a positive outcome.

In an example from Sinja, after a group of first responders was detained, one of their colleagues went to the SAF security authorities to explain the group's work and convince the authorities to release them.

In an example from Central Darfur, the humanitarian coordinator's office helped win the release of a staff member of a humanitarian organisation who had been arrested in February doing first responder work.

Despite many such examples of local relationships paving the way for release, many other examples show that such efforts are not always successful. Hundreds or even thousands of people, including first responders, are being held in detention centres across the country by both the warring sides.

According to an initiative that tracks missing and disappeared, there are at least 1,100 documented cases of forced disappearances (ACJPS, 2024a).

Protection of first responders under international law

In recent years, international legal, human rights, and humanitarian organisations have focused on the attack of aid workers, drawing attention to the fact that, under international law, such attacks may be considered war crimes and contain elements of crimes against humanity or genocide. These organisations acknowledge that local aid workers are especially vulnerable, as they "are typically the first to deliver aid in challenging environments, with often fewer measures to ensure their protection" (OCHA, 2024a).

Sudanese organisations identified a significant gap in the protection of first responders (Shabaka, 2023b). Many first responders and their supporters stressed the need for better monitoring systems and ways to communicate information to international actors. First responders need more public support and robust advocacy by international actors.

One recommendation is for international humanitarian organisations to recognise first responders as aid workers (ICRC, n.d.). It is clear that Sudanese first responders meet the internationally accepted definition of "aid workers", defined as employees "and associated personnel" of aid groups, including volunteers (AWSD, n.d. a). For first responders linked to existing local or international organisations, there should be no question that they are aid workers and entitled to the same support as other staff. In some examples described in interviews, organisations have helped such first responders in times of need.

However, the question of recognition is complicated, given the range of relationships and activities. The situation may be trickier for first responders and local initiatives not affiliated with aid organisations. Some may not be "associated personnel" of existing local or international aid groups in the same way as others; thus, humanitarian actors may object to a blanket treatment of all first responders. Moreover, no single authority can provide a wholesale status determination for all Sudanese first responders. While a pivotal agency, the UN does not have the power to unilaterally determine a group's status. It is more likely that any such determination would arise in the context of legal proceedings, such as war crimes prosecutions for attacks on first responders.

Under international law, attacks on aid workers and civilians are prohibited and carry the possibility of criminal prosecution. International humanitarian law has been interpreted as prohibiting "harassment, intimidation, and detention of relief personnel." States have condemned "mistreatment, physical and psychological violence, murder, beating, abduction, hostage-taking, harassment, kidnapping, illegal arrest and detention" (ICRC, n.d.).

Recommendations to enhance protection for first responders

The first responders we interviewed also offered a range of other practical recommendations for enhancing protection, including:

- **First responders should decide the appropriate use of social media platforms in their operations.**
- **It is essential that first responders have access to training in communication and digital security protocols, as well as other key subjects such as risk mitigation and effective monitoring techniques.**
- **First responders can mitigate risk by having strategies for engagement with authorities and governing bodies, including transparency regarding sources of funding and operational activities.**
- **Adequate provisions must be made for emergency evacuation procedures, the establishment of secure housing for individuals requiring relocation, and the availability of psychosocial assistance.**

Recommendations to enhance protection for first responders

For international aid groups and donors:

- International aid groups should consider first responders to be aid workers and take steps to support, advocate for, and include them in data collection and reporting. International aid groups should reach out more widely to mutual aid and first responder groups.

- International organisations should actively advocate for first responders and publicly condemn attacks against them as war crimes. Highlighting first responders' vital role strengthens calls for their protection. However, international organisations should also be cautious when identifying information and protect confidentiality.

- International organisations should provide funding and training for first responders in order to improve their core systems of communications and security management, including their ability to report protection incidents. Training should also include protection strategies.

For human rights organisations:

- When feasible, human rights groups should prioritise documenting abuses against first responders by, for example, partnering with first responder groups to ensure accurate and regular reporting. If appropriate, human rights groups should also report on these abuses or patterns as they emerge and alert international humanitarian agencies.

For local responders:

- Improved communication: Local responders require advanced systems to effectively monitor and report incidents to international bodies. Local responders should use existing protection systems and report to human rights organisations.

- Enhanced training: There is a need for comprehensive training for local responders on incident monitoring and security risk mitigation. Sharing successful strategies from elsewhere in Sudan or globally and learning from diverse sources can bolster preparedness.

- Emergency support: Local responders should have access to robust support mechanisms for emergency evacuation, transportation, and medical care. This includes the establishment of safe houses and equitable systems for their use.

- Security training: Security training is a vital protection element for frontline responders, equipping them with the necessary skills to effectively navigate and respond to threats.

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