



North Darfur, the RSF, & the State

A Photo Report by
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I spent a week living with the RSF in North Darfur, looking into the role of the state in the most remote parts of Sudan. This photo report provides evidence that outside of the cities, the RSF is almost the only arm of government present.

The situation is not sustainable:

- The RSF is not designed or budgeted for such a role.
- The government in Khartoum is not operating through the proper executive mechanisms.
- The people are not being given the full range of government services.

In a longer time-frame, the government will want to introduce civil agencies to perform the work currently performed by the RSF. Until those agencies have the funding, people, training, and logistics, a draw-down of the RSF presence would leave many people with no government at all.

The journey began in al-Fasher, whose souk is pictured.

Opposite my hotel in al-Fasher, the car of a civil engineer who works for the RSF had broken down, delaying him from attending a wedding. His Zaghawa neighbor was helping him fix it. Seeing the two friends in a well-off neighborhood raised a question.

The media reports al-Fasher to be a place of ongoing ethnic tensions, always about to spill over into war.

In the eyes of the locals, are ethnic tensions indeed the main problem? Perhaps job opportunities, or the discrepancies between government spending in Khartoum as opposed to Darfur, are more pressing concerns for residents?

It would be good to hear more from Darfurians about what concerns them, as there is the risk that the 'ethnic tensions' narrative is one imposed on them.



I lent a hand with the car, resulting in an invitation to the wedding.



The warmth of Sudanese hospitality became a theme of my time in Darfur.

One of the guests, Professor Adam, was a teacher at al-Fasher University, and a member of the SPA and FFC.

An interview with him is included elsewhere in Volume 1.



Car troubles, and the difficulties of transport across the vast region more generally, also became a theme of the trip.

Some of the best opportunities to make money for poorer people in areas with growing populations and new-found peace lie in importing and selling goods. But without roads across so much of Darfur, only people with access to better cars and mechanics can take advantage of the opportunity.

Infrastructure investment, especially roads, could change lives and improve the economy of this area.



6 hours north of al-Fasher, across hardened mud tracks, we reached Gurair at midnight.



There are no roads and very few houses are made of brick. There is little evidence of any normal support from the outside world here; a clinic, school, mosque, and very little else.



In Gurair I met
Mohammedin ad Dud,
Nazir of the Mahariya.

An interview with the Sheikh is
included elsewhere in Volume 1.

He was at pains to point out that
the town was rebuilding from
zero, having been destroyed
during the wars. The people and
the government needed to focus
on rebuilding across the region.

We visited the newly built
school. It was a weekend, but an
extra revision class had been put
on for upcoming exams. Rather
more girls than boys had shown
up...



Beer al-Deek, the next stop, is a Zaghawa town a few hours north of Gurair, on a hill next to a busy well. The meeting with its leaders was open and informative, and is also recorded elsewhere in Volume 1.





The Zaghawa leaders were grateful for the well, school, and medical clinic.

But they wanted the RSF to provide ongoing support: medicines and teachers.

It was very apparent that there was no sustained government presence here other than the RSF. The leaders wanted more support from the RSF, and the RSF colonel escorting me, Colonel Musab, replied that he simply didn't have enough budget.

It was surprising to hear them talk this way. It seemed to be assumed on both sides that the RSF would be the government arm providing civil support.

The previous night, the RSF had driven a woman from the area experiencing complications as she gave birth to al-Fasher, over 6 hours away across bumpy terrain. As I photographed children at the school, such as the elegant lady below, I wondered how people here interacted with the government in similar cases of emergency.

The response was that the only sustained presence in the region is the RSF. So, if there is a criminal or medical emergency, the people go to the nearest RSF base. From there the RSF can notify the civilian police, or at the larger bases there is a policeman attached. Medical emergencies rely entirely on the RSF, or a bus to al-Fasher for more routine matters beyond the scope of the local clinic.

The RSF presence here cannot be reduced without there first being an increase in the presence of other government agencies, otherwise there will be no government at all in Beer al Deek.

The difficulty is that the cost of maintaining logistical support across these vast areas will be more than most civil agencies can afford. The RSF has vehicles and protection by virtue of being an armed unit: without their infrastructure, even the police attached to them would be unable to remain.



Colonel Musab exchanged contact details with the Zaghawa leader so that future issues could be handled directly by phone, without the people of Beer al-Deek having to drive for an hour to the nearest RSF base.

WhatsApp to the local colonel: a functional, if unusual, system for these citizens to reach the government.



Down at the well in Beer al-Deek.

Life for humans and animals alike is hot, poor, and dusty. Small investments could make a large difference. It would be interesting to know what the budget for the area is, and how the allocation process will work.

The huge impact of small investments makes prioritization of work particularly sensitive. This is especially true as development budgets will be part of the settlements made in the truth and reconciliation process.



The RSF are building a new well, providing the engineers, resources, budget, and logistics.

The RSF's role as the only civil engineering corps and humanitarian force in some places will need to be taken into account in discussions about its future in Sudan.



We continued a few hours north from Beer al-Deek to Zurug. This well-town is the last large settlement on the route north to Libya and has a regional market.

I met the town's three Umdas; from left to right, Zaghawa, Mahariya, Quraan. Their interview is provided elsewhere in Volume 1.





The further we travelled from al-Fasher, the more dependent on the RSF the local populations were. After the 1985 drought, Zurug was uninhabitable. Today, Zurug is large enough to have a permanent RSF base, with civilian police. But the seven wells that allowed its 2,000-strong population to return, and two schools, were all built by the RSF. The RSF here do 3-year tours of duty and are completely integrated into the local population. They are a one-stop-shop for all civil, engineering, medical, and security functions.

A common question for the truth and reconciliation program is how it will resolve competing claims for land. Zurug serves as an example of a functional solution: new wells and infrastructure allow people to live in new places, meaning land competition can be solved through expansion. One can forget just how large Sudan is.

A few hours north of Zurug, we met our escort into Wadi Hawar.

From our rendezvous with the desert-based RSF units, things were decidedly more military.

Two main threats exist here: Libyan human-trafficking gangs, who are well armed; and poachers. Both engage the RSF with a range of weapons.

My hosts, the wildlife protection unit of the RSF, live off their vehicles for months on end. They are much more heavily armed than their colleagues in the towns we had passed.

Media reports can sometimes fail to differentiate between the readiness and equipment levels of different units.



Mornings begin with a First Parade, before the different groups are sent off on patrol.



The road to the left of this soldier leads to the border with Chad, 40km away. The road to the right leads to Libya, over 500km north.

There are no meaningful roads or towns before either border. Given the instabilities in both Chad and Libya, the frequent references made in interviews to border security make sense.

The first job these soldiers perform is to guard the border areas. Drug smuggling and human trafficking groups are well armed, often with access to money and arms from Libya.



The main role is wildlife protection, specifically a type of antelope that has been over-poached in North Darfur. There is a 2-year sentence for poaching; the RSF interdict poachers, pass them to the police, and then the poachers enter the judicial system in al-Fasher.



There is no logistical support this far out. Teams are entirely self-sufficient for water, food, fuel, and anything else they need.

The enormity of the area they cover- we spent 12 hours a day on the move in their cars- and the harshness of the heat put a strain on the vehicles. Each vehicle was very well cared for, with full checks being carried out frequently. The manner of the driving is quick but cautious, as a broken vehicle here would require over 6 hours of towing to reach Zurug, and another 6 or more for al-Fasher.

Another role is finding and reporting discarded munitions. Locations are marked by GPS and sent to the police, while bomb disposal units from the SAF were also informed for this larger find. It was a positive example of inter-agency co-operation.



Of most interest to me was the final role the RSF play; civil engagement. They know all the local nomads, which wells they visit, and where they graze their animals.

Most of the day was spent doing the rounds visiting these people. Each family unit would be given water by the RSF, reducing the frequency with which they had to visit wells. This decreases the likelihood of conflicts breaking out over grazing lands.

Note the boy on the left filling the family water-jug from the RSF truck- this was habituated behavior. The only surprise to him or his mother was my camera.

In return, alongside a kind offering of camel milk, the nomads discuss any issues that have arisen; local disputes, munitions that have been found, and any smugglers they've seen.

This kind of civilian engagement is exemplary soldiering by any standards. It raised a series of questions of acute importance.





How will these people vote in 2022?

What are their constituencies?

Who will register them to vote?

Nomadic areas have smaller populations than towns so how will their interests be balanced against those of populous urban areas?

It appears the RSF is the only government institution that knows these people and where they live, let alone has the logistics to access them. What does this mean for their enfranchisement?

Is it feasible to bring in a new agency to build all the relationships and logistics for voter registration before 2022?

If not, what mechanisms need to be put in place and when, to enable the RSF to register people fairly and manage polling on the day of elections?



Our trip ended as it had begun, with an act of Sudanese hospitality and generosity.

Colonel Musab's father invited us to a wonderful dinner and evening at his house in Melit, a trading town on the route from Libya down to al-Fasher.



He told stories of how in the 1970's, before Gadaffi's wars, he used to sell Italian denim in Melit only a week after it had been launched in Milan. Sadly, that is no longer possible even after forty years of globalization.

He also reminded me that this was not his first experience of regime change. He had grown up under British rule and remembered clearly the progress and the mistakes made in the transition after independence that time.

Conclusions

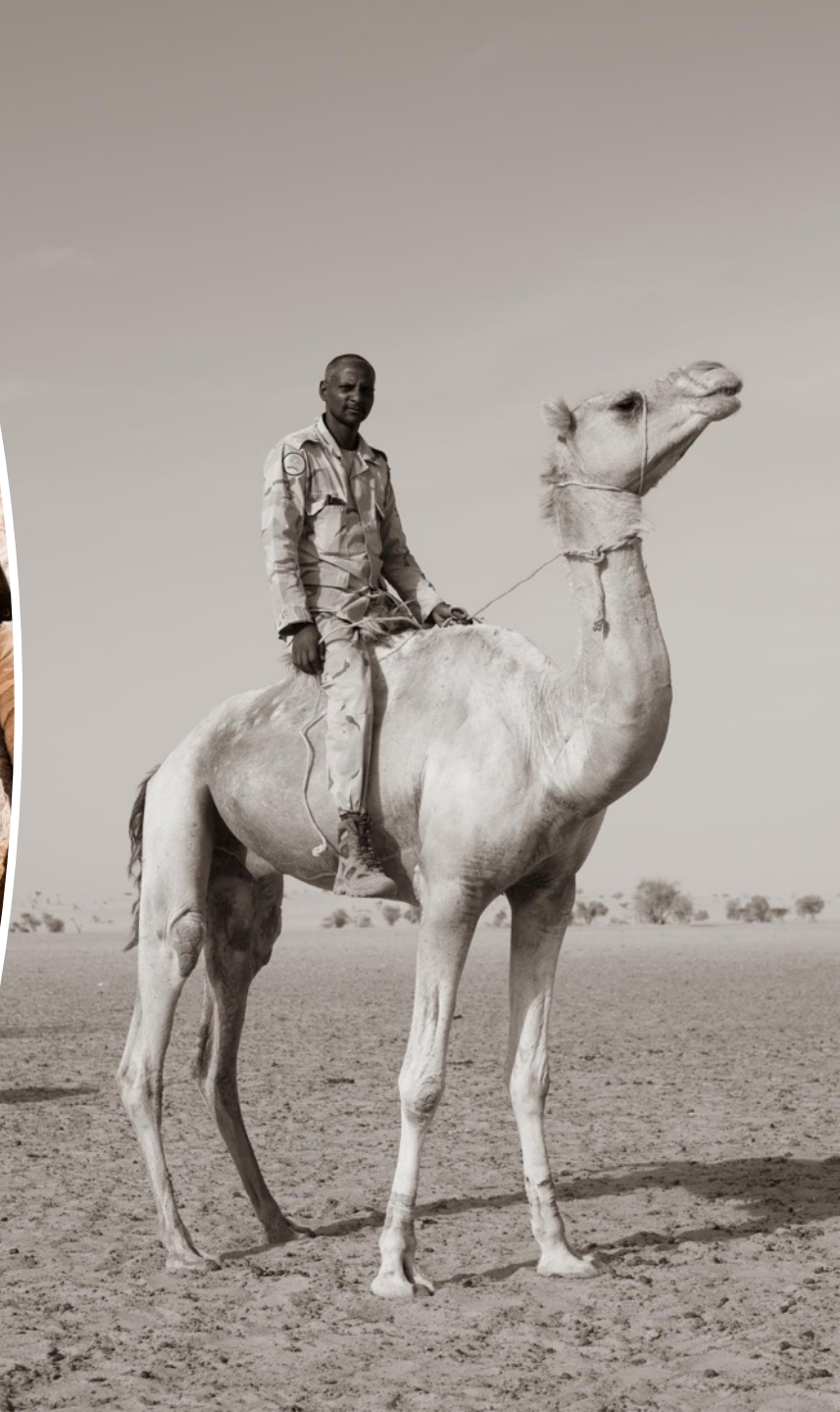
The sights and experiences of North Darfur are other-worldly.

The RSF spans both worlds, from the politics and ceremony of Khartoum to the deserts of Darfur, where in some places it is the only government presence.

Universal human rights apply, by their very nature, across all geographies.

For other issues, any evaluation of the role of the RSF and wider Sudanese government in North Darfur requires contextualization against a default of the absence of government.

For now, there appears to be little difference between the demilitarization of Darfur and its disenfranchisement.





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