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1.3.2. Communication and media presence

This section should be read in conjunction with section 1.1.4 Communication blackout and media coverage of the EUAA report Sudan - Country Focus (26 April 2024) as the main issues addressed there remain relevant and valid during the reference period of this report.

○ (a) Crackdown on media outlets and conflict media coverage

According to the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate, an estimated 90 % of the country's media infrastructure has been destroyed since the outbreak of the conflict, with around 1 000 journalists losing their jobs,499 hundreds driven into exile500 and some disappeared or killed.501 Women journalists have been targeted with sexual violence. 502 In many cases, attacks against reporters also extended to their family members. 503 The conflict has left electricity supply lines and communication networks destroyed in Khartoum, Darfur and elsewhere in the country.504 Several sources explained how the insecurity caused by the conflict generally affected the reporting across the country: journalists being intimidated, harassed, arrested,505 killed or driven into exile, as well as interruption of internet and mobile services affected journalistic reporting in the conflict zones.506 The dangerous working environment for journalists has led to self-censorship,507 lack of reporting on the ground508 and underreporting of events. 509

International media coverage of the conflict was limited510 as few foreign journalists managed to enter Sudan, let alone spend significant periods of time observing the conflict.511 Moreover, the reference period saw the Sudanese government suspending the work of several international news outlets in the country.512 For further information on the situation of media workers, see section 2.1 Journalists and treatment of media personnel of the EUAA report Sudan - Country Focus (April 2024).

☐ (b) Propaganda war

Both the SAF and the RSF disseminated disinformation, propaganda and hate speech though their social media channels[513] and sought to shape content in ways that advanced their preferred narratives of the conflict.[514] Traditional media such as Sudanese National Television have supported the SAF through coordinated war propaganda, broadcasting numerous reports of alleged SAF victories over the RSF and misleading video material on the army's control of territory.[515]

One confidential source consulted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands was quoted as saying that the parties to the conflict had infiltrated online chat groups used by journalists and human rights activists. Moreover, both conflict parties operated hundreds of accounts on social media through which they monitored posts they deemed undesirable.[516] Social media platforms also became an arena where AI-generated 'deepfakes' were frequently used to disseminate fake news about the respective opposing warring party, including images of alleged atrocities/attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure.[517]

War propaganda also framed narratives about certain tribes supporting either the RSF or the SAF, heightening the spread of hate speech towards some tribes.[518] Ethnic hate speech in social media amid ongoing tensions between Arabs and Zaghawa in Darfur was exploited by the warring parties as a driver of recruitment of new fighters.[519]

☐ (c) Mobile networks, internet access, and blackouts

The conflict has witnessed frequent deliberate disruptions of the internet,[520] with both the SAF and the RSF shutting down the internet to obstruct information flows in areas controlled by the opposing party. A near-total communication blackout occurred in February 2024 following a disruption of all networks and internet services,[521] affecting the entire country.[522] The shutdown was attributed to the RSF,[523] who had reportedly seized facilities of the country's main internet service providers (ISPs)[524] (those of MTN, Zain Sudan, and Sudani)[525] in retaliation for a similar blackout imposed by the SAF in the largely RSF-controlled Darfur region in 2023.[526] It was noted that the blackout followed the lapse of an ultimatum that the RSF had issued to Zain Sudan (Sudan's largest mobile carrier and internet provider), to restore services in Darfur, as

well as similar orders and threats to the other two networks.527 As the shutdown continued, it restricted the ability of millions of people to communicate with their families, access essential necessities for survival,528 and receive mobile money services, and seek safety from fighting.529 While very limited levels of connectivity were re-established during the following weeks530 as two of the three major ISPs (Zain Sudan and Sudani) set up new data centres in Port Sudan,531 full service on all ISPs was not restored until May 2024.532

According to Freedom House, more localised disruptions of the internet were reported in areas with ongoing hostilities throughout the period from June 2023 to May 2024, including in Khartoum, Omdurman and in towns in the Darfur and Kordofan regions.533 Disruptions like these have severely hampered the work of journalists534 and exacerbated the humanitarian situation by impeding aid deliveries535 and preventing residents from documenting acts of violence committed by the warring parties.536 Repeated internet and communication outages resulted in healthcare providers losing contact with survivors, or survivors unable to call for medical support.537 Humanitarian organisations had difficulty keeping their co-workers and communities briefed as information could not be shared effectively during connectivity shutdowns.538

Due to frequent internet disruptions and damage or instability of existing communications infrastructure, there was increased reliance on Starlink's satellite-based service,539 despite the fact that its cost was prohibitive to many civilians540 and organisations541 and its use remained unauthorised,542 with the SAF-led government seeking to restrict the use of Starlink devices as they were being used extensively by the RSF.543 A chief editor of a local independent newspaper who was interviewed by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) pointed out that while many journalists on the ground were accessing the internet through Starlink, this was a dangerous endeavour as the RSF was able to locate journalists using the service and retaliate against them for covering atrocities committed by the RSF.544

The RSF seized critical communication infrastructure in April 2023, including Sudan TV and Sudatel Data Centre, and in April 2024, the RSF shut down telecommunication services offered by MTN Sudan and Sudani, the two major telecommunication companies, and forced Zain Sudan, the third largest, to suspend services to River Nile State and Port Sudan.545 Radio Dabanga reported that the RSF has carried out sabotage operations against telecommunications infrastructure in Al Jazirah state, and that the SAF has deprived Al Jazirah and other states of the Sudani network.546 In April 2024, Sudan suspended the operating licences of Saudi owned broadcasters Al Arabiya and Al Hadat, as well as United Arab Emirates (UAE)-owned Sky News Arabia for their 'lack of commitment to the required professionalism and transparency and failure to renew its licenses'.547 On 2 October 2024, Radio Dabanga reported that, according to the Sudanese Journalists Syndicate (SJS), the current conflict has decimated 90 % of the country's media infrastructure and that 80 % of Sudan's states are cut off from access to internet and telecommunications, which makes it 'difficult to report on the

war's developments'.548

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