



Sudanese refugees in Chad: ‘I still hear the sound of shooting’



Patrick Freyne
in Aboutengue refugee camp, Chad

Having escaped a war where horrific abuses seem systematic, 1.3 million people from Sudan struggle to meet their basic needs in Chad while bearing physical and emotional scars

In the Aboutengue refugee camp in Chad, an hour's drive from the border with Sudan, six women sit in the shade of a sycamore fig tree and tell us about the war. It's very hot. Most of the people in the camp are women and children. The government and the aid agencies want to move the refugees in Adre, a huge unofficial camp on the Sudanese border, to more organised camps such as this one. This is largely because of the security issues that arise from having so many people on the border. There is a fear that militia groups might cross over.

But the Sudanese are often reluctant to go. While the educational and health facilities are better here than in Adre, the refugees say that there are issues finding work in such a remote place and the food rations aren't sufficient on their own. There are also issues with water on the day we visit. There are lots of jerry cans over by the water pump waiting for the supply to work.

Robert Bachofer, head of the World Food Programme office in Farchana, tells us there is also a psychological consideration: "They very much hope to return [to Sudan] and moving farther inland to Chad is an admission that this might not happen."

Unlike the homes in Adre, which are constructed from straw, here the houses are made from UNHCR-branded tarpaulin with a corrugated iron roof that gleams in the hot sun. Some have built extra

rooms with brick and straw. These women came here in 2023. They are hugely supportive of each other. They are Masalit people who were targeted for rape and murder by the RSF, one side in the Sudanese war. They have set up a "women's society" and have asked the aid agency Acted to help with psychosocial support.

"We organised some meetings to support each other and to remember what happened," says Rowda Mohammed, a former teacher. "To remember the pain."

Mohamed Mahmoud, our fixer and interpreter, has a gentle way with people. I suspect that he is, on occasion, softening our questions. Each woman tells her story directly and clearly and before I can ask another question, another begins speaking. They haven't had much chance to talk about this except with each other.

The Sudan war started on the third day of Eid 2023 and reached Yamah Mohammed Ramadan in her home in El Geneina a few days later. All of her neighbours gathered in one house for safety as the RSF looted and burned homes. "They killed the young men they could find," she says. "Slaughtered them."

"With women," she says, "they use the weapon of rape. They tried to rape my nine-year-old daughter. I protected her so they beat me instead. I was beaten very badly."

On June 15th, 2023, when the governor of West Darfur, Khamis Abakar, was murdered by the RSF, Yamah and her family decided to escape to Chad. "There were a lot of bodies on the road," she says. People were being shot indiscriminately but men were much more likely to be detained by the RSF and much more likely to be killed. She has teenage boys. How did she get them safely to Adre? "I dressed my two sons in female clothes."

Tyseer Abdurhaman Hassan is a teacher. She lived with a very big extended family in a compound in El Geneina. The war first reached them as bombs and drone attacks. Her eight-year-old boy's eyes were injured by a bomb. Many people were killed. When the RSF fighters arrived they began killing people indiscriminately. Her home was burned. Later her husband was badly beaten when he was out trying to earn some money. He subsequently died of his injuries.

She had nothing, she says. Her neighbours financially supported her and her five small children to get to Adre. "We are now depending on humanitarian assistance," she says, "but that just delivers the basics. Sometimes we trade it at the local market for other things they can't get. Emotionally I am still suffering. But bless to God, I am alive and have my children."

Rowda Mohammed recalls RSF drone strikes killing multiple people before the RSF came in person, surrounded her home and the homes of her neighbours and set fire to them. Two of her sister's children were killed. She saw older people burning because they couldn't run away. Like the other women here she is living in a household dominated by women. Her 20-year-old son is missing. She doesn't know if he is dead or alive. This is a story we hear repeatedly in east Chad.

Hawa Ibrahim is holding a baby. She says, "We condemn the work of the RSF because the RSF desecrated our country and let us have no freedom. They orphaned our children. We are widows."

When the war started she wanted to leave but her 21-year-old son thought they should stand their ground. When the RSF came she was trying to shelter the younger kids while he was out with some other young men trying to protect them. "He was a fighter."

Burning home
The RSF used a drone to destroy the car he was in. "I ran to the vehicle. I found him dead." She left then, with the smaller children. She had to leave his body and her home burning behind her.

On June 17th, 2023, they arrived in Adre. "But bless God, IRC [the International Rescue Committee] helped us emotionally. My sister brought me to the psychologist and I got counselling for my trauma. I have improved. I am now blessing God."

When the RSF kicked in the door to Azza Abkar's house in Jamarak in El Jamena she hid in a corner trying to shelter her five small children as they shot up the room. "We were scared and holding each other."

An older RSF man stopped them from shooting her. The paramilitaries started to fight with each other. The older man said: "Don't shoot a woman with children unless you want to kill me too."

They left but one of the younger men came back later and beat her very badly. She was holding her baby when he did so.

The RSF eventually arrived again shooting in the air and ordered her and her surviving neighbours to leave the country. They killed two of her neighbours in front of them. She took her children and went

with neighbours to Adre. "I still hear the sound of shooting in my ears."

Fatima Adam Abdulkareem once worked for Concern Worldwide so is happy to be talking to an Irish journalist. She lives in Aboutengue with her sister, her mother and her two children. The war came to her door the day the governor of West Darfur was killed. The RSF and the Janjaweed – an Arab militia – were causing chaos. She and many of her neighbours were gathered together "and beaten very badly".

They took all the young men and had them lie on the floor and then they beat them to death with sticks. "They were slaughtered like animals. They selected young women and threatened them with knives and guns and told them to remove their underwear. Then in front of the other men and women they raped the young ladies."

On the road to Adre snipers shot at them. "Many people fell down because of snipers." She shows me a mark on her leg where a bullet grazed her.

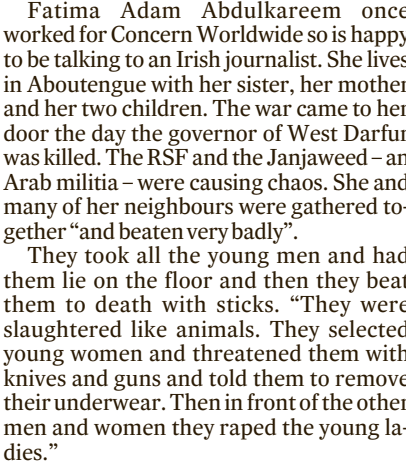
After a while she and some other women stopped under a tree with a pregnant woman who was about to give birth. RSF fighters came and when they explained what was happening, they said, "We have to wait until she gives birth and if it's a boy we will kill it."

What was the baby? "It was a boy."

■ Clockwise from main: Hawa Ibrahim holds a small baby; Aboutengue refugee camp in Chad; the MSF hospital in the camp; Azza Abkar, Rowda Mohammed, Tyseer Abdurhaman Hassan and Rowda Mohammed sit beneath a tree.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRIS MADDALONI

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Artist keeps Sudan students in frame from Ethiopian exile



Hannah McCarthy
in Addis Ababa

Dean of Sudan's only public art school resigned in protest over a coup by the Sudanese Armed Forces

In a small studio overlooking a garden in the Kirkos neighbourhood of Addis Ababa, artist and academic Abdelrahman Shangal sends messages to students displaced by the two-year-long war in his native Sudan. He also works on an abstract portrait, a form of art he sees as a "window" into what another is feeling and experiencing.

Along with other college lecturers and artists, Shangal (65) was part of a popular movement that demanded economic and democratic reform in Sudan after nearly three decades of dictatorial rule under

president Omar al-Bashir. The campaign led to the ousting of al-Bashir, who was replaced in 2019 with a civilian prime minister, Dr Abdallah Hamdok.

From 2020 until 2022, Shangal served as the dean of the only public art school in Sudan, the College of Fine and Applied Art in Khartoum. But along with several other deans, he resigned in protest over a coup by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Genl Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, which overthrew Hamdok's civilian government. "We said: we're not going to work with this [government]," says Shangal. "We'll go back when there are elections."

Power struggle

A power struggle ensued between two factions within Sudan's military forces and in April 2023, the SAF began fighting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Gen Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. After the war broke out, Shangal stayed for three months before leaving Sudan. "There was no work and I have a family so I have to get some income," he says. "During a war, it is not logical to sell art and no one can buy it, of course."

Last year, Shangal returned to Addis Ababa after a stint in Nairobi. He says he found the Kenyan capital too expensive and unsafe. "I like to feel free to walk at night in the city without having the feeling that someone can come and take your telephone," he says.



■ Artist and academic Abdelrahman Shangal: one of his paintings depicts Asia Abdelmajid, a famous Sudanese actress and teacher, buried in the grounds of a school where she died from a stray bullet. PHOTOGRAPH: TOM CLARKE

Shangal says he's more comfortable in Ethiopia where he has academic ties with several universities from his time as a dean and when he researched sculpture from the Meroe kingdom.

Meanwhile, an offer of an apartment and studio space in Addis Ababa by a family working for a German aid agency has given Shangal stability and time to focus on his art and teaching.

In Shangal's recent exhibition at the

“We have to have hope. We have to accept each other. We have to build our country in a new way so that we can live together in peace”

Fendika Culture Centre in Addis Ababa, the war in his home country was a recurring theme. "We have to be part of events in the art movement," he says. "We are not to stop because of the war – we have to continue."

In one painting, Shangal depicts Asia Abdelmajid, a famous Sudanese actress and teacher, buried in the grounds of a school where she died from a stray bullet fired as the SAF and RSF battled in Khartoum during the early weeks of the war in 2023.

Abdelmajid was the wife of the late Sudanese-Libyan poet and diplomat Muhammad al-Fayturi whose celebrated

writings chronicled the legacy of race, class and colonialism in contemporary Africa and drew on his own experience as a black African living among Arabs. Other paintings in Shangal's recent collection address sexual violence against women during the war and the bombardment of Khartoum.

Shangal says the art college, as well as his home and studio in the Sudanese capital, now lie in ruins. "Sometimes, when there is internet people post photos." He teaches remotely – about 80 per cent of his students from Khartoum are scattered across Sudan and neighbouring countries. He says he has lost contact with his other students.

Materials

Students studying sculpture are told to use whatever materials are available to them – "If they cannot find plaster, they do clay; if they cannot find clay, they can do wood or plastic or cartons."

Some classes are undertaken by video calls while others take place by exchanging voice notes and photographs on WhatsApp due to poor internet connection. "The important thing is that we tell the students that we trust them, so we continue the process with them," he says.

"We have to speak about a ceasefire loudly," Shangal says. "We have to have hope. We have to accept each other. We have to build our country in a new way so that we can live together in peace as a country – all of us."