

Maia Dunphy tells of her anger over Gaza. Page 6

Keith Duggan talks to survivors of the Oklahoma bombing 30 years on. Page 10

There is a 'pervasive anxiety' in Irish society, a new poll finds. Page 8



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CHAD'S DESERT CITY OF REFUGEES

An unforgiving conflict between rival military factions in Sudan has killed 150,000 people over the past two years and created the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Some 12 million people are displaced, many fleeing to a huge desert camp in eastern Chad

By PATRICK FREYNE

'MY SON WAS KILLED IN FRONT OF MY EYES. THREE BULLETS IN HIS CHEST'

In the desert in east Chad is a city of refugees: 237,000 people living in an ad hoc camp of huts on the border with Sudan. They have experienced the worst things people can experience

By Patrick Freyne
Photographs by Chris Maddaloni

Imagine you had a good comfortable life and now you have to live this way looking for food and water," says 18-year-old Sudanese refugee Mayaz Osman Ababker, who wants to be a doctor.

In the desert in east Chad there is a city of refugees: 237,000 people, about the population of Cork city, live in an ad hoc camp of huts made of straw on the border with Sudan. They have experienced the worst things people can experience – the murder of loved ones, rape and torture.

Sudan's latest war is two years old this week. It's the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. When the Sudanese people ousted longtime autocrat Omar Al Bashir in 2019, it looked like they were on the brink of democracy. But such hopes vanished. Since April 15th, 2023, they have been caught up in a violent power struggle between Abdel Fattah Al Burhan, leader of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Both groups were previously allies and aligned to Al Bashir. Dagalo's faction



has its origins in the Janjaweed militia, which is responsible for the worst atrocities during the Darfur crisis of 2003-2008.

Since 2023 it is estimated that 150,000 have been killed, while 12 million have been displaced – 760,000 of whom have crossed the 1,403km border Sudan shares with Chad, triggering a new emergency of similar proportions there. The new refugees are in addition to the 430,000 people who

came during the earlier Darfur crisis. About 237,000 of the new arrivals are living in this unofficial site in the town of Adre, but Chad's government and aid groups want them to move to official settlements further into the country for their own safety.

Both armies are heavily funded by rival international powers – the SAF by Russia, Iran and Egypt; and the RSF by the United Arab Emirates. But humanitarian aid efforts in this proxy war are severely underfunded. This is being further exacerbated by the recent US aid funding cuts. The 2024 refugee response plan of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was funded at only at 30 per cent of what was needed.

"This year, we are already in April, and it is funded at only 7 per cent or 8 per cent," says Jerome Merlin, deputy representative for the UNHCR in Chad. "People are still coming. We are not at the end of the crisis. . . We anticipate 250,000 new arrivals."

The majority of refugees are women and children. Most are Masalit people



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ple who are being "ethnically cleansed", murdered and raped by the RSF who dominate Sudan's West Darfur state. Young Masalit men enjoy less freedom and have been tortured and killed. Since losing the Sudanese capital Khartoum to the SAF last month, the RSF is doubling down on its dominance in this region. The exodus continues daily. Just last week the RSF massacred more than 100 people in Al-Fashir city in Sudan. Among the dead were children and aid workers.

The unofficial Adre camp stretches out across the desert – a warren of straw buildings. Some homes have



hens, goats, tended gardens and solar panels. Most do not. There's no education. There's not enough food. There is not enough water. It's 38 degrees Celsius, a dry hazy heat. This is a desert area with sporadic trees and scrubland. Sometimes, due to the heat, the straw homes and fences catch fire and the flames spread through the camps.

In the Aboutengue camp we talk to a young woman named Hafsa Suliman Abdalla while she puts decorative henna on her feet, a form of body art. ("It keeps them cool," she says.) She and her children are terrified to sleep

at night because of fires. "We only sleep during the day."

The Adre camp is organised by the Chadian government agency CNAAR with the help of the French aid agency Acted in concert with committees of refugees. Acted has a "suggestion box" where refugees can make requests.

A young man named Basheer Ibrahim tells us he was shot twice during the turmoil. The second shooting resulted in his right leg being amputated from his upper thigh. Subsequently he and 13 men were held in a jail cell by RSF fighters, who tortured them. Each day their captors would come

■ **A young child inside a hut at the Adre refugee camp, where limited food supplies and faltering humanitarian aid are especially impacting children.**

Photograph: Chris Maddaloni.
Map illustration: Paul Scott

and take someone out to shoot them. They killed seven in total. The other six thought they were going to die too, but then, out of the blue, the RSF let them go. Why?

Because they knew them from school, says Basheer. "They said: 'We have to violate you and get information but because we know you, you can go now.'"

Basheer and the others made their way to Adre, seeing many bodies along the road. "They were our people." He was once an electrician, he says. "Now there is no future." His eyes redden as he talks but the woman

beside him, a stranger, comforts him. Later, I see him bounce her baby on his one knee and smile.

An older man, Adam Haroun, shows gunshot holes in his abaya, a robe-like garment. He was wearing it when he was shot but somehow avoided injury. The RSF killed seven of his family members, including one child.

A young woman feeds her baby. She only recently came to the camp. She doesn't want to talk in detail about what happened to her but she looks shaken.

Mariaha Abdelkareem was a medical student in El Geneina before the war. She speaks good English and she

❖ thanks us for coming to listen to them. “We have lost so many people,” she says. She describes her journey from El Geneina and “the people dead in the street”. The RSF were shouting at them. “There were violations for the girls and the women. If you were a man, they were killing you . . . It’s too difficult to describe this as ‘war’. We lost our community and our sense of being human beings.”

She describes how they moved from place to place, eventually arriving in Chad. Her family are spread across several of the camps. “We want to live as people. We want to finish our education and we want to eat. Because we suffer a lot without eating.”

The refugees are dependent on food and money distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP) and water pumped from wells bored by the WFP, UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) or one of the other non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Some refugees supplement the meagre rations with casual employment in the village of Adre or with the NGOs themselves. Many of the women work making bricks. You can see big structures of in-progress brick around the camp which will later be baked with fires set inside the hollow centre.

A woman tells us she was once a civil servant in West Darfur. She was close to the late governor Khamis Abakar, who was murdered by the RSF in June 2023, so we don’t photograph her or use her name. Their abusers still threaten them on Facebook, she says, and since arriving here, she has seen Janjaweed fighters she recognised in Adre town. One day two men attacked her and she was only saved thanks to passersby. “I’m not feeling very protected here,” she says.

She recalls how when the war moved to El Geneina and the RSF started burning internally displaced persons camps, government buildings, schools and water points.

“They stopped all services. They started harassing women everywhere – at the market, at the water point – violating them . . . Many people were killed and there were piles of dead bodies. Some were buried alive among the dead.”

At one point the only source of food was at El Geneina’s WFP stores, which the RSF commandeered. Whenever women went there, they would be assaulted. “The only way to feed children was the WFP stores,” she says. “All the women were raped.”

“Whenever men or women or children went to the WFP warehouse they faced rape,” says Darrelsam Issa Mohamed, the woman sitting next to her.

She saw atrocity after atrocity. She tells how the RSF and their supporters split into different groups to rape, murder and destroy. People were shot and burned in their houses. People were drowned in latrines. The RSF said: “We are coming to clean the black people from Geneina.”

“The people here are in mourning,” says Darrelsam. “There are no celebrations, no ceremonies.”

“There is too much sadness,” says



Mariaha, the medical student. “Because we do not have our dignity. We are not free.”

Later I ask our “fixer” and interpreter Mohamed Mahmoud, a refugee himself, if there is any music in the camps. “People are too sad to sing,” he says.

To travel between camps in east Chad, aid workers and journalists are accompanied by soldiers in a second vehicle because of the threat of attacks by bandits. In general people use donkeys, camels, motorcycles, horses and carts and yellow motorised tuk-tuks. Every car or jeep is a Toyota. In the east there are no real roads. During our trip we come upon the sites of two crashes, a motorbike carrying three people and an overturned land cruiser (no-one was hurt).

The rivers here are dry so we can drive where there should be water.

■ Clockwise from above: Rugia Ibrahim Abdallah crying as she describes the RSF taking her sons, who were later found dead; a school in the Farchana refugee camp in Chad; a girl digging for water outside the Farchana camp; Maria Mahmoud Adam’s hennaed hands, a sign she is married.

Photographs: Chris Maddaloni

During the rainy season these riverbeds are impassable, but the water never stays in the soil. UNHCR staff bring us to a concrete “spreading threshold”, spanning a river outside the Farchana refugee camp, which is designed to stop rainy season water from flowing away. Nearby is a market garden that is farmed by both refugees and local people. “They are our family,” says local farmer Bashir Adam Abdullah of the refugees.

At the Farchana camp we meet women who have gathered at a dried-up river to dig for water that would have been, before the aforementioned project, too deep to access. That day in the Farchana camp the pipes from the official borehole had run dry. A pile of jerrycans lay by the pump. Nobody is sure why, says Maria Mahmoud Adam, who has beautifully hennaed hands. Her friend Zainab Ab-

dullah, a widow, explains that the henna is a sign she is married. Zainab has seven children but adopted eight more when their mother was shot dead. “She is a good example to us all,” says Maria. Nearby a woman drinks cloudy water straight from the ground.

The Chadian government has a relatively progressive asylum policy that allows refugees to work, settle and even get access to land. But the Chadian people themselves are very poor and resources are tight. Aid agencies are doing their best to provide services and infrastructure to both communities. Otherwise, the fear is that tensions will grow between the two groups.

In Adre we sit in the small straw yard of an older couple, Faiza Mohamed and Taj Elsir Adam Ibrahim, alongside their four daughters and four granddaughters. Why did they leave?

“My son was killed in front of my eyes,” says Faiza Mohamed. “He was a driver, and while he was carrying first aid to help the wounded people the Arab militia and RSF targeted and killed him.” She saw it happen, she says. “Three bullets in his chest.”

Taj suddenly breaks down crying. He takes out his phone and shows me a photo of his son – a handsome young man, smiling.

They had no idea what happened to their other two sons until recently. They thought they were dead. To their relief they recently heard one was in Egypt and the other in Libya. This is a common theme. People are separated in the chaos, their phones are stolen and they have no way to contact each other.

At the border we meet a young man called Mubarak Mohamed, who es-



caped the violent SAF takeover of Khartoum. He is looking for his wife and three children and he has heard they are registered in the Dougie refugee camp. He's going to go there, he said, "to see for myself".

Faiza and Taj and their family recently arrived from Al-Fashir, which is under siege from the RSF. They feel safer here but they haven't enough food and, despite the best efforts of the MSF hospital, the healthcare is limited. Faiza touches the shoulder of a tiny granddaughter who has a respiratory illness and another who has anaemia. "Before the war our life was very good," says Taj. "I had a lorry. I had a business. The war destroyed everything."

Nazira Adam arrived two days before we speak. She's in a tiny half-built hut with some food and a rug given to her by her neighbours. Her face is bruised and her baby is hiding in her shawl. She was a farmer and came here after the RSF ransacked her home and beat her badly. In the chaos she came here with two children. She has three other children. She hopes they went with her extended family to another refugee camp. She heard her family are in a camp called Alasha, but "I have heard no news".

Children process trauma differently. Everywhere we go they follow us, saying "How are you?" This long-haired western journalist is something like a circus clown to them. At a market in the old Farchana camp, which dates back to the Darfur crisis, we are surrounded by children.

They're very funny. One girl says to Mohamed of me, "I want his hair." Another girl asks, "Is it a man or a woman?" Mohamed points at me and says, "This man, when he takes off his hat he turns into a lion." I take off my hat.



A small child says, defiantly, "I'm not scared." Chris Maddaloni, The Irish Times photographer, says: "And I have no hair." He takes off his hat and they fall into hysterics, laughing.

In the Farchana camp at a school run by Nimat Abdullah Sabin, some five-year-olds are singing. Nimat tells us that they draw pictures of men with guns and warplanes. Before the school was built the teachers in the camp ran unofficial schools under trees. This reminds me of Irish hedge schools in Penal Law times. There is no school in the huge Adre camp.

In Adre two teenage girls, Halima Tigani and Tamdor Ahmed Adam, come over to talk to us out of curiosity. They make bricks. "It is difficult and sometimes when we work they refuse to give us money," says Halima.

"We don't always have food and wa-



We found a number of dead bodies in the street when we were getting out. We were stepping over them. It was genocide

ter," says Tamdor.

One morning Mohamed takes us to a part of the Adre camp settled by people from Ardamata in El Geneina, where there was a massacre in November 2023. There's a small market here where refugees sell goods to one another. An older man named Ahmed Siam tells us how his cousin was shot and killed in front of him at an RSF checkpoint. "They were just pulling out passengers who they suspected of being policemen or rebels. Any young man who was suspected was pulled out and shot and killed."

Yagoub Ibrahim, a father of one, makes a living laying concrete floors for people's homes. He's fixing his tools when we meet him. He came here after the massacre. "It was really an atrocity," he says. "Killing. Fire. Looting. All crimes were committed. We found a number of dead bodies in

the street when we were getting out. We were stepping over them. It was genocide."

Yagoub is registered in one of the official camps but he was unable to get work there so he returned to Adre. The issue with work in the official camps is a recurring theme – an example of the reality clashing with official policy. The rations aren't enough, he says, and yet when a bowl of sorghum porridge emerges he still offers us some.

Everyone is hungry. Abdul Adam Ismail has set up a butcher's stall but finds people are too poor to buy meat. Sixty-year-old Nura Isaac has come to see if she can get some bones for a broth. Back in Ardamata her house was burned, and when she and her family were running to safety her husband was shot dead by a sniper. "I couldn't even get the body. I was scared."

In the confusion her adult son went missing. She starts to describe him and says, "Will you search for my son?" Mohamed explains that I am a journalist and not someone who can do this. She nods despondently and says: "It's very hard to live without our children."

In her small yard Rugia Ibrahim Abdallah tells us about when the RSF came to her neighbourhood. Everyone was beaten. One of her aunts was beaten to death. The women and men were then separated and 12 of the men, including Rugia's three sons, were taken away in a truck. "They were told to lie down and they put a plastic sheet over them and sat on top of them," she says.

A few days later Rugia's other aunt, who was herding goats, found the 12 bodies in a dry stream. Rugia is crying as she tells us this.

One of her daughters brings us some fruit cordial that we feel embarrassed to take but also embarrassed to refuse. The people we meet in Adre and Aboutengue and Farchana are generous, dignified, resilient and humane. Later, at a busy MSF hospital where babies are being treated for malnutrition, I drop a 10,000 Central African franc note on the ground without noticing. I get a tap on my shoulder and a young woman with a baby in her arms is holding the money out to me. That note is worth over a month of food for her.

Rugia Ibrahim wipes her eyes. She starts talking about the jasmine flowers they have planted in the corner. "Culturally we grow flowers at home," she says. "We are not able to forget our culture. We wait until absent people arrive and we have a meal together. If someone in the neighbourhood hasn't enough food, we support each other. We do not forget the generosity of our neighbours."

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