

# Floods inundate Sudan amid escalating economic crisis

By Jean Shaoul  
14 September 2020

A month of torrential rains has brought record-breaking floods to Sudan, killing at least 100 people, injuring 46, and destroying more than 100,000 homes. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost everything they owned.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that more than 557,000 people had already been “affected” by this year’s floods. As Sudan’s rainy season lasts from June to October and always brings flooding—last year’s floods affected 400,000 people—the country is likely to face more rains and displacement.

The OCHA warned that the humanitarian situation in Sudan is worsening and that the supplies needed to respond to the crisis are running out, while the destruction of roads has made it difficult to deliver aid to communities in need. Access to clean water has been affected, with around 2,000 water sources broken or contaminated, increasing the danger of water borne diseases.

The hardest hit has been the capital Khartoum, where the Blue and White Nile Rivers meet, as the Nile burst its banks, demolishing everything in its way. Blue Nile and River Nile states have seen similar devastation, while the Gezira, Gadarif, West Kordofan, and South Darfur regions have reported damage. At least 16 of Sudan’s 18 states have seen some flood damage.

The level of the Blue Nile hit a record high of 17.58 metres due to heavy seasonal rains in Sudan and Ethiopia, the source of the Blue Nile that accounts for about 80 percent of its waters. It is the highest since the 1912 flood in Sudan when the level reached 17.14 meters. Further heavy rains are forecast for neighbouring Ethiopia and parts of Sudan.

The volume of rain has been the highest on record. Marwa Taha, a climate change expert, told *Al Jazeera*, “But this year we’ve seen an increase in the amount of rainfall because of climate change and so the Nile has flooded more than before. In addition, a lot of trees have been cut down to make place for residential areas near the Nile, affecting the valleys where the water would flow through.”

The rising Nile floodwaters could also inundate one of Sudan’s ancient archaeological sites at Al-Bajrawiya, the capital of the Kushite Kingdom of 2,600 years ago that also includes the famous Meroe pyramids, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Marc Maillot, head of the French Archaeological Unit in the Sudan Antiquities Service, said, “The floods had never affected the site before.”

Teams are building sandbag walls and pumping out water to prevent damage to the site, which is usually some 500 metres away from the river.

Sudan has declared a national emergency for three months and designated the country a natural disaster zone.

While some tents have been erected to accommodate the displaced, many families have had to sleep in the open on whatever dry land they could find in Khartoum. Ezz Aldin Hussein, an engineer whose home in south Khartoum was badly damaged, blamed the government. He told *Al-Jazeera*, “The rainy season is known to come every year, but we don’t see the government seriously prepare for it.”

Not only have successive governments failed to take preventative measures to minimize flood damage, they have also failed to make basic preparations to help people affected.

As Hussein explained, when he called the police and civil defence authorities for help, “no one came to help us.” People have had to rely on neighbours and charities for help.

The government’s failure to help people who have lost everything in the floods has added to the mounting perception that Sudan’s new military-dominated transitional “technocratic” government, headed by Dr Abdalla Hamdok, differs little in substance from the regime of former President Omar al-Bashir. Al-Bashir, who came to power in an Islamist-backed coup in 1989, was overthrown in a pre-emptive coup by the Sudanese military, with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, in April last year after months of anti-government protests.

In practice, the country is ruled by the deputy chairman of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who heads the paramilitary Rapid Support

Force (RSF), widely hated for its brutal operations in the Darfur conflict. The RSF, more powerful than the Sudanese army, controls most of Sudan's towns and cities.

On June 30, tens of thousands of Sudanese demonstrators took to the streets of Khartoum and other major cities demanding change, including a full transition to democracy and civilian rule.

The government's handling of the pandemic has been widely criticized. As cases emerged, widely believed to have been transmitted by the hundreds of Sudanese migrant workers returning from Egypt and the UAE in March because of the outbreak, the government sent them to quarantine centres. Conditions were so bad that many left prematurely. Students returning from Wuhan, where the virus was first detected, protested at the airport when the government tried to put them into quarantine, forcing the government to let them go home.

The government imposed a nationwide lockdown in April. Police beat up and arrested doctors, including the head of the largest maternity hospital in Sudan, as they were heading to work even though they were carrying travel permits.

Dozens of health centres, including hospitals, closed after the outbreak of the pandemic, with many doctors refusing to work because of the lack of protective equipment.

Since the government lifted the lockdown and reopened its borders, the number of cases and deaths has doubled to reach just under 13,500 cases and 833 deaths.

The lockdown left millions of Sudan's day labourers without income, as the government provided no safety net. Inflation running at 100 percent and unemployment at 25 percent compounded their plight. Sudan's \$34.5-billion economy contracted 2.5 percent in 2019, with a further 8 percent expected this year, exacerbating a fiscal crisis that has sent living costs soaring and sparked the mass protests that led to Bashir's ouster.

Sudan is seeking an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan that entails persuading the Trump administration to drop its long-standing listing of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism—although most long-running US sanctions were removed in 2017—and settling or rescheduling its \$1.3 billion arrears to the IMF and \$57.5 billion external debt. The \$3 billion pledged by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi last year comes nowhere near resolving Sudan's economic crisis and has not been followed by further aid.

The Hamdok government is looking at scrapping subsidies for fuel products that would trim about \$2.5 billion from the budget and regaining the assets, believed to be worth \$3.5 to \$4 billion, illicitly stolen by al-Bashir and his cronies.

Key to gaining US consent to an IMF loan is the agreement to pay about \$826 million (up from a previous \$300 million deal) to the families of the 200 or more people

killed in the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania by al-Qaeda in 1998, allegedly with the support of the al-Bashir regime. While the new government has agreed to pay compensation, it is unclear how it will raise the money to do so. This follows Sudan's payment in February of \$30 million to the families of 17 US Navy sailors killed in the 2000 suicide-bombing of the USS Cole, although Sudan's government "explicitly denies" any involvement in the attack.

Last month, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Khartoum to press the US's demands, including the strengthening of Sudan's relations with Israel following the UAE's "normalization" of its relations with Israel as part of its closer alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Iran. It follows the meeting in February between General Abdul Fattah al-Burhan, Sudan's de facto head of state, and Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Uganda. This contrasts with the al-Bashir regime that was aligned with Qatar, Turkey, and Russia, although it had more recently sought to gain US support.

Sudan is under pressure to resolve multiple long-running armed conflicts that threaten the further breakup of the country following South Sudan's secession in 2011. The government has signed a peace deal, which covers issues such as land ownership, power sharing, and the return of the millions displaced by the fighting, with five of seven rebel groups in Juba, the capital of South Sudan, aimed at ending 17 years of conflict in the western region of Darfur and southern states.

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