

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by Ms. Hala Al Karib UN Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security 25 October 2023

President, Excellencies, civil society colleagues,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you today. I am Hala Al Karib, Regional Director of the Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), a network of about 100 women's organizations across the region. Today's open debate on women, peace, and security (WPS) is an opportunity to reflect on the urgency of this agenda and why women's rights must be central to addressing any conflict or crisis. Sadly, my country, Sudan, starkly illustrates the consequences of failing to do so.

The current conflict in Sudan is a result of decades of violence against civilians, violence that has impacted nearly every aspect of women's lives. During this time, mass atrocities, including sexual violence, rape, and other forms of gender-based violence, have been used against my people. These atrocities took place under former president Omar al-Bashir, who led a militarized regime reliant on the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and armed militias like the Janjaweed in Darfur, which later became the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The mass protests led by women and youth that began in December 2018 and led to the fall of al-Bashir were, in part, a direct response to how women's bodies and voices have been systematically under attack for over 30 years. In 2019, this Council heard from Sudanese protestor Alaa Salah, whose voice was one of many calling for freedom, peace and justice. Al-Bashir was forced out of office by this women-led movement. The transition between August 2019 and October 2021 saw popular support for inclusive civilian governance, increased attention to women's rights and space for women's civil society, adoption of a National Action Plan on WPS, and support for possible CEDAW ratification.

The transition, however, was short-lived, and further change did not come. Violence continued against civilians in Darfur and the women and youth protestors across the country. Transition authorities failed to address systemic violence, discrimination against women, and the impunity that has plagued Sudan. Perpetrators, in some instances, were appointed to top government positions. The subsequent military takeover illustrates how only paying lip service to the WPS agenda, without insisting on women's rights and women's meaningful participation in peace and political processes, is not enough to overcome the repressive patriarchal status quo.

War erupted again in April, this time reaching Khartoum. The gendered nature of the conflict became clear mere hours after the fighting began. The first case of gang rape was reported at noon on April 15, inside a woman's home in Khartoum. Alerted by her screams, neighbors started gathering, and the perpetrators, identified as RSF soldiers, quickly fled. The same day, two other women were gang-raped inside their homes in the same area. From that day on, reports of sexual violence and kidnapping flooded human rights and women's organizations. Women were subject to brutal atrocities, torture and trafficking by the RSF in greater Khartoum and Nyala in South Darfur. The RSF's brutality was in full display in El Geneina city in West Darfur, where they raped women from Masalit and other native African tribes in front of their families, whom they then killed. More than 4 million women and girls are now at risk of sexual violence in Sudan and countless others have been slaughtered.

Both the SAF and RSF have committed serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. While calling on both parties to end such acts, UN experts have expressed concern at consistent reports of widespread violations by the RSF, including subjecting women and girls to enforced disappearance, sexual assault, exploitation and slavery, forced work, and detention in inhuman or degrading conditions. Fear of stigma

and reprisals means that we do not even know the full scale of violations. This pattern of widespread, ethnically motivated attacks, including sexual violence, could amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. In my view, the targeted attacks on specific communities in El Geneina also poses a serious risk of genocide.

Life after experiencing violence and torture at the hands of the RSF is unbearable—a number of these women and girls have died by suicide. Moreover, women’s access to healthcare, especially comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care, is limited, in part due to the lack of skilled medical service providers and attacks and occupation of hospitals.

This war has also resulted in millions of women losing their livelihoods and savings, limiting access to food and essential healthcare. Women and children are also the majority of the displaced and in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Yet lack of funding, and denial of humanitarian access and security and administrative impediments imposed by the SAF, both pose serious challenges to reaching those in need. Further, humanitarian delivery is rarely informed by women’s views, despite their prominent role in the response.

The suffering of women in Sudan mirrors the suffering of women across Africa—we are being treated as collateral damage, rather than as agents of our own lives. The fundamental premise of the WPS agenda is that relegating women—and their rights—to the margins of decision-making further entrenches women’s exclusion and prolongs violence. This must change now.

I therefore urge the Security Council and its members to do the following:

- Demand an immediate cessation of hostilities and the adoption of a comprehensive ceasefire in Sudan that will end all violence targeting civilians, ensure the safe passage of civilians, and halt the destruction of critical civilian infrastructure.
- Reiterate that the full, equal, meaningful, and safe participation of Sudanese women and civil society is critical to any de-escalation efforts or building future peace, and further, all efforts must place respect for human rights at its center. We repeat our demand for the meaningful representation of women, including feminist movements, at 50%, at all levels, from beginning to end. We further call on the UN to ensure women’s equal and direct representation in any peace processes it supports.
- Call on all parties to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian access in line with international law. Urgently fund the Humanitarian Response Plan and the Regional Refugee Response Plan. Direct more resources to local civil society, including women’s groups.
- Pursue accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity by calling for, and/or initiating independent and impartial investigations based on the principle of universal jurisdiction. Hold all parties accountable for any acts of sexual violence, and strengthen the existing sanctions regime to include sexual and gender-based violence as a stand-alone designation criteria.
- Update and strengthen the mandate of the United Nations Integrated Transition Assistance Mission in Sudan (UNITAMS) so that the mission is directed to take all possible actions to support protection of civilians and human rights, maintain all existing WPS-related provisions, and meaningfully consult with civil society.
- Condemn any threats or attacks against women human rights defenders and peace activists, and remove any restrictions on civic space or their right to continue their essential work.

Excellencies,

The current conflict in Sudan is a result of the failure to uphold women’s rights and women’s participation in shaping my country’s future. I urge the international community not to repeat this mistake in other crises, where you have the power to do things differently. Stand with courageous women human rights defenders in crises around the world and show them you will not abandon them. Show solidarity with Palestinian women, who have suffered the world’s longest occupation, and today, an escalating crisis in Gaza, and support their calls for an immediate ceasefire. Support the calls of Afghan women to hold the Taliban accountable for gender apartheid.

Show the women of Ethiopia, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Yemen and so many other conflicts around the globe that their rights are not dispensable. And demand that the UN take a principled stand by ensuring that women's rights, and women's full, equal and meaningful participation are always a fundamental part of any peace process it supports. Uphold the central principle of the WPS agenda, which is that there can be no peace without protection of women's rights.

Thank you.