

# **BRIEFING NOTE: CANADA'S OPTIONS IN THE DARFUR PHASE OF THE SUDANESE WAR**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On November 3, 2025, Dr. Jon Unruh provided invited testimony to the Canadian Parliament's Subcommittee on International Human Rights on the topic of the current situation in Sudan with a focus on Darfur. Two written briefs accompanied this testimony<sup>1</sup>. This JICW Briefing Note elaborates the first brief.

The Briefing Note here addresses the current human security concerns in Darfur with a focus on policy options that Canada can pursue to both engage its role in international peacebuilding and preserve important emerging international trade opportunities. Drawing on the author's direct experience in Darfur with the United Nations and over three decades of work in war-affected contexts in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Southeast Asia, this note avoids reiterating the well-documented atrocities in Sudan and instead focuses on options that can technically de-escalate the security problem in Darfur - the region of highest humanitarian and security concern. It identifies three actionable technical levers: 1. disrupting conflict-gold supply chains, 2. reinforcing accountability signals that can affect combatant behaviour, and 3. operationalizing Sudanese civil society and diaspora-linked micro-peace mechanisms. Failure of the international community to act in Darfur risks regional destabilization, famine, ongoing human rights violations and the fragmentation of Sudan.

## **PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of this briefing note is to outline concrete, technically feasible actions that Canada can support to de-escalate violence in Darfur and contribute to peacebuilding--independent of potentially complicating trade priorities.

## **THE SECURITY PROBLEM**

Darfur is presently experiencing large-scale ethnic cleansing by Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF) financed in part through illicit gold revenues, and facilitated by weak military command structures, regional entanglements, and the erosion of accountability. The conflict presents escalating risks to civilian

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ourcommons.ca/committees/en/SDIR/StudyActivity?studyActivityId=13210457>

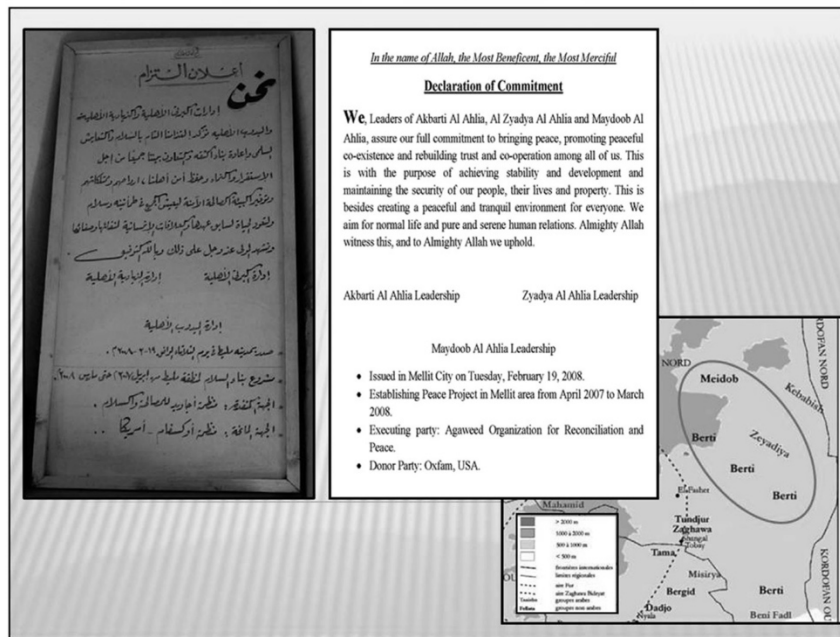
protection, regional stability, international security and Canada's emerging trade relationship to the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

## BACKGROUND AND KEY FACTS

As one of the two belligerent actors in the current Sudanese war, the RSF is derived from the Janjaweed militias which emerged in Darfur's earlier war (beginning in 2003) (Konozy and Baleela 2025). The Janjaweed engaged in widespread scorched earth campaigns against farming populations through ethnic cleansing, large-scale loss of life and instability in Sudan and the region. Darfur's current violence mirrors this earlier conflict, including systematic violent dispossession of lands through ethnic cleansing and massacres by the RSF (CPA 2026), and targeting of segments of the civilian population by the National Army (OHCHR 2025). With primary international attention focused on the atrocities committed by the RSF in the Darfur region, significant scrutiny is currently placed on evidence that illicit 'conflict gold' currently flows from Darfur to the UAE with the financial return used to sustain RSF military operations (Walsh 2024; SwissAid 2025). This presents Canada with a dilemma as it currently engages with the UAE to expand strategic and economic partnerships including an approximately USD \$50b investment agreement (PMC 2026).

Four primary tools exist to enhance Canadian foreign policy toward the Sudanese war. First, the international community has in recent years become adept at thwarting flows of 'conflict commodities' (including gold) and the revenues they generate to perpetuate war, by bringing international legal tools (and the actions they permit) to bear on specific problems (RMI 2026; World Gold Council 2026; Unruh 2022). These are technical mechanisms with established institutions and processes operated by international actors, whose efforts can be supported bilaterally, directly or indirectly. Those most relevant to the situation in Darfur are elaborated below. Second, past international accountability measures employed in Sudan—most notably the ICC indictment of former President Omar al-Bashir—demonstrably influenced combatant narratives and behaviour on the ground (Unruh and Abdul-Jalil 2014) and can be used in the current conflict in a similar manner. The ICC indictment for crimes against humanity committed in Darfur from 2003 onward had the effect of influencing the narrative of regular Janjaweed combatants regarding their behaviour (Unruh and Abdul-Jalil 2014). International statements of accountability do affect actions on the ground. The

more specific and pointed they are, the greater the influence. Even when lower-level combatants know that they themselves will not be indicted, the greater influence is to undermine their presumption of continued control over land obtained through ethnic cleansing. Once this uncertainty sets in, it can reshape the conduct of the conflict. Third, Sudanese civil society has historically negotiated localized ‘mini peace agreements’ across conflict lines, facilitated by long-standing social ties (Flint 2009; Unruh and Abdul-Jalil 2014) and occasionally supported by international actors; and these can be of utility in the current conflict. Local peace agreements come about because the constituencies to the different sides in the conflict know each other and have interacted over time to mutual benefit. Support from international actors can be important in solidifying these agreements, as the peace agreement in the figure below demonstrates with regard to Oxfam.



A local peace agreement between the Berti, Meidob, and Zaiadya clans.

And fourth, the Sudanese diaspora in Canada maintains regular contact with local constituencies attached to different sides in the conflict, representing an under-utilized peacebuilding asset. 'Diaspora as diplomats' is a known aspect of war-affected scenarios, acting to shape how armed groups and various constituencies conduct the war and influence the prospects for peace and humanitarian action (Singh 2026), including in Sudan (Shabaka 2021).

## KEY CONSIDERATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Disrupting Conflict-Gold Supply Chains**

The primary tool available to Canada to disrupt the trafficking in conflict gold originating in Sudan is the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas (OECD 2016), which Canada has endorsed. The guidance describes the legal backing and actions that Canada can engage in to thwart trafficking in gold. Additional mechanisms for neutralizing the trade in conflict minerals include: 1) the London Bullion Market Association standards (LBMA 2026), 2) the World Gold Council standards (World Gold Council 2026), 3) EU Regulation 2017/821 (Eur-Lex 2017), and 4) the U.S. Dodd-Frank Act Section 1502 (USSEC 2024). Applying, aligning with, or supporting these mechanisms (officially, unofficially, through third parties) can reduce RSF financing for the conflict in Darfur and constrain its operational capacity, while allowing for a separate track to pursue Canada's trade priorities with the UAE. Both Canada and UAE are mature states and frequently engage in multi-track approaches in inter-state relations.

### **Reinforcing Accountability Signals**

International statements of accountability have had an effect on combatant incentives in armed conflict, including in Sierra Leone (CRS 2004), the former Yugoslavia (Orentlicher 2010), and East Timor (HRW 1999) among others. The author experienced this effect firsthand while in Darfur and observed that while lower-level combatants knew they would not be indicted, the broader influence was to undermine their presumption of continued control over land obtained through ethnic cleansing. Once such uncertainty sets in, it can influence the conduct of the conflict. What is important in the current Darfur context, as in the earlier phase of the conflict in the early 2000s, is that the low-capacity command structure of the RSF means that its ground forces will not necessarily follow the orders of their superiors to stop fighting in the event that a peace accord is reached. As a result, tools that will influence these lower-level fighters are needed (Unruh and Abdul-Jalil 2014), and this is one role of international statements of accountability.

### **Operationalizing Civil Society for Peacebuilding**

The Parliamentary Sub-Committee proceedings on November 3, 2025, discussed the potential role of Sudanese civil society in peacebuilding. Included in this discussion was the existence of a number of ‘mini peace agreement’ between civil society constituencies attached to the different sides in the conflict in the earlier war. The value of civilian constituencies in both the mini peace accords and as a diaspora influence on the conflict was noted in the discussion, including by members of the Sudanese diaspora in gallery attendance at the sub-committee's proceedings. The role of constituency interaction in peacebuilding needs to again be explored in the current context as a tool. The Sudanese diaspora in Canada is in regular contact with these constituencies in Sudan and can be brought into this process to determine how such interaction could be encouraged, provided with backing, scaled up and replicated.

### **Risks**

Inaction with regard to the RSF's actions in Darfur holds significant risks for the local population and the international community, including Canada. These include: ongoing human rights violations (massacres, ethnic cleansing), the prospect of famine (no agricultural activities, little inflow of food aid), and the potential spread of the conflict internationally. The latter includes the prospect that the Zaghawa tribe (positioned against the RSF) whose area of occupation extends into Chad, could have co-ethnics drawn into the conflict (Bouessel 2025). Other ethnic connections exist in Chad, particularly among Arab tribes whose impoverished members may be open for RSF recruitment (HRW 2024; UNHCR 2025). Other potentially internationalizing aspects include the backing of the Sudanese National Army by Egypt, risking a proxy confrontation with the UAE (ICG 2025); the occasional pursuit of refugees into Chad and South Sudan by the RSF (Halakhe 2026); the proximity of jihadist forces in the Sahel able to capitalize on instability (ICG 2024); and the potential balkanization of Sudan - with parallel governments controlling the East (National Army) and West (RSF) of the country - similar to Libya and Somalia (Marsden 2024).

### **Alternative Perspectives to Be Considered**

Complicating Canada's response to the situation in Darfur is the current effort to develop trade relationships with the UAE, notably with the initiation of talks on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement. Canada is also attempting

to attract UAE investment and broaden cooperation in innovation and security. Nonetheless, Canada has considerable diplomatic capacity and is well able to pursue both a trade relationship with the UAE, and its priorities with Sudan.

### **What Is Not Known**

A number of elements need further elaboration to bring potential Canadian policy options into greater focus. These include the full extent of current gold supply routes and intermediaries linked to RSF financing; the present configuration and viability of existing local peace arrangements inside Darfur; the degree to which lower-level RSF fighters currently perceive accountability risks as credible; and how quickly regional actors might escalate involvement if the conflict intensifies.

### **Next Steps**

In pursuing options with regard to the Sudan conflict, the Canadian government can, 1) task relevant government departments, civil society actors, and elements from the diaspora along with international partners to map conflict-gold flows linked to RSF and Darfur and assess how to practically align with or support international legal mechanisms on conflict minerals; 2) examine the prospect of using local peace agreements and the 'diaspora as diplomats'; and 3) coordinate targeted accountability messaging that emphasizes the consequences of ethnic cleansing.

### **Available Options**

Among the options available in Canada's response to the conflict in Sudan, three appear most feasible. A passive monitoring option would see Canada continuing diplomatic engagement without operational intervention. With this option there is a high risk of worsening violence and regional spillover. A selective engagement option would support one or two tools (e.g., conflict-gold disruption) without a broader strategy. The result would be moderate impact and limited synergy. A third option would be to pursue compartmentalized diplomacy involving a simultaneous pursuit of conflict-commodity disruption, accountability signalling, and civil society peace facilitation; along with with a separate diplomatic engagement with the UAE on trade, investment, security and diplomacy. This option would have the highest potential for near-term de-escalation while maintaining an economic relationship with the UAE.

### **Recommendation and Justification**

Canada should pursue an operational approach that mobilizes existing international legal tools, reinforces accountability narratives, and supports Sudanese civil society peace mechanisms. While the Canadian government may not be in a position to directly implement all measures, it can support domestic and international actors to do so. Such efforts can be pursued in a variety of ways that can be lower profile, discrete, backchannel, unofficial or through third parties so as not to overtly complicate the ongoing development of investment, trade, security and diplomacy efforts with other countries. Given the escalating humanitarian, regional, and security risks in Darfur—including ethnic cleansing, famine, proxy conflict, refugee flows, and the potential balkanization of Sudan—inaction carries significant strategic and moral costs.

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Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

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