

Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP
Minister for State for Development and Africa
Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

20 June 2023

Sent via email

Dear Minister,

Atrocity Prevention Working Group letter on Sudan

We write as members of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group, which exists to cooperate, collaborate, and share knowledge to improve the UK's prediction and prevention of mass atrocities.

This letter follows on from our Group's repeated warnings over years to His Majesty's Government of increasing risks of mass atrocity crimes in Sudan and the pressing need for the United Kingdom's Sudan policy, resourcing, and diplomatic priorities to fully acknowledge and contribute to confronting these risks. Amid the people's revolution in 2018-2019 and the ousting of former President General Omar Al Bashir, followed by a massacre instigated by General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemeti" Dagolo, [we warned](#) that the fragile transition required the UK to learn from its own lessons in Myanmar, where a democracy-first strategy did not take into account the rising risks of identity-based violence and mass atrocity crimes. When General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and others led the military coup d'état in 2021, ending Sudan's unsteady steps towards a civilian government, our Group [wrote](#) to your predecessor, Vicky Ford MP, of our concern 'that the UK's systems, capabilities and policies towards Sudan still lack[ed] a focus on atrocity prevention, grievance, and political marginalisation.' Our repeated warnings were never heeded.

This letter raises in the strongest possible terms our dismay that our repeated pleas to His Majesty's Government – and the pleas towards HMG that came from Sudanese citizens in Sudan and here in the UK – were time and again never prioritised or taken seriously. We write to you in the dear hope that with your support we can help the UK to break this pattern.

Since 15 April 2023, violence has spread across Sudan in an attempt to reimpose military dictatorship, with the deployment of a spectrum of violence and oppression in efforts to seize political control. This is not simply a power struggle between two warring generals, but a continuation of an ideology of Arab and Islamist supremacy by Sudan's political rulers over generations fomented in [structural discrimination](#) that have fueled mass atrocities. [Over half the population](#) of Sudan is in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Civilians endure [daily violence](#); [babies](#) and the [elderly](#) are starving to death, trapped in homes and orphanages; there are mounting reports of conflict-related [sexual violence](#) that 'suggest a broad pattern of behaviour in which women are being routinely targeted.' [Civil society activists](#) that once led the call for democracy, as well as medical personnel and other civilians still trapped in war, are now being [systematically detained, killed, or forced to flee](#), according to the UN Mission in Sudan. More than 1,800 people have been killed since the battles began in mid-April, according to the [Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project](#). Such figures routinely ignore the huge death and injury figures from beyond the centre, such as in Darfur, where fiercer battles rage, and where our partners are told of appalling scenes from their Sudanese friends, away from phone, internet, and media coverage.

The UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group has been meeting regularly in recent years with the UK's Special Envoy to Sudan and officials from the UK's Sudan desk in an effort to bring focus to the UK's Sudan policy and to put in place measures to help prevent escalations of identity-based violence and atrocities. We are particularly grateful for the time, consideration and personal commitment of Special Envoy Robert

Fairweather whose candour, honesty and openness are deeply appreciated –and rare. However, despite these meetings often being constructive, we have observed no tangible change in policy, resourcing, or strategy. In our last meeting with the Sudan country team (but not the Special Envoy) in April 2023, just ten days before violence in Khartoum began, we shared concerns of growing instability and were told the transition process was being viewed with “cautious optimism”. This optimism stood in sharp contrast with the already escalating mass atrocity violence in Sudan’s peripheries, including Darfur, now marking its twentieth anniversary since the internationally recognised start of the genocide. This also stood in marked contrast to what our partners were being told about the risk of a military confrontation in Khartoum itself – many individuals and activists spoke to chose to leave the capital days or even weeks before 15 April 2023.

While we claim no special foresight in predicting the exact crisis now playing out in Sudan, we have repeatedly reiterated our concerns that HMG in Sudan and London was not prepared. To the best of our knowledge, no alteration was made during this period of flux and risk to the UK’s Sudan policy in a manner that sought to integrate atrocity prevention analysis or policy. As far as we are aware, before this recent escalation of violence, the UK’s Sudan team never adopted any of our recommendations to develop its expertise, resourcing, and training with regard to mass atrocity prevention. As violence broke out in April, the Sudan Team had in place no expertise on the dynamics of atrocity violence; no system of urgent alarm raising; no risk assessment process to monitor the distinct indicators of mass violence; were receiving no central guidance on how to prepare for increasingly likely scenarios that could lead to violence and mass atrocity; and undertook no training to help plug even in a very modest way these skills and systems gaps. The absence of a central UK strategy on atrocity prevention has continued to hamper efforts by the country and embassy team to prepare for or consider how to mitigate mass violence in the country. Nor have we seen any increase in engagement with a broader range of Sudanese civil society expertise, whether here in the UK or in Sudan.

We recognise that the FCDO and its country teams are having to do more with less, with aid budgets for Sudan [cut by 97.5%](#) in the space of a year and a further cut announced to East Africa of £13m in late [May](#). The challenges of the region more widely, of a tentative cessation of hostilities in northern Ethiopia, of looming famine, are also not lost on Working Group partners. However, the UK’s Sudan policy has paid a high price. Despite growing political will to do more on atrocity prevention planning as part of the UK’s Sudan policy, the necessary – though very modest – resources were never made available. None of these measures outlined above are high cost; all are geared towards enhancing the preparedness of the UK government in the face of violent crisis and in maximising opportunities for the UK to help mitigate loss of life.

The failure to better centre atrocity prevention considerations is in stark contrast to the welcome and significant changes made elsewhere in the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office regarding this pressing global challenge. The decision in the 2021 Integrated Review to prioritise mass atrocity prevention signalled the beginning of a step change in UK understanding of the distinct pathology of mass atrocity violence; we have and will continue to champion the FCDO’s new Mass Atrocity Prevention Hub, which represents an exciting new model of national level atrocity prevention that we know other states are watching with interest. We urge you in your capacity as Minister for Africa but also as Minister for International Development, and therefore holding ministerial responsibility for mass atrocity prevention at the National Security Council, to ensure the UK’s new stated leadership to strengthen its contributions to the prevention of mass atrocity crimes does not fall short in Sudan. Indeed, we note your own longstanding personal leadership to confront these dreadful crimes, from Darfur to Syria.

The current crisis in Sudan should not have come as a surprise; the warning signs were clear. For the past four years, HMG and other members of the international community have failed to recognise and respond to Sudan's continuing trends of violence and risks of mass atrocity crimes. Instead, priority has been given to democratisation, normalising relations with, and propping up the very actors complicit in the Darfur genocide - laying the foundation for the devastation and violence we have seen explode over the past nine weeks. We are pleased to hear that atrocity prevention expertise has now been brought into the UK's Sudan crisis team and would welcome clarity on what this means in terms of staff numbers, level of expertise, and the percentage of the country team who have now received atrocity prevention training. We must ask too, however, why this increase in atrocity prevention capacity and the decision to enhance atrocity prevention risk monitoring was not done sooner?

Effective prevention of identity-based mass violence requires consistent and constant effort. Better networking contributions to prevent violence and save lives is integral. Your own Conservative Party's Kigali Declaration against Genocide and Identity-based Violence rightly said in 2017 that 'we need to apply atrocity prevention to our international development and our foreign policies but also to our arms sales, our migration and refugee policy, our work to combat climate change.' The UK must therefore commit to confronting the networks, relationships and transactions enabling violence in Sudan, stemming arms sales to the combatants, and by helping to protect vulnerable populations in Sudan as well as those who seek sanctuary within our own borders. HMG must commit to prosecuting those on our soil who are suspected of perpetrating international crimes; the UK cannot become a haven for Sudan's genocidaires and war criminals. As you have so frequently advocated, our financial system must not be used to harbour dirty money – unexplained wealth orders, asset-freezing orders and repatriation can stop the profits of violence and mass atrocity from being laundered or stored in the UK. Here too, the evacuee population and wider diaspora is a crucial source of intelligence. This would also ensure the UK's Sudan policy complements and builds upon that pursued in the United States.

It is in this spirit that we remind His Majesty's Government that the responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from identity-based violence and mass atrocities begins at home. News continues to come in of almost 2 million [people having been displaced](#) within the country or across its borders, fleeing to Egypt, Chad, and South Sudan, with the ripples of the crisis now reaching UK shores. Sudan remains the eighth highest country of origin for asylum claims in the UK, with a grant rate of 83%, according to the latest Home Office immigration statistics, yet face policies which would limit their right to refugee protection, having their claims unfairly decided against outdated information on the situation in Sudan. Some of those with UK entry clearance were evacuated to the UK in complex operations, but the evacuation still left many trapped in Sudan due to HMG's narrow criteria, and evacuees nationwide are greeted with a patchy and uncoordinated assistance package. The recent evacuees add to existing numbers of Sudanese who reached the UK in former years in order to claim asylum, but who have been marginalised by the UK's hostile environment, and who now risk being further criminalised should the Illegal Migration Bill pass into law. As this current crisis has painfully exposed, there are no safe and legal routes for those fleeing violence in Sudan. We call on the government to uphold its obligations to those who reach the UK from Sudan or over whom the UK has responsibility, recognising they deserve the right to have their protection needs and right to apply for asylum protected, and clear and consistent welcome and integration packages offered.

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a penholder on relevant Sudan and Darfur resolutions, as a state which aspires to help prevent mass atrocity crimes, and because of the histories that connect Sudan and the UK, HMG is well placed to lead by example. The UK should add pressure on both the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces by continuing to urgently raise the crisis at the UN Security Council or in Special Sessions of the Human Rights Council. We welcome the UK's

leadership in securing such a Session on [11 May](#) and the following UK-drafted [resolution](#) which condemned the human rights violations and abuses taking place. The UK should leverage its multilateral influence to support international isolation of both the Sudan Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces, and we urge the UK-led resolution at the Human Rights Council session in [July 2023](#) to commission further reporting from the High Commissioner and the UN Expert on Human Rights in Sudan to keep up this international pressure, including through the suspension of financial support, and the considerations of sanctions, all in coordination with US and EU partners, as well as the World Bank and IMF.

We ask the UK's Sudan team to meet again with our Working Group with the explicit objective of how our collective expertise can help HMG to unlock opportunities to mitigate violence, stand in solidarity with the people of Sudan, and look ahead to risks coming down the tracks. We humbly invite you to join our next meeting, which would signal personal and political leadership in a time of considerable and grave concern. We note that FCDO colleagues have before enjoyed very positive relationships with the UK-Sudan advocacy working group coordinated by Waging Peace, and that group intends to make itself available at any opportunity for information-sharing, connections, and joint thinking. As host to one of the largest resident Sudanese diaspora groups, including a large asylum-seeking and refugee population, the UK must engage these individuals, recognising they will play a crucial role in securing meaningful peace and democracy in Sudan - and will always be the first to raise the alarm ahead of crises, and the first to find solutions for the challenges they are facing.

The ingredients are there for a descent into large-scale violence, including widespread systematic identity-based violence breaching thresholds of crimes against humanity and genocide. A destabilised Sudan may yet become a new base for violent Islamist extremism. But pathways to mass atrocity crimes can be identified, interrupted, and rerouted. Even in this dire moment for the people of Sudan, nothing is inevitable. The UK is well placed to help build an alternate route away from violence and authoritarianism.

We ask the Minister and his colleagues to meet with and draw on the expertise of the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group coordinated by Protection Approaches, and the UK-Sudan advocacy group and diaspora network coordinated by Waging Peace, so that we might work together towards a more peaceful Sudan, and raise to your attention the following key asks:

- Prioritise the deployment of a cross-departmental atrocity prevention strategy for Sudan to ensure coherence and weight to the UK's policy, recognising that such an approach will be both cost effective and demonstrate British leadership.
- Immediately bolster the identity-based violence and atrocity prevention capabilities of the UK's Sudan crisis team and HMG's regional embassies, through rapid upskilling and/or augmenting the staff with specific atrocity prevention expertise.
- Work with and recognise Sudanese civil society's crucial role in securing meaningful peace and democracy in Sudan as they will always be the first to raise the alarm ahead of crises, and the first to find solutions for the challenges they are facing.
- The responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from identity-based violence begins at home and so the government must uphold its obligations to those who reach the UK from Sudan or over whom the UK has responsibility, recognising they deserve the right to have their protection needs and right to apply for asylum protected, and clear and consistent welcome and integration packages offered. This could involve better information sharing with the Home Office.
- Implement the commitments in the Conservative Party's Kigali Declaration against Genocide and Identity-based Violence to confronting the networks, relationships and transactions enabling

violence in Sudan, stemming arms sales to the combatants, and by helping to protect vulnerable populations in Sudan as well as those who seek sanctuary within our own borders.

- Show leadership in formal and informal multilateral fora, from the UN Security Council to the International State-level Working Group on Atrocity Prevention to rapidly mobilise international focus on the prevention, escalation, and intensification of the violence.

Thank you for your consideration of this urgent matter. We look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

European Centre for the Responsibility to Protect
Dr Jess Gifkins (Assoc. Prof. in International Relations, University of Manchester)
Jo Cox Foundation
Minority Rights Group
Protection Approaches
Rights for Peace
Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace & Justice
United Nations Association UK
United Against Inhumanity
Videre est Credere
Waging Peace

Copied via email to:

The Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Minister for Middle East, North Africa, South Asia and the UN, FCDO; and Prime Minister's Special Representative for Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict)
Rt Hon Suella Braverman KC MP (Secretary of State, Home Office)
Robert Fairweather OBE (UK Special Representative for Sudan and South Sudan, FCDO)
Alicia Kearns MP (Chair, Foreign Affairs Select Committee)
Sarah Champion MP (Chair, International Development Select Committee)

