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ISSUE BRIEF

DARFUR'S LONG-DISTANCE TRADE

Impact of war and Rapid Support Forces' trade embargo

Introduction

When the current war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) broke out on 15 April 2023, analysts expected the economy to become a battleground in which the two belligerent parties would seek to maximise the economic gains critical for achieving dominance (Abushama et al., 2023). As trade, especially long-distance trade, is an essential component of Darfur's economy, it was almost certain to be impacted by the ongoing conflict. Eventually the RSF was able to control much of Darfur (except for El Fasher) and thus the region's economy came effectively under its control.

This brief provides an overview of the effect of the war and the subsequent embargo imposed by the RSF on regular trade into and out of areas it controls, focusing particularly on Darfur (see Box 1). The embargo obstructs the trade and export of locally produced commodities in areas under RSF control (mostly in western Sudan) to other destinations in Sudan and effectively outside the country. The conflict has impacted the lives of a wide range of people at various levels of the trading chain: producers, traders, businesspeople, transporters and wage labourers. The impact is both direct and indirect, affecting many sectors and trade within the region itself. See also SPARC (2025) brief *The impact of war on trade and markets in Darfur: destruction, resilience and adaptation*, which explores how markets and trade within Darfur have been affected by and have adapted to the conflict situation. Based on first-hand accounts and monitoring by researchers in each of Darfur's states, the brief draws attention to some of the overall consequences for Darfur's economy, and thus the affected population, to inform actors in the humanitarian, development, food security and peace sectors.

Trucking goods over long distances and non-tarmac roads. © Wirestock Creators / shutterstock

BOX 1 SUMMARY OF THE *UNDERSTANDING MARKETS* STUDY

This briefing note is part of a 12-month SPARC study on *Understanding markets and trade in a context of extreme conflict and humanitarian crisis, with limited access, in Darfur, Sudan*. It sets out to address three research questions:

1. How can market monitoring and data collection be adapted, with flexibility and sensitivity, to at least partially fill the information gap in Darfur – a context of extreme conflict, insecurity and constrained access – through local actors?
2. How has trade in agricultural and livestock commodities adapted, positively and negatively, to the current context of extreme conflict in Darfur, how is trade affecting the conflict, and what are the implications for social cohesion and for conflict-sensitive programming by humanitarian actors?
3. How can a deeper understanding of markets and trade in food commodities contribute to improved understanding of the severity of food insecurity in Darfur?

A brief explanation of the RSF trade embargo

As the war intensified, the RSF imposed a trade embargo on Egypt on 8 October 2024. It issued a directive prohibiting the transport of goods from areas under its control to territories held by the SAF, which are the traditional routes for exports to Egypt. Following air bombardment of RSF forces in Jebel Moya (in the western part of Sinnar state), which led to reoccupation by SAF forces on 3 October 2024, the RSF accused Egypt of siding with the SAF in the war by sending the aeroplanes that delivered the bombardment. The ban targets key Sudanese exports such as gum arabic, groundnuts, cooking oil and gold, all of which are critical commodities for trade with Egypt and other markets beyond. In addition to the above, it covers other agricultural goods such as sorghum, millet, sesame, *tombac*,[1] okra and hibiscus, as well as livestock such as camels, cattle, sheep and goats.

Although the RSF directive did not specifically name Egypt, it effectively targets the SAF-held northern regions through which Egypt imports Sudanese goods from Darfur and Kordofan. A top RSF commander is reported to have directed resources to be exported to neighbouring nations other than Egypt, asserting that Egypt is an adversary to Sudan and other neighbouring countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and Chad (Sudan War Monitor, 2024).

The decision threatens Sudan's own economy and humanitarian efforts. The embargo affects the lives of ordinary people in Darfur who depend mainly on producing and selling agricultural crops and livestock. Indeed, the overall impact on the region's economy is yet to be fully understood, as it could have far-reaching implications for food security and humanitarian conditions for the population at large. The conflict between the SAF and the RSF has had devastating effects on Sudan's economy, particularly on the agri-food system and food security. Following the announcement of the embargo in the third week of October 2024, hundreds of trucks and thousands of livestock on the hoof coming from the states of Darfur and Kordofan were turned away at the borders between the Northern state and North Kordofan. These trucks were carrying raw materials that are rebranded in Egypt for resale in European and Gulf markets, according to Sudanese economic observers.

The history of long-distance trade out of and into Darfur

There is a long history of trade between Darfur and Egypt on the one hand, and Darfur and central Sudan on the other. Furthermore, in the past, Darfur played a pivotal role in connecting the Nile Basin with West Africa through long-distance trade. For centuries, Darfur has been a major crossroads for trade, and that trade is an important dimension of its economy and livelihoods. The caravan route to Egypt via northern Sudan – the 'Forty Days Road' – was a prominent historical trading route for exporting products to Egypt. After Sudan gained independence in 1956, and due to improved means of transport, Omdurman became the main trading hub for goods from Darfur, replacing the Forty Days Road except for camels, which continued to be trekked to Egypt.

The last five decades have witnessed a steady increase in cross-border trade between Darfur and neighbouring countries – mainly Egypt, Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic, Cameroon (via Chad) and South Sudan. During Omer El-Bashir's regime, which lasted for three decades, a significant shift in trader profiles occurred. In particular, there was a huge expansion in the military's appetite to monopolise the commercial export sector of the country's economy, especially agricultural products and livestock. Darfur assumed greater importance in the country's economy as a crucial provider of livestock and agricultural goods for export (in addition to gold), especially after the secession of South Sudan in 2011 and the loss of petroleum revenues. For this reason, many have considered the war that broke out in Darfur in 2003 to be a war of resources (Sudan Transparency and Policy Tracker and Facts Center for Journalism, 2024; Abushama et al., 2023).

The RSF's role in the extractive political economy

Since its beginning, the RSF has used military power for financial gain through extracting rent. The paramilitary group came into existence as a result of El-Bashir's

1 *Tombac* is locally produced and processed chewing tobacco.

counterinsurgency strategy. To fight the armed rebels who were predominantly from non-Arab ethnic groups, he supported the formation of a militia from predominantly Arab ethnic groups in the region. When war broke out between rebel movements and the SAF in 2003, the early formation of the RSF's predecessor paramilitary group (the Border Guards) was partially funded through looting (i.e. allowing fighters to loot animals and property as an incentive instead of paying them salaries). Later, their leader was awarded a licence to manage the gold mine in Jebel Amir in North Darfur for the same purpose. When the RSF was formed in 2013, the licence was passed on to its leader ('Hemedti') and the Border Guards were dissolved into it. Under the new leadership, the paramilitary group benefited from preferential access to resources and trade, especially gold and livestock, in addition to outsourcing its forces to fight as mercenaries in the war in Yemen. After the overthrow of Omer El-Bashir in 2019, the RSF leader Hemedti upscaled his trading activities with Egypt, in particular the export of livestock (camels, cattle and sheep) from a base in Moweilih, west of Omdurman, with most of the livestock coming from Darfur and Kordofan.

The war and competition over Sudan's resources

The war that started in April 2023, stalling the transition to democratic rule, is connected to competition over Sudan's resources (mainly gold, livestock, cereals and oilseeds) between the two military actors (RSF and SAF). Both groups are connected to privileged national elites as well as regional sponsors benefiting from these resources. The sudden disruption caused many to flee the national capital and halted manufacturing and trading activities. As a result, Omdurman's position as a trading hub dwindled rapidly. Instead, Al-Dabbah in the Northern state became the main hub for trade between the western regions and northern and eastern parts of the country, as well as through Port Sudan (the main port) and Egypt. The growing prominence of Al-Dabbah has practically reactivated the old historical caravan trading route of the Forty Days Road. One study from 2023 predicted that the increased cost of conflict over time, along with the depletion of existing resources for political and military financing, would lead to increased competition between the SAF and the RSF over productive resources, production nodes and trade routes (Abushama et al., 2023; p. 15).

Consequences of the war and RSF embargo on long-distance trading

Cash crop production in Darfur and exports

First-hand information obtained by researchers in various Darfur states refers to the production of, and trade in, export agricultural crops such as groundnuts, gum arabic and sesame being affected in many ways. Uncertainties over the mobility of goods and marketability of produce due to the trade embargo have pushed farmers away from planting export crops and towards food crops. This has affected the production of cash crops such as *tombac*, groundnuts and sesame. As an illustration, before the war, the sale of a sack of groundnuts in Nyala could pay for 35 kg of sugar. As the price of sugar (an imported commodity) has increased twenty-fold, while the price of locally produced groundnuts has only increased five-fold, the sale of a sack of groundnuts could now pay for only 8.75 kg of sugar. This situation is likely to affect the farmer's decision about which crop to plant in the next season. The reduction in groundnut exports is partially compensated by a new trend of exporting cooking oil to Chad and South Sudan where there are very few groundnut mills. But the overall pattern is a contraction of the long-distance trade and exports of groundnuts.

The production of *tombac*, which is almost solely grown in North Darfur and exported to the rest of the country, has declined sharply this year according to a researcher, citing both lack of labour and export challenges.

Traders and daily labourers

Traders interviewed in Cairo report that most independent large-scale crop exporters have left Darfur and many have left Sudan altogether. Moreover, big businesses involved in processing agricultural crops (e.g. DAL, Mahgoub Sons and SAY Groups) have also left the country.

Medium- and large-scale operators of cross-border and long-distance trading from Darfur are almost entirely men. An exception is the involvement of women in West Darfur in smuggling goods across the Chad–Sudan border in small quantities, often by donkey and sometimes along formal roads (Adre and Adikong) in Land Cruiser pickup trucks.

The declining viability of long-distance trade affects the entire trading chain, from producers to local and petty traders to export traders. Women are particularly affected by the contraction of the long-distance trade in groundnuts – as small-scale producers, as agricultural daily wage labourers, and as daily wage labourers engaged in the semi-processing of groundnuts for export.

Transport

The profitability of trade in Sudan has long been affected by the high costs of transport due to the poor condition of roads and railways. The war has presented truckers with new challenges. Roadblocks and checkpoints have more than tripled travel times. Truckers have claimed that the journey from Al-Dabbah to major destinations in Darfur, which would normally take a week, now takes from three to four weeks because of roadblocks set up by the warring parties to prevent the flow of arms to their adversaries. In addition, after announcing the export embargo, the RSF were keen to check trucks for compliance with their decision. Some truckers try to follow new routes to escape heavy unofficial levies that they are compelled to pay, and to avoid associated delays. Truckers must also pay protection fees for armed guards to escort them through some dangerous legs of their journey. The armed escorts usually belong either to the RSF or to some other dominant militia within the area of influence, depending on the travel route. The long alternative routes now used by truckers increase the consumption of fuel, which has risen sharply in price (Table 1). In combination, these factors result in massively increased transport costs. For example, the total cost of transporting goods by regular 30-ton trucks from Al-Dabbah in North State to Dar Alsalaam south of El Fasher in North Darfur has been reported to have reached SDG 30 million (approximately $12,500).[2]

According to many informants in Nyala and Zalingei, the challenges facing long-distance transport have led to the rise of a group of new truckers with RSF connections, who are able to pay greatly reduced or even no fees at checkpoints. Since December 2024, members of the RSF have been transporting *tombac* and groundnuts from Darfur to Omdurman, capitalising on the exponential price differential and the fact that they have RSF vehicles and will be exempted from the fees paid by other traders. Although there is no evidence that this is an official policy on the part of RSF leadership, exploitation of the situation by RSF-related individuals to ease the passage of traded goods and/or engage in trade themselves represents a new trend that may change regular trade patterns in the region. The gradual accumulation of such practices may lead to the emergence of a new class of traders who could control the economy of Darfur in the long run to the exclusion of others, probably on an ethnic basis. This clearly feeds into a growing war economy that is slowly taking shape. The more established it becomes, the less the incentive to make compromises for the sake of peace.

Livestock exports

Livestock producers in Darfur have also been affected by the war and the RSF embargo on export of goods. The region is especially renowned for the quality of its livestock (camels, cattle and sheep). Camels from Darfur were historically exported on the hoof to the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt and Libya (Buchanan-Smith et al., 2012). The new millennium witnessed a huge increase in cattle exports to Egypt, where they are rebranded and exported to European Union countries as organic meat products. The same is true for sheep. The current war has directly affected livestock quality and health due to lack of medicine, and violent confrontations in some areas have restricted access to pastures. Reports from Central Darfur refer to pastoralists migrating to Chad to avoid looting of their animals in Sudan. The blockage of trade routes out of Darfur and the inability to reach traditional domestic markets (e.g. Omdurman) and export markets (e.g. via Port Sudan and direct to Egypt) jeopardises the entire livestock value chain. This includes export wholesale traders, local traders and petty traders known in Darfur as *gallaga* (livestock middlemen). As a result, most exporters, except for those associated with the RSF, have left Darfur or Sudan altogether. New traders with unknown profiles have appeared in the market. Informants say that for many new traders, their sources of wealth are also unknown, implying that they are illicit in nature. Moreover, such traders (most of whom are from Arab pastoralist groups) operate under the protection of RSF forces. The implication is that control of the livestock trade has taken an ethnic turn.

The transport of livestock from Darfur to traditional marketing destinations suffered in the same way as that of other goods. Camels are trekked on foot along new complicated routes to avoid checkpoints and the embargo – with inferior grazing and water sources en route, negatively affecting the condition of the livestock on arrival.

A recent report refers to the resilience of camel trading with Saudi Arabia and Egypt: despite logistical and bureaucratic hurdles, the trade continues, underpinned by enduring

TABLE 1 BREAKDOWN OF TRANSPORT COSTS BETWEEN AL-DABBAH AND NORTH DARFUR, JANUARY 2025

Commodity	Trade route	Costs of transporting the commodity, in SDG (million)					Total cost
		Truck rental (includes fuel costs)	Official taxes	Checkpoint fees	Security escorts	Loading and off-loading	
Wheat flour	Al Dabbah to Sani-Krow in North Darfur	21.0	3.0	2.5	2.5	1.0	30.0

Source: Authors' own

2 The current exchange rate on the black market, which is used by traders and truckers, is approximately $1 = SDG 2,400 (Sudanese pounds).

demand and diplomatic negotiations (Nougud, 2024). This is confirmed by knowledgeable traders interviewed in Cairo, who point to deals between some Kababish Arab pastoralists (who live in the desert between North Kordofan and Northern state) and livestock traders from Darfur and Kordofan, involving smuggling of camels to Egypt via its southern borders with Sudan. The leaders of this pastoralist tribe have allied with the SAF to guard the buffer area between the Nile and western Sudan, which is controlled by the RSF. Consequently, some Kababish started to operate as double agents, exploiting their position to maximise their economic interests. According to informed sources, camels are trekked from Darfur and when they reach the buffer area, hired Kababish herders take over caring for the animals until they reach further destinations in Northern state or the borders with Libya and Egypt.

Imports

The cross-border trade for imports is fraught with challenges. For example, border crossings with Chad are frequently closed, which encourages smuggling. Darfuri traders must also have access to West African francs (CFA). As trade routes become restricted, previous minor trading routes have now assumed greater importance for imports. Some goods that used to be transported from Omdurman are now arriving to different markets in Darfur: through East Darfur for goods arriving from South Sudan, through Central Darfur and West Darfur for goods arriving from Chad, and through Nyala for goods arriving from the Central African Republic. Informants in Ed Daein, the capital of East Darfur state, noted that some Sudanese traders are now importing goods from the United Arab Emirates via Mombasa port in Kenya, across South Sudan and ultimately into East and South Darfur. Imported items include manufactured goods and processed foods such as macaroni and biscuits.

However, because bread is a food staple in towns and for displaced people, wheat flour is still transported to Darfur from northern Sudan and imported from Egypt despite the embargo. By controlling trade routes and transport, the RSF has gained control over trade in this critical food product, which was previously monopolised by big business families in Sudan such as DAL Group and Mahgoub Sons. In this connection, and because of its lucrativeness, informants have reported that RSF and SAF personnel have been making unofficial deals in the bush allowing the commodity to pass to North Darfur (and from there to other Darfur states, in particular East, South and Central Darfur).

Currency

The introduction of new notes in the Sudanese currency is hampering trade, particularly between Darfur and the rest of Sudan. The new notes recently introduced by the Sudan government in Port Sudan are banned by the RSF, while being widely used in neighbouring states. This is also affecting trade with Chad, as Chadian traders regard the new notes with caution and therefore prefer CFA.

Conclusion

The flow of trade continues into and out of Darfur despite the ongoing violence and the RSF embargo. However, crucial changes have taken place in the form of higher prices, higher transport costs, changes in trader profiles and changes in some routes. These are all related to the conflict. The main source of goods brought into Darfur, such as fuel and processed food commodities, is no longer central Sudan; it is now more diverse, involving in particular neighbouring countries such as Chad, Libya and South Sudan.

Economic and military/political power in Darfur continue to be very closely aligned, and the RSF now controls much of the trade from and into Darfur. Accordingly, individuals close to the RSF, including those ethnically affiliated, have preferential access to trade. They do not pay taxes or informal checkpoint fees and may be given shops and premises that have been taken from others. The war economy is being fuelled by the rise of new RSF-affiliated traders engaged in long-distance trade who are benefiting from the proceeds of checkpoints and provision of armed escorts, in addition to the new traders who appeared after the war through access to illicit wealth.

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