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# When the shelling and air strikes start, it's time to move: Shakir's harrowing journey across Sudan

By Shakir Elhassan, with Reid Davis

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People flee the conflict in Sudan's Gezira state on foot, with their suitcases. Photo: Mohamed Altaj/CARE Sudan

Shakir Elhassan had lived peacefully in Khartoum for more than three decades.

Despite the years of conflict in Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile that caused massive displacement, drove food insecurity and forced children out of school, Shakir was firmly rooted in the

capital city, where he lived with his wife and five children and worked for CARE Sudan.

His older children were in school, with his oldest preparing to take a university exam and continue his education. On weekends Shakir visited the small farm he owned, delighting in the care of his sheep, goat, dogs, and chickens. Each Friday he would visit the grave of his father, who passed within the last year.

But in April, all that changed, as an armed group arrived in the city, bringing shelling, gunfire, and military checkpoints.

Shakir and his family endured for four months, during upheaval, danger, and instability, because he considered his humanitarian work too important to leave.

But when basic commodities like medicines, food, and mobile-phone service started to completely vanish in August, and when armed men started knocking on doors got as close as nearby neighbors, Shakir sent his family northward for their safety. Meanwhile, he traveled the opposite direction, about 120 miles south, up the Blue Nile to the city of Wad Madani, where CARE established a regional office. After 52 days Shakir found a place to live, and his family rejoined him.

## **A forgotten crisis**

With the world's attention largely focused elsewhere, Sudan has become a forgotten crisis. More than 7.2 million people have been displaced within and outside Sudan since mid-April 2023. Humanitarian workers like Shakir aren't immune.



Omar, one of Shakir's sons, enjoys the company of his birds during more peaceful days in Khartoum. Photo: Shakir Elhassan/CARE Sudan

At least 1.4 million people have fled Sudan since mid-April seeking safety and protection in neighboring countries like Chad, South Sudan, and Egypt. Sudan now has the largest child displacement crisis in the world, with three million children fleeing the widespread violence.

The conflict has also left 19 million children out of school, with 10,400 schools closed in conflict zones. This has hit home in Shakir's household, as his four school-age children have seen their days, once filled with studies, turn to idleness.

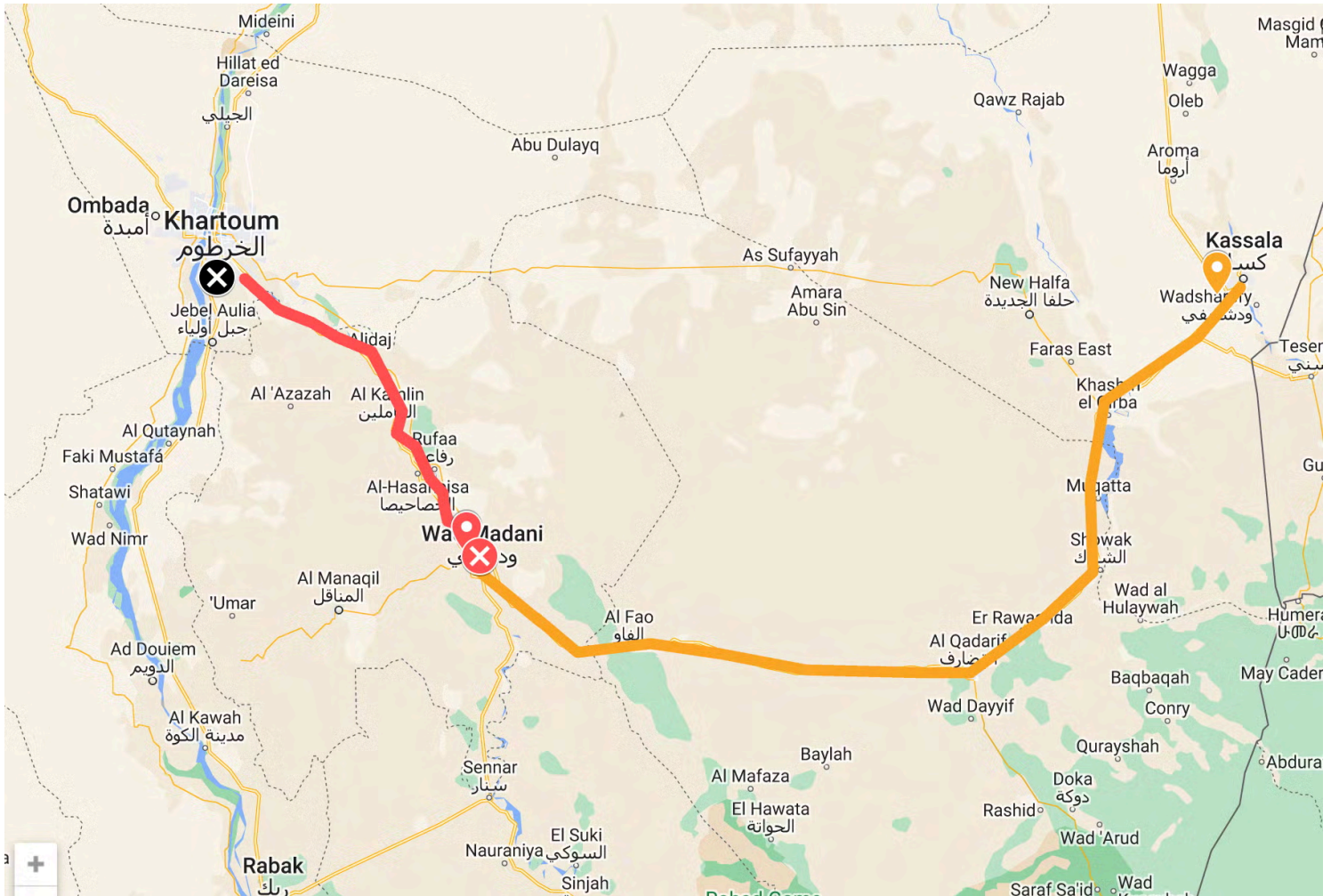


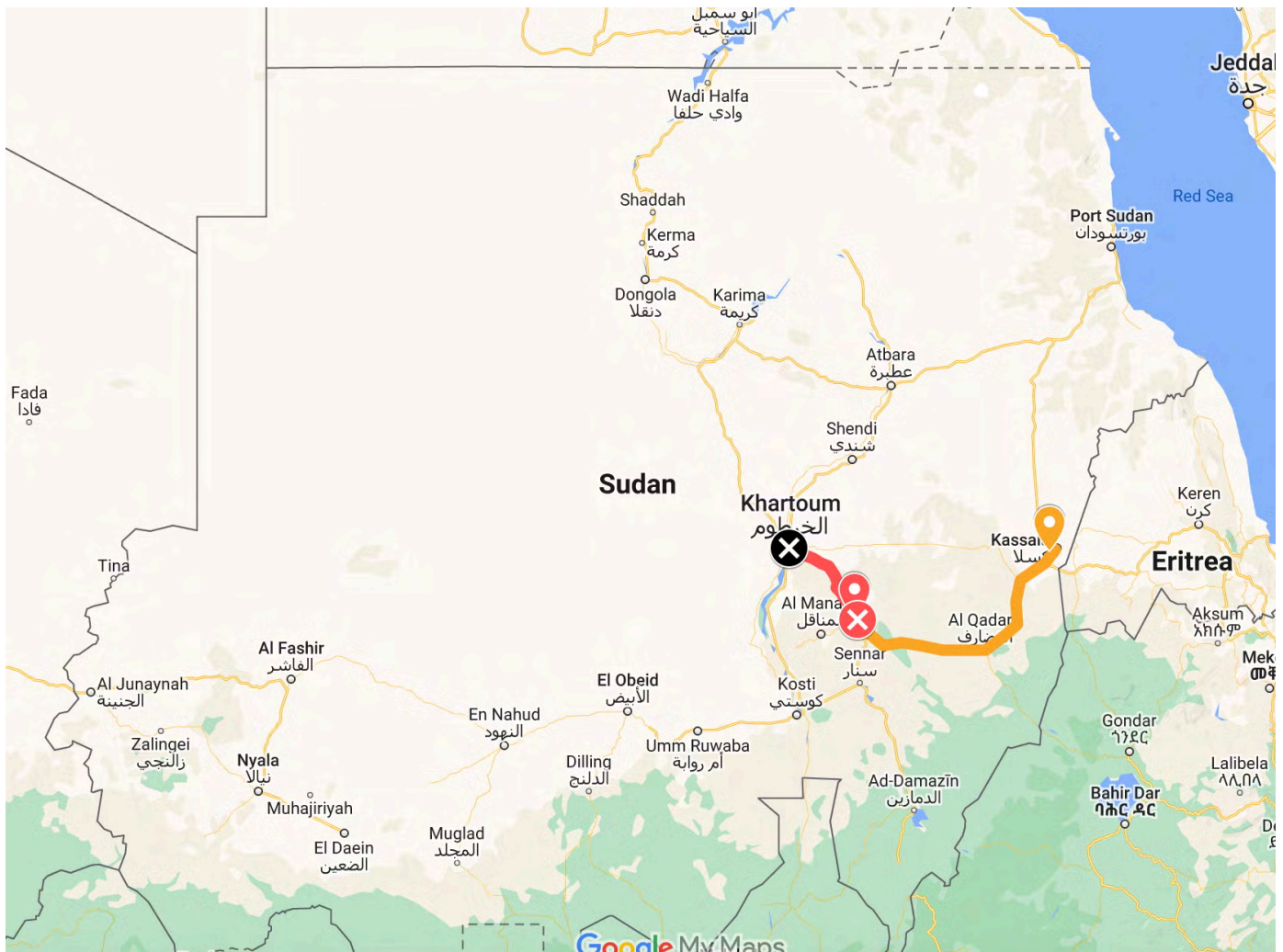
Omar and his brother Ahmed enjoy a weekend donkey ride at the family's small farm. Photo: Shakir Elhassan/CARE Sudan

Of his oldest, now 17, Shakir says: "He's sleeping – sleeping a lot. When I ask him, 'please get up,' he asks me back: 'to do what?'"

And in Madani, the relative peace didn't last. While many around the world celebrated holidays, those displaced to Madani were displaced again – which uprooted Shakir's family in the process, this time to Kassala, about 280 miles to the east, near the border of Eritrea.

Shakir's own words tell the story of what followed:





These maps show the route of Shakir's journey if he had taken commonly-used roads, but reality was far more complicated. As he says: "There is a paved road from Gezira to Sennar, and the journey using that road is around 90 minutes. But since the beginning of the conflict, this road is closed. We had to take unpaved roads, moving around to cross irrigation channels in Gezira's agricultural land. These routes are usually used by herdsman with their animals, and not for public transport. There are no signs or directions to guide you, and most of the time we had to stop and ask villagers the right direction to Sennar. Many times we had to go back and change the route."

## The second displacement

*"It was a weekend, a Friday morning, I was just preparing to go shopping, as usual, when I started hearing shelling and air strikes, making loud 'boom' noises and producing heavy smoke and dust. I asked people what's going on. They said armed forces were trying to cross the village into Madani, on the west bank of Blue Nile.*

***I went out of the building to see literally thousands of people running for their lives.***

***All people, men, women, children, all carrying whatever they could – things like bags, water bottles, and loaves of bread.***

*I have seen people exhausted. Women sitting in front of the building we are using as an office and accommodation for us, asking for water, telling us that when the shelling started, the stray shells started to fall onto their houses, so they escaped for their lives.*

*Then I noticed traders fleeing the main market – my place was on the main road to the market – carrying whatever possible with tuktuks [three-wheeled motorized vehicles commonly used as taxis], with trucks, with their hands, because they were trying to save whatever they can.*



People fleeing the conflict in Gezira state, in late December. Photo: Mohamed Altaj/CARE Sudan

*Public transport stopped, so people were walking for hours trying to find buses to take them outside of Madani, the main town in Gezira state. Some managed to use trucks, to use donkey carts; whatever is possible we used to escape. This is Friday. Saturday, the same, people moving. Sunday, it was a bit calm.*

*On Monday, Dec. 18, the armed forces crossed into Madani. They started checkpoints and preventing public transport, so it was challenge for people to move.*

## A long, harrowing journey.

*I moved out of Madani on Saturday evening, taking unpaved roads on a journey that usually takes less than one hour. It took me seven hours in a small van to arrive there on dusty roads.*

***Along the road I saw thousands of people, literally thousands of people, riding what was available. If nothing was available, they were walking.***

*People were resting under trees while villagers provided them with water, whatever food was available.*

*From Sennar I took another van to Qadarif – a 10-hour drive on a dusty road.*



Villagers along the road from Gezira to Sennar provide displaced people with water and food. Photo: Mohamed Altaj/CARE Sudan

*Also, along the road, I saw thousands of people moving either on foot or on whatever kind of vehicles they could find. I also saw villagers trying to serve food and other things. There was a huge fuel shortage, so public transport was dramatically reduced. I have seen truck drivers taking people to safety.*

*I spent the night in Qadarif and from there I took to the bus to Kassala. It was a four-hour drive. In total, I think it was over 20 hours to move from Gezira to Kassala to join our CARE office in Kassala.*



People flee the conflict in Gezira state on foot, via car, and via donkey cart. Photo: Mohamed Abdulmajiid/CARE Sudan

*From Saturday to Saturday, I wore the same clothes: a colored, short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. In the panic, my wife only took things for the kids. I took my laptop, and medication. I'm diabetic, by the way. It was key for me to take my medication. And on the way I took some money.*

## **Women at risk**

*From early days of the conflict, reports came out that women, especially women, were targeted, harassed, raped, and looted.*

*I spoke to a woman sitting closer to me in the van. She told me that she tried to leave Madani three times. Each time she was pushed back by armed men telling her not to leave, to stay, saying "nothing will happen to you." And she was afraid of being raped or her possessions looted. And at the end she managed to sneak out just with the clothes on her back.*

***She told me for three nights she didn't sleep; she didn't eat.***

*And when she arrived at the bus station she called one of her relatives to send her money to buy a ticket. The cost of transport was so high.*

*Most of the people fleeing Gezira were originally displaced from Khartoum, living in Gezira for several months, and then again, they were forced to leave Gezira looking for safety.*

*In Gezira I saw many thousands of people just sheltering around mosques and other public buildings, because they didn't have money to buy tickets to move to another town. In Qadarif I spent the night in the bus station.*



People flee the conflict in loaded-down vehicles on dusty roads Photo: Mohamed Altaj/CARE Sudan

*I can say more than 15,000 people were just spending the night under the sky, waiting for morning, trying to find a way to go to another place. Most of them were bankrupt, living on what the Sudanese people and other agencies are providing them with. No facilities, no bathrooms.*

## **300,000 displaced, insufficient shelter**

*According to the figures I read yesterday, 300,000 people are newly displaced in Kassala. Kassala is small. [Update: About 300,000 have fled outside Gezira state due to fighting, while another 200,000 are now displaced within the state, including over 220,000 of them subjected to secondary displacement. -ed.]*

*There are large numbers of refugees from other countries. This adds to the burden the town is facing.*

*Kassala is not ready to host such large crowds. I have seen people urinating outside, open defecation, because there are no toilets.*

*When I arrived here, I saw also thousands of people arriving knowing nobody.*

***“I don’t know anybody in Kassala. Please, can you help me find a place to stay?”***

*Schools are very crowded, usually with limited sanitation facilities. The whole town is suffering from water shortages.*

*Schools are the resort for those who don't have any money at their hands, while others trying to find a place to rent. They shelter with relatives.*

*Today, I went to the market to buy a medication for myself. I met a family, an old woman with her two daughters and their children. I think they were seven. They just arrived and they were looking for a place to stay. They were hungry. They told me the journey took three to four days to arrive to Kassala. They arrived in Kassala for the first time in their life. They didn't know what to do because their mom is old and sick.*

## **Traveling without money**

*In the van from Gezira to Sennar. I bought some candy and chocolate for my younger kids. In the van was a mother and two or three kids, I counted two but I think there were three because one was sleeping. I took some sweets, and I gave them to her kids. The mother was apologizing to me. "This is for your kids." I told her, it's OK.*

### ***She told me she was not able to feed her kids for almost two days.***

*She was just looking for safety. She had no money. The sweets that I gave her children was the first thing they had to eat in more than 30-plus hours. At the next stop I bought some food, sandwiches and juice, for her and her kids. I believe this is the same for others.*



Women with their luggage flee conflict in Gezira. Photo: Mohamed Altaj/CARE Sudan

*For myself, I avoided taking much cash with me, depending on electronic payments with my mobile phone. Sadly, the network went off, so in Gezira I faced a huge challenge to get money to pay for transport and borrowed money from a colleague, and when the Internet came back, I sent him money back.*

*So, most of the people were moving without money, without food. It was very, very sad. For five days I was not able to wash myself. I was sleeping with the family in a crowded place before moving to Kassala.*

*When I arrived, I went to the market to buy new clothes and had a bath.*

## **Life in Kassala**

*People are exhausted.*

*People look very tired, desperate, don't know what to do.*

*Eyes are closed. Eyes work with a minimum capacity.*

*Most of them were displaced twice, so they are not sure what's going to happen next.*

*Most of the people were not paid since the beginning of the conflict back in April. They are struggling financially. Some of them are sick. I visited a clinic supported by CARE on Tuesday. I saw crowds waiting to see the doctor.*

*I spoke to people there. They told me this is the only free functioning health facility within 10 kilometers. Most of the health facilities are closed.*

*Back in the village in Gezira, I went to buy some medicine for myself. I spoke to the pharmacist. He told me nothing is available in his pharmacy. This is a pharmacy inside a government clinic. I went to two pharmacies in the village – both of them told me they ran out of supplies. I take medication for diabetes and here in Kassala I didn't find the drug.*

*I called a colleague in Port Sudan to buy it and send it to me, which he did through a bus driver, and I just collected it. I have it here in front of me. I guess this is the case for thousands of people with chronic diseases. Pharmacies are almost empty. The supply chain is interrupted, so people are looking for other alternatives which is not easy for people without money.*

## **Pleading for the world's attention**

*The people are suffering silently, because they don't have voice for themselves.*

*And people are dying, people are sick, people are not able to feed themselves.*

*People are fearing for their own safety, fearing for their future.*

*I used to tell myself that soon I will be back to our home, to my house, to my small farm, to my friends, to my relatives – that my kids will go back to school. This dream is running away from me. Now I found myself displaced twice. And I'm afraid of a third wave of displacement.*

*This conflict is not reducing. It is expanding, moving from state to state. Sudanese people are missing their voice. The people are suffering silently because they don't have a voice.*



This Sudanese woman was first displaced from Khartoum to Gezira, and now has been displaced again from Gezira. Photo courtesy of subject.



*I spoke to a colleague, a mother of three kids. She told me she's not sleeping well. She is feeling that the conflict might move to our place here in Kassala. It moved to Gezira. Conflict is now in Sennar, which is closer to our place, so people are uncertain what's going to happen.*

*Nobody is speaking on behalf of ordinary Sudanese people, so we are telling others we are operating; doing what is possible to serve people.*

*As a CARE family, our concern is to continue supporting people. We are continuing to serve people, but we are in need of more resources to serve millions of people.*

*CARE has supported 40 percent of all people supported by NGOs in Sudan. So we need to tell others we are here. We are operational. We will not give up. We will continue serving people.*

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