

Chemical Weapons in Sudan's Civil War: Credibility, Consequences, and the Need for Accountability

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Summary

This article examines the renewed concerns about chemical-weapons use in Sudan's civil war. Allegations of chlorine-gas deployment by the Sudanese Armed Forces reflect weakening global norms, persistent impunity, and uneven international responses. The case underscores the urgent need to reinforce chemical weapons non-proliferation and strengthen mechanisms for accountability.

Introduction

The prohibition against the use of poisonous gases in warfare is one of the oldest and most firmly established norms in international humanitarian law.¹ For over a century, deploying chemical agents has been recognised as a war crime, shaped by the devastating human toll witnessed from the First World War through later twentieth-century conflicts. Despite this legal and moral repudiation, chemical weapons continue to surface in contemporary wars.

In recent years, the global norm against chemical weapons has eroded under mounting pressure. Syria's repeated use of sarin and chlorine gas, Russia's deployment of chemical agents in Ukraine, and reports of Iran developing weaponised synthetic opioids all point to a weakening system of accountability under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). These developments reflect a troubling trend: states and armed actors are increasingly willing to test, exploit, or circumvent international enforcement mechanisms, often without significant consequence.²

Against this backdrop, the events of 9 October 2025 marked a significant shift in the discourse surrounding Sudan's protracted civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). On that day, France 24's digital verification unit released a detailed investigation drawing on geolocation techniques, open-source intelligence, and visual analysis. The team identified footage showing yellow-green plumes and chlorine canisters adapted as improvised aerial munitions, imagery that strongly suggested the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) had used chlorine gas in areas around Khartoum. These visuals represent some of the most

compelling indicators of chemical-agent use in the conflict, injecting renewed urgency into an issue that the international community had long struggled to conclusively verify.³

The October findings became more important because they directly challenged months of official denial by Khartoum. Earlier, on 22 May 2025, the United States had accused the SAF of using chemical agents during the 2024 phase of the war.⁴ Washington did not share details about where the attacks took place, how extensive they were, or which chemicals were used. Still, it acted under the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act, suspending defence exports, freezing certain financial assistance, and placing sanctions on senior SAF officials, including General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.⁵

Khartoum rejected the U.S. allegations, calling them political and pointing to an internal inquiry as proof of its compliance.⁶ Sudan's Permanent Representative to the United Nations submitted a letter to the UN Security Council on 24 May 2025, enclosing a Foreign Ministry statement rejecting recent U.S. accusations that the Sudanese Government used chemical weapons.⁷ The statement dismisses the claims as unfounded and criticises Washington for relying on media leaks instead of using the procedures mandated under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), including notifying the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), of which Sudan is an Executive Council member.

Sudan reiterates its commitment to the CWC, noting that it submits regular declarations and does not produce, stockpile, or use chemical weapons. It also rejects any unilateral U.S. measures taken based on these allegations, arguing that such steps violate the Convention and undermine Sudan's sovereignty and security.⁸ This

pattern of denial is not unique to Sudan. In Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine, early reports of chemical-weapons use were also met with blanket refutations, limited access for investigators, and attempts to challenge the credibility of monitoring bodies. These tactics slow down verification, weaken the enforcement of international rules, and make future violations more likely. In Sudan's case, the suspected use of chlorine, a common industrial chemical that is banned as a weapon under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC), shows how easily everyday materials can be turned into tools for prohibited military use.

The implications go beyond the battlefield. The new evidence undermines the SAF's earlier denial and fits a wider pattern of violations by both the SAF and the RSF. Investigations have shown both parties using siege tactics, restricting movement, and blocking humanitarian aid. The RSF's capture of El Fasher in October 2025 was marked by mass executions, which drew strong condemnation.⁹ The suspected use of chemical agents by the SAF is even more serious, introducing a new level of risk with major legal and normative consequences.

Assessment

This is not the first time Sudan has faced allegations of chemical-weapons use. In 2016, Amnesty International reported that government forces had likely deployed blister agents during operations in Darfur, findings that, despite their seriousness, prompted little meaningful international follow-up.¹⁰ The absence of accountability at the time may have contributed to the present recurrence. Together, these episodes illustrate how the norm against chemical weapons is eroding, raising urgent questions about deterrence, enforcement, and the future of global non-proliferation efforts. Recent investigations strongly

suggest that chemical weapons were used in Sudan's civil war. The likely deployment of chlorine gas by the SAF in rebel-held areas marks a serious escalation in a conflict already characterised by widespread violence and humanitarian suffering. This new evidence provides the clearest indication yet that toxic agents may have been used on the battlefield.

The emerging picture also brings renewed attention to Sudan's long-standing culture of impunity. For more than two decades, both the SAF and the RSF have been documented employing siege tactics, restricting civilian movement, and blocking humanitarian aid. The RSF, in particular, has normalised extreme violence, openly recording and sharing acts of brutality as a form of intimidation. Yet accountability has remained rare. Only one Janjaweed commander has ever been prosecuted by the International Criminal Court, and even that occurred due to voluntary surrender.¹¹ This entrenched lack of consequences has created an environment in which further violations, including the suspected use of toxic agents, become more conceivable.

International reactions to the allegations were uneven. Following the U.S. determination, the United Kingdom called on Sudan to uphold its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention, while European states voiced concern and supported investigative efforts but avoided imposing sanctions. China, however, remained largely silent, reflecting its strategic interests in Port Sudan as a key Belt and Road hub and its view of the SAF as a dependable partner. These varied responses illustrate how geopolitical considerations strongly influence how states address chemical-weapons allegations.

Complicating matters further is the external support enjoyed by both warring parties. The RSF has received weapons and drones from the United Arab Emirates, while the SAF continues to draw backing from Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. These networks of foreign support insulate both sides from pressure and reduce the likelihood of meaningful accountability. As a result, violations, including chemical-weapons use, occur in a context where neither faction fears serious international consequences.

This environment must also be understood within broader global trends. The erosion of chemical-weapons norms in Syria and Ukraine, along with concerns about Iran's development of incapacitating agents, has weakened long-standing restraints. As great-power competition intensifies, chemical agents are increasingly viewed as tools of coercion or asymmetric advantage. Sudan's alleged chlorine use, therefore, fits into a wider pattern of declining global restraint. Together, these dynamics make Sudan a significant test case for the changing international order. Chemical-weapons use no longer triggers automatic isolation; instead, responses are fragmented and inconsistent. This reflects the erosion of long-standing norms and highlights the limits of Western influence in a more multipolar world.

Finally, the situation exposes vulnerabilities within disarmament regimes. The near elimination of declared chemical stockpiles in 2023 was seen as a major achievement,¹² yet Sudan's case shows how enforcement can falter, especially regarding improvised, undeclared, or dual-use chemical agents. As long as state and non-state actors believe they can act without meaningful consequences, the deterrent effect of international law will continue to weaken.

Conclusion

Sudan's alleged use of chlorine gas represents a serious breach of international norms and a crucial test for the resilience of the global non-proliferation regime. Despite Khartoum's denials, credible investigations by media and human-rights organisations warrant independent scrutiny. The international community must move beyond expressions of concern and employ the mechanisms of the Chemical Weapons Convention to ensure accountability; failure to do so risks normalising chemical-agent use and eroding decades of arms-control progress.

The broader civil war, driven by economic collapse, militia fragmentation, and the involvement of external factors such as Russia, Iran, the UAE, and Egypt, further complicates this challenge. Sudan now stands as a critical measure of the international community's willingness to uphold the fundamental prohibition on chemical weapons. The credibility of the non-proliferation system will ultimately depend on whether these allegations are investigated thoroughly and addressed with decisive action.

Endnotes:

- ¹ International Committee of the Red Cross. (1899). *Declaration (IV,2) concerning asphyxiating gases: The Hague, 29 July 1899*. International Humanitarian Law Databases.
- ² Hall, N., & Horschig, D. (2024, November 21). *Reviving chemical weapons accountability in a multipolar world*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.
- ³ The FRANCE 24 Observers, & Peschard, Q. (2025, October 9). *Videos show the Sudanese army's use of chlorine gas as a weapon*. FRANCE 24.
- ⁴ Lewis, S., & Psaledakis, D. (2025, May 23). *US to impose sanctions on Sudan after finding government used chemical weapons*. Reuters.
- ⁵ Determinations regarding use of chemical weapons by Sudan under the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991. (2025, June 27). *Federal Register: The Daily Journal of the United States Government*.
- ⁶ Abdelrheem, A., & Sio, M. (2025, May 23). *'Unfounded, false': Sudan rejects US claims over alleged chemical weapons use*. Anadolu Agency.
- ⁷ Letter dated 24 May 2025 from the Permanent Representative of the Sudan to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council. (2025, May 27). *United Nations Digital Library System*.
- ⁸ Letter dated 24 May 2025 from the Permanent Representative of the Sudan to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council. (2025, May 27). *United Nations Digital Library System*.
- ⁹ de Waal, A. (2025, November 6). *Terror returns to Darfur, only American pressure can stop the killing in Sudan*. Foreign Affairs.
- ¹⁰ Amnesty International. (2016, September 29). *Sudan: Scorched earth, poisoned air: Sudanese government forces ravage Jebel Marra, Darfur*.
- ¹¹ Holligan, A., & Chibelushi, W. (2025, October 6). *Sudan militia leader convicted of war crimes during Darfur war*. BBC.
- ¹² OPCW. (2023, July 7). *OPCW confirms: All declared chemical weapons stockpiles verified as irreversibly destroyed*.