News



People fleeing clashes between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the army gather at the bus station in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 19. (OSV News/Reuters/El-Tayeb Siddig)



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Hundreds of Catholic sisters in Sudan have shut down their ministries and are desperately seeking ways to escape the violence that has engulfed the northeastern African country as rival security forces continue to fight for control.

On April 15, fighting erupted in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, between the Sudanese Armed Forces loyal to the head of the military government, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and those loyal to his deputy, Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who leads the Rapid Support Forces militia.

The clashes that have spread across the country since that day have led to the deaths of hundreds of people and displaced hundreds of thousands. Millions of residents are in need of food and other essential goods as supplies dwindle. The country is experiencing power outages, internet disruptions, road closures, school closures, and canceled flights.

Sr. Angelina Ebrahim Trilly Koko of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd said her congregation had already shut down several schools and hospitals that serve thousands of residents and stopped their pastoral work because of the ongoing fighting in the country of more than 45 million people.

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Koko, a teacher in El Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan state in central Sudan, described shock and disbelief at what was happening in her country. She said bodies are scattered on the streets, the noise of the gunshots and explosions is all over, and people are panicking and hiding in their homes.

"Our country is now dead. Many people have lost their lives, and some have fled their homes," Koko told Global Sisters Report by phone from El Obeid, where there has been intense fighting for the last few days. "The problem with these fighting groups is that they are now advancing their tactics by throwing grenades at people's houses. This makes the number of people who have died unknown."

Koko said she was terrified and worried about her life and the lives of her family, and she could escape her native Sudan to Egypt or any other country with help. The nun said the ongoing fighting had affected food supplies and disrupted access to water and electricity. Going to the market or shop to purchase food and other items was

risky, she said.

"The situation in Sudan is terrible, and you can die anytime," she said, referring to an incident on May 8 where she was almost caught in an exchange of gunfire while shopping for food. "I had a very bad experience when I went to the market. While there, I heard gunshots and had to hide. Many people were running all over. There were a few dead in the streets. It was a scary scene to see. After one hour, the violence went down. I hurried back to the community house."

Another sister who is trapped in Khartoum told GSR by phone that she was waiting for a flight back to her country, South Sudan, which is also experiencing a bloody 10-year civil war. The nun, who requested anonymity for safety reasons and is from the Good Shepherd Peace Center, said they had suspended their operations in the country meant to serve vulnerable communities. The sisters had been running schools, hospitals, orphanage homes, and elderly homes.



Smoke rises from burning aircraft inside Khartoum Airport during clashes between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the army in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 17. (OSV News photo/Reuters)

The nun said fighting between rival groups has intensified, and fighter jets continue with air strikes in Khartoum despite ceasefire talks taking place in Saudi Arabia.

"I don't think this war will end soon," she said, adding that she was among dozens of people hiding in a building in Khartoum. "I want to go back to my country. South Sudan is now safer than Sudan. The situation is terrible, and the soldiers are attacking every building in Khartoum. I hope I will be safe and get home as soon as possible."

Sr. Gisma Youstina AltairI Ismail Amia, who was born in Sudan and is now a minister in Egypt, said the recent clashes in Sudan had affected the church, resulting in the closure of churches, damage to church institutions, including schools and hospitals, and shutdown of church ministries.

"All the congregations have gone back to their countries. The war is very serious, especially in Khartoum. Nobody, even our sisters who are based in Khartoum, are still there. They all went back to South Sudan, where we have another convent," said Amia, a member of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Egypt.

Meanwhile, Koko said the sisters still trapped in Sudan amid the fighting are committed to prayers, hoping God will save their country from collapsing.

"My prayer is one day for us to have peace as a country," she said. "I pray every day that we will also experience prosperity like any other country. The warring parties should sit down and get a solution because the people are really suffering."