

Darfur on the brink: failing rains, war, constrained mobility and access

Humanitarian Update – 24th September 2026

Introduction

Three years of continuous warfare and violence, a deepening war economy, and displacement on a massive scale have taken a heavy toll on the lives and livelihoods of the people of Darfur. There have been pockets of confirmed famine,¹ a high likelihood of unconfirmed famine,² and cases of genocidal violence.³ Flows of remittances and mutual aid, provided by the Sudanese themselves, have been a lifeline for many, slowly exhausting the Sudanese diaspora.⁴ International humanitarian assistance has played a vital role but has been slow to respond to a highly politicised context of constrained access, to take risks and adapt to the prominence of locally-led humanitarian action. At the global level Sudan has received little attention despite this being the world's most severe humanitarian crisis, and the international response has suffered from the slashing of western aid budgets.

Now the 2026 rainy season has failed across most of the greater Darfur region with devastating consequences, immediately and for the next twelve months or more. Darfur is no stranger to drought and the Darfuri people have well-honed strategies for responding to one year of poor rainfall. But in 2026 this looks very different. Household assets have been severely depleted in the war, the livelihoods of most of the population have been massively compromised, human and livestock mobility have been

¹ See

https://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/IPC_Famine_Review_Committee_Report_Sudan_Dec2024.pdf

² During the siege of El Fasher in 2025 and in Dar Zaghawa as conflict intensified in 2026.

³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/05/09/sudan-ethnic-cleansing-west-darfur>

⁴ <https://digitalisingfood.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/SOAS-UoK-Sudan-DFA-Working-Paper-2-FINAL-24-June-2026.pdf>

constrained or blocked, and over half of the population is now displaced⁵. Prolonged conflict in Darfur has severely weakened household and community resilience. It is against this backdrop that the consequences of the failing rains must be assessed.

This update is based upon information collected by a network of senior local researchers across all five Darfur states. It aims to sound the alarm now, of an impending humanitarian catastrophe, so that timely action can be taken and lives and livelihoods saved. It provides an overview of the failed rainy season and its impact on crop cultivation, livestock production, other aspects of local livelihoods and markets. It describes what we know of how households and communities are already responding, often with negative long-term consequences, and it makes recommendations for immediate humanitarian action. This update is provided by the 'Understanding Markets in Darfur' project, run by the Centre for Humanitarian Change (CHC).

Failure of the 2026 rainy season

Table 1: Local observations of rainfall and critical dry locations, for each of the Darfur states

State	Onset of rains	Critical dry locations at the time of writing
North Darfur	Late August / early September	El Malha, Dar Zaghawa (Kornoi, Ombaro, El Tina), Kutum, Mellit, Umm Keddada, Darelsalam.
West Darfur	Mid-August	Muktar and Mastora administrative units within Kulbus locality, Sirba and Jebel Moon localities.
Central Darfur	Late August	Trij, Garsila, Deleig, Tella, Sullu, Mukjar, Bendasi, Yinqa Dalu, Dankuj, Shawa, Khor Ramla, and Nertiti
South Darfur	Late August	Kas, Beliel, Mershing, Al Wihda, Nitega.
East Darfur	Mid-June - started, then stopped	Sarhan, Kario, North Assalaya, Al Firdous, Shia'ria, Adila.

⁵ According to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix

Others have provided evidence of well-below-average rainfall across Darfur in 2026, indeed across Sudan, widely associated with the El Nino effect.⁶ This update provides more granular analysis of the parts of the Darfur region worst affected by disrupted rainfall. The rains normally commence sometime between May and July. This year they did not start until mid-August in most places, and have been highly erratic with long dry spells into early September. In the last week of September there has been more rain falling across all Darfur states but this is too late to support most cereal production (see below). In some locations, for example in East Darfur, the limited rainfall was accompanied by strong winds, in turn damaging crops. Wadis that are normally impassable in the rainy season, for example Wadi Kaja in West Darfur, have remained dry and easily traversable on foot. Other major wadis such as Wadi Azum did not flow until September. This raises concern about whether the water table is being recharged, and signals longer-term water insecurity that could persist well into 2027.

Table 1 summarises the patterns of rainfall in each Darfur state, as observed by local people, and the areas worst affected by rainfall failure, in particular in North and West Darfur States.

Implications for crop cultivation

The delayed rains have had a devastating impact on crop cultivation. By the time the rains arrived, in mid to late August in most places, and there was sufficient soil moisture for germination, there was not enough time nor continued rainfall for crops to reach maturity before temperatures start to fall. Even where farmers have replanted due to poor germination of the first planting, for example in South Darfur, the prospects for crops maturing are poor. This has caused widespread and catastrophic crop failure, illustrated by numerous images emerging from Darfur in August of wilted and withered crops. See below. Although rain started to fall again across Darfur, especially from mid-September, this was too late for most cereal production, much of which had already wilted.

The seriousness of this is amplified by the large number of farmers now displaced, who have become consumers rather than producers.

Some farmers changed their cropping patterns, at least partially in response to the very poor rainy season. There has been a widespread shift from groundnuts to cereals – millet and sorghum – for example in East and parts of West Darfur, a trend already seen in 2025.⁷ (Groundnuts are still being cultivated in Al Lait and Taweisha in North Darfur, where rainfall has been slightly better, and in parts of Central Darfur). Millet and sorghum are generally favoured for being more drought resistant and to meet household

⁶ See FEWSNet and FAO's GIEWS

⁷ See the Issue Brief: 'Impact of Sudan's war on cereal production and trade in Darfur: Implications for food security'. <https://whatworks.co.ke/cash-consortium-of-sudan-2/>

food security needs. However, there has been a notable shift from cereals to watermelons in a small part of Darfur in goz (sandy soil) areas, for example in the eastern part of North Darfur such as Umm Keddada and the northern and eastern parts of East Darfur. This is a typical response to drought as watermelons can persist into the winter months to ripen, and will benefit from the late September rains. Watermelons are grown for seeds as a cash crop and to eat, for liquid to drink, and as livestock fodder. However, late planting and therefore late harvesting exposes fields to greater risk of encroachment and grazing by the livestock of others.

Where possible some farmers have opted to cultivate local early maturing cereal varieties better suited to the delayed and lower-than-usual rainfall, for example in Central Darfur and South Darfur,⁸ but it remains to be seen if they will be able to harvest. For many farmers the high cost of inputs, for example for improved and early maturing varieties and for tools, was a major barrier to cultivation in all Darfur states. In some places, such as the northern localities in West Darfur which are on the frontline of active conflict (Sarba, Sali'a and Kulbus localities), there was an overall lack of seed which prevented cultivation. In some areas, however, farmers used water harvesting techniques (constructing earth bunds) to maximise the limited rainwater.



Millet field outside Fata Borno village, Kutum: crop failure in early September 2026

Credit: local informant

⁸ Some farmers have planted '*najadh*' sorghum, a local variety which matures earlier than other sorghum varieties.

Failed cultivation is particularly severe across North Darfur and large parts of West Darfur, plus significant dry areas in normally productive parts of Central and South Darfur. There are few parts of Darfur that have been able to cultivate with the prospect of a reasonable harvest, for example the eastern part of Jebel Marra in South Darfur and some parts of Central Darfur.

Protection issues affecting crop cultivation

There are significant protection issues negatively impacting crop cultivation across Darfur. In West Darfur many farmers were prevented from cultivating in areas designated ‘military zones’ by the RSF, for example Kulbus locality, on the pretext that tall crops like millet and sorghum obscure visibility. There are also disturbing reports of the systematic prevention of cultivation by certain ethnic groups in West Darfur, for example the Masalit, Eringa, Qimir, Mararit, and Zaghawa. They are prevented from accessing their land under the pretext that they ‘belong to certain regions’ or had sought refuge elsewhere.

In both West and South Darfur there are reports of certain pastoralist groups associated with the RSF already encroaching on farmers’ fields to graze their herds, unusually early in the agricultural season because of lack of pasture. Farmers in parts of Kass locality are said to have abandoned crop cultivation altogether due to the destruction of their crops by herders’ livestock. While livestock grazing farmers’ fields before the harvest is an annual threat, at best managed through negotiations between pastoralist and farming communities, it has taken on a new dimension during the war years as power dynamics have shifted and some heavily armed pastoralist groups, usually affiliated with the RSF, operate with impunity.

In parts of Central Darfur farmers had to pay certain groups (usually Arab pastoralists encamped nearby) for protection in order to cultivate. This practice was common during the 20-year Darfur conflict from 2003. In response, the previous administration initiated the creation of ‘agriculture season protection committees’. The current local administration in Central Darfur, supported by Darfur’s civil authority, has reactivated these committees, involving the native administration. This appears to have had a positive impact in preventing or at least reducing this extortion practice.

In North Darfur, farmers were directed by the RSF to cultivate in the Darelsalam area at the beginning of the season when some farmers were hesitant due to the risk of early livestock grazing by armed groups. This active encouragement by the RSF is interpreted as a reassurance that they will be more proactive in protecting farmers’ fields. However, this is somewhat hypothetical as crops have failed due to poor rainfall.

Implications for livestock production

For three years there has been war-related looting of livestock and disruption to mobility. All Darfur's long-distance livestock migration routes have been affected in some way with different pastoralist groups unable to move into particular areas. One example is the Zaghawa who would normally migrate southwards at this time, but this migration is blocked by conflict and military operations. This had already caused a high concentration of livestock herds around the safer Muzbat and Forawiya areas in Dar Zaghawa, even before the rainy season. The impact of failing rains on grazing and water resources has made a bad situation so much worse. Dar Zaghawa is one of the hotspots that requires close monitoring and may require urgent action. Other camel herding pastoralist groups affected by constrained migration include the Zayadia and Meidob in North Darfur. A critical pastoralist adaptation in a year of poor rainfall is thus simply not available to many livestock herding groups.

The lack of water and pasture due to failed rains in the north of the Darfur region has forced the premature early return of cattle herds to the south, as long as this is not impeded by conflict. Pastoralists in East Darfur, for example, would normally stay in northern pastures until end October. By September they were already moving toward the South Sudan border and into Bahr Al-Arab. There is reported to be overcrowding of livestock in Bahr Al-Arab and unsustainable consumption of water and grazing. This creates a volatile environment as different groups compete for limited resources. Within Darfur the likelihood of violent conflict between herders and farmers has substantially increased as pastoralists move south earlier than usual and occupy wadi areas that they would normally avoid at this time, encroaching upon farmers' fields in search of green fodder.⁹

Abnormally, many sources of surface water have remained dry throughout the 2026 rainy season, forcing the unseasonal and costly use of water yards. The late rainfall in September may improve water availability, and should be closely monitored. The impact of late rains on grazing resources is likely to be limited.

Livestock health is widely reported to be deteriorating rapidly as animals lose weight and succumb to disease, with no or limited access to veterinary services. This includes disease in sheep herds in West Darfur, and within cattle herds in Dar Zaghawa.

Local informants report that there are already distress sales of livestock in North and West Darfur and falling prices in many markets due to poor animal condition and increased supply. Livestock mortality is also said to have increased in these two states. In South Darfur some herders are selling part of their herds to protect their investment in the rest of the herd by reducing pressure on limited natural resources and to

⁹ See also: <https://darfur24.com/en/2026/06/22/east-darfur-herders-warn-of-farmer-herder-clashes-over-delayed-opening-of-livestock-routes/>

purchase fodder. This is pushing livestock prices down in markets such as Nyala. In East Darfur there has been increased cultivation of watermelons, specifically for livestock fodder.

Impact on water for human consumption

The failure of the rains impacts water sources and availability for human consumption as well as for livestock and crops, now and over the next twelve months if wadis do not flow adequately during the rainy season nor reservoirs replenish. In North and West Darfur shortages of water for human consumption were already evident as the price of water soared. In Geneina, for example 2 barrels (400 litres) of water pulled by donkeys/ horses a year ago cost SDG 6000; this year the cost rose to SDG 25,000. Lack of water is also evident at village level in West Darfur: households that would normally expect to collect water nearby were travelling up to 7 km to find drinking water as local reservoirs remained dry. This burden of water collection usually falls on women and children. Rising fuel prices, the unavailability of spare parts, and lack of infrastructure for solar energy are further barriers to the functioning of water yards. Late rainfall in September may have an easing effect in some areas, to be monitored and confirmed.

Local informants have raised concerns about pastoralists and settled communities using, and competing for the same water sources – another potential flashpoint for conflict.

In East Darfur the local authorities are proactively monitoring and beginning to address water shortages, for example improving water storage facilities and establishing solar power stations.

Impact on the market

The price of cereals is soaring. The rainfall in September does not appear to have modified this trend, an indicator of shortage and also pessimism that such late rains will make little difference. In El Geneina, for example, the price of millet rose by over 80% during the first three weeks of September. It is highly likely cereal prices will continue to rise up to harvest time and beyond due to very limited supplies. This is exacerbated by Darfur no longer being integrated into Sudan's national cereal market since the war began,¹⁰ although in 2026 there is widespread crop failure across the country. Cereal traders in Darfur's main markets appear to be holding extremely limited stocks, and households are no longer bringing small amounts to sell, aware of the deepening crisis.

Meanwhile livestock prices are reported to be falling widely across Darfur, a consequence of destocking and some distress sales. This indicates a rapidly declining

¹⁰ See the Issue Brief: 'Impact of Sudan's war on cereal production and trade in Darfur: Implications for food security'. <https://whatworks.co.ke/cash-consortium-of-sudan-2/>

livestock to grain terms of trade. This should be carefully monitored in the coming months, as well as the daily wage to grain terms of trade as an indicator of the purchasing power of poorer households.

Indeed, as the rains have failed it has negatively impacted the agricultural labour market, an important source of income for poorer households. The economic consequences of the drought are expected to continue and deepen at a time of rising fuel and other prices. Agricultural processing is affected in towns such as Ed Daein, and lack of water negatively impacts local brick production in towns where the construction sector is still vibrant, also Ed Daien.

There are reports of some state authorities – in Central Darfur, South Darfur and East Darfur – and even some localities (in West Darfur) attempting to ban the flow of cereals out of their respective state, although somewhat unsuccessfully. This has been common practice in Darfur in years of shortfall, but such interference with trade is rarely effective. Where there is adequate purchasing power and trade is allowed to flow freely, food security is likely to be stronger.

Local community perspectives, vulnerability and adaptation

The poor performance of the 2026 rainfall season, on top of three years of devastating war, is feared by local communities as a portent of famine in the coming months. The word '*maja'a*', translated as famine, is being widely used by local people, meaning severe food shortages and unaffordability, acute hunger and human suffering.¹¹ Comparisons to the last major Sudan-wide famine in 1984/85 are also being made, in terms of the potential scale and intensity of the crisis although the causes and therefore likely trajectory are very different.

Many of the coping strategies that Darfuri households would normally deploy in a year of drought are simply unavailable in 2026, either because of the severity of the drought and/ or because of insecurity and conflict. This includes the lack of household grain stores, exhausted by three years of war and/ or looted; agricultural labour migration, blocked by insecurity; cultivation of vegetables in gardens around the home, which have failed because of inadequate rainfall; collecting wild foods¹² for consumption, many of which have not germinated this year because of lack of rain, and/ or it is too insecure to venture far into rural areas to collect wild foods; pastoralists adapting their migratory routes, now impossible due to conflict and insecurity.

¹¹ The 1984/85 famine was known by some in Darfur as '*maja'a algatala*', the 'famine that kills'. See de Waal, A. (1989) 'Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan'. Local people have their own descriptions of famine, which may differ from how international humanitarian actors describe or define famine. See, for example, the IPC definition: <https://www.ipcinfo.org/famine-facts/>

¹² This includes *mukheit*, *koraib* and *diffra*.

Instead, some households are taking actions that have negative consequences. This includes reducing the number of meals consumed to one per day (reported in Darelsalam in North Darfur), and distress sales of livestock.

Some of those currently most at risk are groups without access to humanitarian assistance. In West Darfur this includes many households in conflict-affected northern localities. This is also the case for those still living in Dar Zaghawa in North Darfur.

Indeed, there are already alarming reports of people moving from some rural areas where food is running out, for example in North Darfur from Malha and from villages in Korma administrative unit to Tawila, seen as a humanitarian hub where there are many aid agencies and food is likely to be available. There are also reports of people moving to towns where food is expected to be more readily available, for example from villages to the towns of Darelsalam and Shangil Tobay in North Darfur. These movements have taken place in the first two weeks of September.

Desperately worried about the failing rains and deteriorating food security, many communities are being proactive, for instance setting up local committees to manage communal grain stores and *Zakat* warehouses; establishing 'agricultural season protection committees' to safeguard their minimal cultivation from livestock encroachment. In Dar Zaghawa in North Darfur community members in the diaspora have begun steps towards convening a conference to address the failure of rains as an urgent issue.

Conclusions and recommendations

The scale and extent of the failing rains across the greater Darfur region are deeply concerning for a population that is already highly stressed, impoverished and food insecure due to more than three years of a brutal nationwide war. For many households, communities and traders they have no buffer to fall back upon. Coping strategies they would normally rely upon simply aren't available nor feasible.

Many groups in North Darfur appear to be worst-affected with near total rainfall failure in many areas and therefore very little cultivation. This is closely followed by West Darfur where there are also significant areas that have received little or no rain. Conflict has prevented cultivation in parts of both states with high levels of displacement. Pastoralists in both states are also struggling with limited grazing and water resources and highly constrained migratory options. There is limited cultivation in parts of Central and South Darfur, some of which may benefit from the late rains in September. But overall agricultural production is likely to be greatly depressed. East Darfur state which is least affected by ongoing violent conflict has pockets of more successful cultivation; however, its vibrant livestock economy is badly impacted.

In many cases the impact of the poor rainy season is immediate, for example for those dependent on the market for their food security as prices soar and sources of income evaporate; and for rural households whose cultivation has totally failed and they have no stocks. With reports of some rural households already on the move, this could trigger fresh and deadly waves of displacement.

Also troubling is the longer-term impact over the next year as the harvest fails, the water table is not recharged, seeds run short for 2027, and competition for dwindling pasture and water creates friction and a high-risk of armed conflict between herders and farmers.

As long as war strategies impede the mobility and therefore the productive and adaptive capacity of people, livestock and trade, and also constrain their access to humanitarian assistance, this one-year drought will have catastrophic consequences. Many parts of Darfur are already teetering on the brink of a major crisis and some are highly likely to descend into famine. The speed at which this happens is unpredictable, partly dependent on the continuation of the late rains, on conflict dynamics, and the swiftness of humanitarian action. The Darfuri people who talk ominously about imminent *ma'ajar* (famine) should be heeded.

Recommendations

Essential monitoring to end of the rainy season

To determine whether and where the late September rains could make a positive difference, and the likelihood and speed of displacement due to lack of food and water, the following should be closely monitored:

- Any evidence of population movement due to lack of food and/ or water
- Protection issues which could further compromise agricultural cultivation and livestock mobility
- The extent to which the late rains will benefit livestock production in terms of grazing and water resources, and/ or whether conditions are likely to deteriorate further, including outbreaks of livestock disease
- Market dynamics, and terms of trade
- How people and communities are responding, positively and negatively
- The extent to which the water table is being recharged by the late rains

Hotspots to be closely monitored over the coming weeks and months

Geographical areas of greatest concern due to the concentration of vulnerable groups include: most parts of North Darfur, with a particular emphasis on Dar Zaghawa, and the localities of Kutum, Malha and Mellit; northern localities in West Darfur.

Immediate humanitarian response

- Stepping up the humanitarian response, providing urgent humanitarian assistance to the worst affected rural areas, particularly in North Darfur, to prevent further displacement and overcrowding in humanitarian hubs like Tawila that are becoming a magnet for those running out of food
- Overcoming international agencies' lack of access to badly affected areas by working with and through more local actors

Immediate livelihood interventions

These have been identified by local stakeholders in Darfur:

1. **Provision of agricultural inputs for winter cultivation:** where winter cultivation is feasible (in terms of sufficient residual moisture/ groundwater, and safe farmer access) provision of seed and cash transfers to support winter planting of vegetables, beans (and wheat in selected areas), and to compensate for crop losses during the main rainy season
2. **Support to water infrastructure:** construction and maintenance of solar-powered water stations to replace fuel-dependent water yards; provision of spare parts for water yards
3. **Veterinary services:** support to paravets and mobile clinics to treat livestock disease, particularly in areas of high livestock concentration
4. **Support to local peace-building committees:** support to local communities to form, and/or maintain the effective functioning of 'agricultural season protection committees' and local peace committees, promoting local agreements between pastoralists and farmers to manage livestock grazing and avoid conflict when herds return to zones of cultivation

Market-based interventions

5. **Multi-purpose cash transfers** to support local communities known to be taking positive action to support and protect their members
6. **Stepping up cash transfers** to the most vulnerable households, both in terms of the value of the cash transfer as food prices rise, and also the coverage of households as more face acute food insecurity
7. **Support to well-established local traders trusted by local communities**, to keep trade flowing in order to meet consumers' needs

Humanitarian diplomacy

8. **Stepping up humanitarian diplomacy:** in a war where obstruction of access of affected people to humanitarian assistance and obstructed mobility appear to

be deliberate strategies, humanitarian diplomacy must be stepped up with armed actors held to account for any failure to prevent a catastrophic deepening of the humanitarian crisis and famine. Specifically, this means:

- a.** Facilitating the movement of trade, especially cereals across the country
- b.** The unfettered movement of people and livestock within and beyond Darfur
- c.** Unobstructed access of affected people to humanitarian assistance