News



People board a truck as they leave Khartoum, Sudan, on June 19. Clashes resumed between Sudan's military and a powerful paramilitary force after a three-day cease-fire expired June 21. (AP, file)



by Tawanda Karombo

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Sr. Teresa Roszkowska remembers May 24 — the worst day in her 44 years as a Salesian Sister of Don Bosco living in Sudan — with a sense of trepidation, fear and insecurity.

On this day, Roszkowska and three others of her order were saying the rosary inside the dining room at their house 20 kilometers outside the capital city of Khartoum when "heavy and horrible shootings" broke out. It was not for the first time, nor would it be the last.

Despite ceasefire agreements between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the two warring parties at the center of the civil conflict have been plaguing Sudan since April 15.

Sudan fell into the hands of military control in 2021 after Omar Ahmad al-Bashir was thrown out of power in a coup in 2019. The military-controlled government has now fractured, leading to the outbreak of war as they fight for control of power.

The SAF and RSF have been dueling, with intense fighting on the streets of Darfur and Khartoum, affecting ordinary citizens, destroying infrastructure and halting school and church activities, as well as shutting down about 11 hospitals. The war has plunged the country into a crisis, leaving 600 people dead and 1 million others displaced from their homes, many of them fleeing into neighboring countries.

> 'There are days when we are full of abnormally fearful silence and all we do is just pray, and hope that God will touch those hearts of stone.'
>
> —Salesian Sr. Teresa Roszkowska
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Roszkowska, who is from Poland and arrived in Sudan on Jan. 24, 1989, has been witnessing the impact of the war on ordinary Sudanese people firsthand. She has had to stand steadfast amid the gloom of war at a time when other religious have been forced to flee.

On May 24, "we could not hear each other because of the noise from the shootings," she said. She added that, "in fear, some lay on the floor, feeling like it was the end" of the world.

"We decided to run to the chapel for safety but that is the moment that the scared and wounded people from the shootings started to arrive at our house. As I ran towards the gate to open it, I really felt like it was the end of the world because of the sight of scared people running towards the house," Roszkowska told Global Sisters Report in an interview.

Her fear comes not out of her own vulnerability but out of care and worry for the situation that the war-ravaged citizens and children of Sudan have found themselves in, she said.

There has been no real abatement to the crisis as the war rages on, disrupting telecom services and electricity supplies for lengthy periods. In fact, says Roszkowska, in mid-June the situation was "still worse" as several gunmen exchanged fire and shot wantonly into places where civilians were.

"The house was full of people as they were exchanging shooting and many more poor people, some with their children, were arriving wounded. Actually, one of the soldiers was the one bringing many of them from the shacks around our area.

"There has been no day without these kinds of shootings and we are actually starting to get used to the sounds."

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The Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco in Sudan say they "have nothing special to help the wounded with" and are forced to use an over-the-counter antiseptic and disinfectant to clean wounds. They occasionally administer antibiotics.

Most clinics and hospitals have been forced to close, and humanitarian assistance such as medications and food are often looted while access to affected areas has at times been restricted, according to Médecins Sans Frontières.

"After the looting of one of our medical warehouses in Khartoum, fridges were unplugged and medicines removed. The entire cold chain was ruined so the medicines are spoiled and can't be used to treat anyone," said Jean-Nicolas Armstrong Dangelser, emergency coordinator for Médecins Sans Frontières in Sudan.

Religious flee Sudan war

Over the years, a strong community of international Catholic sisters and other religious has been active in Sudan. According to Roszkowska, there have been many Catholic sisters from as far as India, El Salvador, Vietnam, South Sudan and Poland.

However, after the latest war erupted in April, only four Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco remain in Sudan. Global Sisters Report recently reported on Sr. Angelina Ebrahim Trilly Koko of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd saying that her congregation had already shut down several schools and hospitals serving thousands of residents and stopped pastoral work.

On April 30, Archbishop Michael Didi Adgum Mangoria of Khartoum confirmed that "many people, including priests and nuns, have fled the most contested areas" of Sudan since April 15.



A man walks by a house hit in fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 25. (AP/Marwan Ali)

Amid this situation, Roszkowska and the other three remaining Salesian Don Bosco Sisters continue to assist those affected by the war in Sudan. Roszkowska says the sisters are "living and working among poor people living round our house in shacks and tents," after being displaced from their homes.

The Don Bosco Sisters run a primary school with 840 children. However, because of the war, there have been no classes since April 15. For now, the sisters run a small dispensary that functions as a first aid room for the children and others injured by the war.

Before the war , the sisters assisted women in learning to be self-reliant through courses such as pasta- and bread-making, as well as baking biscuits and dressmaking. But the courses cannot be conducted now because the beneficiaries are constantly on the move, fleeing the war.

"True and deep love for the people to whom I am sent is keeping me going and I feel this strength is from God as a religious mission," Roszkowska said. "By being with the people of Sudan, all their troubles and suffering are mine too; when they cry, I cry with them."

At present, the Don Bosco Salesian Sisters of Sudan are providing shelter and food to some of those affected by the war, Christians and Muslims, and helping to save them from "bullets and senseless" fighting.



Smoke rises over Khartoum, Sudan, June 7, as fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and paramilitary Rapid Support Forces continues. (AP)

"Daily about 100-140 children and mothers, sick, old, wounded are staying with us and they also get food here too," Roszkowska said. "Other pastoral programs are not possible at all. Every evening, we say the rosary with all the children and mothers in our house."

What is further compounding the situation for the Don Bosco Sisters of Sudan is that "there are not any agencies working or collaborating" with them. Being aged above 60 "and not in good health," the four Salesian Sisters have however resumed Mass which they have not had for more than a month.

'Hope for the better'

Very often, especially when the shootings are nearby, it is easy to feel hopeless, explained Roszkowska. However, greater hope for a better and peaceful Sudan gives the sisters the divine urge and unexplainable power to soldier on with the work of assisting the people.

"Yes, very often we feel hopeless, and more so at this current time we are in now," she said. "We just live as best as we can, knowing that we only have today to live as tomorrow may not be ours. But deep down, we have this overwhelming hope for the better."

In this sudden and horrible situation, there is nothing special to be happy about, Roszkowska said.

After the sisters' courage and decision at the beginning of the war to "open our home for whoever needs shelter and food," the house started to fill up with "children and poor people day and night." Seeing these people have access to food and shelter, their hearts were filled with "immense, unspoken deep joy" until now.

Yet amid the turmoil, senseless destruction of property and shootings, displacement of innocent civilians and killings, the Salesian Sisters' optimism is tinged with a sense of uncertainty for the future.

Their only faith that the situation will turn around for the better is in God's ability to turn the hearts of steel and bullets of those at the center of the conflict into hearts of peace.

"We can't imagine what 'they' are planning to do next, or which ways they want to pursue to stop this senseless war," Roszkowska said. "There are days when we are full of abnormally fearful silence and all we do is just pray, and hope that God will touch those hearts of stone, change their minds and that the situation will be better."

This story appears in the **Hope Amid Turmoil: Sisters in Conflict Areas** feature series. View the full series.