

# Containment Without Capacity:

## Sudan's Displacement and the Limits of Border Politics

Kübra Aktaş



(Lino Ginaba - Anadolu Agency)

Sudan's regional spillover cannot be understood solely through the lens of border control, refugee inflows, or humanitarian pressure. Rather, it reflects a broader governance challenge driven by the widening gap between containment and capacity. As neighbouring states tighten border regimes through increased securitisation and regulation, the institutional and economic means required to sustain these measures often remain inadequate. In such contexts, containment does not necessarily produce order; instead, it can expand informality, intensify unofficial mobility, and place greater strain on protection systems, public services, and political stability in border regions. By centring this imbalance, this policy outlook moves beyond the binary of "open" versus "closed" borders to focus on the more critical question of manageability—who can be registered, protected, and governed, and under what conditions. As the second in a series examining Sudan's "Hunger War," it frames displacement not only as a humanitarian issue, but as a broader test of state capacity, regional stability, and the limits of border governance.

**B**uilding on the framework established in the previous piece, attention now turns from Sudan's internal famine-displacement system to its cross-border implications.

Hunger in Sudan, together with worsening access and uncertainty, intensifies displacement; once this multiplier spreads beyond the border, the crisis is no longer only about population movement, but also about the mounting pressure placed on border management, protection systems, and the political stability of neighbouring states.

Mobility originating from Sudan produces a recurring pattern on the ground. States develop an early control reflex to manage uncertainty: narrowing crossings, increasing oversight, redefining registration processes, and directing settlement. However, the capacity required for this control to be sustainable -registration infrastructure, temporary housing, basic services, legal processes, local integration, and funding- does not expand at the same rate. When capacity is lacking, even if control can produce a sense of "order" in the short term, in the medium term, informality and unofficial mobility increase, weakening both human security and the state's governability. Therefore, the Sudan spillover has today transformed into a governance and stability issue that transcends the boundaries of humanitarian aid.

This policy outlook argues that the central tension shaping Sudan's regional spillover is the growing gap between containment and capacity: while states increasingly adopt restrictive, securitised border practices to manage uncertainty, the institutional, economic, and administrative capacity to sustain these measures remains insufficient. It is this imbalance that transforms displacement from a humanitarian challenge into a broader governance and stability risk.

## Regional Picture: The Same Crisis, Different Border Files

Movement from Sudan takes different forms depending on the route. In some areas, urban arrivals increase housing and economic pressures and politicise local issues. Elsewhere, border security incidents lead authorities to further restrict passage. Some places host both refugees and returnees, broadening the issue to include resettlement and integration. This variety means no single policy can meet every challenge; each country experiences the crisis differently.

## El-Fasher: When a City's Shock Moment Accelerates Border Politics

Spillover often doesn't progress slowly like an "infiltration"; it explodes like a "shock" at critical moments. The exodus from a city accelerates during intensified sieges, escalating conflict, or shrinking civilian areas; this acceleration hardens the reflexes of neighbouring countries and border administrations.

El-Fasher is a clear example. The rapid displacement of thousands strains Sudan internally and changes how neighbouring governments approach the crisis. During rapid exoduses, authorities must quickly ask: who is arriving, what they need, and whether they will use official or informal routes. If capacity is low, control measures dominate; this can increase informal movement and



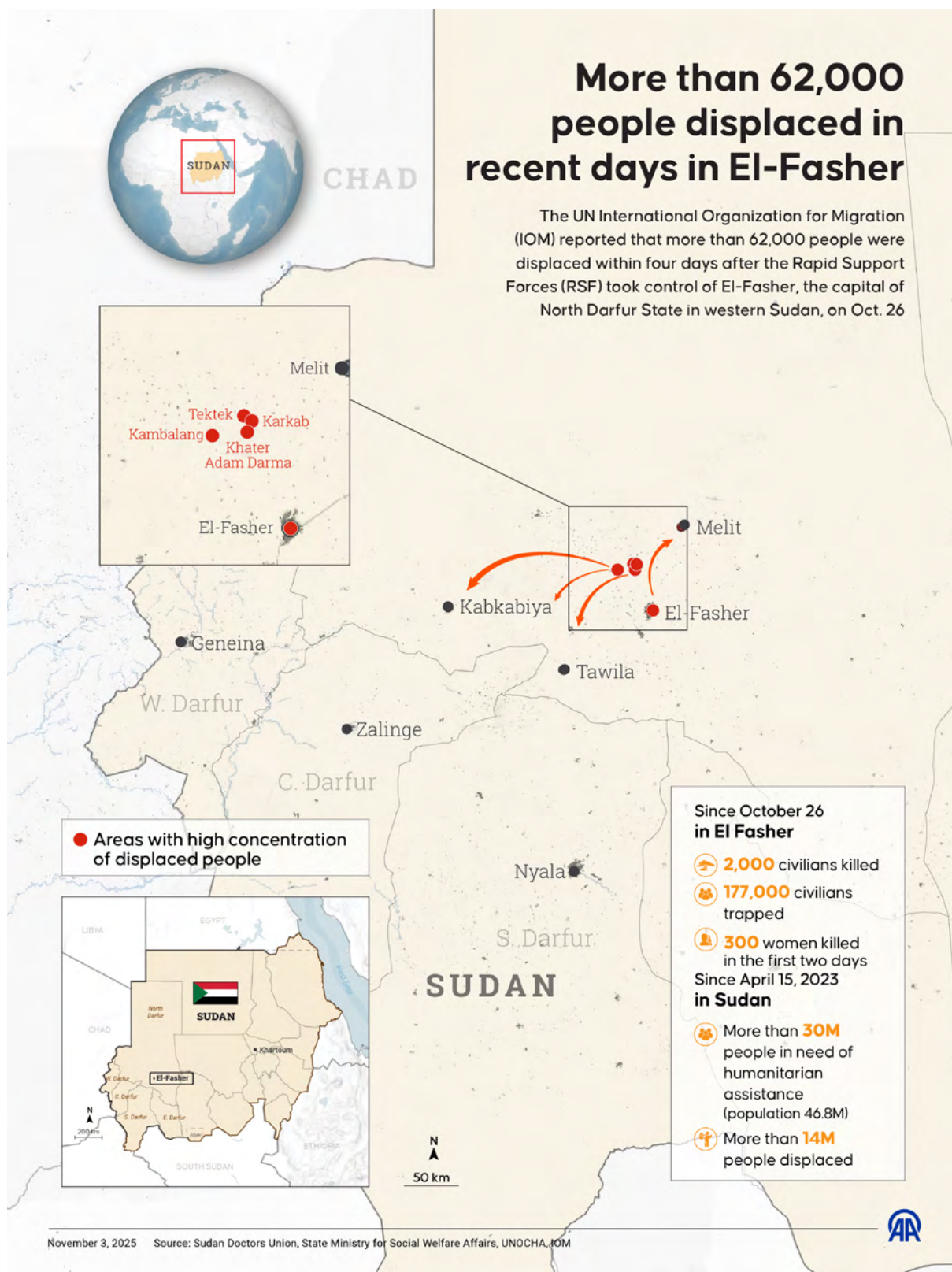
(Türk Kızılay - Anadolu Agency)

## POLICY OUTLOOK

lead to tougher security language. Thus, what begins as a humanitarian spillover can harden into a permanent, restrictive border regime.

More broadly, such “shock moments” represent a recurring feature of contemporary displacement dynamics: sudden

accelerations of movement that overwhelm existing governance systems and trigger immediate securitisation responses. These moments are critical because they compress decision-making time, forcing states to prioritise control over capacity-building.



## Border Politics: The Daily Tools of Securitisation

Securitisation frequently occurs through daily administrative practices rather than through overarching policy discourse. Documentation and screening regimes may become stricter, increasing the burden of proof during transit and blurring the distinction between temporary stay and international protection. Intra-city residence and movement can be restricted, making those outside the formal economy more visible and susceptible to criminalisation. Settlement policy extends beyond the camp-city dichotomy, forming an implicit regime that determines residency, access to services, and participation in economic activities.

The livelihood sector represents the most critical threshold among these practices. When the right to work is restricted or becomes inaccessible in practice, pressures on housing and livelihoods intensify. This escalation fuels informality, and as informality increases, narratives of risk are reinforced. Consequently, inadequate containment paradoxically complicates, rather than facilitates, the objective of control.

Taken together, these dynamics form a self-reinforcing loop: restrictive control measures reduce formal access and legal pathways, which in turn expand informality; as informality grows, risks to both human security and state authority increase, prompting further tightening of control. In this way, containment policies that are not matched by capacity begin to reproduce the very instability they seek to manage.

## Where is the protection regime cracking?

It is vital to note that border management tools are not inherently bad. In situations of major and unpredictable inflows, states need systems for entry, registration, and settlement. In Sudan's spillover, the core problem is not a lack of control measures but reliance on them without sufficient capacity or adequate protection for those displaced.

Protection fails in three areas: slow registration, poor urban economic conditions, and vague rules that toughen enforcement. Delays create uncertainty and vulnerability in shelter, jobs, and basic services. This is not just about losing rights; it also reduces the state's ability to officially manage people. In cities, legal status alone is not enough if high costs and poor services push people into political debates.

When enforcement language hardens, the grey areas expanding around the principle of non-refoulement become more visible: arbitrary detentions, pressure for deportation, discriminatory practices, and administrative obstacles that effectively make access to protection more difficult. While such hardening may seem to produce "control" in the short term, in the medium term it can increase the risk of informality and abuse, thereby weakening the crisis's manageability.

## Host-state capacity: Why is the South Sudan example critical?

South Sudan cannot handle the influx from Sudan with "empty capacity." The country is already facing a heavy humanitarian burden: in October 2025, an OCHA report showed that about 9.3 million people needed aid, and floods had damaged health infrastructure. The main argument is that measuring host states' "capacity" requires looking beyond border crossings to their overall ability to absorb new shocks.

Image 2UN: Around 9.3 million people in South Sudan are in need of humanitarian assistance

Therefore, in countries like South Sudan, spillover is not just a matter of "entry and exit"; it is a stability file where services, the local economy, and community cohesion are managed simultaneously. As capacity pressure grows, border politics become more prone to hardening—because when politics fails to produce "manageability," it tends to produce "constraints."



(Türk Kızılay - Anadolu Agency)

## Secondary destabilisation in border regions: the local political economy of crisis

The most acute effects of spillover are felt in border regions. These areas experience simultaneous humanitarian and economic strain—higher rents, fewer jobs, overburdened public services, and frustrations over fairness. When official crossings are restricted, people find other ways, which in turn grow informal economies and increase risks. As risks grow, political language hardens, leading to even narrower legal avenues. This cycle is not unavoidable, but without increased capacity, security measures often become the default response.

## Macro constraint: Why is capacity not just a technical issue?

In host countries, “capacity” goes beyond borders. Rising debt, inflation, and budget limits reduce resources for services and support. This decline makes policymakers more likely to favour restrictive responses. Managing

spillover involves both border controls and maintaining funding and local capacity.

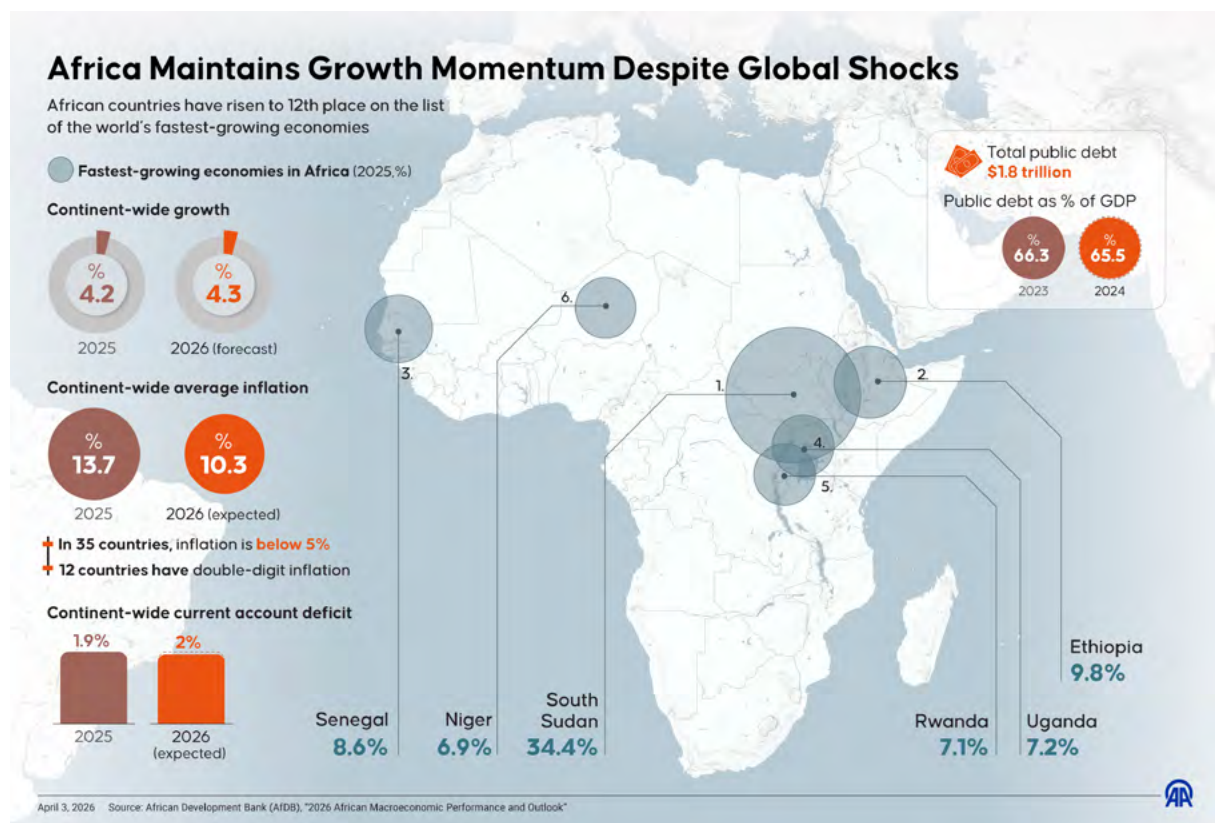
## Box: Four moves that make Spillover manageable

If the core problem lies in the gap between containment and capacity, then the objective of policy is not to reduce mobility per se, but to align control measures with the institutional and operational capacity required to manage them sustainably.

The goal here is not to “zero out” mobility; it is to prevent mobility from generating protection gaps and instability multipliers. For this, four moves make the biggest difference in practice—and these should be thought of not as “substances” but as a management logic.

The first move is to transform border points from transit lines into management nodes: without registration capacity, referral, health screening, a chain of transmission for vulnerable groups, and temporary shelter arrangements, politics is more prone to producing “constraints” rather than “management.”

The second move is to set minimum protection requirements at the implementation level. The principle of non-refoulement and transparent oversight against arbitrary practices are not an “ethical addition” here, but



a condition for manageability, because when protection narrows, informality grows, and as informality grows, security management becomes more difficult.

The third move is to treat border regions not as buffer zones, but as a direct priority for stability. Without support for housing, the local economy, infrastructure, and community tension management, the crisis will become politicised at the border rather than in the capital, and the “politics of closure” will accelerate. The fourth step is to establish regional coordination at the operational level: data harmonisation, logistics/permit processes, and delicate transit mechanisms provide a level of predictability that no single country can produce on its own. Predictability is the strongest calming factor, both for protection and security.

## The Real Test: Managing Spillover Without Losing Protection

When access and continuity collapsed within Sudan, hunger accelerated displacement; the first part of the series showed how this cycle was established. Across the border, the same discontinuity shifts from a matter of “aid delivery” to a matter of border and protection regimes: who can cross, who can be registered, who can live where,

and what livelihoods they can access are increasingly determined by a system shaped by “politics.”

Therefore, spillover is not just about numbers; it is a regime change that tests the governance capacity of neighbouring countries. When the control reflex is not supported by capacity, the result is often not more order, but more informality and more unofficial mobility. This paradoxically both narrows the scope of protection and makes security management more difficult—that is, containment, to the extent that it does not translate into capacity, begins to produce a cycle that amplifies its own justification. Yet this picture is not inevitable.

The Sudan case illustrates a broader pattern in contemporary displacement crises: when mobility is met primarily with restrictions rather than capacity-building, governance systems become increasingly dependent on measures that generate instability.

As the crisis drags on, the real choice facing neighbouring countries and donors isn’t simply an “open door” versus “closed door” dichotomy; a more realistic distinction lies between an approach that generates manageability and one that fuels informality. A framework that transforms border points into management hubs, establishes minimum on-the-ground protection requirements, prioritises stability in border regions, and generates predictability through operational coordination could transform spillover from a destabilising factor into a manageable issue.



(Muhammed Emin Canik - Anadolu Agency)