

GENEVA - UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk today strongly condemned the rising use of armed unmanned aerial vehicles in Sudan and the deadly impact it is having on civilians, warning of intensified and widening violence in coming weeks that could lead to more displacement and disruption to critical aid flows.

Pointing to findings by the Office's Sudan team that drone strikes accounted for at least 880 civilian deaths - more than 80 percent of all conflict-related civilian deaths - between January and April this year, the High Commissioner said: "Armed drones have now become by far and away the leading cause of civilian deaths."

"This increasing reliance on drones allows hostilities to continue unabated in the approaching rainy season, which in the past has brought about a lull in ground operations. An intensification of hostilities in the coming weeks, as the parties seek to gain or consolidate control of territory amid shifting conflict dynamics, risks hostilities expanding even further to central and eastern states, with lethal consequences for civilians across enormous areas."

"This must not be allowed to happen. The international community is on notice that, unless action is taken without delay, this conflict is on the cusp of entering yet another new, even deadlier phase."

Türk called for the adoption of robust measures to prevent the transfer of arms, including increasingly advanced armed drones, to the fighting parties. "Drone attacks against civilians and civilian objects will only worsen if they are met with utter impunity, with this violence being increasingly normalized as a go-to tactic by both parties," he said.

Most of the civilian deaths attributed to drone strikes in the first quarter of the year were recorded in the Kordofan region. Most recently, on 8 May, drone strikes on Al Quz in South Kordofan and near El Obeid in North Kordofan reportedly killed 26 civilians and injured others.

Parties to the conflict have used drones, repeatedly striking civilian objects and infrastructure, compounding the suffering of civilians already experiencing hardship amid diminishing access to sufficient food, clean water, and health care. Markets have been repeatedly targeted, with at least 28 such attacks resulting in civilian casualties, as have health facilities, which were struck at least 12 times during the four-month period - in some cases, shuttering facilities and forcing civilians to travel long distances to seek treatment, or to go without health care at all. Fuel stores and supply routes have also been repeatedly struck in recent weeks.

The use of drones by both the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) is increasingly spreading beyond Kordofan and Darfur, to Blue Nile, White Nile and Khartoum. A drone strike on Khartoum International Airport on 4 May led to the disruption of all flights, and between 28 April and 5 May there were several targeted drone attacks elsewhere in Khartoum and the sister city of Omdurman.

"The intensity of these attacks has shattered the relative calm that has prevailed in recent months, as increasing numbers of civilians have returned to the capital - and triggered fears of a return of hostilities to Khartoum," said Türk.

A likely intensification of hostilities in Kordofan will also put civilians at greater risk of retaliatory attacks and further large-scale displacement, particularly in the SAF-controlled cities of El Obeid and Dilling in South Kordofan, both of which have been under siege-like conditions, the High Commissioner said.

The High Commissioner warned heightened violence would also disrupt provision of critical humanitarian assistance. "Much of the country, including Kordofan, is now facing an increased risk of famine and acute food insecurity, a situation exacerbated by expected delays or shortages of fertilizer as a result of the Gulf crisis," Türk said. "Persistent attacks against health care facilities in several states have also left many hospitals and clinics low- or non-functional, further increasing risks to civilians displaced from conflict-affected areas."

"I call once again on all parties to ensure the protection of civilians, including safe movement from areas of active hostilities," the UN Human Rights Chief said. "Parties to the conflict must facilitate safe, voluntary and informed movement of civilians across displacement routes. Civilians must be protected from reprisals, including summary executions, sexual violence arbitrary detention and abductions," he added.