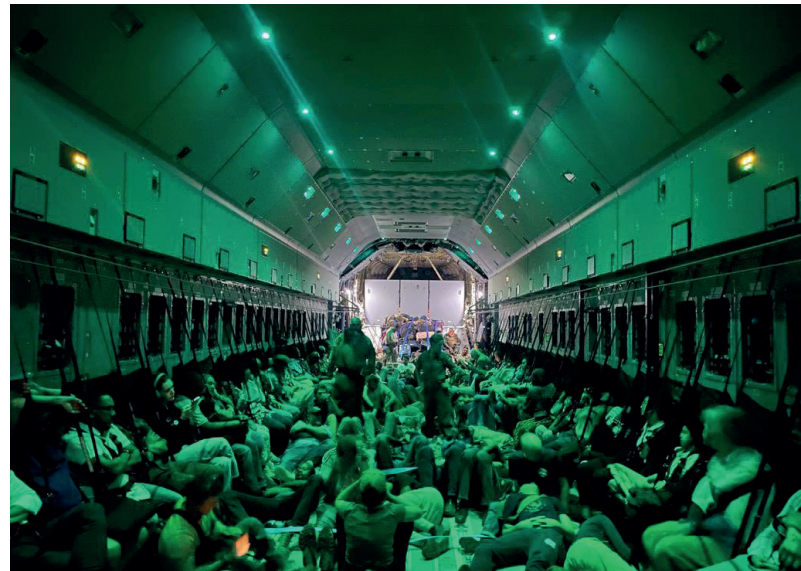




Three A400M aircraft and one Airbus 330 were used to transport the military material and personnel involved in the operation, a total of nearly 200 soldiers.



The civilians were evacuated by A400M aircraft from Sudan's Wadi Seidna Air Base to Djibouti.



The CHOD greets evacuees on their arrival at Torrejón Air Base on board an Airbus A330 from Djibouti

OPERATION SUDAN

Four aircraft and nearly 200 military personnel evacuate over a hundred citizens trapped in the conflict in Sudan

OVER 100 citizens were safely evacuated from the perilous armed conflict in Sudan. This intricate rescue mission involved the efforts of four aircraft and nearly 200 Spanish military personnel. “These have been days of intense danger, but we are relieved to have successfully brought our fellow citizens back to Spain”, expressed Defence Minister Margarita Robles, as the evacuees arrived at Torrejón Air Base on 24 April 2023. Among the evacuees, there were 34 Spanish nationals, while the remaining individuals hailed from Italy, Ireland, Mexico, Argentina, Venezuela, Portugal, and Poland.

The Non-combatant Evacuation Operation (NEO) commenced on Friday, 21 April, with the arrival of the initial A400M aircraft at Djibouti Airport. An *Airbus A330* and two additional A400Ms subsequently joined the mission.

The evacuation operation involved a diverse group of participants, including approximately 90 soldiers from the 1st Parachutist Battalion and the Spanish Army's Special Operations Command. Additionally, there were 80 members of the 31st Wing, the 45th Group, the Air Deployment Support Squadron, and the Air and Space Force's Air Evacuation Medical Unit. The joint effort also included a reconnaissance and liaison team from the Operations Command, personnel from the Joint Special Operations Command, the Joint Force Air Component (JFAC), and various other units, all under the operational control of the Operations Command.

Prior to the commencement of the evacuation mission in Sudan, meticulous

diplomatic coordination was carried out, and the necessary protective measures were put in place whilst awaiting the most suitable moment to take action, considering the sensitivity of the situation. Despite the announcement of a three-day ceasefire coinciding with the end of Ramadan, the fighting that had erupted on the 15th persisted without interruption. As Khartoum International Airport was unusable due to the ongoing conflict, the Spanish Armed Forces established their base of operations at Wadi Seidna Air Base, located approximately 16 kilometres north of the Sudanese capital. The initial phase of the operation involved the arrival of an A400M aircraft from Djibouti, transporting two VAMTAC vehicles and ground forces. Several hours later, two additional A400Ms arrived, carrying the remaining military personnel, vehicles and equipment required to support the evacuation mission.

After establishing a secure perimeter, the convoy proceeded with the transportation of civilian personnel from the embassy, where they had sought shelter, to the airport. A ground patrol was dispatched to escort them to the secure zone. This

phase of the operation posed a significant risk, as there was a potential threat of rebel groups launching uncontrolled attacks on the convoy. Fortunately, the convoy successfully reached the secure zone without any incidents. Shortly afterwards, the A400M transported the more than 100 civilians to Djibouti. From there, a group of 70 individuals boarded an *Airbus A330* bound for Spain, while the remaining evacuees stayed in Djibouti to arrange alternative means of returning to their respective countries.

On the 24th, the Chief of Defence Staff, Admiral General Teodoro López Calderón, joined the Minister of Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares, at Torrejón Air Base to welcome the evacuated citizens. On his arrival in Madrid, the Spanish ambassador to Khartoum, Antonio Isidro González Alonso, spoke by telephone with the King, who congratulated all those involved “on the success of the operation”.

The operation in Djibouti was supported by personnel from the *Orión* detachment, which is currently deployed as part of Operation *Atalanta*, acting as a forward base for the evacuation and enabling the deployment of both air and ground assets from Spain.

WELCOME CEREMONY

Within a span of 48 hours, the aircraft transported the military equipment and personnel involved in the rescue operation back to Spain. On the 25th, the Minister of Defence welcomed 53 of the soldiers at Torrejón air base. The CHOD, the Chiefs of Staff of the Spanish Army, Amador Enseñat, and of the Air and Space Force, Javier

The evacuation was very complicated due to the threat of attack by rebel forces

Salto, and the General in charge of the Parachutist Brigade (BRIPAC), Luis Jesús Fernández Herrero, were also present for the homecoming. "It has been a difficult evacuation. It has taken many hours to perform each of your tasks, but I have nothing but words of praise and thanks. Once again, as in Kabul, you have placed Spain in high regard", the minister stressed in her address to the members of the contingent. The CHOD also expressed his gratitude to the soldiers for "accomplishing the mission", which was not without risk, for their "response capacity" in resolving unforeseen challenges and for their "dedication and spirit of sacrifice".

Colonel Alberto Fajardo of the Operations Command, the head of the Spanish contingent, also emphasised the coordination between the Ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs, as well as the agility of the Operations Command in "transforming the contingency plan into an actionable plan that could be implemented within a 24-hour timeframe".

The key to this rapid reaction, the colonel added, "has been the timely work of the armed forces, identifying personnel

with the necessary skills for the mission, and coordination on the ground between elements from Foreign Affairs, Defence and authorities from Sudan and other countries".

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Colonel Juan José Pereda, commander of the 1st Battalion of the Parachutist Brigade, shed light on the challenges encountered in moving the convoy of civilians amidst the threat of attack by armed groups.

CONFLICT IN SUDAN

Fighting in recent weeks between the Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the country's primary paramilitary force, has shattered any hopes of a peaceful transition to civilian rule. These two groups orchestrated the joint coup that toppled the transitional government in October 2021.

The situation escalated on 15 April 2023 as armed clashes between the two factions intensified. In the days that followed, UN estimates reported a death toll of at least 460 individuals and 4,000 injured. The Spanish embassy in Khartoum issued an advisory urging nationals in the country to remain at home and avoid non-essential travel.

Fighting persisted despite multiple announcements of truces from both sides. Khartoum Airport remained inoperable and borders closed. Essential services were disrupted, exacerbating shortages of water, food and fuel. Some 10,000 Sudanese citizens fled to neighbouring Chad.

On the 21st, the Sudanese army expressed its willingness to facilitate the evacuation of foreigners, while the paramilitary group also gave assurances of partially opening controlled airports. The fragile truce provided a window of opportunity for several countries to evacuate their diplomats and citizens, including UN mission personnel in the country, who boarded a French frigate at Port Sudan. Meanwhile, over 1,000 evacuees from 58 different countries arrived at Jeddah Naval Base in Saudi Arabia.

The rescue of the Spanish nationals was carried out without incident, even in the face of resumed fighting on the second day of the ceasefire. Convoys from other countries were not so lucky and encountered attacks.

Víctor Hernández/Photos: EMAD



On 25 April, the Minister of Defence welcomed 53 soldiers of the contingent at Torrejón air base.