

THE “VOLUNTARY RETURN” TRAIN FROM EGYPT TO SUDAN:

A JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN

12.08.2026

Since October 2025, Egypt has run a program transporting Sudanese nationals home by train from Cairo's main train Station to Aswan in the South of Egypt. Then the trip continues onward by bus and challenging border crossings. It's called "Voluntary Return." But set that name against three parallel trends: arrest campaigns, near-impossible access to residency papers, and an ongoing war in Sudan — and the word "voluntary" becomes a real journalistic question, not a semantic one.



The Numbers and the Timeline

The train program launched in October 2025. By May 2026, about 150,000 Sudanese refugees had crossed back through the Argeen and Ashkeit border points alone since the start of that year. In April 2025, the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix recorded a 44% jump in returnees from Egypt in just three weeks, reaching roughly 165,330 people. By July 2026, the Al-Amal Committee for Voluntary Return ("The hope") reported having transported around 35,000 Sudanese by train and bus.

The key detail: in that same statement, the head of committee Mohamed Wadaa said the 35,000 figure includes "people detained during crackdowns on irregular residency, plus the sick." The official count itself merges three very different groups: people who chose to leave, people released from detention on condition of border transfer, and people forcibly deported. The committee is also negotiating with Egyptian authorities to deport Sudanese refugees in Libya directly to Sudan's border via the Salloum crossing bypassing Egyptian cities entirely. That pushes the process even further from "choice."

More broadly, IOM data shows over 4 million Sudanese have returned to their home areas inside Sudan since the war began in April 2023, with only 41% citing improved local security. But that figure covers all returnees region-wide, not Egyptian pressure specifically.

The Other Side of the Figure: Arrest and Detention

Egypt releases no official detention statistics. But, the Human Rights Watch July 7, 2026 report documents thousands of arrests and deportations of refugees and asylum seekers in 2026 only. The crackdown intensified in late 2025 and continued through 2026, largely targeting people over expired residency permits. Usually the permits are delayed by government backlogs, with some renewal appointments even set as late as 2028. Rights organizations have documented at least 15 deaths in detention, attributed to poor conditions or medical neglect.

The Sudanese government tells a different story. Sudan's ambassador in Cairo denied in late January 2026 that Sudan had ever asked Egypt to restrict or deport its citizens, calling such claims "baseless illusions". He cited very different figures: around 6 million Sudanese in Egypt, versus just 400 in Egyptian prisons. That gap between the embassy's account and rights groups' documentation deserves its own investigation.

"Voluntary" here describes the mechanism, refers to the online registration, getting a train or bus seat, but not necessarily the motive. When the official "voluntary return" track officially overlaps with "released from detention" and "forcibly deported," the word loses much of its meaning.

Is Sudan Really Safe to Return To?

Deaths: Since the war began on April 15, 2023, through July 2026, at least 58,000 people have been killed according to ACLED, based on documented UN statistics. Aid groups estimate the real toll may exceed 200,000. The usual gap between confirmed figures and broader estimates in hard-to-document conflict zones. 14 million people remain displaced: 9 million inside Sudan, 4.6 million in neighboring countries.

Humanitarian situation: The UN calls Sudan the world's largest humanitarian crisis: over 33 million people in need, 21 million needing health services, and nearly every hospital in the country partly or fully out of service. The UN also warns the Rapid Support Forces are preparing a ground assault on El-Obeid, capital of North Kordofan, where drone strikes are already hitting power stations and cutting access to drinking water.

Disease: Sudan is in its third cholera wave in three years. The current wave, in West Kordofan, has killed 120 people since May 2026 (WHO), and has spread to North Kordofan with roughly 300 more suspected cases and 3 deaths. A July 10, 2026 UN update in Geneva raised the toll to 1,330+ confirmed cases and 114 deaths. The previous wave (July 2024–March 2026) infected over 124,400 people and killed 3,500, per Sudanese government figures. It began just two months after that wave was declared terminated. A sign of structural health-system collapse, not a one-off crisis. Dengue, malaria, meningitis, hepatitis E, and measles are also active.

Together the rising death toll, a third cholera wave in three years, a collapsed health system, and the threat of new fighting. These facts make it hard to objectively call Sudan "safe to return to" under the legal standard for non-refoulement in International refugee law.

Egypt is gathering huge funds from the EU/ USA under the pretext of solving the migration problem - at what price?

On March 17, 2024, Sisi and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen signed a deal elevating Egypt-EU relations to a "strategic and comprehensive partnership," backed by a €7.4 billion package for 2024–2027.

Washington has kept pace with its own support. On July 16, 2026, the U.S. The Embassy in Cairo announced more than \$24 million in funding for the World Food Programme to support Sudanese refugees in Egypt specifically. The timing is notable: the announcement landed in the middle of the same crackdown; this section describes humanitarian funding and deportation pressure running on parallel tracks.

European rights groups, including Statewatch, say the deal props up an authoritarian government and lets Europe overlook its rights record as long as Egypt keeps acting as a "safe, reliable partner" for migration control. UN experts say arrests and deportations accelerated sharply from late 2025, some without individual risk assessments. Egypt's official response to UN inquiries in December 2025 described the detentions as merely "temporary precautionary measures" to verify identity and fight smuggling and trafficking.

The apparent contradiction: generous Western support alongside a harsh crackdown, isn't really a contradiction.

It's an implicit trade: Egypt hosts millions of refugees and blocks their route across the Mediterranean, protecting Europe's external border, and in return gets political and economic cover that lets it pose as a regional "stability partner" despite its domestic record.

The cover extends to press freedom and detainees. In the 2026 RSF World Press Freedom Index, Egypt ranked near the bottom among the 11 worst countries globally (169th–170th of 180, depending on the source) with media under direct state and security control, almost no pluralism, ongoing blocks on independent outlets, and systematic prosecution of journalists on charges like "false news" and terrorism links. HRW's 2026 annual report counted 23 jailed journalists as of May 30, most in prolonged pretrial detention, plus 44 deaths in detention during 2025 (per the Committee for Justice), under conditions HRW called ill-treatment and torture.

The final station:

Tens of thousands of "returnees" whose own official count blends ex-detainees, the sick, and genuine volunteers. Thousands of documented detentions and deportations, despite no official statistics. Famine on the rise. Increasing death toll and spreading epidemics in Sudan. Thousands of young men and even girls ending up in armies and militias as the only source of income to feed their families. A multibillion-euro package of the European Union tied to migration control. Together, these facts describe a story far more complex than the label "Voluntary Return."