

Sudan on the brink: a civil war and those profiting

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The brutal conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has plunged Sudan deep into humanitarian crisis, marked by staggering loss of life and mass displacement. Death tolls are now nearing 150,000, and millions have been forced from their homes. The scale of suffering reported is immense.



International involvement is intensifying the situation. Russia, by leveraging its ties through the FSB controlled Africa Corp (ex-Wagner Group), is reportedly exploiting Sudan's gold reserves to bypass sanctions and finance grander geopolitical ambitions. Gulf states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have also been linked to indirect financial and logistical support for competing factions, each pursuing their strategic interests in the Red Sea region. These entanglements elevate the conflict's complexity, making a solution challenging.

Sudan's civil war also threatens industries. The country's resource wealth, including gold and oil, is a double-edged sword, bringing both an opportunity and a vulnerability. The prolonged fighting risks disrupting supply chains, bringing with it reputational challenges for companies linked to conflict-affected regions and the threat of boycotts.

Roots of conflict

Sudan's descent into civil war derives from a volatile combination of political instability, unfulfilled democratic aspirations and conflicting military ambitions. The 2019 ousting of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir initially raised hopes for a democratic transition.

An unstable power-sharing arrangement was established between civilian leaders and the military, aimed at finally steering the nation toward democratic elections. However, deep-seated distrust and competing interests within the transitional government undermined these reforms.

The RSF, originally a militia formed from the notorious Janjaweed in Darfur, emerged as a formidable paramilitary force during this period. Under the command of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (known as Hemedti), the RSF grew in power and influence, leveraging control over gold mines and proxy military contracts. Meanwhile, the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, sought to preserve its dominance in the nation's political and security framework.

Tensions between these factions escalated as both vied for control of Sudan's future. The October 2021 military coup, in which the SAF and RSF jointly overthrew the civilian-led government, marked a turning point. However, instead of consolidating power, the coup fractured the delicate alliance between the SAF and RSF, exposing underlying rivalries. Efforts to negotiate a democratic transition collapsed, resulting in open conflict in April 2023.

This struggle for dominance has thrown Sudan into chaos, unravelling years of progress toward peace and stability. The militarisation of governance, coupled with the absence of civilian supervision, set the stage for the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe and geopolitical turmoil seen today.

Humanitarian and security crisis

The conflict between SAF and the RSF has created a dire humanitarian emergency, with widespread insecurity and suffering. Regions controlled by the SAF and RSF remain in chaos, with clashes spreading into urban centres like Khartoum and key borders. These fractures have left millions displaced in-country and across neighbouring states, impeding already strained regional infrastructures.

Refugee surges have overwhelmed camps in Chad, South Sudan and Egypt, where basic resources are not meeting escalating needs.

Sudan's healthcare system, already strained, has collapsed in many areas, with hospitals destroyed or inaccessible due to fighting. The looming spectre of famine adds another layer of urgency, as disrupted agricultural cycles and blocked humanitarian corridors worsen food shortages.

Military operations have ground civilian life to a halt in many regions, with both SAF and RSF forces accused of atrocities, including targeted violence against civilians. International peacekeeping efforts remain fragmented, with limited success in reducing violence or ensuring the safety of humanitarian rescue workers themselves.

The RSF is militarily the dominant force, now pushing worryingly close to the east coast, although to many Sudanese, it is politically corroded. Gaining support from army mutineers and warlords as their conquest continues, recruits are said to only be interested in pay packets and ill-gotten gains, which are clearly not the ingredients for a political coalition that can be reasoned with.

US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, stated this month that the US was imposing sanctions on RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo for his participation in "systematic atrocities" in west Darfur. Although it is accepted that both the SAF and the RSF had committed war crimes during the civil war break out in 2023, which saw tens of thousands die, the latter's systematic killing of civilians as they attempted to flee, and blocking access to critical supplies, was inexcusable.

Stakeholders and international involvement

The conflict in Sudan is shaped by an interplay of domestic and international actors, each following unique objectives, hindering efforts to resolve the situation.

The SAF and the RSF are the primary belligerents. The SAF seeks to maintain its traditional dominance over Sudan's governance and military institutions. Meanwhile, the RSF has leveraged its paramilitary clout and grip on the gold mines to position itself as a rival power bloc. Transitional government factions, initially part of the power-sharing arrangement, have largely been sidelined, further diminishing the possibilities of a political solution occurring anytime soon.

Russia: Through its association with the Africa Corp, Russia has laid deep foundations in Sudan by exploiting gold reserves. This political interest is seen to have been implemented to bypass Western sanctions.

China: Since 2023, analysts have highlighted concerns that Beijing's loans to support infrastructure developments to countries including Sudan, could be a form of "debt-trap diplomacy", which is a predetermined attempt to gain key strategic influence such as ports. China's growing military relationship with African nations, to include establishing naval bases, is one example of how Beijing has subtly engineered a way to expand its military might and influence overseas, quietly.

Gulf states: The UAE and Saudi Arabia are implicated in providing indirect financial and logistical support to opposing factions, motivated by competing interests in the Red Sea region's strategic corridors and resources.

Western nations: The US and EU have focused on sanctions against conflict players, humanitarian aid and diplomatic actions. However, their influence is somewhat frivolous against the deep-rooted dynamics of local and regional stakeholders.

Regional organisations: The African Union (AU) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have attempted mediation, but their efforts have been muted by the entrenched positions of internal factions and a lack of cohesive international support.

Sudan's civil war, while devastating for millions, has created opportunities for a group of beneficiaries who exploit the instability for personal and political gain. These players range from local warlords to global powers, each using the chaos as a veil to advance nefarious interests.

Warlords and militias have done very well amid the disorder, capitalising on weakened governance to facilitate control over resource-rich areas. Armed groups exploit Sudan's gold reserves and agricultural land, filling their pockets while continuing to spread violence and terror to maintain their grip on these invaluable assets.

The collapse of state oversight has also opened the door for black markets, from smuggling to arms trade, fuelling cycles of conflict. The arms trade has surged as foreign suppliers capitalise on the warring factions' insatiable need for weaponry.

Conclusion

Sudan's civil war represents a devastating confluence of humanitarian suffering, political instability and international opportunism. The conflict between the SAF and RSF has not only claimed the lives of nearly 150,000 people and displaced millions but has also shattered Sudan's fragile hope for a democracy. The struggle for dominance between entrenched military factions has unravelled years of progress, leaving the nation in chaos and its people in desperate need of aid.

The humanitarian toll is catastrophic, with refugee crises overwhelming neighbouring nations and critical infrastructures in disarray. Meanwhile, international actors - including Russia, China and the Gulf states - have exacerbated the crisis, using Sudan's resources and strategic position to pursue unrelated goals. Warlords and profiteers make good in the absence of governance, instilling violence to maintain their grip on lucrative gold and oil assets.

As Sudan teeters on the brink, one pressing question remains: How can this tragedy be resolved, and what role should the international community play in forging a path toward peace, if they are in a position to do so?

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