

SUDAN: DESOLATION, HUMANITARIAN CATASTROPHE AND OBLIVION IN EASTERN AFRICA

The nation has been engulfed in civil war since April 2023, claiming thousands of lives and leaving thousands more displaced, while the international community attempts to reach a challenging ceasefire



A young Sudanese girl cooling off at a fountain in the village of Omar al-Mukhtar, near Khartoum, where there is a school for refugees.

Fred Noy/ONU

THE power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has plunged the country into a scenario of death and desolation, causing a deep humanitarian crisis. All peace initiatives have so far failed, and confrontations are still being fuelled by the conflicting interests of external actors. Sudan became an independent and sovereign state on 1 January 1956 by agreement between the UK and Egypt. Since then, the history of this African giant has been a succession of military uprisings and dictatorial governments, against the backdrop of an almost permanent theatre of war. Violence erupted throughout Sudan at the beginning of this century under President al-Bashir's absolute power since 1989 in the form of armed uprisings in the states of Port Sudan and Kordofan; secessionist rebel groups in the southern region that, after five decades and two million lives lost, secured South Sudan's independence in 2011; and, in 2003, the ruthless genocide committed in the Darfur region by the Janjaweed ("horsemen on horseback"), led by al-Bashir himself, as declared by the International Criminal Court in 2010.

In April 2019, when nothing augured that Sudan's future would be either peaceful or promising, the overthrow and imprisonment of Al Bashir brought about an unexpected turn of events that was to change the country's future. Seven months earlier, the city of Atbara had become the epicentre of a peaceful social uprising that, in just a few days, spread throughout the country. Under the slogan "freedom, peace and justice", the Association of Sudanese Professionals succeeded in uniting the entire Sudanese population in its desire for change, despite the bloody repression of the powerful and omnipresent military power.

After overthrowing the dictator with the army's blessing, a civilian-military government was agreed upon, which, after a period of transition, was expected to establish a democratic regime in Sudan. Although the road was strewn with obstacles, civilian leaders took on the task of reforming security institutions despite the reluctance of the Armed Forces, who systematically opposed any significant changes to state institutions. But the Transitional Sovereignty Council, which was the cohabita-



Sudan's capital, Khartoum, filled with smoke after the clashes in April 2024 that started the war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

tion government with Abdalla Hamdok as prime minister, was becoming unsustainable, and a failed coup attempt in September 2021 attributed to al-Bashir's partisans served as a wake-up call.

A month later, on 25 October 2021, the Sudanese hope for peace and good governance was abruptly and definitively cut short after the second, and this time successful, military uprising. This time, the coup was led by Sudan's two most powerful generals: Al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council (then the highest national authority) and Supreme Commander of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF); and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, alias Hemedti, commander of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

**There is little chance
that the civil war
currently bleeding
the country to death
will end in a peace
agreement**

and Deputy Chairman of the Sudanese government. Following the arrest of Prime Minister Hamdok, along with several ministers and leaders of the Sudanese Professionals' Association, al-Burhan declared a state of emergency and halted the democratic transition. However, the demands of much of the international community — especially the Arab League and the African Union — led to Hamdok's return to office. But he resigned permanently in January 2022 after realising he was now irrelevant in the new national government.

By then, and without civilians in Sudan's government, al-Burhan and Hemedti — two generals who had been promoted to the highest military rank by al-Bashir as a reward for their unwavering loyalty — became the country's highest authorities despite the overwhelming rejection of civil society. With great resignation, the African and international community had no other choice than to accept the pledge of these two generals to continue with the transition process until the April 2023 elections, which were systematically postponed. They also promised to address the unification of the Sudanese Armed Forces and the RSF into a single national institution. However, any government agreement was unfeasible due to their eternal rivalry, their inordinate lust for power and their



Albert González/ONU

Women and children in the UN-supervised Women's Centre in Abu Shouk IDP Camp in North Darfur.

disagreements over the political configuration of the Sudanese state. Instead, they strengthened their external alliances in order to garner support for their respective causes. In this confrontational scenario, the failure of military reunification served as a pretext for conflict, and it became clear that the two generals' sole goal was to preserve their power and control over the country's vast resources and immense natural wealth.

AND WAR BROKE OUT

The war between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces ultimately erupted in the capital city, Khartoum, on 15 April 2023. Within days, the conflict spread throughout most of the country, while the Sudanese population remained trapped and defenceless in the crossfire between the two military factions. The confrontation soon extended to the states of Gezira and Kordofan, which are home to the major oil fields. It also reached the hard-hit Darfuri region, which is full of gold mines, mostly controlled by Hemedti, who is reviled for being the leader who planned and led the 2003 Darfur massacre at the command of the Arab Janjaweed militias. As a result, both parties have made oil and gold the ultimate goal of the war since, in addition to serving their own interests, their legal and

illegal sales overseas provide the funding that fuels both the SAF's and the RSF's war machine.

After 20 months, the conflict remains in an attrition phase. However, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the paramilitary forces, who control the states of Darfur, North and South Kordofan, and are enforcing a continuous siege on the capital, Khartoum, have a territorial advantage. Attacks by both sides are now spreading throughout most of Sudan, presenting a dramatic scenario of violence and destruction, while attempts to reach a ceasefire continue to fail.

So far, none of the armed factions, both of which are accused of war crimes by various human rights organisations, has achieved a decisive victory. The Sudanese Armed Forces have more than 200,000 troops and are equipped with tanks, long-range artillery and fighter jets. However, this notorious superiority has not been enough to defeat the RSF (between 100,000 and 150,000 paramilitary troops). The latter are lighter forces that are better prepared to fight in urban areas, and are responsible for the biggest killings among the Sudanese population.

Major combats continue to take place in the Darfur region, where there are important cross-border trade routes and where the smuggling of fuel and weapons,

especially from Libya and Chad, is actually stimulating the clashes. Against this backdrop, the RSF are using their military dominance to maintain their siege on Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur. Al-Burhan's regular military force still has some control over this city. However, it still tries to win over former rebel groups—who are now unified as defence militias in the Darfur Joint Protection Force under Governor Minni Minawi—and like-minded ethnic groups, to whom it provides weapons in an effort to weaken Hemedti's forces.

As many international organisations and humanitarian assistance agencies have reported, the conflict has sown death, devastation, and suffering, not only in Darfur but also throughout Sudan, where both factions have been accused of war crimes, particularly indiscriminate bombing in populated areas. The United Nations claims that the death toll now stands at over 20,000, although a US report brings the number to 150,000. In any case, it is impossible to confirm the number of people killed in this war, as it is unfeasible to carry out on-site verifications. Furthermore, the collapse of the health system—80 percent of the country's hospitals are out of service—has also resulted in many deaths; hundreds of villages have been devastated; the mass destruction of schools has prevented 20 million children from receiving an education; and Human Rights Watch claims that gang rape and the kidnapping of women are frequent occurrences.

Conversely, the difficulty of delivering humanitarian aid increases the immediate risk of famine. Nearly half of the 48 million people living in Sudan are suffering from acute hunger. Despite the magnitude of the human tragedy, the catastrophe is unquestionably even worse than it seems, since it is nearly impossible to know what is actually going on in Sudan, which is ruled by an iron-grip and dictatorial military government. As a result, public demonstrations are routinely put down, while press freedom, information verification, and access to humanitarian cooperation agencies are all becoming increasingly restricted.

"These numbers are staggering, and we cannot turn our backs", stresses the new UN humanitarian affairs chief, Tom Fletcher, who has called for immediate international action to address Sudan's

deepening crisis, highlighting the mass flight of the population from their homes. Over 12 million people have been forced to move in appalling conditions to safer places or to refugee camps inside or outside of the country. “It is the fastest growing crisis in the world, with an average of 20,000 people displaced every day”, says Fletcher, “and yet the world is not responding with the solidarity and support that is needed”. Moreover, despite the severity of the war and the brutality against civilians, it is being waged outside the media spotlight and the general interest of the international community, which makes it even more difficult to move towards a settlement. In fact, both sides are using the lack of interest in this conflict to further exploit the armed struggle as the sole means of resolving their disputes and, eventually, seizing power.

The international stance has become a key factor in this conflict and sometimes even causes clashes between the two parties and brutal attacks on civilians. However, it will also be decisive and necessary to bring about peace, which in turn cannot be achieved if external interference that merely seeks to safeguard its spurious interests continues. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are facing off in Sudan. Both countries participated in the establishment of a transitional government in 2019. However since the coup d'état in 2021, they have sided with al-Burhan and Hemedti, respectively, in an effort to seize control of Sudan's energy resources and capitalise on their privileged strategic position in the Red Sea. Egypt, on the other hand, which has maintained its presence in Sudan and has consistently opposed the civilian transition that started in 2019, advocates leading the peace talks. However, Hemedti has accused Egyptian President El-Sisi of supporting al-Burhan by sending troops and fighter jets, accusations that the Egyptian government systematically denies.

Both warring parties also have strong ties with Russia. Although the Russian mercenary Wagner Group has supported Hemedti's RSF militarily during the conflict on behalf of the Kremlin, its ties to al-Burhan's businesses are also apparent. In or-

der to maintain this self-interested balance and to safeguard its stubborn claim to a naval base in the Red Sea, Russia did not hesitate in November 2024 to veto a UN Security Council resolution tabled by the UK and Sierra Leone. It called for an immediate cessation of hostilities because —according to Russian representative Poliansky— the resolution amounted to “imposing a Council decision on the Sudanese [...] Our country will continue unflinchingly to use its veto to prevent such events from happening to our African brothers”.

LITTLE HOPE

All regional and international efforts to facilitate peace talks and establish an interim government in Khartoum have been unsuccessful so far. In Africa, the African Union



Sudanese Armed Forces commander, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, greeting his partisans during his visit to the Masawi region in August 2024.

—the guarantor organisation for implementing “African solutions to African problems”— suspended Sudan's membership following the 2021 coup. However, since the outbreak of the war, its internal division —marked by the member states' support for either al-Burhan or Hemedti— has prevented Sudan from exercising strong leadership in resolving the conflict. Both the peace initiatives of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which unites the nations of the Horn of East Africa, and the UN-brokered ceasefires, which have been systematically violated by the two factions, have failed. For their part, in May 2023, Saudi Arabia and the US managed to bring delegations from both warring parties together in the Saudi city of Jeddah. Then again, the talks were

suspended sine die after months of heated negotiations and unfulfilled agreements. All hopes were pinned on the Geneva talks of August 2024, which were attended by delegations from the UN, the African Union, the IGAD, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. While an RSF delegation showed up, the leaders of the Sudanese Armed Forces refused to attend, claiming that they were not recognised as the military force of Sudan's legitimate government. “Though we were in consistent communication with SAF virtually, we regret their decision not to be present, and we believe that limited our ability to make more substantial progress towards key issues, particularly a national cessation of hostilities”, the international mediators said. Finally, the warring parties agreed to improve access for humanitarian aid, mainly to the hard-hit Darfur region; however, this agreement once more did not materialise on the ground.

Despite the failure of the first round conference in July, Egypt finally announced in early December its intention to hold a second round shortly with the participation of all Sudanese factions and political forces. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty stressed that Egypt “is ready to contribute to initiatives to restore stability in Sudan, halt the ongoing conflict, and safeguard the lives of Sudanese citizens”.

Undoubtedly, a definitive cessation of hostilities will only be achieved through an inclusive and comprehensive dialogue. However, in order to achieve this, it is imperative to promote the pressure and attention coming from the international media, and to halt the external intrusions that are fuelling this forgotten and devastating conflict. And after reaching a peace agreement, which is still a long way off, it will be essential to build a stable and sustainable future for Sudan under the leadership of a civilian-led democratic regime. Otherwise, it will only be a matter of time before war returns to Sudan, while its people, who are the main victims of the ongoing misrule and terror in the country, will once again suffer its dramatic consequences.

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