

FORUM: Disarmament and International Security (DISEC)

ISSUE: Civil War in Sudan

AUTHORS: Jeremy, Rayan, Jai

POSITION: Chairs, Committee Members



Background

The current civil war in Sudan must be understood within the broader historical context of Sudan's political instability and ethnic divisions, particularly those exacerbated by the partition of Sudan in 2011. Sudan was the largest country in Africa until its southern region seceded following decades of civil war between the northern, predominantly Arab-Muslim government and the southern, largely African-Christian and animist population. These wars, which spanned much of Sudan's post-independence history, were driven by disputes over governance, resources, and identity, culminating in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA allowed for a referendum in 2011, where an overwhelming majority in the south voted for independence, creating South Sudan. However, the partition left unresolved issues, including disputes over oil-rich regions and cross-border ethnic ties, which have continued to destabilise both nations.

Before the partition, Sudan endured two lengthy civil wars (1955–1972 and 1983–2005), largely centred on the marginalisation of the peripheries by the central government in Khartoum. The second war was particularly devastating, with an estimated two million deaths and widespread displacement. While these conflicts initially focused on north-south divisions, they set the stage for the emergence of other internal disputes within what remained of Sudan after the south's secession. The Sudanese government, dominated by the National Congress Party under Omar al-Bashir, increasingly relied on militias such as the Janjaweed to maintain control, particularly during the Darfur conflict. This reliance on paramilitary forces planted the seeds for the current power struggles between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the latter of which evolved from the Janjaweed.

The partition of Sudan further strained the economy and intensified internal conflicts in the north. South Sudan took with it approximately three-quarters of the former united Sudan's oil reserves, leaving the Khartoum government struggling to generate revenue. This economic crisis exacerbated existing grievances in marginalised regions like Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile. Darfur, in particular, saw genocidal violence in the early 2000s, with government-backed militias like the Janjaweed targeting non-Arab communities. The Janjaweed's brutal campaigns not only led to mass displacement but also international condemnation, including an arrest warrant for Omar al-Bashir by the International Criminal Court. However, instead of dismantling these militias, the government restructured them into the RSF, giving them formal recognition while fostering a parallel power structure.

The 2019 ousting of Omar al-Bashir following nationwide protests marked a turning point in Sudan's history but left a fragile and fractious political landscape. The transitional government, which was supposed to balance civilian and military power, was marred by deep mistrust and conflicting agendas. Key among these tensions was the relationship between the SAF, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the RSF, led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). Hemedti's rise to power was fueled by his control over lucrative gold mines and his international dealings, which gave the RSF a level of autonomy that threatened the SAF's dominance. The power-sharing arrangement disintegrated in 2021 when the military staged a coup, sidelining civilian leaders and setting the stage for the eventual conflict between the SAF and RSF.

The historical divisions created by the marginalisation of Sudan's peripheries, the legacy of militia politics, and the economic fallout from partition have all contributed to the current civil war. Additionally, unresolved questions about national identity, resource distribution, and governance remain central to Sudan's instability. The partition of Sudan not only failed to resolve these systemic issues but also left behind a deeply fragmented society where multiple factions vie for power. The ongoing conflict is thus the latest chapter in a long history of political fragmentation and contested sovereignty, with roots that stretch back to the colonial era and Sudan's post-independence struggles. Without addressing these historical grievances, any resolution to the current civil war will likely remain tenuous.

Current Situation

As of January 2025, Sudan's civil war, which began in April 2023, has resulted in catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has led to the deaths of nearly 15,000 people and displaced over 8.2 million, marking it as the world's most severe displacement crisis. The United Nations reports that more than 18 million individuals are facing severe hunger, with five million at emergency levels. The World Food Programme highlighted that over 95% of Sudan's population cannot afford a meal a day, underscoring the dire food insecurity.

In response to escalating violence and human rights violations, the United States imposed sanctions on Sudan's de facto president, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and previously on RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). The U.S. Treasury Department cited the SAF for conducting airstrikes against civilian targets and implementing food blockades, while the RSF has been accused of genocidal actions, particularly in the Darfur region. Despite these sanctions, both factions continue to engage in hostilities, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

The conflict's repercussions have extended beyond Sudan's borders, affecting neighbouring countries. In South Sudan, violence targeting Sudanese traders led to the imposition of a nationwide overnight curfew to curb unrest. This unrest was

reportedly triggered by alleged killings of South Sudanese nationals by militia groups in Sudan, highlighting the conflict's regional impact. Additionally, local Sudanese communities have established Emergency Response Rooms (ERRs) to provide essential aid, as international organisations face challenges operating safely within the country. These grassroots initiatives underscore the resilience of Sudanese civilians amid the ongoing turmoil.