

A photograph showing a section of a damaged mud-brick wall in Sudan. The wall is made of light brown earth and is heavily cracked. On top of the wall, a large, flat, and collapsed wooden roof structure is visible, made of many thin, light-colored wooden planks. The background is a clear, pale blue sky. The foreground is a dry, dusty ground.

SUDAN

**The war the West has
chosen to ignore**



Sudan's catastrophic civil war has entered its third year, leaving a legacy of death, widespread destruction, massive population displacement and chronic insecurity. If the conflict persists, it could kill millions and spread instability across the region.
OLGA YOLDI writes.

The north-eastern Africa nation of Sudan was plunged into a brutal civil war in April 2023 as a result of a power struggle between two rival groups within its military, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Both are led by unscrupulous generals, the nominal head of state Abdel Fattah al-Burhan (SAF) and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti (RSF). Both are vying for control of the state and its spoils.

Fighting started in the capital, Khartoum, and quickly spread to Darfur in the west and the more central and southern Kordofan. At least 9000 attacks have occurred, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project – yet neither side can gain the upper hand on the battlefield and there is no military solution in sight. Efforts at mediation have failed, so the conflict has become a war of attrition.

To make matters worse, the conflict has drawn in countries from the region and beyond. Thousands of mercenaries and armed groups have joined the fray and

are fighting alongside both parties. The UN says weapons supplies to the warring forces from external allies are enabling the slaughter and must stop.

Among the allies are the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which supports the RSF financially, militarily and diplomatically; Egypt and Iran arm the SAF; while Russia courted both sides. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are also vying for geopolitical influence in Sudan. These countries are fuelling the fighting and prolonging the war, turning the conflict into a proxy war while also threatening further destabilisation in the region. The West appears to be indifferent, and the UN paralysed.

The war has been particularly catastrophic for Sudan's civilian population. According to UNICEF, the conflict has killed 150,000 civilians and 13 million people have been forced to flee their homes. The majority are internally displaced, although three million have fled to neighbouring countries. It is the largest child displacement crisis in the world, 14 million children are in need of life-saving humanitarian assistance and an estimated 19 million are out of school.

Thus, Sudan is the largest humanitarian and food crisis in the world today by the sheer number of those



affected. An estimated 25.6 million face man-made famine that, according to analysts, may well be deadlier than Ethiopia's famine of the 1980s. In 2024 Médecins Sans Frontières estimated that every two hours a child was dying from starvation or disease, and since then the situation has deteriorated.

In May 2024, in a report on Sudan from the Clingendael Institute, a Dutch think-tank, author Dr Timmo Gaasbeek predicted 6 to 10 million deaths in excess of normal mortality by 2027. The report says fighting has destroyed food production systems and infrastructure. The burning of crops and farms and the inability of farmers to cultivate the land has dramatically raised the prices of food and other products, causing widespread poverty and starvation.

At the same time, both armies have obstructed or diverted international food aid, looted warehouses and targeted aid workers. Disease outbreaks are rampant in refugee camps and among internally displaced people. According to media reports, 70 per cent of health facilities have been destroyed with health workers killed or forced to flee, contributing to deaths from cholera, malaria, dengue fever and childbirth, among others. The UN says

that some 30.4 million people – more than two-thirds of the total population – need health and food aid as well as other forms of humanitarian support.

Yet Sudan's war has received little attention from the international community, and there seems to be no political will to intervene. In an editorial, *The Economist* wrote: "Despite the huge stakes, the world has responded to Sudan's war with neglect and fatalism, showing how disorder is becoming normalised. While the world has been preoccupied with the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Sudan's threatens to be deadlier than either conflict."

Indeed, Africa doesn't feature prominently in European or US foreign policy and Washington has not put serious pressure on countries supplying arms to the combatants. The reason, says Sudan expert and Executive Director of the World Peace Council, Alex de Waal, is that those countries meddling in the war – Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – are favoured allies of the US. "If those countries would agree to do something to stop the war, the US would go along with it. If they don't agree, the US is not going to do anything about it ... the aspirations of Sudanese people are set aside in favour of this geopolitical, cynical realpolitik."

Caption



“Military, militias and mercenaries in conflicts around the world believe they can get away with anything, and because they can get away with anything they do everything.”

— David Miliband



UNICEF/UNI645800/Omar Targ

Not only are aspirations being ignored, but also the extreme suffering of civilians and the grave violations of human rights. Both warring parties, but in particular the RSF, are committing war crimes, crimes against humanity and other violations of international humanitarian law such as widespread, unlawful killings including mass executions, destruction of civilian property and infrastructure, and widespread looting and pillaging and the SAF has been accused of using chemical weapons. Both use explosives in densely populated areas and camps for the internally displaced, according to the *Human Rights Watch 2025 report*.

The RSF has engaged in sexual violence against women and girls and ethnically-motivated killings against the Masalit in Darfur. Both have forcibly recruited child soldiers and conducted arbitrary arrests, detention and torture, according to the UN Panel of Experts Sudan report. A new UNICEF report published in February describes horrific abuses of children as young as 12 months old: armed men have raped hundreds of infants and young children, it says and health providers have recorded another 221 cases of rape since the beginning of 2024.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says these violations and crimes occur in a context of impunity, given both parties' failure to hold their forces accountable. It is unlikely the perpetrators will ever face consequences for their crimes. As David Miliband, CEO and President of the International Rescue Committee writes, the world has entered an age of impunity, a time when crimes go unpunished: "Military, militias and mercenaries in conflicts around the world believe they can get away with anything, and because they can get away with anything, they do everything."

"It is a sign of growing global impunity and disorder."

Sudan is Africa's third-largest country and one of the poorest countries in the world. The north is dominated by Arab populations practicing Sunni Islam and the south by traditional African communities, with a small percentage following animist religions and Christianity. South Sudan is one of the most diverse countries in Africa, home to more than 60 ethnic groups. Since its independence in 1956 from the British and

Egyptians, Sudan (which included South Sudan up to 2011) has never known peace, stability or democracy and has always been ruled by military regimes. Popular uprisings, military coups, ethnic conflicts and violence have been common throughout its modern history.

The first civil war (1955-1971) between the Arab-led Khartoum government and southern rebels was long and bloody. The south demanded representation in the central government and autonomy for their land. When it seemed peace had finally been attained, economic stagnation led to widespread discontent as agricultural outputs were exported, leading to a rise in food prices, food scarcity and unrest.

A second civil war (1983-2005) between north and south erupted following the government's Islamisation policy, which would have instituted Islamic law. It was also a result of the lack of settlement of the grievances that had triggered the first civil war. Land claims were also at the centre of the hostilities since southern rebels complained central Sudanese were expanding their land claims and control into South Sudan.

When Omar al-Bashir seized power in 1989 he launched a new campaign of repression. He banned trade unions and political parties, imprisoned political opponents, silenced the press and dismantled the judiciary. He reintroduced Islamic law and fought to end the raging civil war in the south. Unable to beat the southern rebels – the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) – he armed an Arab militia to fight the SPLA, blocking food aid and engaging in war crimes. He ruled Sudan for 30 years.

In 2005 the SPLA signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement that provided for a new constitution and outlined new measures for sharing power, wealth and security. It allowed for a separate administration and stipulated a referendum for independence. South Sudan finally became its own sovereign nation in 2011 after 20 years of guerrilla warfare that left two million dead and four million displaced.

In the meantime, a separate conflict had emerged in Darfur (2003-2010), another area long ignored and marginalised by the central government. Rebels launched an insurrection against the central government's disregard for the western region's non-Arab population. Ethnic tensions, economic marginalisation and exclusion fuelled the violence. In response, al-Bashir's government equipped another Arab militia, the Janjaweed, to defeat the rebels. They terrorised, killed and abducted civilians and also blocked the delivery of foreign aid, creating another humanitarian crisis. The conflict claimed the

lives of 400,000 people and displaced three million. In 2008 al-Bashir was charged by the International Criminal Court with orchestrating genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity and sought a warrant for his arrest.

In 2013 al-Bashir created the RSF (with former Janjaweed fighters). He sought a counterbalance to the regular armed forces, hoping to keep the army under control and thwart coups, appointing Hemedti as the RSF's leader. Then, in April 2019, the RSF deserted al-Bashir and joined the SAF in a coup that overthrew al-Bashir. Al-Burhan then became president, with Hemedti as his deputy and a civilian, Abdallah Hamdook, as prime minister. Hamdook promised to lead a transitional government for two years, after which elections would be held for a new civilian government. There was fresh hope for a real democratic transformation after decades of oppression, corruption and violence.

However, tensions between al-Burhan and Hemedti were building as the deadline for forming a civilian government approached. Talks on how the RSF would be integrated into the regular armed forces and who had control over key military sites and land within key regions, led to arguments. Then in April 2023, the RSF launched a coup attempt and secured control of four out of the five Darfur states. The SAF retained a presence in North Darfur.

Two years later RSF still controls most of Darfur and much of Kordofan, and the situation is worsening. Densely populated areas have been reduced to rubble; and electricity, food and water supplies have been cut off. Famine is spreading rapidly as emergency foreign aid, including soup kitchens run by AUSAID, has had to be halted while the warring parties continue to block aid.

The SAF, which sees itself as the legitimate government, controls the north and east of the country and has recently captured Khartoum. The RSF has escalated attacks on Sudan's famine-stricken Zamzam refugee camp near el-Fasher – capital of the North Darfur state and home to the Zaghawa people – that hosts 500,000 of the internally displaced.

Those that have crossed the border, human rights organisations say, face threats, abuse and forced returns by adjoining countries, with most living in unsustainable conditions. Egypt unlawfully expelled an estimated 800 Sudanese in 2024, according to Amnesty International. In Ethiopia's conflict-affected Amhara region, Sudanese refugees faced violent attacks by both government forces and non-state armed actors.





Sudanese women who fled the conflict in Geneina in Sudan's Darfur region, line up to receive rice portions from Red Cross volunteers in Ourang on the outskirts of Adre, Chad July 25, 2023. REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra/File Photo Purchase Licensing Rights

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has described the current situation in Sudan as “a catastrophe on a staggering scale of brutality”. He has called on world leaders to use their influence for peace and boost humanitarian aid efforts, but without a response.

Sudan's collapse into a failed state would have far-reaching consequences, experts say. As former US envoy to Sudan, Tom Perriello, noted: “The conflict could spiral into a full-blown regional crisis. It could become a Somalia on steroids.” Alice Nderitu, UN adviser on prevention of genocide, warned the UN Security Council: “The longer the war endures, the greater the risk of genocide.”

Sudan has some 800 km of coastline on the Red Sea. Most of the nations it borders (Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Egypt) face varying degrees of economic and political instability and some are among the poorest in the world, accounting for 21 per cent land mass that is home to 280 million people. Sudan could destabilise these countries. “They are all under severe pressure. None of them are able to absorb large refugee flows or find the resources to do cross-border assistance for these people,” de Waal noted. “These countries face large flows of refugees,

guns and mercenaries,” says Cameron Hudson, an expert on US-Africa policy at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies: “We are talking about something 10 times the size of the Libya crisis. The prospects of controlling illegal flow of weapons, migrants, fighters across unstable regions in Africa ... you can kiss all of that goodbye if Sudan collapses. There are huge consequences to us ignoring Sudan or getting it wrong, which many people aren't fully attuned to.” It could, in fact, negatively affect three continents.

US intelligence agencies warned that Sudan could once again become an ideal environment for terrorists and criminal networks, and could see the return of Islamists. It could also trigger an exodus of refugees to Europe. And as *The Economist* writes: “Were Sudan to fall into permanent anarchy or become a rogue state hostile to the West, it could further imperil the operation of the Suez Canal, which normally carries a seventh of the world's trade mainly between Europe and Asia. It is already creating disruption from the Houthi attacks in Yemen, forcing cargo ships to take the long, costly detour around Africa.”

Prior to the conflict, the Sudanese Transitional government and the Russian government reviewed an

agreement for Russia to build a naval base on the Red Sea that would host 300 personnel and four ships, including nuclear-powered vessels. If it goes ahead, it will give Russians access to the Red Sea, Eastern Africa and the Indian Ocean, and the ability to export military materiel to and from the base. Media reports say hosting nuclear-powered vessels in the Red Sea would enable Russia to challenge Western dominance and project power in both the Middle East and East Africa.

According to the Intel Drop website, Western shipping companies and defence strategists fear a Russian naval presence in Sudan could disrupt maritime security and has the potential to militarise the region: "It will probably lead to heightened tensions with the US and NATO. If the deal proceeds as planned, the Red Sea could become a flashpoint for intensified military and economic competition, setting the stage for further shifts in the global order."

The war could come to an end if the UAE stopped arming the RSF. In the view of some commentators, that would stop the RSF in its tracks. The question is, why would a country like the UAE want to get involved with Sudan? Most say it is interested in Sudan's vast mineral resources (gold and gas), fertile agricultural land and livestock exports. The UAE needs to import most of its food and non-oil minerals. Sudan is Africa's third-largest producer of gold, a sector mostly controlled by the UAE's ally, Hemedti, who supplies it via a global trader in gold, although both sides have smuggled and sold gold to fuel the war machine.

"From Libya to Somalia we see a pattern of the UAE working with paramilitaries to exploit the continent's resources," researcher Hamid Khalafallah noted. This also extends to Chad, Egypt and Eritrea.

But it is not only about resources. Andreas Krieg, a Middle East security specialist at Kings College, London, argues that the UAE's primary goal is political influence in a strategically important country. Krieg says it is also countering the Saudi Arabia influence in Sudan and preventing the spread of political Islam, which it views as a security threat. In any case, the UAE appears to be keen to expand its regional influence. It has trained the armies of eight African countries and in 2022 signed an agreement to build a port in the Red Sea to boost its supply lines.

The UAE has a long history of engaging the services of Hemedti's RSF militias, who fought against Houthi rebels in Yemen in 2015 as part of the Saudi-led coalition, and with Khalifa Haftar in Libya, another ally of the UAE.

From Libya to Somalia we see a pattern of the UAE working with paramilitaries to exploit the continent's resources.

— Hamid Khalafallah

Since Sudan's latest war started, there is evidence that the UAE has set up sophisticated operations to get weapons to the RSF through networks in Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. Yet neither the US nor Europe has ever confronted the UAE's government, and as a result it has suffered no consequences for breaking with American policy or for being complicit with terrible war crimes.

Some observers attribute this to both a general indifference towards the Sudan conflict and the fact that neither Europe nor the US want to upset the UAE. "The UAE's strategic importance, and as a counterweight to Iran and its role in diplomatic efforts to end the war in Gaza, makes Western leaders hesitant to lean too hard on Abu Dhabi," write John Prendergast and Anthony Lake in *Foreign Affairs*. But Robbie Grammer writes in *Foreign Policy* that it is great power competition that has clouded the US response to the conflict as it competes with Russia for influence in Africa across the so-called "global south".

The Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights is now campaigning to hold the UAE accountable in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) or through other legal avenues, such as in Germany or the European Court of Human Rights. The SAF has also filed a case to the ICJ accusing the UAE of complicity in the genocide of the Masalit tribes of West Darfur through its military, financial and political backing for the RSF. The UAE's government has rejected Sudan's allegations, calling the case a "cynical publicity stunt" and saying it will seek an immediate dismissal.

Sudan has asked the court's judges to issue an urgent restraining order against the UAE, but it remains uncertain if they will grant it. "Even if they do, they have little power to enforce it," writes Marlise Simons in *The New York Times*. "Judges issued such an order against Russia after it invaded Ukraine. They also handed down several orders against Israel over attacks against civilians in Gaza. All were ignored."

Twenty years ago an international peacekeeping



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mission was sent to Darfur. Today that possibility hasn't even been considered. The UN Security Council hasn't proposed anything and neither have European nations or the African Union (AU). De Waal explains that until a few years ago the multilateral peace and security architecture within the African Union, the UN and regional organisations like the Arab League were all functional and were able to convene credible peace talks and deploy peacekeepers, but that option no longer exists: "That apparatus has been demolished by the Middle Eastern powers fighting a war in the way Yemen, Syria, Libya was fought, a cynical proxy war in Sudan."

Without international intervention, Sudan's disintegration and fragmentation will only accelerate, civilians will continue to face extraordinary threats and die from violence, starvation and disease and war crimes will continue to haunt the nation. This is the sad reality. Time is running out.

Ending the conflict is going to require active engagement from key international organisations such as the UN Security Council. It may involve not only pacifying the RSF and SAF, but also convincing outside powers invested in the conflict, those that keep the warring parties armed, to change course. It may require a long and arduous diplomatic effort. But if the international community acts now it will still be possible to save millions of lives.

The most urgent priority must be pressuring the warring parties to allow food and medicine to reach besieged communities, then to bring the RSF and SAF to the table to work towards a ceasefire, to

implement sanctions on companies supplying weapons to warring parties and to ensure the arms embargo is not continually violated. The idea of setting up a peacekeeping force in some key areas should also be considered. The International Criminal Court (ICC) should investigate and hold the UAE accountable for its role in Sudan and bring truth and justice to the victims. A UN Fact-Finding Mission's recommending the establishment of a separate international judicial mechanism to complement the ICC's work should be implemented.

For all of this to happen, the West needs to develop a clearly defined and unified policy towards Sudan and Sudan needs to rate higher on the international political agenda. This is not the case now when all eyes are on Ukraine and Gaza.

It is going to be hard to put Sudan back together again. As Jamie Shea, former deputy assistant secretary general for emerging security challenges at NATO, writes on the Friends of Europe website "If the war ends in a stalemate, Sudan could end up becoming another Libya, with rival governments in charge of different parts of the country.

"Sudan could be a strategic game-changer. It could decide who controls the Red Sea, a vital lifeline for the global economy, which power emerges dominant in the Middle East and whether Africa is able to move forward along the lines of the African Union's Agenda 2063 for a peaceful continent bound by a single market and trade area, or lapses back into the corruption, poor governance and sectarianism that have isolated it from the rest of the world." R