

Current Status of the Sudan War and its Regional Implications

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Background of the Conflict:

On April 15, 2023, during Ramadan, a conflict broke out between the competing factions of the Sudanese military government – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti. Although the conflict has spread across different states of Sudan, the Darfur region and Khartoum, the country's capital, have seen the most fighting.

Interestingly, the two parties that are waging this war against each other used to be on the same side back in 2019, when major pro-democracy protests by the Sudanese people were sweeping the country to remove President Omar Al-Bashir, who had been ruling the country for three decades. The two leaders hijacked the protests and overthrew the President, but the Sudanese people did not want a military regime either. So, they kept up the pressure and eventually, a caretaker government comprising the military and some political groups which represented the pro-democracy movement was established with a plan to transition Sudan to a democracy. However, in 2021, the two leaders staged another coup which allowed Al-Burhan to take control of the government and entitled Hemedti to a great deal of power. Since then, a power struggle started between the two forces as the SAF wanted to bring the RSF under its command. Initially, it was agreed by RSF but while the army wanted to absorb RSF within two years, the RSF wanted this timeline to be ten years. It is also important to note here that the RSF was slowly gaining

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momentum and becoming a stronger force, which was previously only the paramilitary force of Sudan. The two parties are now arch rivals which are trying their best to gain control over all of Sudan. While the Sudanese Army is very highly equipped with heavy ammunition and warplanes, the RSF has anti-aircraft weapons, about 100,000 men, and control over some very important areas, such as Sudan's capital. In short, power struggles, ideological differences between the army and the RSF, and control over resources can be pinned as the key drivers of the ongoing conflict in Sudan.

According to a conservative estimate by the Armed Conflict and Event Data Project, 12,000 people have been killed already in this conflict and the UN has declared that at least 6.8 million people have been displaced by the war.² Keeping all these data in mind, this commentary will evaluate the current status of the crisis in Sudan and its regional implications.



Source: CNBC

² Al Jazeera, “Thousands flee as war reaches Sudan’s second-largest city”, 17 Dec 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/17/thousands-flee-as-war-reaches-sudans-second-largest-city>.

Destruction in Khartoum and Other Cities:

While fighting is taking place in different parts of Sudan, Khartoum being the capital of Sudan, has been the center of the conflict between the army and the RSF. There is continuous airstrike and shelling, no electricity or water supply and a serious shortage of food. The army has been bombarding many RSF bases which are located in residential neighborhoods, resulting in a lot of civilian casualties as part of collateral damage.

At this point, many are viewing this conflict as a result of personal rivalry between General Al-Burhan and Commander Hemedti. This is because the RSF has become much stronger and independent than it was before and the army is viewing this as a big threat as a powerful and well-established RSF might become a competition for the army, which badly wants to take control of the entire Sudan. The RSF has already become like a second army in Sudan. This is why, the leaders of the respective forces who have had amicable relations in the past are now fighting against each other to prove who is the top dog.



Source: NewsClick

Since the two forces jointly overthrew President Omar Al Bashir, the RSF has been able to operate more independently. It has established large investments around and outside the country, especially in the gold trade. The army is seeing this as a big threat to its control over Sudan as a growing RSF would mean the army might lose its power and collapse. As of now, the two forces are engaging in intense face-offs and both parties have tried to take over infrastructures such as the presidential palace, the airport, and the state TV channel. In the pursuit of these takeovers, Khartoum has witnessed tremendous levels of violence, thousands have been killed and injured and about 15% of Khartoum's residents had to flee their homes in search of a safe haven. The shortage of necessary supplies had been so bad that it was reported that seventy-one orphans died of starvation at an orphanage as there was no food to provide for them.

People who have fled from Khartoum have mostly taken refuge in Wad Madani, which is the second largest city in Sudan and a safe haven for displaced people. From the beginning of the ongoing conflict in April until now, Wad Madani has been under the army's control and it has been accommodating displaced people from Khartoum and nearby towns. However, on December 15, the situation in Wad Madani also turned into nothing short of a nightmare as the RSF reached there with their gunfire and explosions. The RSF has previously vandalized and looted civilians' homes, tortured civilians, raped women and now, they have threatened to do the same in Wad Madani.³ Although the army has retaliated with airstrikes, even as its foot soldiers withdrew, in response to reports that the RSF has entered the city and robbed banks and stores, peoples' faith in the army is gradually fading out. Will Carter, the Country Director of the Norwegian Refugee Council in Sudan stated that most UN agencies and aid organizations operating in Wad Madani have closed down and are evacuating their employees from Sudan as they do not want their colleagues to get trapped amidst indiscriminate bombing by the SAF as the RSF advances deeper into the city. The displaced people who have taken shelter in Wad Madani expected the army to protect the city from the RSF as it is acting as the last hope for millions of people. However, the army disappointed them and now, the same people are questioning the army's stature to fight against the RSF and are concerned if the army will be able to regain control of Sudan's second-largest city. Civilians are

³ Mat Nashed, "Losing hope: Sudan civilians terrified as RSF attacks second biggest city", Al Jazeera, 19 Dec 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/12/19/losing-hope-sudan-civilians-terrified-as-rsf-attacks-second-biggest-city>.

now worried that if the RSF takes full control of Wad Madani, getting aid into this city along with some other nearby cities would become impossible as it is the country’s heartland.

Along with Khartoum and Wad Madani, the whole country’s medical sector has almost collapsed and people are struggling with hunger. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the conflict between the Sudanese army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces has shattered the nation and left at least 24 million people – more than half the population – in urgent need of aid. Almost six million people have either left the country or become internally displaced after being forced from their homes. In the east, in army-controlled cities, a large number of Sudan's displaced people have fled and found some relief. The army controls all the aid allocation through its de facto administrative capital in Port Sudan on the Red Sea and as it has restricted the supply of relief goods to the cities which are controlled by the RSF, people of those cities have become even more helpless.⁴



Source: Africa Guide



Source: UNOCHA

⁴ Mat Nashed, “Sudan facing humanitarian crisis as relief funding dwindles”. Al Jazeera. 20 Oct 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/20/sudan-facing-humanitarian-crisis-as-relief-funding-dwindles>.

Current Status of the Conflict:

Resuming the US and Saudi Arabia-led negotiations in late October was agreed upon by the SAF and RSF in response to pressure from international governments and rights groups. But neither side committed to an end to violence while negotiations were still going on. Previous ceasefire agreements have not been kept by the warring factions, leading to the failure of previous negotiations. Early in May, negotiations broke down because the SAF withdrew from the discussions that Saudi Arabia and the United States had mediated. This came after Burhan said that Volker Perthes, the UN ambassador to Sudan, would no longer be allowed to remain in the nation; this was a clear indication of the belligerents' unwillingness to assist with international attempts to bring about peace. The Biden administration initiated actions in June to encourage conflict participants to take responsibility for their actions. The United States sanctioned RSF-affiliated mining corporations and businesses that supported the SAF's operations, increased the business advisory for Sudan, and imposed visa restrictions on SAF and RSF leadership as well as those connected to the old Bashir regime.

In the meantime, there is still fighting in Khartoum, and there are more violent occurrences elsewhere, especially in Darfur. The governor of West Darfur, Khamis Abbakar, was assassinated on June 15, which was a significant turning point in the situation. Abbakar was pushing for international intervention to protect civilians in Darfur and had recently accused the RSF of resuming genocidal attacks against minorities when he was killed (probably by RSF militants). Since fighting broke out in mid-April, militias in Darfur have burned at least sixty-eight villages. At the beginning of November, in the western Darfuri town of Ardamata, about eight hundred people were massacred in a multi-day rampage by RSF soldiers and allied militias. This latest incident is indicative of a recent upsurge in ethnically motivated murders in West Darfur that target the Masalit. Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), issued a warning, stating that the present violence is reminiscent of the Darfur genocide, which was acknowledged by the United States and claimed an estimated 300,000 lives between 2003 and 2005.

Implications of the Conflict on Sudan's Neighbors:

Politics, trade, culture, and a shared Nile are the factors that have shaped the histories of Sudan and Egypt, the most populous Arab nation with a formidable army. Since the revolt that deposed Bashir in 2019, Cairo has been concerned about political unrest in its southern region. Burhan is connected to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who similarly assumed office through a military takeover.⁵ RSF's leader Hemedti has accused Egypt of colluding with Burhan and sending warplanes to Sudan to fight alongside the Sudanese army. However, Egypt has denied it and stated that Egyptian forces were in Sudan's territory for a joint military exercise. The strategic location of Sudan on the Red Sea, its access to the Nile, and vast gold reserves have long been coveted by other global powers leading to both SAF and RSF being backed by outside forces. The RSF has close ties with the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Libya. Libya is already sending mercenaries to fight in Sudan, which is further complicating the situation.

After more than six months of combat, Sudan's two opposing factions are still engaged in a lethal power battle. Thousands have been killed and millions have been displaced by the conflict; of these, 80,000 are internally displaced and hundreds of thousands have fled to dangerous regions in South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Chad. A cholera outbreak and terrible humanitarian conditions have prompted the UN to call for greater assistance. In the meantime, other states have chosen sides in the conflict, and numerous, mainly disorganized attempts at mediation have yielded no fruit. A truce in southwest Sudan was broken by the rebel organization SPLM-N, and the violence runs the risk of upsetting the precarious peace in nearby states.⁶

⁵ Reuters, "Sudan – What worries neighbours, the US and others", 21 April 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/sudans-conflict-what-worries-neighbours-us-others-2023-04-21/>.

⁶ Center for Preventive Action, "Civil War in Sudan", 19 Nov 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/power-struggle-sudan>.



Source: Reuters

Sudan is no stranger to strife, given its heavy reliance on international handouts. Located in an unstable location straddling the Red Sea, Sahel, and the Horn of Africa, the capital is being torn apart by conflict this time instead of a remote corner of the country. Thousands of civilians have already fled to neighbouring Chad, which is one of the poorest countries in Africa and practically unfit to host such a huge influx of refugees. Reports have shown that civilians are somehow taking shelter in crowded tents and the humanitarian assistance which is required there is not available, leading to a massive shortage of food, water and necessary medicines. Journalists from different international media outlets have been reporting that this level of humanitarian crisis will surely have spillovers on Sudan's neighbours and as a result, the entire region will face a tumultuous political situation in the near future.

Way Forward:

International organizations, human rights organizations, and foreign governments keep demanding that violations of civil rights end and that humanitarian access be granted. Before April 2023, the country's conditions were dire, and they have since gotten worse. In the first month of combat, more than six hundred individuals lost their lives, hospitals and other critical infrastructure were

destroyed by attacks, and the bloodshed resulted in almost four million people being internally displaced. The Sudanese crisis is "spiralling out of control," according to a UN report from August. Over a million people have fled the nation, and the health system is still in disarray, increasing the possibility of disease outbreaks. Amidst this situation, it is important for the United States and some neighbouring countries of Sudan, such as Egypt, to step up and bring both the Sudanese army and the RSF to the negotiation table. And while doing so, it must be ensured at any cost that during the negotiation process, a ceasefire is maintained.