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THE IJR LENS ON AFRICA

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WHAT DOES IT TAKES TO BRING PEACE TO EMBATTLED SUDAN?

Some years ago, while working as a journalist for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), I was on assignment in Sudan. I recall being in the capital, Khartoum, where I had to pay for everything, including my hotel, in US dollars as no credit cards were accepted. At the time, the country was under international sanctions and excluded from the international SWIFT payment system. This was during the Omar al-Bashir regime, the former Sudanese leader who was later ousted from power. The Sudanese people I met were unwilling to speak in public about the regime, not even in their own homes. There was a culture of fear and distrust—something the Bashir regime was successful in creating with the constant threat of arrest.

I also travelled to Darfur, about 1,000 kilometres from the capital, to visit a UN refugee camp. I was escorted by several UN soldiers, who happened to be South African. During our journey, the soldiers pointed out the militia members of the rebel group Rapid Support Forces (RSF). They carried sniper rifles, but because we were part of a UN envoy, we were safe in that moment. The soldiers did warn us, however, that the militia were young, and some did not follow the rules of war.

I often reflect on this reporting assignment, as Sudan is a beautiful country despite its troubled history. For the past two years, however, it has been plagued by a war that has devastated many parts of the nation. Sudan, Africa's third-largest country, shares borders with Egypt, Chad, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Eritrea.

Many Sudanese people have fled the country, becoming refugees and facing a humanitarian crisis. Millions have been displaced, and some

humanitarian organisations, including the International Rescue Committee (IRC), have described Sudan as the "biggest humanitarian crisis ever recorded."

Who are the players?

The fighting has been between two warring military leaders who were once close allies: army head General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the RSF. They have been battling for control for ultimate power.

I have always maintained that this conflict is a power struggle between two individuals who were once friends and comrades but are now sworn enemies. The one side is the head of the army and *de facto* president, General Burhan, pitted against former deputy and the leader of a paramilitary group, General Dagalo, also known as 'Hemedti.'

Ironically, it was in Darfur that Hemedti rose to power and built his political base. The RSF and the army filled the void left by Bashir's ouster in 2019. Hemedti understands power, and after years of being in the background, he was Burhan's second-in-command in the Transitional Military Council, later serving as deputy in the powerful Sovereign Council.

The International Crisis Group warned in a paper released in April 2023 that the Burhan-Hemedti partnership was shaky from the outset and became increasingly unstable. The Crisis Group noted that tensions between the two escalated after "disagreement over the integration schedules and the chain of command." These disagreements grew into open conflict, exposing deep-seated rivalries and diverging ambitions. As the situation deteriorated, the fragile alliance that once held the council together fractured, raising serious concerns about the future stability of the region.

Humanitarian crisis

The fighting has been devastating for Sudan, a country of nearly 50 million people. "I am heartbroken and have effectively been displaced. Not everyone has the cash to leave; there is a scarcity of commodities, a lack of water, and no communication after MTN Sudatel towers were destroyed. Hospitals are without basic medication, and the army and the RSF have no regard for their people," a Sudanese journalist told me when the war started. Sadly, not much has changed.

According to the latest humanitarian update by the UN Refugee Agency, "there are now 12.0 million forcibly displaced due to the outbreak of conflict, including 7.7 million internally displaced and another 4.1 million in neighbouring countries."

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The death toll is estimated at more than 150,000 people. Several mediation efforts by different actors, including Saudi Arabia and the African Union, have so far failed to bring the warring parties together.

The ongoing violence has triggered a dire humanitarian crisis, with millions lacking access to basic necessities such as food, clean water, and medical care. As the situation worsens, international organisations are calling for urgent action to provide relief and support for those affected by the conflict. Sudan's army has maintained control of the country's central, northern, and eastern states.

Breaking in two.

And now, to complicate matters further, the RSF announced last month the formation of a new coalition and rival government in Darfur. The newly formed presidential council is led by the RSF's General Dagalo as the president, with another party, the SPLM-N, as its deputy. The council also includes regional governors.

The RSF, which controls nearly all of the Darfur region and parts of the south, along with some armed groups, formed the Sudan Founding Alliance (TASIS) in March. They had previously alluded to the fact that they would be establishing a "Government of Peace and Unity" in the region under their control. However, they have now gone a step further, with Dagalo claiming jurisdiction over all of Sudan.

In a statement, TASIS said it was committed "to build[ing] an inclusive homeland and a new, secular, democratic, decentralised, and voluntarily unified Sudan founded on the principles of freedom, justice, and equality."

Condemnation of this announcement was swift. The AU declared it would not recognise a "so-called parallel government" in Sudan, warning that it "has serious consequences on the peace efforts and the existential future of the country." The UN has cautioned that the existence of the new administration could deepen Sudan's fragmentation and complicate diplomatic efforts to end war.

Sudanese analysts argue that the timing of the announcement was intended to coincide with peace talks that were scheduled to take place in the United States but have since been postponed until September. This delay has raised concerns about the ongoing instability in the region and the potential for further conflict. Experts warn that without a unified approach to governance and peacebuilding, the situation in Sudan could deteriorate even further, leaving its citizens in a state of uncertainty and unrest.

The talks were due to be hosted by US secretary of state, Marco Rubio, alongside leaders from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Mediation efforts and what is next?

According to reports, Sudan's army has maintained control of the northern and eastern states from its wartime capital, Port Sudan, on the Red Sea. Earlier this year, it also regained its central states and the capital, where it says it will relocate.

The paramilitary group has also allied with the SPLM-N rebel group, which controls large areas of South Kordofan state along the border with South Sudan. More recently, the RSF has expanded the international borders of its controlled territory by taking control of the northern "border triangle" with Libya and Egypt.

Neither the army nor the RSF has shown a desire to end the war, as both sides refuse to negotiate for the best outcome, and support from international actors has done little to change the situation. In April, the army brought a legal case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing the UAE of supporting the RSF and demanding that the UAE pay "full reparations," including compensation to victims of the war.

The conflict has been devastating, causing a severe humanitarian crisis. Reem Ketait, an official from the UAE foreign ministry, reportedly told the ICJ that Sudan's claims were "completely untrue."

"Since the start of the war, the UAE has not provided any arms or related materiel to either". The claims made by Sudan were unfounded," Ketait said.

The international actors involved in the conflict must be held accountable, as there is no clear political will for the army and the RSF to begin meaningful mediation and find an end to the war. Without this, the upcoming talks in the US will have little impact on bringing peace to the country. The ongoing conflict has not only affected the lives of countless individuals but has also hindered the nation's potential for growth and stability. Amid the chaos, there are still stories of resilience from people who long to live in peace. If only the two men at the centre of the conflict would listen.

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