

Sudan's civil war and “world's worst” humanitarian crisis unleashed by imperialist scheming

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An emergency session of the United Nations Security Council held to discuss Sudan's catastrophic civil war on Monday occasioned much handwringing but failed to discuss any measures to stop the fighting or relieve what aid agencies have called “the world's worst humanitarian crisis.”

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that the Sudanese people are living through a “nightmare of violence, hunger and displacement,” while countless others are facing “unspeakable atrocities”, including widespread rapes. He highlighted “shocking reports of mass killings and sexual violence” in villages in east-central Gezira province where paramilitary fighters in a days-long assault had killed more than 120 people in one town.

Guterres said that outside powers are “fuelling the fire” and intensifying the nightmare of hunger and disease for millions and warned that the 18-month civil war faces the serious possibility of “igniting regional instability from the Sahel to the Horn of Africa to the Red Sea.”

The emergency session follows last month's UN fact-finding mission that said both sides of the conflict have probably committed war crimes, including targeting civilians and blocking humanitarian aid, during the now 18 months-long civil war.

Fighting broke out in April 2023 between the army, headed by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, leader of the Sovereign Council and de facto ruler of the country, and his deputy Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (better known as Hemedti) who heads the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF). The UN mission said that the RSF had also probably committed crimes against humanity and called for the deployment of an independent peacekeeping force to protect civilians.

The RSF, based in the western Darfur region, has taken control of the west of the country and most of the capital Khartoum. Al-Burhan, who has the backing of Egypt's military regime, South Sudan and Saudi Arabia, and what remains of the civil authorities have retreated to the east and Port Sudan, on the Red Sea where they have established a quasi-government-in-exile.

Both factions, composed of rival sub-ethnic groups with

competing interests, have the support of various local militias as well as constantly shifting support from outside forces, with Egypt (until forced to back off by its paymaster the United Arab Emirates), Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and more recently Iran supporting al-Burhan and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Russia's Wagner Group supporting the RSF and mobilising their regional allies in Libya, Chad and South Sudan. Russia has largely taken a neutral stance and latterly has supported al-Burhan. This has led to fighting along ethnic lines that has evolved into five or six different wars, with local militias taking control of the northern part of the country, with the potential to splinter the country and spill over into and exacerbate conflicts in neighbouring countries.

The two army leaders, al-Burhan and Dagalo, fighting to control Sudan rose to prominence during the war in Darfur, in which 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced in fighting from 2003 to 2008. Al-Burhan headed the army, while Dagalo led the notorious Janjaweed militias responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the conflict. Dagalo has become enormously rich based off Darfur's gold. Both men were implicated in war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Fighting between these two corrupt figures erupted in no small part due to longstanding efforts by US imperialism and other regional powers to exert control over Sudan and its resources—gold, minerals, oil and agricultural land—and cut off Khartoum's relationships with China, Russia and Iran, which all have growing economic interests in the region.

While there are no official or reliable statistics for the number of people killed in the conflict that started in the capital Khartoum, spread to Darfur and extended into other states, the death toll could be around 200,000. At least 245 towns or villages have been burnt, while much of Khartoum lies in ruins. The fighting has forced almost 11 million people to flee their homes, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). While around 3 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries such as Egypt and Chad, the vast majority—nearly 8 million—remain inside Sudan, many of them in camps like Zamzam, an internally displaced people (IDP) camp, on the outskirts of the city of el-Fasher in Northern

Darfur province in western Sudan

In August, the UN declared a full-blown famine—only the third time in 20 years—in the Zamzam. A staggering 25 million of Sudan’s 50 million population face severe food insecurity. Aid agencies have been unable to reach much of the country, with reports of some convoys taking six weeks to cross the country as both the Sudanese army and the RSF have refused to let trucks carrying aid go through their check points and/or are extorting bribes. Food prices have gone through the roof.

The situation has been further exacerbated by the heavy rains and flooding in the states of Red Sea, River Nile and Northern State that have caused deaths, injuries, the loss of livestock, the destruction of homes, public infrastructure, bridges, roads and the catastrophic collapse of the Arba’at Dam in Red Sea State, hindering the movement of goods and people. With the health system and water systems broken, cholera outbreaks have been reported, with at least 112 deaths between July 22 and September 1.

Last April, the charity Médecins Sans Frontières estimated that a child in the camp was dying from starvation or disease every two hours. Since then, the situation has worsened with Sudan facing mass starvation on a scale not seen in decades. Even in the most “optimistic scenario,” with fighting stopping and this month’s harvest better than last year’s, there could be six million “excess deaths” by 2027, with more than 10 million perishing if the fighting continues.

Sudan’s location in the Horn of Africa gives it enormous geopolitical strategic importance. It is the gateway to the Sahara, Sahel and the Horn. It has an 800-kilometre coastline along the Red Sea that carries around 15 percent of world trade by volume. While it borders seven countries, most of which are in an equally fragile state, it is also close to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf States.

The Gulf States have turned to the Horn of Africa in search of food supplies for their burgeoning populations, buying up land. Much of Sudan’s most fertile region—the states of Khartoum, River Nile and Northern that once sustained indigenous farmers—has been bought up, particularly after the 2008 food crisis and 2013 introduction of business-friendly legislation. Land has been turned over to highly mechanised food production for export, often via agreements with agribusiness companies such as the US firm Cargill. The UAE’s AD Ports Group has just signed a \$6 billion agreement to build and operate a port to export the produce, as well as an industrial zone, an international airport and an agricultural zone covering more than 400,000 acres at Abu Amama, north of Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

In other regions dominated by agro-pastoral subsistence economies, changes in the ownership, rearing and export of livestock have led to violent land clearances and the militarisation of livestock rearing for a rapidly expanding export market, as well as to the displacement and destitution of local people forced to live in edge-of-city shanty towns or giant

internally displaced peoples’ camps that are little more than bonded-labour camps. The militarised livestock production is believed to have played a role in exacerbating the ethnic and tribal rivalries and the civil war in Darfur and Kordofan states.

With the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, North Africa and the Red Sea basin becoming key battlegrounds for competing interests, the Biden administration in the United States has been unable to broker any agreement either among its own regional allies or between Sudan’s rival gangsters. While in the past the UN Secretary Council might have sent in peacekeepers to keep the warring factions apart and stop the killing, it has been stymied by the imperialist powers’ refusal to oppose the UAE—a crucial ally in its preparations for war against Iran—and the hostility between the US and Russia.

As a result, it has left it to regional bodies, including the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), an eight-country trade block in the Horn, and the African Union (AU) that are themselves wracked with conflicts. Guterres ruled out sending a UN peace-keeping force to Sudan, saying, “At present, the conditions do not exist for the successful deployment of a United Nations force to protect civilians in Sudan.”

With the Sudanese authorities’ three-month approval for the UN and aid groups to use the Adre border crossing between Chad and Darfur—that has also been used to transport mercenaries and arms to the RSF for some of the most intense fighting between government forces and the RSF—due to expire in mid-November, Russia insisted that it was up to the Sudanese government to decide whether the Adre crossing would remain open beyond mid-November and that it would be “inappropriate to put pressure on” the government.

Guterres pointed out that only 56 percent of the UN’s humanitarian funding appeal of \$2.7 billion had been met. The miserable funds testify to the prevailing view among the imperialist powers that Sudan’s impoverished people are surplus to requirements.



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