

Sudan fighting erupts between rival military factions backed by external powers

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On Saturday, fighting broke out across Khartoum, the Sudanese capital, and other cities between rival factions of Sudan's armed forces.

The fighting comes after months of rising tensions spiralled into an all-out battle for control of the country. Paramilitaries from the Rapid Support Force (RSF) headed by warlord Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, deputy leader of the ruling Sovereign Council, and believed to have 100,000 fighters—said they had taken control of the presidential palace, the state television station, Khartoum airport where two Saudi jets were hit, and other key buildings and infrastructure. The military, headed by army chief, leader of the Sovereign Council and de facto ruler General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, denied the claims.

Armed clashes were reported across the country, including at the Port Sudan on the Red Sea, West Darfur, Meroe and the southern provinces, with both sides claiming control of key installations, and accusing each other of staging a coup. There are fears of a broader civil war, embroiling neighbouring countries amid reports of Egyptian forces fighting alongside the Sudanese army in Meroe, where Cairo has a base housing fighter jets used in joint drills in 2020.

The air force told people to stay indoors while airstrikes were launched on an RSF base in Khartoum's twin city of Omdurman, with the Sudanese army saying the airport and other bases remained under its "full control." With fighting taking place in residential areas where the two sides have offices and bases, at least 56 people have been reported killed and 600 more injured, including civilians and combatants. On Sunday, a working day, the authorities declared a holiday in Khartoum state, closing schools, banks and government offices.

Both leaders rose to prominence during the war in Darfur, in western Sudan, where 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced in fighting from 2003 to 2008. Al-Burhan was an army chief, while Dagalo (widely known as Hemedti), led the notorious Janjaweed militias responsible for the worst atrocities of the conflict.

Al-Burhan is backed by Egypt's brutal dictator, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and layers close to the military that have long controlled Sudan's sprawling military-industrial complex. He is reportedly supportive of the US and the European powers in the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Dagalo, who has

become enormously rich based on Darfur's gold, is backed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Controlling the export of gold, he has close relations with Russia whose Wagner mercenaries operate in Sudan and neighbouring Central African Republic.

The eruption of hostilities prompted US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres, the Saudi and UAE foreign ministers, Russia, China, the Arab League and African Union to appeal for calm, testifying to the multiple, competing interests in the conflict-ridden country. On Sunday afternoon, with al-Burhan's forces apparently gaining the upper hand in Khartoum, both sides agreed to the UN's proposal for a three-hour humanitarian pause.

The long-expected power struggle threatens to destabilise not just Sudan but much of the Horn of Africa region, which is beset with myriad conflicts amid drought and famine and is the arena of a battle for influence involving the Gulf powers, the US, the European Union and Russia.

Sudan's military has close relations with Russia, which is trying to establish a base at Port Sudan, on the Red Sea; selling much of its gold that accounts for 40 percent of the country's exports to Russia via the UAE; abstaining on the UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine and infuriating the Biden administration. Washington is determined to sever Sudan's relationship with Iran, Russia and China, close Port Sudan to the Russian navy, and strengthen its regional anti-Iran alliance to which Sudan had signed up earlier this year.

The European powers are anxious to avoid any instability in Sudan, strategically located in the Horn of Africa alongside the Red Sea and the entrance to the Suez Canal, that might disrupt oil supplies or generate a new wave of refugees. It takes place as Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous country and the Horn's powerhouse, having reached an agreement to end a two-year-long civil war with Tigrayan rebels, faces mass unrest in Amhara province over plans to integrate its regional armed force into the national army. The Amhara forces played a key role in defeating the Tigrayans, with whom it has territorial disputes.

The violence at the weekend erupted after weeks of mounting tensions, increased army deployment and security measures and jockeying for public and international support over the planned

integration of the RSF—along with former rebel militias involved in insurgencies in various parts of the country—into the Sudanese army. This was a key demand of al-Burhan’s faction in the negotiations due to be concluded this month, returning the country to civilian rule and ending the political and economic turmoil that has engulfed the country since December 2018. Dagalo had called for the elimination of the Islamist powerbrokers from the al-Bashir era and civilian control of the military.

In April 2019, following months of mass protests against the Muslim Brotherhood-backed military dictatorship of President Omar al-Bashir that had the support of Qatar and Turkey, military chief al-Burhan—with the support of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia—mounted a pre-emptive coup, overthrowing al-Bashir. His aim was to prevent the overthrow of the entire state apparatus and the expropriation of their substantial financial and corporate institutions that control much of the Sudanese economy.

In the months that followed, and despite a massacre by the military of more than 1,000 unarmed protesters, the leaders of the protest movement—the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), an umbrella group of 22 bourgeois and petty-bourgeois groups, including the professional trade unions and the Sudanese Communist Party—held out the prospect of negotiating a return to civilian rule with the military. Given Sudan’s long history since independence from Britain in 1956 of coups and military rule, such a treacherous path could only provide a cover for the military to carry out the economic measures needed to remove the US sanctions that had crippled the country and access international loans.

In the event, the government of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, a British-trained economist and former member of the Sudanese Communist Party, as head of a transitional “technocratic” government, with the real power held by al-Burhan’s Sovereign Council, lasted little more than a couple of years.

When free market and political reforms, including the abolition of fuel subsidies, the privatisation of hundreds of state companies and the crackdown on corruption and the looting of state revenues by companies linked to al-Bashir and the military, threatened the military’s substantial commercial, political and diplomatic interests, al-Burhan sacked Hamdok and his “technocratic” government and resumed military rule in October 2021. He stacked the governing and state-owned bodies with generals, Islamists and other reliable allies of the al-Bashir regime and stepped-up repression, clamping down on the resurgent protest movement. Undaunted, the main opposition parties agreed another treacherous and unpopular deal with the military that reinstated Hamdok, which fell apart weeks later, leaving al-Burhan in power.

Since then, Burhan and Hemedti have had increasingly fractious relations, amid a crackdown on the ongoing social protests that have led to the deaths of more than 120 civilians.

Some 15 million of Sudan’s 46 million people face acute food insecurity due to escalating food and fuel prices, the economic crisis precipitated by the secession of oil-rich South Sudan in 2011, political instability, conflicts and the displacement of some 3 million people, poor harvests and floods.

The FFC has supported Dagalo, whom they view as a counter to the Islamists, and in December signed a renewed framework agreement for a return to civilian rule, although local resistance committees opposed the deal. This agreement has little to say about the dismantling of the former regime, the Juba Peace Agreement with the various rebel movements that has failed to resolve the conflicts, and the crisis in Sudan’s resource-rich east—which is home to diamond and gold mines—as well as the vital Port Sudan, where armed groups have taken control of the country’s ports and are demanding more autonomy.

The claim that any civilian government, stitched together by such forces, would be capable of resolving the enormous social and economic problems confronting Sudanese workers and rural masses is a dangerous trap. The aim of these middle-class forces, liberal layers and their fake left supporters is to block a social revolution, as the history of the Middle East and Africa has shown.

The only way to combat the offensive of the military and the machinations of the imperialist and regional powers and to establish a democratic regime in Sudan is through a struggle led by the working class, on a revolutionary socialist perspective. This must be directed at taking power, expropriating the regime’s ill-gotten wealth in the context of a broad international struggle of the working class against capitalism and for the building of socialism. This requires the construction of a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Sudan, as well as sections in Egypt and all the countries of North Africa and the Middle East.



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