

# Sudan's "forgotten war" leads to epic suffering and regional instability

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Last week, United Nations (UN) relief agencies warned the Security Council that Sudan is suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crises in recent history, after nearly a year of gruesome fighting between rival factions of the Sudanese armed forces for control of the country.

Sudan faces a famine of biblical proportions because of the war, displacement, the breakdown of the economy and the almost total absence of international aid. Many buildings in the capital Khartoum have been destroyed. The government, virtually bankrupt, barely functions.

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 RSF, based in the western Darfur region, has taken control of the west of the country and most of the capital Khartoum, although it is struggling to hold onto these gains. Al-Burhan, despite backing from Egypt's military regime, South Sudan and Saudi Arabia, has yet to win a major battle. He has retreated to the east and Port Sudan, on the Red Sea.

Both factions, composed of rival sub-ethnic groups with competing interests, have the support of various local militias, leading to fighting often along ethnic lines, as well as support from outside forces. They are mobilising for a long war in the east of the country.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, there have been 13,900 reported fatalities across Sudan, while the Health Ministry has reported 27,700 people injured between 15 April 2023 and 26 January 2024.

The UN highlighted "mass graves, gang rapes, shockingly indiscriminate attacks in densely populated areas" and the displacement of 8.1 million of Sudan's 45 million population, including at least 1.76 million who have fled to neighbouring countries also wracked by poverty and instability.

According to the UN, "at least 25 million people are struggling with soaring rates of hunger and malnutrition" and 3.8 million children under the age of five are malnourished. Aid agencies say that a child in refugee camps in Darfur dies of hunger about every two hours. Martin Griffiths, head of the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

(OCHA), warned that "almost five million people could slip into catastrophic food insecurity in some parts of the country in the coming months."

Cholera has broken out. At least 292 people have been killed by the disease and there were over 10,700 suspected cases as of 17 February 2024.

Compounding the crisis is the disruption to farming by the fighting. The *Middle East Eye* cited the Sudanese organisation Fikra for Studies and Development as reporting, "Only 37 percent Sudan's agricultural land has been cultivated in comparison to previous years. Also, Sudan's national wheat production has reduced by 70 percent."

With international attention focused on the US/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, Sudan's war and its wider implications have been all but ignored. The UN relief agencies have called for \$2.7 billion of assistance for this year, but they have received pledges for just \$135 million. Last year, just 43 percent of the target was raised. The miserable funds testify to the prevailing view among the imperialist powers that Sudan's impoverished people are surplus to requirements.

The two army leaders 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 since 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.

The country saw its first military coup within three years of independence from Britain in 1956, aimed at suppressing the working class and tenant farmers whose struggles had rapidly politicised as key export prices fell, threatening the economy with collapse.

Since then, the country has been riven by secessionary wars,

violence and intrigues, spread across its unstable neighbours. These conflicts testify to the multiple, competing interests in the conflict-ridden Sahel region and the Horn of Africa, strategically located on the Red Sea through which 20 percent of global container shipping passes.

The expansion of commercial, export-oriented agriculture, spurred on by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and Gulf investors, has been characterised by violent expropriation, rampant exploitation, deep inefficiencies, and ecological destruction, which in turn spurs more land grabs. This has torn apart traditional ways of life, created severe food insecurity in one of Africa's most fertile regions and fuelled tensions between communities.

Apart from a few brief periods, Sudan has been subject to military rule or military-backed dictatorships that ruthlessly quashed all dissent on behalf of the country's tiny elite.

Al-Burhan first came to prominence in April 2019, when, following months of mass protests across the country and with the support of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, he led the pre-emptive military coup that overthrew President Omar al-Bashir and his Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated military dictatorship.

The protests were fuelled by Sudan's economic collapse, precipitated by the US-brokered secession of oil-rich South Sudan in 2011, poor harvests and floods that led to soaring food and fuel prices, widespread poverty, political instability, conflicts and the displacement of some 3 million people.

The aim of the military was to prevent the overthrow of the entire state apparatus and the expropriation of their own substantial financial and corporate institutions that control much of the Sudanese economy. Al-Burhan opened negotiations with leaders of the protests, 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, over the formation of a joint military-civilian government to provide a cover for the military, while carrying out the economic measures needed to remove US sanctions and access international loans.

Just weeks afterwards, soldiers and paramilitaries massacred more than 1,000 unarmed protesters, chasing them through Khartoum, tying concrete blocks to their feet and throwing them into the Nile. In October 2021, Abdalla Hamdok's transitional "technocratic" government, made up of "leftists" and serving as a front for the Sovereign Council headed by al-Burhan, threatened the military's privileged commercial and political interests. Al-Burhan sacked it, resuming military rule alongside Islamists and other reliable allies of the al-Bashir regime.

Eighteen months later, war broke out between al-Burhan and Dagalo following mounting tensions over the planned integration of the RSF, and other former rebel militias involved in insurgencies in various parts of the country, into the Sudanese army.

Al-Burhan's faction has supported the US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and was backed by Egypt until Cairo was forced to back off by its paymaster, the UAE, which has become increasingly entrenched in the region.

According to the *New York Times*, the UAE is covertly shipping weapons to the RSF, as well as to Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, who controls the Tobruk government in eastern Libya. Abu Dhabi has also supported neighbouring and landlocked Ethiopia's controversial agreement with the internationally unrecognised breakaway Somaliland for access to the port of Berbera, developed by UAE's DP World.

Somalia, along with its allies Qatar and Turkey, views this as an attack on its territorial integrity and has recalled its ambassador from Addis Ababa.

Dagalo has courted support from Somaliland and Ethiopia, as well as Chad, all increasingly dependent on UAE investment, threatening more regional instability. Further afield, his control over the export of Sudanese gold has fostered close connections with Russia, which buys via the UAE, enabling the Putin government to bypass NATO sanctions.

Moscow, whose Wagner mercenaries operate in Sudan, eastern Libya and neighbouring Central African Republic, is trying to establish a base at Port Sudan. There have been rumours and unverified reports of Ukrainian forces active in the country, targeting Russian operatives.

With the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, North Africa and the Red Sea basin becoming key battlegrounds for competing interests, an infuriated Biden administration has been unable to broker any agreement either among its own regional allies or between Sudan's rival gangsters, with its special envoys to the country each quitting after a few months in post.



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