

Two years on: Sudan's civil war spreads amid worsening humanitarian disaster

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Britain, Sudan's former colonial ruler and the UN Security Council's penholder on the country, hosted delegates from 20 countries at a conference in London last week on the second anniversary of Sudan's civil war in a bid to resolve it. It broke up without achieving any of its objectives.

In April 2023, fighting broke out between two former allies and military chiefs, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, leader of the Sovereign Council, de facto ruler of the country and head of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and his deputy Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, leader of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The country was split, with the RSF, based in the western Darfur region, seizing the capital Khartoum and the west of the country, and the SAF taking the eastern part of the country, including the Red Sea Port Sudan. But al-Burhan's forces and what remains of the civil authorities have started to regain control of the country. Having recently recaptured Khartoum, now largely devastated by the fighting, al-Burhan is pressing on for total victory and the RSF's surrender.

Fighting is ongoing in much of the country. In recent days, the RSF has captured two refugee camps in Darfur, displaced 400,000 people from Zamzam refugee camp and killed more than 400 people around El Fasher, the last major city in Darfur held by Sudan's military, in an offensive that began in the last few weeks. El Fasher is one of several areas of Darfur where a famine, affecting 637,000 people, is raging.

Both rival military factions, composed of sub-ethnic groups with competing economic interests, have the backing of various local militias and constantly shifting support from outside forces. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Eritrea and Iran have backed al-Burhan and the SAF, while the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Russia's mercenary Wagner Group have supported Dagalo and the RSF, mobilising regional allies in Libya, Chad and South Sudan, although more recently Russia has supported al-Burhan.

These Arab and African states are using Sudan's conflict to gain power, influence and access to resources, gold, minerals and agricultural land in the war-torn country. As the gateway to the Sahara, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, Sudan's location gives it enormous geostrategic importance. It has an 800-kilometre coastline along the Red Sea that carries around

15 percent of world trade by volume.

Not only does Sudan border seven countries, most of which are in an equally fragile state, it is close to the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf States. Turkey and Qatar signed deals to build and manage commercial ports there in the 2010s and in 2022 a UAE consortium signed a \$6 billion port and agriculture project, now cancelled because of its support for the RSF. Russia has agreed a deal with the SAF to build a naval base in Port Sudan.

These commercial interests have spawned fighting along ethnic lines that has evolved into five or six different wars, with local militias taking control of different parts of the country. With the potential to fragment Sudan, it now threatens to spill over into and exacerbate conflicts in neighbouring countries. The intensely bitter fighting has been characterised on both sides as war crimes, including targeting civilians and blocking humanitarian aid.

The two army leaders fighting to control Sudan rose to prominence during the 2003-08 war in Darfur, in which 300,000 people were killed and 2.5 million displaced. Al-Burhan headed the army, while Dagalo led the notorious Janjaweed militias responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the conflict. Dagalo became enormously rich based on Darfur's gold transported to and sold in the UAE. 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 regional powers to exert control over Sudan and its resources and cut off Khartoum's relationships with China, Russia and Iran, which all have growing economic interests in the region.

In de facto recognition of the expanding and externally driven nature of the war, British Foreign Secretary David Lammy, who organised the conference, did not invite the main Sudanese parties to the conflict (the SAF and RSF), al-Burhan who remains the official head of state, or civilian organisations. He did however invite their regional backers, including the UAE, which the UK government supplies with arms. Al-Burhan has accused the UAE of facilitating genocide by the RSF in a case relating to the RSF's treatment of the Masalit people in Darfur that has just opened at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

The conference failed to produce a joint communique as negotiations broke down amid a fallout among the Arab powers on opposing sides of the war. Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed language that called for “respecting state institutions”, implicit backing for the SAF and de facto government, while the UAE that supports the rival RSF opposed that line in favour of stronger language calling for “civilian governance”.

What started out as a power struggle between the military’s two leaders has become a proxy war involving regional powers for control over the Horn of Africa’s resources. While the UN Secretary Council might have sent peacekeepers in the past 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 their preparations for war against Iran—and the hostility between the US and Russia under the Biden administration.

Efforts to form a new African Union-led international contact group to facilitate a ceasefire were unsuccessful as the two sides and their backers have refused to negotiate.

Neither did the conference seek donor pledges for what aid agencies have called “the world’s worst humanitarian crisis”. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of people are believed to have been killed in the fighting, which has forced nearly 13 million people to flee their homes—the world’s largest displacement crisis—according to the UN’s International Organization for Migration (IOM). Around 3 million have taken refuge in neighbouring countries including Egypt and Chad, but the vast majority remain inside Sudan, many in internally displaced people (IDP) camps such as Zamzam, on the outskirts of the city of el-Fasher in Northern Darfur province in western Sudan.

Most have lost their livelihoods and rely on community networks or aid agencies. In March 2024, the World Food Programme declared Sudan the world’s largest hunger crisis. Months later, famine conditions were reported in five areas of North Darfur and Nuba Mountains in Kordofan state.

The fighting and aerial bombing have eviscerated critical infrastructure, with roads, hospitals, water systems, dams, power lines, internet connections and markets damaged or destroyed. This has combined to stop food reaching markets, particularly those in isolated and conflict-locked areas, forcing up prices. Famine is expected to spread to at least 10 areas by next month, ahead of the lean season.

A combination of food insecurity, poor water facilities and a lack of functioning hospitals is driving a rapidly worsening nutrition crisis, while outbreaks of infectious diseases, including a cholera outbreak across 10 states earlier this year, are increasing the risk of malnutrition and disease in the coming months when the rains will restrict access.

Half of Sudan’s 51 million people, including 3.7 million children under the age of five, need humanitarian assistance, yet in February only 3 million, identified as in need, had received assistance, according to the UN’s Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). The huge cutbacks in foreign aid, including the USAID stop-work orders earlier this year, amounting to up to 80 percent, have made matters worse, forcing the closure of community kitchens upon which many depend.

Last year’s conference in Paris received pledges of more than €2bn (£1.68bn) for Sudan. While the UK pledged £87 million, Foreign Office officials have refused to say whether this was actually paid, amid Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s announcement in February that he would use the UK’s aid budget to fund an increase for the military. The World Bank pledged \$555 million but that too has not been paid. The UN’s fund for Sudan has received just 6.63 percent of its target, a shortfall of \$3.9 billion.

At last week’s conference, Lammy pledged £120 million in humanitarian aid, enough to help deliver food to 650,000 people, while Germany’s foreign minister, Annalena Baerbock, released a further €125 million (£105 million) for Sudan and neighbouring states.

Despite the terrible humanitarian situation, the war shows every sign of embroiling at least some of Sudan’s equally fractious neighbours.

The RSF has broadened its wartime coalition, adding the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-North), a rebel group based along Sudan’s border with South Sudan, linked to the ruling party of South Sudan’s President Salva Kiir.

Kiir, whose forces have been fighting those of his rival and main opposition leader, Vice-President Riek Machar, has accused al-Burhan’s SAF of aiding Machar, whom he has arrested and detained, presaging a resumption of the six-year long civil war that ended in 2018.

Tensions are also rising between al-Burhan’s SAF and Chad, which hosts over 750,000 Sudanese refugees and has served as a major conduit for arms to the RSF, threatening renewed fighting between the two countries. Sudan and Chad fought a war involving proxies from 2005 until 2010 as a spillover from the war in Darfur.



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