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Working with Others to Halt Sudan's Collapse

After a year of war in Sudan, thousands have been killed and nine million are displaced. In this excerpt from the Watch List 2024 – Spring Update, Crisis Group explains how the EU and its member states can bolster mediation and respond to the humanitarian catastrophe.

The catastrophic war in Sudan has entered its second year, with no end in sight. The conflict erupted in April 2023 amid a struggle between the country's two most powerful security forces, the Sudanese army, under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti. After a year of fighting, much of the capital Khartoum lies in ruins, with major combat still raging there and in several other cities and parts of the countryside. The state has largely collapsed. The war has killed tens of thousands, displaced nine million and threatens millions more with starvation. Both belligerents – but particularly the army – are blocking food aid, even as Sudan barrels toward famine. Mediation efforts remain in disarray, and outside states are backing opposing sides in the conflict, adding fuel to the fire.

The imperative to end the war could hardly be clearer. The longer the conflict lasts, the harder it will be to resolve, as both the main protagonists face internal fragmentation and more and more armed groups join the fray. The country's humanitarian disaster – already extreme – will keep getting worse until the guns fall silent.

To bolster mediation efforts and help prevent mass starvation, the European Union and its member states should:

- Put their weight behind the formal ceasefire talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia;
- Help align the peace efforts of key players, including the UN, the African Union (AU), the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional bloc, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE);
- Support work toward a future political process in Sudan, including by continuing to convene and encourage dialogue among Sudanese political and civil figures;
- Meet their aid pledges and lead efforts to demand unhindered humanitarian access to all Sudanese in need; and
- Ensure that the need to resolve Sudan's conflict does not get lost amid the focus on crises in Ukraine and Gaza, which have consumed much of European and U.S. attention.

A Catastrophic Conflict

The conflict in Sudan ignited in April 2023 just four years after the Sudanese people managed to overthrow the 30-year dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. It pits the two most powerful security institutions of Bashir's regime – the army and the RSF, which formed partly from the remnants of the Janjaweed militias that fought at Bashir's behest in the Darfur campaign in the early 2000s – against each other. A proliferating array of militias has been joining the war on either side in recent months.

By way of background, after Bashir's generals removed him from power in April 2019 in the face of a popular movement, they had to devise a plan for appeasing the protesters, who opposed military rule. Eventually, they agreed to hand over power to a civilian transitional government that would pave the way for elections. But though the government was nominally civilian-led, the real authority continued to lie with the top military brass. The army's Burhan served as head of the Sovereign Council, making him Sudan's de facto head of state, while the RSF's Hemedti was formally his deputy. In October 2021, the two dissolved the civilian government and seized complete control of the government in a military coup.

But that power-sharing arrangement did not last, either. In time, the testy alliance between Burhan and Hemedti unravelled, eventually leading to civil war. The reasons were several, but one major trigger was Burhan's decision to reinstate Bashir-era security and military officials to their former roles, in part to counter Hemedti's growing influence. The RSF's recruitment of tens of thousands into its ranks, its political alliances, including with prominent civilian politicians, its commercial interests and its roots in Darfur had all stirred unease in the army's officer corps. The army has dominated the country's institutions and its rigged economy since independence in 1956. The tensions culminated in a standoff in Khartoum in early 2023, amid negotiations over a plan to integrate

the RSF into the army and mounting external pressure to restore civilian rule. Conflict erupted on 15 April 2023. It is unclear who fired the first shot.

The RSF had the advantage for most of the war. Its rank and file have extensive battlefield experience as a paramilitary force, with many having fought in Darfur in the 2000s or alongside the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen in the 2010s. The RSF quickly gained the upper hand, seizing most of Khartoum and much of the sister cities of Omdurman and Bahri within the first month. By the end of 2023, the RSF had expanded its control of vast territories encompassing much of the Darfur and Kordofan regions in western Sudan and, after a surprise offensive in December, Gezira state south of Khartoum.

In 2024, however, momentum seesawed, as the RSF appeared bogged down and the army scored its first significant victories of the war, taking parts of Omdurman across the Nile from Khartoum. From there, the army expanded its offensive into Bahri, directly north of the capital, though this area remains predominantly in RSF hands. The army is now attempting to seize the al-Jaili oil refinery, approximately 70km north of Khartoum, a critical asset for RSF ground operations. The army's offensive got a boost from Iranian drones, acquired after Burhan restored diplomatic ties with Tehran in October 2023. It also has used airstrikes to apply pressure to RSF positions in Darfur and Gezira. Meanwhile, the RSF's advance into Gezira, in the country's riverine heartland, sparked widespread popular mobilisation against it. The RSF and allied militias have committed numerous atrocities during the war, including in Gezira, looting residential areas, killing civilians and perpetrating sexual violence against women and girls.

Neither side has made notable gains in recent weeks, suggesting that the conflict may be entering another stalemate. Though both

sides may try to launch new offensives, both will need time to regroup and resupply.

Deadlock or no, the conflict has entered a perilous new phase, with Sudan slipping deeper into disintegration. For one thing, both main belligerents are struggling with command and control. Burhan has grown increasingly reliant on ex-Bashir and Islamist elements, as well as communal militias and other armed groups, to battle the RSF. He risks losing his hold on the various factions. The RSF, meanwhile, is an ever more motley assortment of tribal militias and warlords, often motivated by the chance for plunder and varied local objectives. The multiplication of groups aligned with the warring parties, with each pursuing its own interests, has made both wartime coalitions more unwieldy.

Further, the war between the army and RSF has aggravated an array of inter-communal conflicts in many parts of the country. Recruitment along ethnic lines led to mass killings and displacement of the Masalit, a non-Arab community, from West Darfur at the hands of the RSF and aligned militias at the beginning of the war. Other Darfuri non-Arab armed groups, such as the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army led by Minni Minnawi, the Justice and Equality Movement headed by Jibril Ibrahim and Mustafa Tambour's Sudan Liberation Movement faction, have joined forces with the army, including by fighting the RSF in Gezira, on the other side of the country from Darfur.

The involvement of Darfuri armed groups and affiliated militias in support of the army has escalated conflicts between Arab and non-Arab communities around El Fasher, a city in North Darfur state. RSF fighters have encircled El Fasher, apparently poised to launch a final assault on the army's final stronghold in Darfur. Any such full-scale confrontation would likely lead to more mass atrocities along communal lines. These tensions are exacerbated by the army's continued bombing of Arab-inhabited areas of Darfur, the mobilisation by the pro-army Darfuri groups to fight the RSF and recurrent clashes between the opposing sides. Both

the RSF and the army rally their supporters with narratives of existential threat. Fissures within many of these groups add to the fragmentation trend and increase the risk of inter- and intra-communal fighting.

Sudan is already facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent memory. Famine looms, with nearly 90 per cent of those experiencing acute food insecurity trapped in active conflict zones, including millions in areas like greater Khartoum, Gezira and El Fasher. To make things worse, both the army and RSF are obstructing aid delivery, though hunger is greatest in RSF-controlled areas, where the army has largely refused permission to UN agencies (which recognise Burhan's government as Sudan's) to deliver assistance.

The conflict in Sudan has far-reaching consequences that extend well beyond its borders, embroiling neighbouring states and fuelling regional instability. The involvement of external powers such as Egypt, Iran and the UAE complicates the conflict's resolution, while also raising the risk of spillover, particularly into Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea. Jihadist groups may also be able to establish a foothold in the country.

Meanwhile, mediation efforts continue to falter, in no small part because of Burhan's reluctance to participate. The U.S. and Saudi Arabia are working to convene a third round of negotiations in Jeddah, this time broadened to include Egypt, the UAE, the AU and the Horn of Africa bloc IGAD, but they appear to be struggling to coax the army back to the table. Egypt, which backs the army, and the UAE, which is the RSF's main patron, succeeded in bringing top officials from the two sides together in Bahrain in January 2023, but the army eventually withdrew from those talks. Another prominent initiative by IGAD foundered after Burhan's government suspended Sudan's membership in protest of Hemedti's invitation to an IGAD summit on Sudan in January.

Key players have recently upgraded their diplomacy, raising hopes for a more serious response. The U.S. and UN appointed

well-respected envoys for Sudan, while the AU named a new high-level panel, also headed by a veteran diplomat. Meanwhile, an April high-level donor conference on Sudan in Paris raised more than \$2 billion in aid pledges and convened important side discussions among Sudanese civil actors. Yet the various attempts to end the conflict still lack coherence and

urgency, with the White House keeping a visible distance from the new U.S. envoy's efforts, the AU continuing to postpone its promised launch of a civilian political track and the initiatives of key international actors – the U.S., the UN, Arab powers, the EU and the AU as well as IGAD – remaining disjointed.

What the EU Can Do

To help halt Sudan's spiral, it is crucial for the European Union and its member states to push concertedly in the same direction.

To start with, the EU should rally its members in support of a new round of formal talks in Jeddah, regardless of whether Brussels has a seat at the table. That means helping push the warring parties to negotiate, while also encouraging other key outside actors – namely the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, as well as the AU and IGAD – to work together to avoid forum shopping and competition. Annette Weber, the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, is a key interlocutor shuttling among influential powers on both sides of the Red Sea and pressing for resolution of the war. EU member states should back her efforts.

Secondly, the EU and member states should also urge powerful actors in the region, such as Egypt and the UAE, to uphold the commitments they made at the Paris donor conference to refrain from exacerbating the conflict by supplying weapons and perpetuating political divisions.

Thirdly, the EU should continue to back the idea of an African-led political process, as it has done since the beginning of the conflict. It is well positioned to do so, as a member of the AU Core Group tasked with coordinating external engagement in Sudan. While the AU has yet to launch a process, the EU, in collaboration with various European organisations, has convened several dialogues among civilian leaders. The most recent happened on the sidelines of the Paris conference, where the EU convened the

first major meeting of a range of Sudanese political actors with opposing stances and visions for the future. Many Sudanese consider this gathering a big step forward. Should the process gather momentum, the EU's active facilitation and support for transparent, inclusive consultations, which are representative of Sudan's diverse political landscape, can help lay the groundwork for robust discussions and ultimately for the Sudanese to find common ground.

Fourthly, Brussels and member states should continue to be leading providers of humanitarian assistance to Sudan, while also doing all they can to help the aid reach the country's most vulnerable people. In 2023, the EU allocated over €128 million in humanitarian aid. It made additional pledges at the Paris conference, which along with those from member states added up to close to half of the €2 billion promised there, although it is unclear how much represents new funding. It is imperative that Europe fulfil these pledges and that Brussels hold its member states accountable to their commitments. Beyond that, the EU should put more public and private pressure on the warring parties and their backers to allow humanitarian aid to reach all Sudanese, no matter where they live.

Finally, as the war in Sudan goes on, it is crucial for the EU to maintain pressure on the army and RSF to seek a negotiated resolution, while working to ensure that Sudan is not crowded out of the global agenda by headline-grabbing crises in Ukraine and Gaza. The

further collapse of Sudan would be disastrous from both the humanitarian perspective and the vantage of peace and security. It could send shock waves through the entire Red Sea and Sahel regions, and it could make the country a haven for jihadists. Urgent action is vital to mitigate the human toll of violence and famine. By helping focus world attention on Sudan's

tragedy and working in lockstep with key players, the EU can boost efforts to halt the country's spiral while helping prevent large-scale famine and curb the growing instability in the crisis-plagued Horn of Africa. ■

