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The authorities repressed the media, civil society organizations and opposition political parties, severely curtailing freedoms of expression, association and assembly. Armed conflict in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states continued to cause mass displacement and civilian casualties; human rights abuses were perpetrated by all parties to these conflicts. Government forces destroyed civilian buildings, including schools, hospitals and clinics in conflict areas, and obstructed humanitarian access to civilians needing support because of the ongoing hostilities.

Background

Parliament approved controversial amendments to the 2005 National Interim Constitution in January 2015. These increased the powers of the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) and granted the President greater powers to appoint and remove senior officials, including state governors and other senior constitutional, judicial, military, police and security posts. The constitutional amendment to Article 151 transformed the NISS from an intelligence agency focused on information gathering, analysis and advice to a fully fledged security agency exercising functions usually carried out by the armed forces or law enforcement agencies.

In April, presidential and parliamentary elections took place. President Omar al-Bashir was re-elected for five years amid reports of low voter turnout, fraud and vote-rigging. The main political opposition parties boycotted the elections. In the run-up to April's presidential election, the government restricted freedoms of expression, association and peaceful assembly and arrested dozens of political opponents.¹

The climate of impunity fostered by lack of accountability for crimes under international law and other serious human rights violations remained prevalent in conflict areas. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights reported in August that, during 2014, there had been at least 411 violent incidents in Darfur in which 980 individuals had been injured or killed. These included abductions, physical assaults and armed attacks against civilians, particularly the internally displaced. Few of these cases were investigated or resulted in arrests. In South Kordofan and Blue Nile states, the conflicts continued with devastating impacts on civilians and limited prospects of peaceful solutions.² Fighting began in mid-2011 and the last direct peace talks between the government of Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), under the auspices of the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP), were suspended in November 2015.

Freedom of expression

The NISS intensified its harassment and censorship of newspapers which regularly faced arbitrary confiscation of their publications. At least 21 different newspapers had editions confiscated by the NISS on 56 different occasions. Newspapers also faced arbitrary requirements imposed by the NISS. For example, they were forbidden from reporting critically on the conduct of the security services, the armed forces, the police and the President. Further, they were banned from reporting corruption cases, human rights violations and the situation in conflict areas.

Al Midan newspaper, affiliated with the Sudanese Communist Party, was prevented from publishing in January and February. Its editor, Madeeha Abdallah, faced several charges under the 1991 Criminal Act including undermining the constitutional order, which carries the death penalty.

On 16 February, NISS agents confiscated the entire print run of 14 newspapers from the printers, without explanation. Some of the newspapers were directly or indirectly funded and supported by the ruling political party, the National Congress Party (NCP). On 25 May, NISS agents confiscated the entire print run of nine newspapers in Khartoum.

Freedom of association

The suppression of civil society increased during the year. In January, the NISS shut down three civil society organizations on the basis that they were violating their registration licences. They were the Mahmoud Mohamed Taha Cultural Centre, the National Civic Forum and the Sudanese Writers' Union. In June, the Sudanese Consumer Protection Society was shut down and two of its members were arrested and interrogated by the NISS.

They were released without charge after seven days. The Confederation of Sudanese Civil Society Organizations reported in July that, since the beginning of 2015, more than 40 registered organizations had failed to renew their licence due to cumbersome legal procedures or obstruction by the government's regulatory body, the Humanitarian Aid Commission.

Freedom of assembly

The police and NISS agents repeatedly repressed freedom of assembly before and during the elections held from 13-17 April.

Opposition political parties were repeatedly prevented from organizing public events during the pre-election campaign period from 24 February to 10 April. On 28 February, the police forcibly dispersed a meeting of opposition political parties in Dongola, capital of Northern state, seriously injuring many participants. On 12 March, the police in North Kordofan forcibly prevented members of the National Umma Party from organizing a public event. Police arrested 50 party members and closed the party's office. On 2 April, local authorities in Al Nihoud in West Kordofan state prohibited a public event arranged by the Sudanese Congress Party to publicize its boycott of the election.

In August, the NISS prohibited a political symposium of the Sudanese Congress Party (SCP) and arrested three senior members. Also in August, the Minister of Justice dissolved one of the oldest trade unions in the country, the Sudanese Farmers' Union, which had been in existence since 1954. On 5 September, the authorities shut down the Republican Party's offices in Omdurman.

Arbitrary arrests, torture and other ill-treatment

The NISS carried out arbitrary arrests and detentions, a number of which were politically motivated. Some detainees were released without charge. None appear to have received compensation and no security officers appeared to have been held to account.

Farouk Abu Issa, leader of the opposition alliance National Consensus Forces (NCF), Dr Amin Maki Madani, head of the Alliance of Sudanese Civil Society Organizations, and Farah Al-Aggar, former senior member of the NCP in Blue Nile state, were released on 9 April, after spending 124 days in detention. They had been arrested in December 2014.³ They were arrested after signing a document calling for democratic transformation, dismantling of the de facto one-party state and an end to conflict in Sudan. Both Dr Amin Maki Madani and Farouk Abu Issa had been charged with capital offences under the 1991 Penal Code including "undermining the constitutional system".

In total, at least 30 political activists were arrested across the country during the election period. In North Darfur, students at Al Fasher University organized peaceful protests on 14 April calling for a boycott of the presidential elections and a change of government. The police and NISS arrested 20 students and charged them with various offences under the Criminal Act, including establishing a "criminal and terrorist organization", rioting and causing a public nuisance. They were subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention. They were all released pending trial.

On 6 July, a court in Khartoum tried and convicted three members of the opposition SCP including its political secretary, Mastour Ahmed Mohamed. They were convicted of disturbing the public peace and each subjected to 20 lashes.

Armed conflict

Armed conflicts persisted in Darfur, Blue Nile and South Kordofan, with devastating impacts on civilians across Sudan, ranging from loss of life to denial of humanitarian assistance and lack of access to basic social services such as education and health care. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was targeting support to an estimated 5.4 million people affected by conflict in Sudan in 2015.

South Kordofan and Blue Nile

Government forces continued to attack rebel-held areas of the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan and Blue Nile using ground troops and indiscriminate aerial attacks.

Amnesty International visited South Kordofan in early May and documented serious violations of international humanitarian law and human rights, including aerial and ground attacks targeted against civilians and civilian objects and the denial of humanitarian access. Lack of humanitarian access perpetuated other human rights violations, including violations of the rights to health, education, food, safe water and adequate housing. Amnesty

International concluded that the Sudanese government was committing war crimes in South Kordofan.⁴

Amnesty International obtained evidence suggesting that government aircraft deliberately bombed hospitals and other humanitarian facilities, and dropped cluster bombs on civilian areas of South Kordofan's Nuba Mountains in February, March and June 2015. Between January and April, the air force dropped 374 bombs in 60 locations across South Kordofan. Since 2011, the air force has bombed 26 health facilities (hospitals, clinics and health units). By 2015 there were only two hospitals operating to serve a population of 1.2 million people.

A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) hospital was bombed in January: a Sudan Air Force fighter jet dropped 13 bombs, of which two landed inside the hospital compound and the others just outside the hospital fence.

The aerial bombardments also had a debilitating impact on the right to education in South Kordofan. There were six secondary schools in SPLM-N-controlled areas when the conflict began, of which only three were still operational in 2015. The number of children in secondary schools in SPLM-N-controlled areas fell from 3,000 to about 300-500, while 30 primary schools were closed with enrolment numbers dropping by 23,000 since 2011.

The use of aerial bombardment and flights over civilian villages and communities has been a consistent practice of the Sudan Air Force since 2011 and had a profound psychological impact over the course of the conflict. Aerial bombardments in May and June 2015 disrupted cultivation activities before the rainy season.

Fighting continued intermittently in Blue Nile state between SPLM-N and government armed forces, resulting in the displacement of an estimated 60,000 civilians. In May, armed clashes in Blue Nile led to the deaths of 22 civilians and the displacement of 19,000.

Darfur

The armed conflict in Darfur entered its 12th year. Although large-scale fighting between the government and armed groups had subsided, there were sporadic clashes, acts of banditry and incidents of intercommunal violence. Restrictions on freedom of movement and political liberties persisted throughout Darfur. An estimated 223,000 people were displaced from their homes by conflict during the year, bringing the total number of internally displaced persons in Darfur to 2.5 million.

In December 2014, the government re-launched Operation Decisive Summer, attacking villages in Jebel Marra and East Jebel Marra by air and land. In its January 2015 report, the UN Panel of Experts on the Sudan characterized the government strategy in Darfur as one of "collective punishment of villages and communities from which the armed opposition groups are believed to come or operate" and "induced or forced displacement of those communities", with "direct engagement, including aerial bombardment, of [armed rebel] groups when their location can be identified".

Gender-based and sexual violence remained widespread in Darfur. After her visit to Sudan in May, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women urged the government to set up a Commission of Inquiry to investigate allegations of mass rape, including allegations that more than 200 women and girls were raped in late 2014 in the village of Thabit.

1. Sudan: Entrenched repression: Freedom of expression and association under unprecedented attack ([AFR 54/1364/2015](#))
2. Sudan: Don't we matter? Four years of unrelenting attacks against civilians in Sudan's South Kordofan state ([AFR 54/2162/2015](#))
3. Health fears for detained opposition leaders ([AFR 54/002/2015](#))
4. Sudan: Don't we matter? Four years of unrelenting attacks against civilians in Sudan's South Kordofan state ([AFR 54/2162/2015](#))