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'Both see a chance to finally eliminate their arch-enemy'

Christine-Felice Röhrs on the bloody power struggle in Sudan, activities of Russian Wagner mercenaries in the country and chances for negotiations

Since last weekend, there have been bloody street fights between the army and paramilitary forces in Sudan. Hundreds of people have already died. What is the conflict about?

We are seeing the eruption of a long-simmering conflict between the two strongest armed groups in the country: the military under General al-Burhan and the so-called Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militias under General Dagalo, nicknamed Hemeti. Previously, the two have cooperated whenever it served their interests, such as in the October 2021 coup when they jointly dissolved the interim civilian-military government that was supposed to lead the country towards democracy – and took power instead. But still, they were always competitors for military supremacy, if not outright enemies.

During the last few months in Sudan, the focus has been on the possibility of the military returning power to a civilian government once again. Since the international community had frozen all funds to the transitional government after the coup, and due to the deteriorating economic and humanitarian situation in the country, the coup alliance had agreed to sign a framework agreement on the transfer of power on 5 December.

A boycott of civilian technocrats prevented the military from installing a government by its own accord. In addition, there were fierce protests among the population, especially the younger generation. Part of the agreement with the civilian, pro-democracy camp would have been a security sector reform, i.e. the plan to form a single national army into which the RSF would have been integrated. Of course, this did not sit well with Hemeti, as he would have lost most of his command, influence and combat power.

Different core issues were evident in the discussions between the two

forces, including their incorporation timeline – the military asked for two years, the RSF for 10 – but also the extent of the power of command. Ultimately, it remains unclear what exactly, or even which side, triggered the fighting last Saturday. But it seems to have become a struggle for existence.

In the meantime, several attempts to establish a ceasefire have failed. What is the current situation on the ground?

The two warring parties are continuing to fight. You can hear all kinds of artillery shells flying through the air or hitting the ground everywhere in the capital, Khartoum. Now and then, the fighting decreases, but the motives behind it often remain obscure. Apart from propaganda, the warring parties hardly publish any information that would be useful to civilians. The fighting is mainly about central facilities such as the airport or the military headquarters as well as the many RSF camps. Yet, all these places are in the middle of a densely populated city with millions of inhabitants. Civilians are thus automatically affected – without the warring parties showing any sense of responsibility.

Residential buildings are hit, also hospitals, many of which are no longer able to provide for their patients. Food supplies are difficult to organise because many shops are closed and cannot replenish their stocks. There are constant power and water cuts – at over 40 degrees and in the fasting month of Ramadan. Due to the attacks on RSF bases, 'uprooted' fighters are now running through the city, looting supermarkets and private homes for food and water. A mass exodus from the city has already started.

What truth is there in the allegations that Russia's Wagner mercenaries are fuelling the conflict?

RSF leader Hemeti has links to Russia, and there are reports that Wagner and RSF are jointly shipping mined gold out of the country, some of which is probably being used to finance the war in Ukraine. Indeed, a major concern at present is that regional allies of the two rivals may try to intervene in the conflict to help 'their' candidate win and thus increase their own regional influence. Sudan's location in the Horn of Africa as well as its sheer size make it geostrategically important for its neighbours. But rumours are numerous, precisely because there are many fears and both parties are quite non-transparent. A counter-argument here is certainly that the neighbours of the already crisis-ridden Horn do not want even more conflicts in their midst, which might then spill over to their countries through the often ethnically interconnected border regions.

What are the chances of an early end to the violence? Is a negotiated settlement realistic?

The two generals have descended into hard-line rhetoric that should make it difficult for either to de-escalate without significant battlefield accomplishments. And they greatly distrust each other. The planned ceasefire probably failed partly because both assumed that the other would then strike even harder or use the pause for further mobilisation. If it becomes clear soon that one is clearly outmatched by the other, the chances for negotiations will certainly increase. But as long as both see a chance to finally eliminate their 'arch-enemy', the situation is more likely to further escalate.

What can the international community do?

Right now, the aim must be to stop the reckless shooting in residential areas as well as the looting – including of national and international aid organisations – and to ensure that corridors for civilians fleeing the city or searching medical emergency treatment remain open. Reliable ceasefires must be established – on a regular basis. Moreover, civil society representatives are again calling for sanctions, as they did after the 2021 coup.

International politicians and diplomats must also keep a very close eye on the possible interference of regional forces. Already now, in the first week of the fighting, they must exert extensive pressure, denounce unilateral interventions and insist on joint de-escalation. In the longer term, the world must continue to strengthen the reform-oriented and pro-democracy forces in Sudan. Many people, young people in particular, had managed to bring about the fall of a dictator with the 2018 revolution. They are the hope for the future.

Whether the political dialogue concerning a civilian, democratic government – that had already begun – can ever be resumed also depends on how long the fighting continues and how many more civilians are killed. A lot of scorched earth has been left behind, a lot of trust destroyed.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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