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Global amnesia

After a year of war, Sudan is mired in one of the worst humanitarian crises on the planet. How much longer until the international community acts?

One year ago, a war broke out in the heart of the Sudanese capital Khartoum — quickly escalating into one of the most brutal worldwide. Within one hour, the opponents – the country's military and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) militia – fired waves of heavy bullets at each other. In doing so, they risked the lives of up to nine million civilians, forcing hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes within the course of one month. After one year, the capital, which is one of the largest in Africa, has been laid to waste, while the war has spread to other parts of the country.

According to UN statistics, Sudan now bears witness to the greatest displacement crisis, with at least 8.2 million displaced people, and one of the most serious humanitarian crises in the world. Some 25 million Sudanese are dependent on humanitarian aid — 14 million of them are children. Experts warn against one of the greatest famine catastrophes. And yet, the international community virtually ignores the conflict. Volker Türk, UN Commissioner for Human Rights, recently spoke of a 'global amnesia'.

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This phenomenon can be partly explained by the fact that many telecommunications channels have been damaged or destroyed by the war, thus transforming the country into a 'black box' from which little news emerges. Moreover, journalists rarely obtain visas and humanitarian aid workers have scarcely any access to the war zone. This means it is not possible to accurately determine the number of fatalities. In mid-February, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reported 14 600 deaths nationwide, while thousands of corpses rot in Khartoum, presumably not recorded anywhere. It is reported that the population of

dogs and scavenging birds have multiplied.

Yet, the misery in Sudan is also overshadowed by the impact of the Gaza war, which, for months, has been attracting a lot of media attention due to its vehemence. Sudan has thus become a blind spot — despite striking parallels between Gaza and Sudan regarding key data on suffering and the brutality with which people here act against their fellow human beings.

The youth gives hope for the future

In the west of the country, in the five Darfur states, the nature of the conflict has taken on further dimensions: ethnic cleansing. Here, as in the early 2000s, the RSF, which is of Arab origin, is joining forces with allied local militias to act against communities of African origin. Torched villages and mass graves can even be seen on satellite images. For this reason, more than 600 000 people have poured into Chad alone (a total of over 1.7 million people have fled abroad). In many war zones the combatants deliberately deny humanitarian corridors — even into the capital, where food, water and medication have become scarce and expensive. There are reports of sexual violence, especially on the part of the RSF, as a means of warfare and to intimidate the civilian population, including the rape of women and girls in front of their families and the forced marriage of children. Both sides are abducting critics and forcibly recruiting combatants. Urban areas continue to witness air strikes and ground battles at the expense of millions of civilians.

With their ruthless power struggle for supremacy in the state, the warring parties have put an end to a remarkable democratic experiment that began only a few years ago with the revolution of predominantly young actors. Millions of Sudanese took to the streets back in 2018/2019 to demand change and ultimately succeeded in toppling the longstanding dictator Omer al-Bashir. Unlike in other countries in the region, where young people have largely turned their backs on political work in light of failed attempts at democratisation and revolutions, there are still large groups of young, active pro-democratic civil society actors in Sudan.

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Prior to the outbreak of the war, surveys counted more than 7 000 active youth organisations and networks in the country. Young Sudanese people aged between 16 and 35 continue to be the driving force behind political, social and humanitarian initiatives even after the outbreak of the war; examples include anti-war campaigns or the so-called emergency rooms, which try – both online and

> on site – to provide families with food, rescue people from embattled neighbourhoods, procure medication for the old and sick or provide psychological support to victims of rape. Having said that, the war is progressively weakening the still very active political youth movement and thus depriving the country of great hope for the future.

Youth networks and the so-called resistance committees were scattered by fighting and displacement. Some young people who were recently active in the non-violent democracy and peace movement are now fighting in armed groups — arising from a feeling that violence is the only option left. Many are traumatised and demotivated in the aftermath of the coup in 2021, the subsequent military crackdown and now the war. Those who continue to work in Sudan are losing sight of their political goals, as they feel it is necessary to engage in local humanitarian work. Others, who have fled abroad, are struggling to survive in the face of restrictive visa policies and a lack of jobs and educational opportunities. The inertia and indifference of international actors is increasingly eroding their trust in Western politics and governments.

The need for an uncompromising tone

Until the outside world exerts far more pressure and shows greater interest, not only the present but also the future of Sudan is in danger. Following the revolution of 2018/19, Germany was a key driver and promoter of the post-revolutionary path towards democracy. The German Federal Government co-founded the *Friends of Sudan Group* and organised a major donor conference in 2020. Still, it would be unrealistic to expect them to have a direct influence on the warring parties. Over the past few years, the RSF have simply ignored the initiatives and warnings from European and other diplomats. The most important players in the region – some of which are purported to secretly support one or the other warring party – are now Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

Yet, there is a lot that Germany can do. Direct support for young democrats in Sudan and those living in exile through political empowerment programmes continues to be important so as to enable them to be part of a solution. Further programmes must counter the radicalisation of young Sudanese and strengthen the mental resilience of young, reform-oriented front-line activists. There is also much diplomatic and political work to be done. Humanitarian aid must be intensified immediately.

The *Humanitarian Response Plan* for Sudan has so far been funded by less than five per cent — a donor conference in Paris in mid-April could remedy this situation if the governments finally take what is happening seriously. On the other hand, dialogue channels with the warring parties, some of which were closed due to protests against the coup, the war and human rights violations, must be kept open. One of the messages needs to be that any potential support in future (for example for rebuilding the destroyed capital) will only be possible in exchange for the acceptance of an inclusive, civilian and democratic government. Powers like Germany, in particular, must adopt a more uncompromising tone.

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African rulers are currying favour with RSF leader Hemeti on his charm offensive tours throughout the region. He is also doing his best, wearing an Obama suit and with rhetoric streamlined by PR companies, to score points with Western diplomats and the public. However, the armed aggressors' blatant disregard for all local and international interventions has shown that their diplomatic involvement does not work and that their verbal assurances cannot be trusted. An uncompromising tone would need to be accompanied by more sanctions and initiatives to prevent arms supplies to Sudan from outside. Communication with states in the region that have an influence on the warring parties or that fuel the conflict through the proliferation of weapons continues to be important here.

While it is also necessary to exert pressure on Sudanese political elites who are, once again – for example with their *Tagadum* Initiative to unite civil society – not acting inclusively enough and are thus repeating the mistake of civilian political work since the transition government, the involvement of young players remains important.

Yet, these steps also require a rebuilding of staffing levels in German political, humanitarian and development-related coordination points for Sudan and the region. Experts were moved or transferred due to the curtailment of development aid following the coup in 2021. After the outbreak of the war and with the evacuation of almost all foreign diplomats and aid workers in the country as well as the destruction of many local branches and representations, the working levels cut down further. But without experts and cooperation, there is no influence. Attempts at negotiation have proved ineffective for months, precisely

because they are only supported by partial initiatives and armed rulers can thus discredit them as being one-sided. Peace in Sudan will only succeed with a major international initiative that brings both warring parties together at one table.



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