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The forgotten war

The world's commitment to Sudan needs to be strengthened and coordinated — for the people's own benefit and for lasting peace

The war in Sudan has caused hundreds of thousands of deaths and driven 12 million people from their homes. Nearly 25 million people are now suffering from acute hunger in the country, the World Food Programme warns, making this one of the worst humanitarian disasters the world has ever witnessed. The conflict is a tragedy of human suffering. But it is also a 'war of visions' between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) — the latter recently forming a new 'parallel government' to combat the SAF politically and deepen the divide in the country even further.

Because humanitarian crises, military power struggles and political fragmentation are so closely linked, we urgently need to make a global effort to achieve lasting peace. But to achieve this, both sides need to lay down their arms, come back to the table and commit to an inclusive political transition process involving civilian groups. At the same time, external backers, such as the United States, the African Union (AU), the European Union and the United Nations, need to play their part as guarantors of effective coordination.

Conflicting interest groups

We are now clearly seeing international efforts in Sudan being stepped up: the US has resumed talks with army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and attended a Quad meeting alongside Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Strengthening support for these kinds of initiatives could pave the way for a humanitarian ceasefire and rapidly improve the situation for thousands of Sudanese people. A short-term solution to secure humanitarian access may provide some relief, but it is short-sighted.

Sudan's post-colonial history has been dominated by countless wars and bouts of violence, including the clash over South Sudan's independence

in 2011 and the Darfur conflict. Since 2012, ethnic groups like the Nuba in southern Sudan continue to be oppressed, carving the latest frontline of the conflict. If negotiations during wartime only include armed, political and foreign elites, there is little prospect of lasting peace that serves the civilian population. Sustainable peace efforts in Sudan need to strike the difficult balance between including the powerful leadership of armed groups and their external backers, and creating the framework for an inclusive political process that involves a broad spectrum of civil society.

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Global players first need to focus on ending the violence. The two main warring parties, the RSF and the SAF, receive financial and political support from their de facto protector states, which only want to prolong and escalate the violence. The RSF receives logistical support from the UAE, while the SAF are supported by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These countries are chiefly shaped by self-interest in their dealings with armed groups. Even though the conflict is unfolding in Africa, regional organisations such as the AU and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in East Africa do not have the strength or authority to lead a meaningful peace process. The Gulf states' interest in the Red Sea region is nothing new; they have been consolidating their growing influence in the region for over a decade now, through financial means and political interference.

For the EU and the US – two influential actors with a vested interest in stability in Sudan – there are two potential courses of action. Either, they could turn up the political pressure on the Gulf states and Egypt through economic sanctions on individuals and companies. An option that needs to be seriously considered, no matter how much the US and the EU value strong economic relations with these countries. Alternatively, the US and EU could pursue a 'pragmatic deal' that serves the economic and geostrategic interests of the protector states, be it in terms of resources or agricultural benefits, ensuring that these interests are catered to once the conflict in Sudan is over. Since this is largely seen as a 'forgotten war' because it attracts so little international attention, the latter option seems more feasible. Only by engaging the protector states in the political process – whether through pressure or not – can there be a realistic chance of cutting off finances to the RSF and SAF and ultimately ending

the war. And even if a pragmatic deal is reached, the US and others must not lose sight of how important ceasefire efforts remain as a prelude to lasting peace.

Dialogue is key

Sudan itself urgently needs to pick up the political transition process of 2019–2023. Although the AU and IGAD have instigated political dialogue for civilian groups and armed movements in Sudan, the parties involved have criticised how the dialogue has been conducted since the war's outbreak. Neither organisation has attempted to pursue talks since early 2025. Yet dialogue requires long-term global support, enough financial resources and a great deal of patience. The latest war has uncovered previously unknown dimensions of political, social and geographic fragmentation. During the December Revolution, protesters demanded ruler Omar al-Bashir's resignation, chanting slogans like 'Just Fall, That's All'. But instead of marking a turning point toward democracy, his ousting in 2019 brought a power struggle, ushering in an era of societal division and violent escalation.

The SAF, RSF and a patchwork of allied and independent armed groups are now vying for power and territory. But alongside this struggle, the democratic energy of the December Revolution endures, embodied in the mutual aid networks of the independent Emergency Response Rooms. While these groups are currently focused on humanitarian efforts, international partners must help keep up this democratic momentum and ensure that young people, women and people from marginalised regions have a seat at the table. The fragmented nature of civilian groups and their frequent ties to armed movements might well hamper efforts to build an inclusive political dialogue alongside ceasefire negotiations. But despite these hurdles, the AU and IGAD should carry on working to keep the dialogue open and support it with consistent action and unwavering commitment, with additional assistance – financial or otherwise – from the EU or the UN where needed.

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Efforts toward a sustainable ceasefire must be closely coordinated with a parallel political dialogue involving civilian and armed groups. Sudan's supporters on the African continent, along with the US, the EU and the UN, should agree on the division of labour, with each party playing to its strengths and resources in dealing with Sudan's warring parties, civilian forces and protector states. Despite their differing interests in relations with the SAF and RSF, for example,

what is needed is a coordinated approach, rather than a feeling of powerlessness, neglect, or ad-hoc solutions. This international coordination could follow the same approach as previous peace processes in Sudan.

But as in the past, international efforts continue to suffer under political trade-offs, scarce resources and a lack of political will. Unlike before, though, global stakeholders now have the chance to learn from past mistakes. The US should keep diplomatic channels open with the protector states, while political pressure must be sustained from all sides, through sanctions, obligations or aid tied to conditions. The humanitarian crisis requires continuous support for the civilian population from the UN and the EU. Meanwhile, the AU and IGAD should take their role as self-appointed dialogue facilitators and coordinators of an inclusive process more seriously, with additional support where necessary. The world's commitment to Sudan needs to be strengthened and coordinated – for the people's own benefit and for the prospect of peace that lasts.



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