

DIGITAL DEVELOPMENT DEBATES

Sudan – Avoiding a New Crisis

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The independence of South Sudan on 9 July 2011 could have brought peace to both regions of Sudan. But the North's problems are far from over and the risk of implosion is very real.

Risk of new armed conflict in North Sudan

“Democratic transformation” was a foundational principle of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) that ended decades of civil war between North and South Sudan. The aim was to achieve more legitimate, inclusive governance – a platform for dealing with the grievances of marginalised groups in the peripheries of the country, including Darfur, the East, the transitional areas of Southern Kordofan, the Blue Nile, and Abyei, as well as the political opposition. But Khartoum's refusal to alter the status quo resulted in a series of all too predictable crises, before and after the South's independence.

If Khartoum continues to block reform efforts to build more inclusive governance, then prolonged armed conflict is inevitable. With multiple grievances still unsettled, this would mean insurgency will spread in the North. This could have destabilising, spill over effects in the Republic of South Sudan and the region as a whole. Unfortunately, international attention focused on safeguarding South Sudan's referendum and independence while only fire-fighting other situations as they flared up. The North needs a holistic approach to resolve its problems, and international actors need to develop a more cohesive strategy that helps to make it a viable partner for peace and stability throughout the region.

Khartoum exploits the periphery

The heart of the North's chronic problems is governance. Political and economic powers are heavily concentrated in the capital, Khartoum, and in the hands of the elite in President Omar al-Bashir's ruling National Congress Party (NCP). As a result, the peripheries remain grossly marginalised and underdeveloped, and their resources are exploited to serve the centre. The NCP's failure to open up the political space and to create an environment conducive to the peaceful resolution of outstanding issues – such as the future status of Abyei, the conclusion of the CPA protocol on Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile states and a lasting resolution in Darfur – has again caused uprisings of the ignored peripheries.

Unfortunately, President Bashir has been hopelessly short on workable policies that address his party's and the country's deep-seated problems. The NCP remains deeply divided between security hardliners and more pragmatic leaders. This has undermined its ability to devise a coherent strategy for coping with the South's separation, including defining the future North-South relationship. With support from the army's generals, party hardliners are determined to solve internal problems militar-

ily. The counterinsurgency campaigns are being waged primarily with aerial bombardment and paramilitary militias who frequently commit war crimes and human right abuses. They are imposing an Arab-Islamic identity on all Sudanese, ignoring its ethnic and regional diversity, and are also ready to sub-divide key states to pander to specific ethnic constituencies. In so doing, they only exacerbate regional and ethnic grievances, making peaceful reform even more difficult.

Bashir's brinkmanship in Abyei: No political solution desired

Smarting over the loss of the South and frustrated that relations with the West remained frozen despite its 'cooperation' on the independence referendum, the NCP sought to strengthen its bargaining position over post-referendum talks with the South. When Bashir ordered the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) to seize the disputed territory of Abyei in May, it was a calculated and dangerous but shrewd move. Bashir was not punished for his actions. He both exhibited a show of strength to domestic political constituencies and demonstrated to key governments that the NCP remains indispensable to North-South cooperation and Southern stability.

On 20 June 2011, Bashir agreed with South Sudan's President Salva Kiir on the withdrawal of their respective armed forces from the disputed territory. They were to be replaced by the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) with 4,200 Ethiopian troops. After some incidents, both sides met again on 8 September and agreed to the complete withdrawal of their forces by 30 September – a deal brokered by the African Union High Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) headed by former South Africa president Thabo Mbeki.

This agreement is a necessary short-term measure to keep Khartoum and Juba's armies apart. It suits Bashir because it provides no political solution to the disputed territory, instead preserving the status quo and leaving the territory's fate hanging in balance. Placing troops between the two countries to avoid new conflict does not bring the region closer to a final solution on Abyei. On the contrary, Ethiopia's presence has worried some who fear that this new concept of peacekeeping, based on troops contributed by one single country, will be very hard for the UN to control.

Brutality in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile

Bashir made a much bigger miscalculation in Southern Kordofan. He authorised a military campaign against former Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) units from the North and loyal to leaders of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Khartoum's onslaught appears to be about several things, including exerting control in a state where there were still SPLA forces – and therefore a potential threat – and demonstrating its strength to other constituencies and groups that continue to defy Khartoum.

The fighting so far has been extremely brutal. In June, a leaked UN human rights report indicated that the traditionally marginalised Nuba people, who had been allied with Southern Sudan in its fight against Khartoum, were targeted by the SAF and allied paramilitary forces. The report alleges arbitrary arrests and detentions, targeted killings, summary executions, extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate shelling and aerial bombings and forced displacement of civilians. A UN Security Council meet-

ing in mid-August failed to condemn the fighting, and China and Russia demanded a statement proposed by the US be watered down.

Conflict soon expanded to Blue Nile. Hundreds of thousands are now displaced and fighting continues in Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile. Khartoum has formally banned the SPLM-N, detained many of its local leaders, declared a state of emergency in the Blue Nile and replaced its SPLM-N governor, Malik Agar.

Demonstrating the strength of the hardliners, Khartoum also immediately rejected a promising framework agreement of 28 June. It includes a political and a security agreement for Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, was facilitated by Thabo Mbeki and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia and signed by Dr. Nafie Ali Nafie, Co-deputy NCP chairman and a presidential adviser. A few days later, however, President Bashir publicly disavowed the agreement.

Misery in Darfur

Meanwhile, the situation remains unstable in Darfur. The NCP has continued its current military push in the region, which has killed hundreds and displaced thousands. NCP leaders are ignoring an inclusive settlement of the Darfur conflict and are targeting ethnic Zaghawa civilians, who are perceived to be supporters of rebel groups that rejected the Doha talks and the government peace strategy.

The opposition's peaceful options are now extremely limited and, not surprisingly, rebel forces, including those from Darfur, are openly attempting to unify and pursue a policy of regime change.

Meanwhile, both the Sudan and South Sudan have intensified rhetoric that each country is supporting its rival's insurgents. The situation will escalate if a response by the international community is delayed, or if there is a disjointed and incoherent approach by the key external actors.

The parties need to return to the table

It is now indispensable to find a holistic solution to chronic conflict with Khartoum and to intensify negotiations between the North and the South. Both sides must still reach agreements on other divisive issues, such as the joint exploitation of oil, border demarcation and security arrangements, and the allocation of Sudan's \$ 38 billion debt. The parties held extensive pre-partition negotiations in Addis Ababa, facilitated by the AUHIP. But the list of issues still outstanding is longer than those resolved, and their resolution has become even more difficult by hostilities in Abyei, Southern Kordofan, and the Blue Nile. The time for brinkmanship is past. The parties must return to the table as soon as possible and sustain the focus and commitment necessary to hammer out deals. Allowing these critical issues to fester will undermine any chance for peace and prosperity, within – and among – the two Sudans.

Recommendations for a unified international strategy

Developments in the North are spiralling out of control. To avert a crisis, the international community must not abandon the North but instead require the NCP to agree to an immediate inclusive national reform process. A national reform agenda should be accepted by all and should include a pro-

gramme on a wider constitutional review process that accommodates all the peoples of Sudan and supports more inclusive governance. To facilitate this, the NCP must respect basic human rights, refrain from arbitrary detentions, allow the media to operate freely, lift the state of emergency in Darfur and stop its indiscriminate military campaigns. The NCP must also make genuine efforts to stop impunity in Darfur, Southern Kordofan and the Blue Nile, allow humanitarian agencies unhindered access, and support international efforts to protect civilians. The NCP cannot guide the reform process alone and should allow a national committee to lead.

The support of the international community will be critical. But so far, a comprehensive strategy or unified approach is lacking. Instead there have been numerous envoys and multiple crises interventions that have prolonged instability. Interested external actors should move beyond the myriad of uncoordinated, ad hoc and isolated initiatives that have complicated international engagement in Sudan to push the NCP in the right direction. If the NCP seriously commits to a national reform agenda, the process should be supported by regional actors as well as major donors like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar, the League of Arab States, China, the US, the EU and the African Union. All these countries and institutions must recognise that reform is necessary for stability.

Alongside these steps, uncertainty in North-South relations should not be allowed to fester. The international community needs to invest capital in North-South dialogue. If both sides continue to refuse to compromise on divisive issues, Darfur and even peacebuilding in the South will not take off.