

# Why Sudan's war is the world's problem

The catastrophic conflict could kill millions—and spread chaos across Africa and the Middle East

THE WAR in Sudan has received a fraction of the attention given to Gaza and Ukraine. Yet it threatens to be deadlier than either conflict. Africa's third-largest country is ablaze. Its capital city has been razed, perhaps 150,000 people have been slaughtered and bodies are piling up in makeshift cemeteries visible from space. More than 10m people, a fifth of the population, have been forced to flee from their homes. A famine looms that could be deadlier than Ethiopia's in the 1980s: some estimate that 2.5m civilians could die by the end of the year.

As our report from inside the country explains, it is the world's worst humanitarian crisis—and also a geopolitical time-bomb (see Briefing). Sudan's size and location make it an engine of chaos beyond its borders. Middle Eastern states and Russia are sponsoring the belligerents with impunity. The West is disengaged; the UN is paralysed. The violence will destabilise neighbours and trigger refugee flows to Europe. Sudan has some 800km of coastline on the Red Sea, so its implosion threatens the Suez Canal, a key artery of global trade.

The main belligerents are the conventional military, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), and a militia called the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Neither has an ideological goal or a monolithic ethnic identity. Both are commanded by unscrupulous warlords vying for control of the state and its spoils.

Sudan has endured civil war, on and off, since independence in 1956. One bloody conflict ended with South Sudan seceding in 2011. Twenty years ago, a genocidal bout of fighting in Darfur caught the world's attention. Yet even by those horrific standards, the current conflict is shocking. Khartoum, a once-bustling city, is in ruins. Both sides bombard civilians, recruit children and inflict starvation. The RSF is credibly accused of mass rape and genocide.

Outside powers are fuelling the fighting. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a hedonists' playground, supplies bullets and drones to RSF killers. Iran and Egypt arm the SAF. Russia has played both sides and deployed Wagner mercenaries. Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar are competing for influence, too. Each of these actors has narrow goals, from securing food supplies to grabbing gold. Collectively they are helping turn a huge country into a murderous bazaar.

The carnage will get worse. Our analysis of satellite data and thermal images shows a country covered in fires. Farms and crops have been burned. People are forced to eat grass and leaves. If the dearth of food continues, 6m-10m could die from starvation by 2027, according to a Dutch think-tank that is modelling the crisis.

Africa has had one other war of comparable horror in the past 25 years, in Congo. What makes Sudan different is the degree to which chaos will spill beyond its territory. It has porous borders with seven fragile states, accounting for 21% of Africa's land mass and home to 280m people, including Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia and Libya. Those countries face destabilising flows of refugees, guns and mercenaries.

Beyond Africa, expect a new refugee shock in Europe, to

follow those after wars in Syria and Libya, at a time when migration is an incendiary issue in France, Germany and elsewhere (see Europe section). Already 60% of people in camps in Calais, on the south side of the English Channel, are Sudanese.

The country could become a haven for terrorists, or provide a foothold for other regimes keen to sow disorder: Russia and Iran are demanding a Red Sea naval base in return for arming the SAF. Were Sudan to fall into permanent anarchy or become a rogue state hostile to the West, it could further imperil the operation of the Suez Canal, which normally carries a seventh of world trade, mainly between Europe and Asia. It is already facing disruption from attacks by Houthi rebels in Yemen, forcing cargo ships to take long, costly detours around Africa.

Despite the huge stakes, the world has responded to Sudan's war with neglect and fatalism, showing how disorder is becoming normalised. Whereas the West sought to end the Darfur crisis in the 2000s, today American officials shrug that they are too busy dealing with China, Gaza and Ukraine. Western public opinion is quiescent: there were not many Sudanese flags flying from Ivy League encampments this year. The UN Security Council is split, its bureaucracy lumbering. China has little interest in solving far-off wars. Other African countries have lost their appetite to call out atrocities. Half-hearted ceasefire talks in Geneva have gone nowhere.

Yet it is a grave mistake for the outside world to ignore Sudan, on grounds of both morality and self-interest. And it is wrong to imagine that nothing can be done. Public outrage can put pressure on democratic governments that care about human lives to do more. And plenty of countries have an incentive to de-escalate and contain the fighting. Europe is keen to limit migrant flows; Asia needs a stable Red Sea.

A more constructive approach would have two priorities. One is to get more aid in quickly, to reduce the death toll from starvation and disease. Lorries laden with food must pour across every possible border. Public and private funding needs to flow to Sudanese NGOs running ad hoc clinics and kitchens. Cash can be sent to the hungry directly, via mobile money, so they can buy food where there are functioning markets.

## Damage limitation

The other priority is to put pressure on the cynical outside actors fuelling the conflict. If Sudan's warlords had fewer weapons and less money to buy them, there would be less killing, and less war-induced starvation. America, Europe and other responsible powers should impose sanctions on any business or state official exploiting or enabling Sudan's war—including those from allies such as the UAE.

No one can easily put Sudan back together again. After more than 500 days of pitiless fighting, the damage will take decades to repair. But it is possible to save millions of lives, and reduce the chance of calamitous geopolitical aftershocks, if the world acts now. For too long Sudan has been the war almost everyone chose to ignore. It is time to pay attention. ■

