Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Overshadowed by Gaza and Ukraine, aid groups warn of genocide and famine in Sudan's forgotten war

The ability to confront more than one foreign policy crisis at a time appears beyond the scope of many western countries as Gaza dominates attention alongside a shifting focus on Ukraine while possible genocide in Sudan barely makes the headlines.

Millions of people face famine and thousands have died since April 2023 in Sudan's war, which appears ignored and hidden even though the UN, EU and others have been sounding the crisis alarm.

"I'm calling for attention to this particular conflict," Alice Wairimu Nderitu, UN special adviser on the prevention of genocide, told the BBC on 24 May. "I have been trying to get my voice out but my voice is drowned out by other wars - in Ukraine and Gaza."

There are no glitzy campaigns like those of some 20 years ago when movie stars from Angelina Jolie and George Clooney to Mia Farrow lent their profiles to campaign against atrocities in the Sudanese region of Darfur that killed 300,000 people and displaced more than two million.

Activists and campaigners on both sides of the Israel-Palestinian conflict engage in heated arguments on social media and campuses about whether the International Criminal Court (ICC) should seek arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli prime minister, and leaders of Hamas for war crimes.

Few remember that Sudan's Omar al-Bashir was the first sitting president to be charged by the ICC for the crime of genocide in 2009. Bashir was ousted from power in 2019 and is reported to be seriously ill somewhere in Sudan.

The horrific death toll in Gaza is rising every day but could be vastly outnumbered by Sudan where 2.5 million people could die from hunger by this September because of fast dwindling harvests, imports and aid, said a report by a Dutch think tank, the Clingendael Institute.

A developing proxy war

Sudan is suffering a developing proxy war with a mosaic of actors akin to conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya that also failed to generate the intense feelings aroused by Gaza.

Sudan's conflict started in April 2023 over plans to incorporate the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti" into the army led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. Before falling out, the two men had ruled together since seizing power following popular protests against Bashir in 2019.

Making sense of shifting alliances and reports of murky deals of arms supplies can be hard to track. Broadly speaking, Egypt, Eritrea and Iran are backing the army while Chad, Ethiopia and the UAE are on the side of the RSF.

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The war threatens further economic turmoil in now independent South Sudan because its main oil export pipeline that runs through Sudan cannot be easily maintained. Spillover from the conflict could also further impact Chad, Eritrea and Ethiopia.

The strategic Red Sea is at the heart of much of the power jostling. Russia and Sudan's military are set to sign a series of agreements including the establishment of a Russian naval support centre in return for weapons and ammunition supplies, according to news reports. Previously, Russia and the private military Wagner Group have had ties with the RSF.

Faltering diplomacy

There is muted hope of a breakthrough from a peace conference to be hosted by Egypt's foreign ministry late next month of Sudan's civilian political groups with other "relevant"

regional and global parties that were yet to be confirmed. Previous efforts led by other countries including Saudi Arabia and the US have failed.

The US has been criticised by regional experts for acting too little and too slowly with faltering diplomacy and sanctions, despite a warning from the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence that prolonged conflict could lead Sudan to "once again become an ideal environment for terrorist and criminal networks."

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After a recent private meeting of the UN Security Council, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, US ambassador to the UN, warned external parties including the UAE against supporting either side in Sudan.

"External backers of the belligerents continue the flow of weapons into the country in flagrant violation of the UN arms embargo – further perpetuating the war, fracturing the country, and destabilising the region," she said in a statement.

She also warned that El Fasher, the last city held by the army in Darfur, was "on the precipice of a large-scale massacre" as fighting intensifies between the army and RSF fighters who have surrounded the city of 800,000 civilians, many of whom were displaced by violence elsewhere in Sudan.

Winning El Fasher would give the RSF control of about one-third of Sudan and the country could end up fractured like Libya. Many RSF fighters were part of the Arab Janjaweed militia which carried out war crimes in Darfur in the early 2000s.

Just another conflict in a poor country

Human Rights Watch say a genocide may have been committed in El Genein in Darfur by the RSF and local allied militias against ethnic Massalit and non-Arab communities when about 15,000 people are believed to have been killed between April and November last year.

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Aid officials say both sides are preventing food aid. Sudan's military has confined UN aid deliveries from Chad to one border crossing and RSF control over aid at Melit, a town north of El Fasher, means humanitarian assistance has practically ended.

Furthermore, Sudan's deepening emergency has failed to open donors' pockets. The UN's Sudan humanitarian appeal for $2.7 billion to help 14.7 million people this year was only 12 per cent funded as of 15 May.

"We see a bloodbath unfolding before our own eyes in El Fasher," said a Médecins Sans Frontières statement.

Many people around the world believe the crisis is just another conflict in a poor country like those in Yemen and Myanmar with complicated causes that defy easy analysis. Only mass famine or a declaration of genocide may command greater attention.