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# Wake up: The Worst Humanitarian Crisis on Earth is in Sudan



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## Takeaways

- The worst humanitarian catastrophe on Earth right now is in Sudan.
- 8.8 million people have been displaced <sup>1</sup> —the worst such crisis in the world. <sup>2</sup>
- 2.5 million people are expected to die of starvation by September 2024. <sup>3</sup>
- The current reported death toll of 15,000 is not credible—the US envoy to Sudan estimates it to be as high as 150,000. <sup>4</sup>
- The warring factions—the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces—are committing the most brutal war crimes imaginable against Sudanese civilians.
- Human rights groups, journalists, and the international community have profoundly failed to report—let alone prevent—these atrocities.
- American action is needed now to prevent calamity on a scale surpassing the Rwandan genocide.

## We Should Care About Sudan

For the entire month of May as blood was spilled, we could not find a single article about Sudan in the New York Times, but we read three articles about sunscreen <sup>5</sup> and ingrown hairs. <sup>6</sup> It wasn't until June that the New York Times Africa section had even a mention of Sudan. <sup>7</sup> The Washington Post noted the bloody civil war just twice in May. <sup>8</sup> The Wall Street Journal only three times in the last two months (to their credit, they published a front page story in June, as did the New York Times several days later). <sup>9</sup>

Congress is only marginally paying attention with a handful of hearings in the relevant committees. In May, the American envoy to Sudan, Tom Perriello said to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: *“As we speak, Sudan faces two distinct but accelerating trajectories—one towards famine and possibly a failed state, and the second towards peace and a democratic future. The only two barriers to ending this war are, first, the political will of two Generals and those fueling this horrific war, and second the absence of enough political will by those of us who could compel a peace.”* <sup>10</sup> Perriello also testified

that he estimates the death toll to be around 150,000.<sup>11</sup> That is far higher than the guesstimate from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project which reported only 15,000.<sup>12</sup>

As for political organizing against the ensuing Sudanese genocide, there is almost none. The English took to the streets in London on May 18 to protest the media's failure to cover Sudan,<sup>13</sup> which, unsurprisingly, went uncovered by western media. A sad trend we have seen repeated time and time again. While there has been extensive coverage of several other global humanitarian crises, Sudan's streets are saturated with blood, and it has been met with silence.

This matters because this disregard does not align with the supposed lessons learned from the initial silent response to the 100-day Rwanda genocide that former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power, called "the fastest, most efficient killing spree of the twentieth century."<sup>14</sup> American activism helped spur action to limit atrocities in Sudan two decades ago. But outside of scattered protests with activists numbering, at most, in the hundreds, that activism is absent today.

## What is Happening in Sudan

Sudan's warring factions are the predominantly Sunni Arab militia known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and the governmental Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). They previously united in a 2019 coup to oust Omar al-Bashir, a dictator who ruled Sudan for three decades.<sup>15</sup> Al-Bashir's tenure included the 2011 secession of South Sudan and 2003-2008 war and genocide against non-Arab and non-Sunni minorities in Darfur, resulting in 300,000 deaths.<sup>16</sup>

Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagolo leads the 100,000-strong Rapid Support Forces, which he formed in 2013 out of the Janjaweed militias. His Janjaweed rose to notoriety in the mid-2000s as al-Bashir's proxy force perpetrated the systematic rape, looting, and killing in Darfur.<sup>17</sup> Hemedti built a fortune illegally seizing Sudanese gold mines and hiring out mercenaries to fight on behalf of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in Yemen.<sup>18</sup> The RSF is following in the Janjaweed's footsteps in Darfur—*again*—slaughtering ethnic minorities and burning whole villages to the ground.<sup>19</sup>

The 200,000-strong Sudanese Armed Forces,<sup>20</sup> led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, is not much better. They stand accused of blocking humanitarian aid from RSF-controlled territory<sup>21</sup> as well as looting, raping, and massacring civilians, albeit on a lesser scale than the RSF.<sup>22</sup> After clashes began in April 2023, the SAF quickly escalated the conflict by abandoning peace talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia,<sup>23</sup> and declaring the UN envoy to Sudan *persona non grata*.<sup>24</sup> In response, the US imposed sanctions on both factions of the civil war.<sup>25</sup>

As a result of both militaries' scorched-earth campaign, 25 million Sudanese are in urgent need of humanitarian aid<sup>26</sup>—more than the population of Florida.<sup>27</sup> 8.8 million have been displaced—

more than the population of Virginia.<sup>28</sup> 2.5 million are projected to die of starvation by September—more than the population of New Mexico.<sup>29</sup> The civil war's reported death toll of 15,550<sup>30</sup> is widely recognized as a dramatic understatement.<sup>31</sup> The reality is there is no one counting the bodies. The true scale is likely closer to the '03-'08 Darfur genocide and on track to eclipse the Rwandan genocide by autumn.

The Sudanese people did not ask for this war. The ethnic tensions, while real, did not instigate this horrific violence. This war is the choice of two unscrupulous, power-hungry warlords—Hemedti and al-Burhan—who would rather commit atrocities than share power because the press and the powerful have chosen not to care what happens to Sudanese civilians.

## **What is Needed from American Leadership**

The Sudanese people need humanitarian aid: food, medicine, refuge, and jobs. Neighboring countries like Chad, South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia need more accommodation for refugees.<sup>32</sup> Sudanese civilians inside and outside the country need clean water and medical attention to recover from the violence and stave off outbreaks of cholera and other disease. Food aid is necessary—and the warring parties must desist from blocking it. The 50% of displaced Sudanese who are children need education, and the 50% of Sudan that is unemployed need economic opportunity.<sup>33</sup>

Congress and the President should hold the RSF and the SAF accountable by calling out their atrocities on the global stage, including a demand for an immediate ceasefire and the protection of civilians. Policymakers can task the intelligence community to investigate the short-, medium-, and long-term consequences of the genocide and provide solutions for ways that policymakers can more effectively address the crisis.

The US should call on the United Nations to be more involved and help to achieve that. As Julie Gregory of the Stimson Center wrote in April: “For the first time in nearly 20 years, Sudan is without a UN peace operation that enables or supports the protection of civilians, increasing the likelihood that the already severe protection gaps in country will worsen.”<sup>34</sup> Making it safer for UN offices to return to Sudan should be a priority for the US.

The US should work with the African Union and other regional powers to create humanitarian corridors and to develop a plan for a ceasefire and lasting peace. “The international community must now organize itself with a hitherto unprecedented political and operational efficiency commensurate to the grave dangers of the moment. This calls for the engagement of very senior officials, representing a few key countries and organizations with an ability to execute policy in the humanitarian and security sectors and in any forthcoming political negotiations.” This was the warning issued by the United States Institute of Peace *13 months ago*.<sup>35</sup>

The lack of knowledge and understanding of Africa in America is crippling. US interest-based relationships with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries are tied to long-run Middle East stability goals.<sup>36</sup> The strategic competition landscape with Russia and China entails the reality of bidding for the allegiance of unsavory characters to stave off continued coups and resource extraction dominance by the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party. We must hold these realities simultaneously while advocating for human rights.

But first and foremost, the world must care and Americans must care.<sup>37</sup> The attention paid to Sudan's civil war is infinitesimal in proportion to the magnitude of its human suffering. US media are too silent; they were silent on Rwanda, too.<sup>38</sup> It is up to those who care deeply about human rights to make sure political leaders and the press pay attention before it is too late.

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