

Sudan on the Edge of Ethnic War



Sudan is heading toward a dangerous escalation, as reports indicate that the clash between the National Army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has shifted from a military struggle for power to ethnic-based killing—a slide into communal war and a mire of societal chaos. This is the very trap that has long been warned against domestically and internationally.

United Nations Under-Secretary-General Virginia Gamba, in her role as the Secretary-General's Special Advisor on the Prevention of Genocide, warned in a June 23 briefing to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva that certain ethnic groups are being deliberately targeted amid the intensifying conflict between the Army and the RSF, emphasizing that the latter “are continuing ethnically motivated attacks against the Zaghawa, Masalit, and Fur tribes.”

The UN's representative stressed that the risk of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in Sudan remains extremely high, amid ongoing ethnically driven assaults by the Rapid Support Forces. She pointed out that “both parties—the army and the RSF—have committed serious human rights violations.”

This surge comes at a moment when all indicators had pointed to a victory by the army led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the decline of RSF leader Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti). After the RSF suffered heavy losses and was stripped of most gains since the conflict began—and with optimism that the war was nearing its end—the militia abruptly re-emerged, regaining momentum and raising questions about who is behind its comeback and to what end.

The “generals' war” that erupted in April 2023 between al-Burhan's army and

Hemedti's RSF has claimed tens of thousands of lives and displaced nearly 13 million people (with approximately 4 million fleeing abroad), creating a humanitarian crisis designated as the worst worldwide by UN agencies. So where do things go from here?

Ethnic Killing as RSF Methodology

Differing roots—no matter how distant, even dating back centuries—is reason enough for killing. Even if we pray in the same mosque, shop in the same market, or work together, this specter has haunted Sudanese dreams for decades.

Such ugly ethnic targeting has recurred in Sudan, most brutally in Darfur, which teetered on the brink of secession time and again. It also emerged in the Blue Nile region, until numerous efforts helped douse its flames.

But the generals' war saw the RSF revive every dormant wolf for maximum gain—national, humanitarian, and ethical concerns be damned. Among its worst excesses were ethnically motivated killing and violence, attempting to achieve through these crimes what they failed to win on the battlefield.

A UN report revealed that between 10,000 and 15,000 people were killed on ethnic grounds in the city of El Geneina in West Darfur between April and June 2023. Observers alerted the Security Council that “intense violence” occurred, accusing the RSF and allied Arab and African militias of targeting the Masalit—the African ethnic tribe—in attacks that may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity, with widespread sexual violence reported as well.

The RSF's dominance in Darfur has been driven by three main logistical lines: aligned Arab communities (notably with UAE ties), complex financial networks (foreign funding, gold revenue, companies linked to RSF, about 50 in various sectors), and new weapon routes through Chad, Libya, and South Sudan (mercenaries from Chad and forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar).

Sudanese rights activist Hassan Abbas told Noon Post that the RSF is adept at exploiting ethnic and sectarian rhetoric to achieve battlefield goals, often before the current war, based on a “divide and conquer” approach aimed at fostering intertribal resentment—particularly against non-Arab African tribes.

He noted that ethnic hostility runs deep in Sudanese society and travels with refugees abroad. Among displaced Sudanese, tribal origin often precedes national identity, widening divisions and fracturing communal unity.

Once Hemedti and his RSF force entered the struggle against the military, they deployed every weapon in their arsenal to erode the army's legitimacy and dismantle national cohesion. Chief among these tactics was nationalistic fervor and ethnic-based killing aimed at attacking the community at its roots.

RSF Resurgence: A Controversial Awakening

On May 20, the Sudanese army achieved full control of Khartoum and stripped RSF of much of its long-held gains, prompting jubilant hope that the war was nearing its end and displaced families began preparing to return home.

But the army's advance subsequently stalled, limiting itself to defensive positions. This reprieve allowed RSF to regroup, strike back across regions—from El Fasher to Khartoum North, and eastward to strategic logistical cities—reaffirming that the war is far from over.

Hemedti's militias have now reverted to scorched-earth tactics—targeting hospitals, airports, schools, electric and water infrastructure, roads, and public transport—to paralyze Sudan and sow fear, sending a clear psychological message aimed at breaking the army's civilian support.

Notably, the RSF has launched drone attacks on multiple towns and states, including Port Sudan—the government's new administrative capital—targeting its airbase, fuel depots, and infrastructure. These assaults demonstrated the militia's ability to strike nationwide, aided by drones reportedly supplied by foreign allies.

Claims—both official and unofficial—have implicated the UAE behind this resurgence, citing steady political, military, and economic support for the RSF, which helped rebalance the battlefield after the army's initial upper hand.

Peace or Reproducing Crisis?

“Between the lines of the U.S. Secretary of State's recent meeting with the Quartet, worrying signs suggest the West seeks not peace that ends the war, but an agreement that preserves a fragile balance between state and rebellion...,” wrote Sudanese academic Yasser Mahjoub Al-Hussein on Al Jazeera Arabic.

He criticizes the quartet (UAE, Saudi Arabia, UK, U.S.) for initiatives that aim to keep Sudan in a stalemate rather than cultivated peace rooted in reality.

He argues that as the army nears a military victory, international mediation risks neutralizing it politically. “The conditional peace proposed on the international agenda... doesn't align with facts on the ground but rather with power politics,” he added, warning that depriving the army of translating victory into political legitimacy risks undermining the national institution, diluting civil transformation, and eroding public confidence in politics.

“The Sudanese who rallied behind the army... will feel their sacrifices wasted if the perpetrators are reintegrated into power.”

He concludes that the gravest danger in an incomplete victory is that it yields

mere coexistence, not true peace: a fighting force standing for statehood alongside rebels benefiting from a fragile status quo. True peace must rest on justice, state restoration, and hope—not glossed-over politics. Otherwise, Sudan risks yet another recomposition of its crisis.

Thus, Sudan’s bleeding continues: killing for identity, political purge, ethnically driven genocide, unyielding displacement, and power conflicts at the state’s expense—all while international actors shape the narrative to suit their agendas, indifferent to a 50-million-strong nation teetering on the brink, despite stark warnings of a humanitarian catastrophe and a collective moral collapse.

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