Statement | Published 11 April 2024

By International Crisis Group

Sudan: A Year of War

All-out fighting between rival branches of the armed forces has devastated Sudan. With millions facing famine, diplomats should push the two main belligerents much harder to accept a ceasefire – before the fragmentation in the two sides' ranks dooms efforts to stop the carnage.

A grim anniversary looms in Sudan, where war rages and the prospect of famine hovers. On 15 April, the country will mark a year since a power struggle between two branches of its armed forces exploded into full-scale conflict. The effects of twelve months of hostilities have been harrowing. Thousands have died in the fighting, or related atrocities, and millions are desperately hungry. The Sudanese state has largely collapsed. As new militias join the mêlée and momentum on the battlefield seesaws, it is clear that the longer the conflict lasts, the harder it will be to piece Sudan back together. The U.S., UN and African Union have revitalised their diplomacy by appointing new envoys, but collective efforts to foster peace still lack coherence and urgency. All states and bodies with influence, including the three Arab powers quietly pushing for a resolution, must work together to press the two sides to end the war. World leaders must also stand with the Sudanese people by addressing aid shortfalls, including at a donor conference to be held in Paris on 15 April, and demanding full access to food aid to prevent mass starvation.

A Seesaw Struggle

Conflict erupted in April 2023 in the heart of the capital, Khartoum, amid a standoff over plans to fold the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) into the army. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the army leader, and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo "Hemedti", the head of the RSF, had ruled together since seizing power in 2019 on the back of a popular movement protesting the regime of long-time dictator Omar al-Bashir. But relations between the two were perpetually strained. After jointly dissolving the civilian government in a 2021 coup, neither was willing to concede to the other on the issue of merging their forces. By early 2023, increasingly at odds and under heavy outside pressure to abide by a commitment to restore civilian rule, both commanders had positioned their troops for a showdown.

It is unclear who fired the first shot, but what followed was an incontrovertible disaster for the entire country. It was also unprecedented: Sudanese governments have waged war on rebels in the country's peripheries for much of the period since independence in 1956, but never before had the fighting engulfed Khartoum or other parts of the riverine heartland. Over the course of the year, the battle for the capital has grown, morphing into a nationwide civil war, with a widening variety of groups throwing in their lot with one side or other in a country awash with guns.

Hemedti's RSF has outmatched the army for much of the war, seizing most of Khartoum in the early days of conflict and keeping the

momentum for some time as its foe struggled to fight back. After expanding its grip on Greater Khartoum in the first months of the war, including by seizing Sudan's main oil refinery, a boon for its operations, in October and November the RSF turned its attention elsewhere. It conquered most of Darfur, the western region where it had first emerged from the remnants of the Janjaweed, a Bashir-backed militia responsible for atrocities against the area's non-Arab majority in the early 2000s. The RSF also launched new offensives in the Kordofan region, and shocked many Sudanese by launching its first strike south east of Khartoum in December, where it captured Wad Medani, capital of the breadbasket Gezira state. Many of Khartoum's residents had fled to Wad Medani, an army stronghold, when the war broke out. By the end of 2023, some Sudanese wondered if the RSF would continue marching east to assail the army's new redoubt in Port Sudan on the Red Sea.

But the RSF's momentum has stalled, with Hemedti's forces appearing overstretched as they fight on fronts from west to east. Clashes across the country, particularly in Kordofan and Omdurman, Khartoum's major suburb west of the Nile, have strained RSF supply lines and resources, although their fighting capabilities remain substantial, with a steady inflow of arms and personnel. That said, the RSF seems unable to or uninterested in administering areas under its control – some with populations deeply hostile to it, due in part to its wanton looting and other abuses – and has struggled to control new recruits. Atrocities carried out by the forces, which include killings, sexual violence against women and girls and systematic theft, have enraged many Sudanese, pushing tens of thousands to take up arms against the RSF, either by joining army training camps or organising under affiliated ethnic militias. At the same time, many of those who have joined the RSF have done so in the expectation of handsome bounty. Many have more loyalty to communal leaders in their homelands than to a strict RSF chain of command.

With Hemedti's forces bogged down, the army launched its first major counteroffensives in January, focusing on Greater Khartoum and Gezira state. Making use of combat drones, reportedly supplied by Iran, Burhan's troops have made steady progress in retaking large parts of Omdurman. The battle may soon turn to Bahri, Khartoum's sister city to the north, as well as to the rest of the capital, both of which areas have been mainly in RSF hands since the war broke out. The army is also likely to seek to oust the RSF from the oil refinery north of Khartoum, which the paramilitaries still rely on for fuel. The army's promised campaign to retake Gezira has moved more slowly, partly due to defensive operations led by a former army officer now leading a local militia aligned with the RSF.

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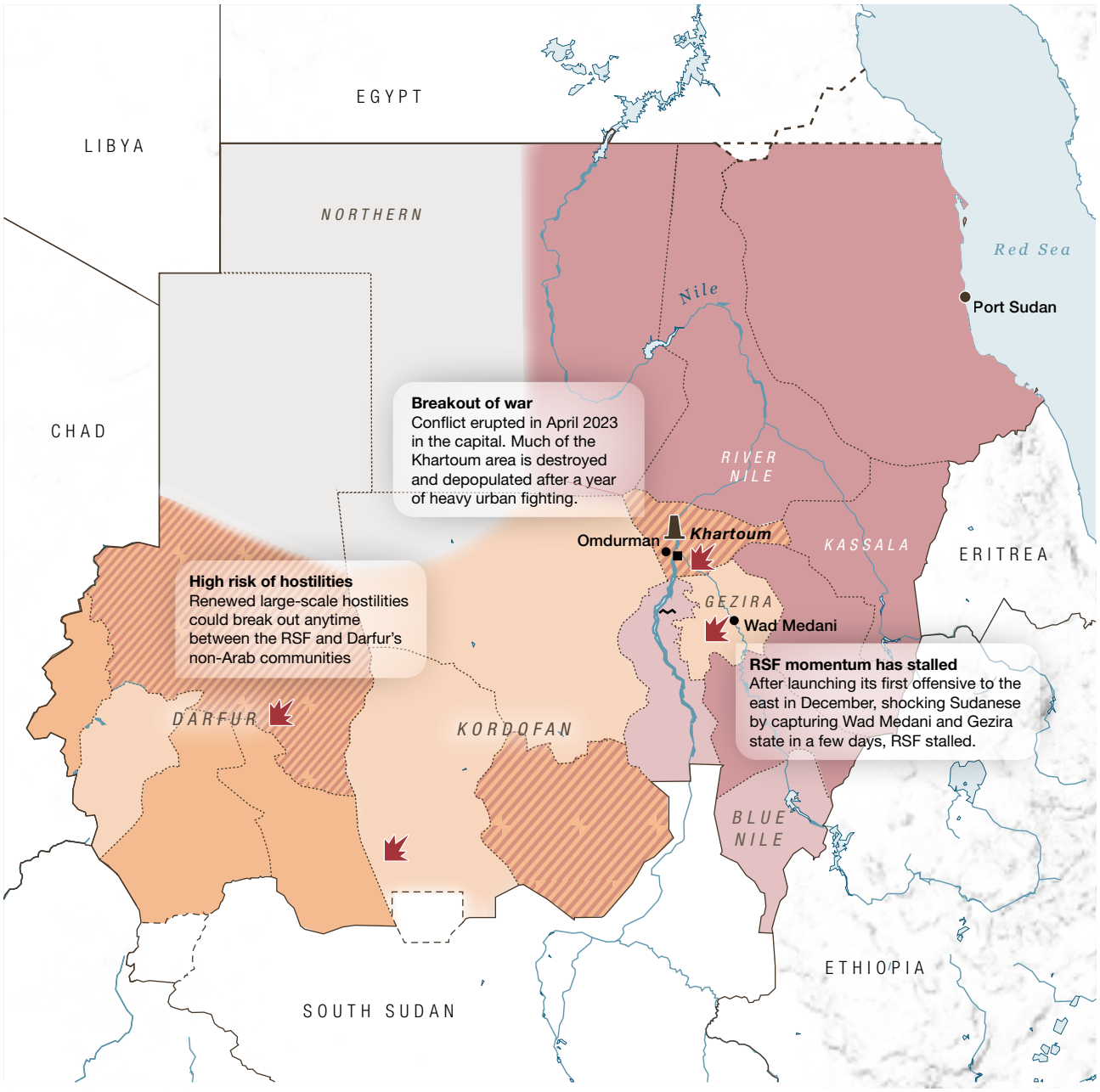
With the two forces now largely arrayed along an east-west divide, the humanitarian threats facing Sudan's people have surged. Each advance by the RSF tends to bring with it a corresponding collapse of what is left of Sudanese state services; those state institutions that remain tend to operate only in army-held areas. Outside Darfur, the territories the RSF have conquered are havens for looting and atrocities. Amid extreme insecurity, destruction and mass displacement (except among those communities that are too fearful to flee or are otherwise trapped), farming and other livelihoods have ground to a halt. The result is a decimation of Sudan's domestic food production. Food



imports have also been squeezed as traders face huge costs and challenges in getting products to markets.

Humanitarian Emergency and Splintering Fronts

Conditions in Sudan could hardly be more dire. The UN reports that 18 million people, more than one third of the population, face acute food insecurity. Both warring parties have hindered humanitarian efforts by impeding access to relief operations. About 90 per cent of those suffering acute food insecurity are stuck in areas of active conflict, including millions of residents in Greater Khartoum and Gezira. The two sides generally show callous disregard for civilians' plight, with the RSF demanding sky-high fees from aid trucks at checkpoints

or stealing their cargo, while the army tries to block relief in RSF-held areas, where many camps for the internally displaced and devastated towns have been unable to receive assistance. In April, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, which supplies analysis of food emergencies to UN bodies and relief agencies, urged "stakeholders to act immediately to prevent famine", while warning that "data gaps" and "connectivity challenges" had prevented it from updating its analysis since December.

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There is little sign of security improving, either, with several regions facing specific risks of heightened conflict. Renewed large-scale hostilities could break out anytime between the RSF and Darfur's non-Arab armed groups. The risk is most acute in North Darfur, where the RSF has locked horns with a host of predominantly non-Arab armed groups, which have fought the Sudanese government since the early 2000s, but many of which now back the army. Tensions have been high since November 2023, when the RSF aborted its offensive on army positions in El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur. Several of the armed groups from Darfur have aligned themselves with the army and even joined the conflict in Khartoum and Gezira, sparking concerns that the RSF and affiliated militias may retaliate against associated non-Arab communities back in Darfur. Furthermore, divisions have emerged within various armed groups in Darfur, potentially incubating conflict between factions that have declared allegiance to the RSF and others that support the army.

Conditions are different but no less troubling in the army's bastion to the east, where Burhan is also relying on an increasingly varied coalition of allies to combat the RSF. The army has been engaged in a campaign to arm popular resistance forces, whose members reportedly number in the tens of thousands. A mix of other groups, including Darfuri and other communal militias, are now also training for battle in the east, particularly in Gedaref and Kassala states. Ousted Bashir-era Islamists, who have come back to dominate Burhan's government ministries and security institutions, are mobilising well-trained militias, mostly from River Nile, Northern and Kassala states, to fight alongside the army, especially in Khartoum and Omdurman. Even Burhan's allies worry that the army is steadily losing control of its own coalition and could implode, given the sheer number of militias now helping it fight the RSF.

With more and more groups entangled in the turmoil, both Burhan and Hemedti may find it increasingly difficult to maintain control of affiliated militias. The potential fragmentation of Sudan's civil war is also ominous because of how it would endanger efforts to resolve the conflict through high-level negotiation between the two leaders. At the same time, the conflict is already rapidly degenerating into inter-ethnic wars, particularly between the Darfuri Arabs and Sudan's riverine peoples, as well as Arabs and non-Arabs in Darfur. Access to more lethal weaponry, the surge in atrocities and the proliferation of hate speech have fuelled calls by military and communal leaders to annihilate communities aligned with the enemy. Ethnically driven violence, along the lines of the mass killing and displacement of non-Arabs in West Darfur by the RSF and its affiliates and similar depredations by the army targeting Arabs in North, South and East Darfur, is bound to become more likely across Sudan so long as the conflict persists.

Proxy War and Lacklustre Diplomacy

Sudan has also become an arena for regional proxy conflict. While Egypt is the army's main outside backer, Iran is also providing it with weapons. Many credit Iranian drones for the army's recent turnabout on the battlefield. On the other side, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is the major patron of the RSF. Other regional

powers have also taken sides, with Eritrea, apprehensive about the RSF advancing further east toward its borders, generally backing the army, whereas its neighbour Ethiopia, a close ally of the UAE and rival of Egypt, is seemingly friendly to the RSF.

These foreign entanglements create the potential for significant worsening of violence the more that the war and its effects extend beyond Sudan's borders, a process that is well under way. In February, South Sudan's main oil export pipeline, which runs through Sudan, fell into disrepair due to a lack of maintenance caused by the fighting, risking an economic meltdown that could deepen its own internal fissures and destabilise the country anew. Spillover from Sudan could also unsettle Chad, from which some of the RSF's fighters hail; or it could draw in Ethiopia or Eritrea, as well as other regional powers. The vacuum of governance could in addition create opportunities for jihadists to establish bases in Sudan. Not least, many of the Arab and African powers involved in the war view it as central to jostling over access to and control of the strategic Red Sea, magnifying tensions.

Diplomatic efforts to end the fighting, meanwhile, have been lagging and lacklustre. Mediated by Riyadh and Washington, two initial rounds of talks in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the first from May to June and the second from October to November, focused on achieving time-bound humanitarian ceasefires, but made little progress. Amid widespread frustration, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional bloc representing the Horn of Africa, then tried to bring the two Sudanese sides together in December. Spearheaded by its current chair Djibouti as well as Kenya, and with the support of the U.S. and others, this effort nevertheless also fizzled out by January.

As both the Jeddah process and the IGAD track faltered, the Egyptians and Emiratis were working through back channels and outside the spotlight to mediate. Talks in the Bahraini capital Manama led to face-to-face meetings between the two deputies of Sudan's warring leaders, later including U.S. and Saudi representatives as well. There, the deputies signed a declaration of principles that committed both sides to accepting a civilian government, holding elections after a transition and creating a united armed forces consisting of the army, the RSF and other armed groups. The parties also agreed to scale back the influence of Bashir regime figures, arrest those who had escaped from prison (a likely reference to a coterie of prominent figures, including Bashir cabinet officials, now allegedly fighting on the army's side), and hand over indicted suspects to the International Criminal Court. Those whom the Court has accused of atrocity crimes in Darfur in the early and mid-2000s include Bashir himself, as well as security strongman Ahmed Haroun, who is at large and reportedly active in the current war. But these direct talks petered out, too. Burhan pulled his deputy out as word of the secret meetings leaked, amid a furore among the former Bashir officials that now back him.

Can Negotiations Achieve a Breakthrough?

Despite the grim outlook for areas scarred by war, at least some of the ingredients for a firm and concerted international push for a ceasefire are coming into place, albeit far too late. The U.S., UN, AU and IGAD have all appointed new officials to lead their respective efforts, with the U.S. naming former congressional representative and diplomat Tom Perriello as special envoy and the UN designating Algeria's former foreign minister and senior AU official Ramtane Lamamra as envoy. The AU, for its part, has put

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together a high-level panel chaired by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, who previously led its mission in Darfur, while IGAD has tapped South Sudanese lawyer Lawrence Korbandy to be its special envoy. These appointments have galvanised the international effort to end the war.

Egyptian-Emirati diplomacy could play a vital role in bringing hostilities to a close, given these countries' respective sway over the opposing sides and warming relations between Abu Dhabi and Cairo. As Crisis Group has stressed since early in the war, Egyptian and Emirati buy-in to any peace process is likely to be a prerequisite for its success. Ties between the two Arab powers have become closer following a $35 billion financial package for Egypt announced by the UAE in February. The clearly unwinnable nature of the war, the growing influence of Bashir-era Islamists (whom both Cairo and Abu Dhabi distrust), Iran's efforts to increase its influence in Sudan through support for the army all provide strong reasons for both countries to boost their diplomatic efforts, even if for now they remain discreet.

Despite some positive developments, however, huge hurdles remain.

First, painstaking advances and higher-level political engagement cannot conceal the fact that diplomats have yet to find their footing. In particular, while the secretive Egyptian-Emirati initiative and the more public Jeddah process could be mutually reinforcing or even merge into one, they could also compete and undermine each other. This risk seems real, given the animosity between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, the resentment among Egyptian and Emirati officials at their exclusion from the Jeddah talks, and Saudi Arabia's desire to keep Jeddah as the principal mediation track. As Crisis Group has stressed, the U.S. is particularly well placed to help bridge these gaps and forge a more unified diplomatic push, an objective that Perriello has already taken up as a priority. Lamamra and the European Union have also lent weight to coordinating among different players.

Secondly, the muddled mediation landscape has left little space or role for other important powers and bodies, including in Africa and Europe, whose respective efforts and resources need to all push in the same direction as part of a collective effort to bring peace to Sudan.

Thirdly, political pushback from Sudan itself is likely to remain a huge challenge. Resistance from both strongmen to entreaties for peace remains formidable. It is far from clear that Burhan in particular is keen to negotiate, given the army's recent military successes: past experience shows the army has repeatedly pulled out of talks whenever they appear to be gaining traction. It is also uncertain whether Burhan is willing to renege on his alliances with Bashir-era Islamists, which is a key demand for the RSF, as well as for Western and Arab powers. Indeed, fears persist that the army could splinter should peace talks accelerate. While Hemedti has long seemed rather more interested in talks, he may not be ready to compromise on terms acceptable to most Sudanese.

Other obstacles loom as well. The two sides do not agree on the conditions for a ceasefire, since the army continues to insist that the RSF withdraw from positions in Khartoum and Gezira as a precondition for talks on a truce – a demand echoed by many Sudanese from these areas, but which the RSF has dismissed. Nor do the two sides agree on what a political process would look like following any ceasefire, who would participate or what positions in the state or public life Burhan and Hemedti might hold. Pinning down the details of how to integrate the various armed forces into a unified Sudanese army, the very issue that sparked the outbreak of civil war, is likewise sure to remain a thorny issue in any future negotiations.

A Matter of Urgency

The U.S., Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE – outside parties that wield significant leverage over the warring parties – have the best chances of persuading the two sides to stop fighting, allow humanitarian aid to reach those who need it and begin the hard work of knitting Sudan back together. The alternative is grim to contemplate, as the country teeters on the brink

of chaos, mass starvation and a war that could spread across its borders to a troubled region. Time is of the essence – particularly since the parties are inveigling new warlords to join the fight with promises that they will share in victory's eventual spoils, which promises to make negotiations to end the war that much more difficult.

Against this backdrop, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia are intent on reconvening talks in Jeddah. The new round should broaden to include roles for Egypt and the UAE, as Crisis Group has long argued, as well as for the new envoys from the AU, UN and IGAD, given the opportunity for reinvigorated diplomacy afforded by these appointments. A single consolidated negotiation process would allow for greater and more cohesive foreign pressure on the two sides, while closing avenues for the belligerents to continue forum shopping to evade serious negotiations. These talks should also expressly aim to reach an urgent permanent ceasefire, instead of dwelling on confidence-building measures as previously. If plans to turn the Jeddah talks into a high-level forum for ceasefire talks falter, then key actors (especially the U.S. and UN) should find a way to make the various negotiation tracks reinforce rather than undermine each other. Advancing as nimbly and quickly as possible toward a deal, using both informal and formal channels and steadily intensifying pressure on the sides should be the goal, no matter where talks take place.

At the same time, moves to spare millions of Sudanese from starvation cannot wait. All those with influence on the conflict parties should prevail on them in public and private to allow unfettered food aid to communities in need. Outside powers should explore other options for getting food into the worst-affected areas of the country, including greater Darfur, if the warring leaders remain uncooperative. Donors should look into funnelling funds through local volunteers, particularly in the Khartoum, Darfur, Kordofan and Gezira areas, where millions are languishing after nearly all the major aid organisations fled. Donors should also stand ready to reach into their coffers to support the gravely underfunded aid response. The humanitarian conference scheduled for 15 April in Paris is an opportunity for a more serious coordinated commitment to saving Sudanese lives.

But the best and perhaps only reliable cure for the horrors that Sudan's conflict parties have brought – from hunger and starvation to a slow-motion collapse of the state – remains a stable ceasefire that allows relief supplies into all parts of the country and which, with any luck, could evolve into a permanent end to hostilities. From there, the path toward remaking a shattered Sudanese state or creating the conditions to allow citizens to return to their homes will be daunting. A year of war has left tens of thousands of Sudanese dead, millions displaced and the state a hollowed-out and barely recognisable shell. Halting the carnage and preventing its spread could not be more urgent.

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