

South Sudan: Struggling to Stay Alive

Written by Mukesh Kapila

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/24/south-sudan-struggling-to-stay-alive/>

MUKESH KAPILA, MAY 24 2014

The world's newest country – the Republic of South Sudan – is fighting to survive. As a refugee put it: “Does my country still exist if we are all dead or have fled?”

To give urgent life support to South Sudan was the aim of the donor conference [1] convened in Oslo recently by the United Nations and the Norwegian Government. A potentially catastrophic funding shortfall of US\$1.26 billion in emergency assistance had to be bridged to avert a looming famine. The donors were quite generous: \$600 million was pledged – nearly half of it by the US, UK, and Norway, the original troika that had midwived South Sudan's birth. This was on top of the earlier \$536 million already mobilised for 2014, and the other billions in aid given to the oil-rich nation since its birth in July 2011.

In reality, with credible signals that the gravest humanitarian crisis on the planet was imminent, donors had no option but to step up to the plate, yet again. Their irritation and skepticism were only too obvious. When the South Sudan Foreign Minister, the urbane Barnaba Marial Benjamin, asked the world to recognise that his country was like the youngest child in the family that sometimes broke the crockery, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid, Kristalina Georgieva, retorted that it was high time for the child to grow up. The South Sudan government admitted that it could have done better to handle the current crisis and pledged to behave better in terms of fostering security and protecting civilians, seeking a political solution, bringing transparency to its finances, investigating crimes against humanity, and removing obstacles to aid delivery.

The UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for South Sudan, Toby Lanzer, placed these “good words” in a real-world context by pointing out [2] that there were still 80 checkpoints between Juba and Bentiu, the capital of the ironically named Unity State that has seen some of the most vicious fighting in recent weeks. It costs eleven times more to deliver aid by air than by road, and it was not right for donors to pay for that. In addition, he demanded that people who deliberately attacked UN bases and staff must be held accountable.

The crisis in the world's newest nation is essentially a problem of governance, not a natural disaster. The 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was supposed to have ushered in a new era of peace, development, democracy, and inclusiveness, ending decades of conflict by granting the people of Southern Sudan the right to self-determination. Yet three years after the population voted overwhelmingly for independence from their oppressive Arab masters in Khartoum, a fall-out among the rebels-turned-rulers of the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) has wrecked this young nation.

Over a million people have been internally displaced, at least 300,000 have fled abroad, and tens of thousands are sheltering within massively congested UN compounds. Nearly five million people urgently require humanitarian aid. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon told the UN Security Council that if the conflict continues, half of South Sudan's 12 million people will be “displaced internally, refugees abroad, starving or dead” by end of the year. At least 50,000 children are projected to die of malnutrition.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. In July 2011, South Sudan was born amidst much hope and expectations, both from its people and from the international community. Half a century of war and neglected development had bequeathed the new nation many of the world's worst socio-economic indicators. So it was showered with

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reconstruction plans, a multi-donor trust fund, and the promise of billions of dollars a year in oil revenues. Such massive inward investments would have been expected to help South Sudan grow rapidly out of its poverty and create the badly needed infrastructure and jobs that would, in turn, attract its talented diaspora to return to build-up their country.

This never materialised. Oil flows were cut off following disputes with Khartoum, although this was not Juba's fault. Outside aid agencies were obliged to shoulder responsibility for health, education, and other essential services that the government should have been providing to win the confidence of its citizens. Meanwhile, inexperience, mismanagement, and a staggering degree of corruption – that lost at least \$4 billion, by the government's own admission [4] – led to a massive national meltdown.

Unsurprisingly, this escalated into a political crisis, culminating last December in a fight between members of the presidential guard which was quickly ethnicised, pitting the largely Dinka supporters of President Salva Kiir against the predominantly Nuer supporters of ousted vice president Riek Machar.

What followed, according to blood-curdling reports from Amnesty International [5] and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan,[6] was an epic level of brutality inflicted by all sides. This deliberately targeted helpless civilians through summary executions; mass disappearances; torture; rape; destruction of homes, churches, and hospitals; attacks on humanitarian workers and premises; and abduction of children to become child soldiers.

Several major towns have been abandoned and whole villages razed. Heavy rains have now arrived, adding cholera and malaria to seasonal woes. One desperate woman expressed the cruel choice she faced. She had been raped three times in two weeks as she went to collect firewood. When asked why she persisted in venturing out, she replied, "because I have to, and, anyway, I don't get raped every day". Another mother fleeing the violence shared her own dilemma: "How do I decide which child to leave behind as I can't carry them all?"

Dignitaries, such as UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, US Secretary of State Kerry, and other leaders, came personally to impress upon Juba the seriousness of the situation. South Sudan's neighbours weighed in as the conflict took on regional dimensions due to refugee outflows and the military presence of Uganda inside the country. The further destabilisation of the border with Sudan and the meddling from Khartoum have added fuel to the fire.

The leaders of the two sides – distinguished by their new acronyms – GRSS (for the Government of the Republic of South Sudan) and SPLM/A-IO (for the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army/Movement In Opposition) were coaxed by negotiators from the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD, a regional cooperation body) to sign a new agreement on 9 May to stop hostilities, the previous one from January having foundered. However, skirmishes continue as elements of the ground fighters are beyond command and control. Many are more like mobs that spontaneously coalesce when inflamed by invocation of past atrocities and the desire to seek tit-for-tat revenge. The regional forces of the IGAD Monitoring and Verification Mechanism will take time to arrive, and their mandate and capacities to enforce peace remain uncertain.

Outsiders must accept a share of the blame for the country's long history of problems. The original CPA was severely flawed as it involved the international community turning a blind eye to some of the world's most egregious human rights abuses – including genocide in Darfur and mounting atrocities in the contested areas of Abyei, Nuba Mountains, and Blue Nile – so that South Sudan could achieve independence "peacefully". The chickens have now come home to roost with a vengeance.

There are no short cuts to ending the conflict in South Sudan without tackling underlying greed, grievance, and governance issues. The country needs a new inclusive government and if current actors want to show that they are worthy to be in it, they could cease fighting and facilitate humanitarian access. There has to be accountability for the crimes against humanity already committed, as history teaches that there is no peace without justice. It is good that the UN has called for a tribunal to challenge prevalent impunity. While some more armed UN peacekeepers with a robust protection mandate could help in the short term, peace will not come out of the barrel of a gun. It is time to try out the new modality of unarmed civilian peacekeeping that is already working in parts of South Sudan.[7] There is a

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further essential consideration: South Sudan will never find peace while President Bashir, indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, still rules the roost in neighbouring Sudan.

Twenty years ago, as part of the UK aid mission to Rwanda, I witnessed the tail end of the last genocide of the 20th Century, and last month, I was in Kigali to commemorate [8] that sober anniversary. Ten years ago, I was forced to leave my job as Head of the United Nations in Sudan because I could not stay silent [9] while the first genocide of the 21st Century – in Darfur – unfolded “on my watch”. Sadly, we could be making the same mistakes again as “never again” becomes “yet again” in South Sudan.

Notes

[1] South Sudan Humanitarian Conference, Oslo, 19-20 May 2014. <http://www.southsudanhumanitarianconference.org>

[2] VOA News. South Sudan must uphold peace, aid access. Accessed at <http://www.voanews.com/content/south-sudan-must-uphold-peace-aid-access-deals—us-special-envoy/1919633.html>

[3] VOA News. Accessed at <http://www.voanews.com/content/un-chief-concerned-by-s-sudan-truce-breaches/1913208.html>

[4] Reuters. South Sudan officials have stolen \$4 billion: president. Accessed at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/04/us-southsudan-corruption-idUSBRE8530QI20120604>

[5] Amnesty International. South Sudan: nowhere safe: civilians under attack in South Sudan. Accessed at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFR65/003/2014/en>

[6] UN Mission in South Sudan. Conflict in South Sudan: A Human Rights Report. Accessed at <http://reliefweb.int/report/south-sudan/conflict-south-sudan-human-rights-report>

[7] Nonviolent Peaceforce. Accessed at <http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/fieldwork/all-projects/south-sudan>

[8] Mukesh Kapila. Lessons from a personal journey through the genocide in Rwanda, 2014. Accessed at <http://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/15/lessons-from-a-personal-journey-through-the-genocide-in-rwanda/>

[9] Mukesh Kapila. *Against A Tide Of Evil*. Mainstream Publishing, 2013. Accessed at <http://www.mukeshkapila.org>

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