I. Background

There are currently several crises happening in Sudan, including those in Darfur, Abyei, South Kordofan and Blue Nile (referred to collectively as the Nuba Mountains), and Eastern Sudan; as well as with South Sudan, which seceded from Sudan on 9 July 2011.

Unrest over political marginalization and economic issues has continued to plague the states of eastern Sudan, where the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement has failed to end the conflict. In Abyei and the Nuba Mountains, the Sudanese government has also been accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity in an ongoing conflict surrounding the exploitation of oil resources in Abyei, as well as the fallout that accompanied South Sudan’s official secession.

Indeed, South Sudan's secession in 2011, while a major achievement in the decades-long war in Sudan, has failed to reduce tensions between many of the Sudanese and South Sudanese, particularly in the regions of Abyei, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile.

Specifically, the peoples of the Nuba Mountains region contend that they were used as a
bargaining chip
preceding South Sudan’s independence.

Indeed, even though they had fought alongside the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) – that is, the military arm of what has become the ruling party in South Sudan – the secession left the SPLA allies in South Kordofan and Blue Nile within Sudan’s official territory and jurisdiction.

Similarly, issues of citizenship have also contributed to the conflict in Sudan. In September 2010, Sudanese officials stated that if the country was indeed to split in two the following year, Southerners remaining in the North (present-day Sudan) would be denied citizenship rights.

Human Rights Watch urged the Sudanese government to reconsider its announcement and instead respect international standards of nationality law, which would grant full citizenship to all peoples located within the territory of the country of Sudan.

Shortly thereafter, in March 2012, Sudan and South Sudan surprisingly initialed agreements on the issue of citizenship.

Unfortunately, however, the citizenship question concerning the disputed region of Abyei remains unanswered.

In addition to issues in these contested areas, Sudan and South Sudan continue to spar over each other’s role in oil production: that of the producer and the exporter, respectively. The protests that occurred in September and October 2013 in response to the Sudanese government’s decision to cut oil subsidies in the capital city of Khartoum are indicative of an as-yet unresolved economic crisis that turned political, as demonstrators also began
Crisis in Sudan

calling

for President Omar al-Bashir to leave office.

Around the same time, a United Nations (UN) human rights expert referred to the situation in Sudan as “precarious.”

Elsewhere, the Darfur crisis, which began in 2003, is centered on local land disputes and rebel clashes with the government of Sudan.

Based on evidence of government-sponsored violence associated with the crimes committed in Darfur, President Omar al-Bashir was indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2009 for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

(For more, please see our separate Darfur crisis page.)

II. Growing Crisis in South Kordofan and Blue Nile

After signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005, and the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) the following year, the Sudanese government subsequently signed the Doha Document for Peace in Darfur (DDPD) in May 2011.

However, none of these efforts – the CPA, DPA, or DDPD – successfully brought the conflict in Sudan to an end.

Even the secession of South Sudan in July 2011, while welcomed by southerners, failed to resolve the conflict in the now two countries.
Present-day violence is particularly concentrated in the South Kordofan and Blue Nile regions of Sudan, the former of which was created under the 2005 CPA. The conflict is attributable to several root causes, including political marginalization, as people in these regions are not adequately represented in the Sudanese government, and economic disparity, which is due to unequal development between northern and southern regions in Sudan.

Much of this inequality is centered on oil production, as the Sudanese government taxes the most oil-rich areas without compensating their inhabitants.

A related economic factor is land dispossession stemming from earlier issues in the 1980s.

In addition, the ethnically and religiously diverse peoples of South Kordofan and Blue Nile are routinely subjected to social marginalization, as the central government of Sudan wishes to impose a homogenous Arab cultural identity on all of its citizens.

As news sources have indicated, this can at times result in violence, as was the case with an incident from 2 February 2012, when the Sudanese government allegedly bombed several churches in South Kordofan.

One of the major actors in the South Kordofan and Blue Nile conflict is the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N). Founded out of the former SPLM rebel group in 2011, the SPLM-N “seeks to change the policies of the centre in Khartoum and to build a new centre for the benefit of all Sudanese people regardless of their religion, gender or ethnicity background.”

In addition to their long-held grievances with Khartoum, tensions flared following the disputed 2011 gubernatorial election in South Kordofan involving Abdel-Aziz al-Hilu of the SPLM-N party.
In addition, the SPLM-N-elected governor in Blue Nile, Malik Aggar, was removed by the Sudanese government in September 2011, in response to increased fighting that had erupted in Blue Nile.

Additionally, issues over oil-revenue sharing also contributed to disputes between the SAF and SPLM-N.

In late 2011, the SPLM-N subsequently formed the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), an alliance between itself and two of the other major Darfur rebel groups, the SLA-Minni-Minnawi and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

Since its creation, the SRF has also reached out to other political parties in Sudan, in order to bolster the alliance's strength.

Committed from the outset to conducting joint military action to overthrow the Sudanese government, the SRF later declared war on Khartoum in May 2013. Even before this formal declaration, however, the SRF had engaged in several attacks against the SAF, including a 27 April 2013 offensive on a town in North Kordofan, which left nine policemen dead, and a 31 May incident in which the SRF allegedly shot down an SAF helicopter, killing a top commander in the Sudanese army.

In November 2013, SRF leaders visited European capitals in an effort to ask governments to pressure the Sudanese government to seek peace and restore respect for human rights.

Sudan responded to the formation of the SRF with gross force, and the SAF soon began carrying out an indiscriminate bombing campaign in the Nuba Mountains.
As NPR noted in 2012, these attacks are meant to punish civilians for their popular support of the SPLM-N, because the government doesn’t want to allow the SPLM-N to live off civilian populations in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

The SAF’s aerial bombardment is crippling, as fear of attacks during the harvest season in particular prevent farmers from gathering their crops.

This disruption, in turn, has resulted in population-wide food insecurity.

In addition to aerial attacks, the SAF has led a ground offensive that also neglects to distinguish between civilian and combatant targets.

On top of these direct actions, the government of Sudan has categorically refused humanitarian aid access of any kind for people in the Nuba Mountains.

Indeed, the government has said that the SPLM-N must first lay down its arms before aid workers will be granted approval to enter the region.

Importantly, however, when the SPLM-N put forth a cessation of hostilities in August 2013, it was rejected by the SAF.

The Sudanese government’s double-pronged approach of direct and indirect killing – by aerial or ground bombardments, and prolonged death resulting from food insecurity, respectively – all coupled with its refusal to allow independent observers into the affected regions, makes it difficult to determine exactly how many people in South Kordofan and Blue Nile have perished or been displaced as a result of the current conflict. Despite a lack of
Crisis in Sudan

accurate numbers, however, the humanitarian situation in South Kordofan and Blue Nile is very serious. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), there were nearly 205,000 Sudanese refugees in South Sudan alone as of 5 November 2013.

It is further estimated that the total number of refugees from Sudan is upwards of 569,000 people.

In addition, as of April 2013, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimated that approximately 930,000 people in South Kordofan and 185,000 in Blue Nile were internally displaced persons (IDPs), or were at least severely affected by the current violence in the region.

As the situation stands today, the SAF and SPLM-N have reached somewhat of a stalemate. Both sides have demonstrated military strength, as the SPLM-N is extremely well-armed due to its successful seizure of many SAF resources.

While the SPLM-N may not receive tangible weapons resources from South Sudan, it is believed that the SPLA might nonetheless be assisting the SPLM-N with logistical and political support.

For its part, the SAF is also well-supplied and has between 40,000 and 70,000 troops in South Kordofan alone, as compared to the SPLM-N’s estimated 30,000.

One of the SAF’s major allies, the Misseriya, also contributes to its strength, particularly as regards the Sudanese government’s objectives in the concurrent conflict in Abyei.

III. International Responses to South Kordofan and Blue Nile Conflicts

The international community has made several attempts to end the violence in South Kordofan and

While the SPLM-N accepted the stipulations of the proposal, the government of Sudan rejected the document over alleged security concerns.

As such, each side ended up signing separate Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with the Tripartite on 5 August 2012.

At this time, the implementation of the Tripartite was initiated.

Unfortunately, however, both parties failed to carry out their duties as defined in their respective MOUs, and after the 90-day implementation period passed, Khartoum still hadn’t completed a plan of action for the delivery of humanitarian aid to SPLM-N-controlled areas.

Citing a lack of success in the three-month implementation period, the Sudanese government declared a definitive end to the MOU initiative in November 2012 by refusing to renew it.

Prior to the Tripartite Proposal, the African Union High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP) on Sudan and South Sudan, which was headed by former South African President Thabo Mbeki, had also been established in October 2009. The outgrowth of its predecessor, the African Union High-Level Panel on Darfur (AUPD), the AUHIP drafted a seven-point roadmap with a view towards ending hostilities between Sudan and South Sudan.

In particular, the roadmap called for a cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of troops, and the end of support for rebel activity.

In May 2012, both Sudan and South Sudan
Crisis in Sudan

agreed

to these provisions.

The UN Security Council (UNSC) endorsed the AUHIP roadmap with the passage of Resolution 2046 on 2 May 2012. Despite this approbation, however, the UNSC remained divided on the issue, with the governments of Russia and China unwilling to adopt sanctions against Sudan.

As Global Policy states, this hesitancy might be attributable to the fact that China and Russia both sell arms to the Sudanese government – arms which are in turn used against civilians.

Russia and China also have economic ties with Sudan regarding oil, which Human Rights Watch identified as early as 2003 as problematic, in light of concurrent human rights abuses happening in Sudan.

Both before and after the AUHIP roadmap was agreed upon, the UNSC had also been publishing several press statements on the situation in Sudan. These include: SC/10677 in February 2012, SC/10677 in June 2012, SC/10773 in September of the same year, and SC/10779 a few days later.
While the initial mandate of the AUHIP was set to expire on 30 July 2013, it was renewed for an additional six months at the beginning of August 2013. Later that month, on 23 August, the UNSC also issued a Presidential Statement (PRST/2013/14) on Sudan, which identified ongoing challenges to the implementation of requirements under both the AUHIP and Resolution 2046.

For its part, the Human Rights Council (HRC) appointed an Independent Expert on the Human Rights Situation in Sudan in 2011. In September 2013, the HRC held an interactive dialogue with Sudan's Independent Expert. However, according to Human Rights Watch, the Independent Expert's report failed to identify the deterioration of the human rights situation in Sudan.

The Independent Expert's mandate was renewed for 12 additional months on 13 October 2013.

IV. Conflict in Eastern Sudan

While the conflicts in South Kordofan and Blue Nile have received a majority of the attention as regards the current turmoil in Sudan, a parallel crisis has also developed in the eastern Sudanese states of Red Sea, Kassala, and Gedarif.

Here, as elsewhere in the country, grievances historically surround a lack of political representation and disputes over oil revenue.

Though the 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA) that was signed between the government of Sudan and the Eastern Front – a collective formed in 2005 between the non-Arab Muslim Beja, and Free Lions rebels from the Arab Rashaida tribe
Crisis in Sudan  

– effectively ended pockets of insurgency, renewed conflict has once again threatened stability in eastern Sudan.

Indeed, student protests over alleged government marginalization were the impetus for violence in Kassala state in October 2011. The government of Sudan’s violent suppression of these demonstrations, which were headed by the anti-government and student-led Girifna Movement, has exacerbated tensions in the region.

With the ESPA still not fully implemented, and the National Congress Party (NCP) failing to make its political processes more inclusive of groups throughout the entire country, any progress made in 2006 has slowly disintegrated.

In addition, the Eastern Sudan Reconstruction and Development Fund, which was agreed to under the ESPA, was supposed to receive a total of US $600 million over four years, beginning in 2007.

By July 2013, however, only US $75 million total had been allocated to the Fund.

The humanitarian situation has also grown more severe since June 2012, when the Sudanese government expelled all foreign aid organizations from eastern Sudan.

As it relates to the wider contemporary conflict in Sudan, ex-fighters from the conflict in eastern Sudan, such as members of the Beja Congress, have begun to join the SRF in the alliance’s efforts to overthrow the Sudanese government.

In December 2013, an International Crisis Group report cited
ineffective Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) strategies, along with a lack of incentives, as a major reason for ex-fighters’ inability and unwillingness to re-assimilate into society.

The same report also called on the government of Sudan to “revive” the ESPA and establish an inclusive international dialogue to facilitate peaceful resolution to conflict.

V. 2013 Protests in Khartoum: Economic and Political Unrest

As the above sections highlight, Sudan is embroiled in a number of internal conflicts. However, the 2011 secession of South Sudan remains at the heart of the crisis in Sudan.

As such, a key consequence of these countries’ separation is that both remain mutually reliant on one another in regards to the oil industry.

Indeed, while South Sudan produces the oil, it is Sudan that is home to the oil pipelines which enable the export of this oil.

As such, when South Sudan seceded in July 2011, Sudan lost a significant portion of oil-producing sites, thereby drastically decreasing the country’s economic revenue.

In January 2012, amidst disputes with the Sudanese government over transit fees, South Sudan accused Sudan of seizing more than US $800 million worth of crude oil from the oil-producing nation.

South Sudan subsequently began to shut down
Crisis in Sudan

oil production in retaliation for Sudan’s alleged theft. This move was initially disastrous for South Sudan, whose oil production made up a staggering 98% of the nation’s economy.

However, by April 2013, when oil production resumed, South Sudan had quadrupled its revenue by diversifying its economy and developing its agriculture sector, among others, thereby partially offsetting its oil revenue losses.

To counteract its own loss of revenue, the government of Sudan took such measures as raising transport costs in Khartoum by 35% in June 2012.

The following month, it proceeded to cut fuel subsidies, despite protests.

In June 2013, after the two countries had resumed oil production, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir threatened to shut off oil flows from South Sudan, whom he accused of funding rebels in the Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile conflicts. By July 2013, however, President al-Bashir had relented and postponed any action to stop oil exports from South Sudan.

At this time, the governments of Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda also reached a deal to construct two oil pipelines – one from South Sudan to Kenya’s port in Lamu, and the other from Rwanda to Mombasa.

The former would effectively bypass Sudan, thus eliminating South Sudan’s dependence on Khartoum.

Unfortunately, major conflict in Sudan erupted again in September 2013 when civilians began protesting...
fuel subsidy cuts.

Most protests occurred in Khartoum, but citizens in other cities, including Wad Madani, Port Sudan, Sinnar, Nyla, and the eastern Sudanese states of Kassala and Gedarif, also demonstrated their disapproval of the government’s decision.

While the impetus was originally economic unrest, the protests soon turned political, as in the wake of a systematic internet shutdown, protestors called for President al-Bashir to step down.

The Sudanese government responded with violence, opening fire on the marchers and killing 21 people in the preliminary days of unrest.

The protests, which began on 23 September with thousands of demonstrators decrying the subsidy cuts, ended on 7 October, as the number of protesters decreased to fewer than one hundred.

By then, more than 200 demonstrators had been killed, with some 800 additional people detained and held through the end of October.

On 22 October 2013, leaders from Sudan and South Sudan met to discuss progress made in rebuilding oil export initiatives between the two nations.

The humanitarian situation remains fragile, however, as food shortages reported on 18 November 2013 indicate that the government of Sudan has failed to make up for the revenue deficit left by its tenuous oil relationship with South Sudan.
In addition, as the Christian Science Monitor notes, the Sudanese government’s security crackdowns have included a "shoot to kill" policy, and systematic human rights violations, including rape and violence against women, are ongoing.

VI. Civil Society Responses

Civil society has remained involved in efforts to end the most recent crises in Sudan. For example, in June 2011, the Enough Project called on the international community to uphold its Responsibility to Protect in Sudan.

By the end of August 2011, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch were already referring to the indiscriminate air raids in South Kordofan as potential war crimes, as was the Global Centre for R2P.

On 26 September 2011, the International Crisis Group raised concern over the spreading civil war in Sudan, in light of violent attacks on civilians in Blue Nile.

Furthermore, in January 2012, Minority Rights Group International called on the Sudanese government to protect civilians, given increasing ethnic clashes in several different communities.

Civil society has also reacted to the violence since the spring of 2013. Indeed, in April 2013, the Satellite Sentinel Project issued a report that provided image-based evidence of Sudan’s perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity against, as well as torture of, its citizens in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

Amnesty International reiterated these concerns in its report from April 2013, citing indiscriminate bombings, displacement, and lack of humanitarian aid as major threats to the
people of South Kordofan in particular.

The organization followed up its April 2013 report with another one two months later, in which it gave evidence of scorched-earth tactics being used by the SAF against civilians in Blue Nile.

Human rights organizations within civil society have remained particularly alert on the situation in Sudan following the events tied to the fall 2013 oil subsidy protests in Khartoum. On 1 October 2013, the International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), in conjunction with the African Centre for Justice and Peace Studies (ACJPS), called upon the African Union (AU) to respond to the violence used against protesters in Khartoum by sending an urgent Commission of Inquiry to the country.

A month later, on 1 November 2013, the Sudan Consortium furthered this request by calling on the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) to establish a fact-finding commission to investigate deaths associated with the government of Sudan’s crackdown on protesters in September and October.

VII. Conclusion

In mid-November 2013, Sudan was expected to resume talks with the SPLM-N, but so far, negotiations have not materialized. This comes on the heels of the SRF’s declaration days beforehand that it would seek to “topple” the Sudanese regime with the help of the National Consensus Forces (NCF), a coalition of Sudanese opposition parties.

On 2 December 2013, the NCF and SRF announced a new plan to defeat the NCP, though details of this strategy were not elaborated on.
Along with the political component, the humanitarian consequences of ongoing violence continue to plague the peoples of Sudan. For instance, a bread shortage in Khartoum threatens to further destabilize the country. In addition, on 17 November 2013, the SAF clashed with rebels from Darfur and killed a deputy leader.

Two days later, fighting between Arab tribes in Darfur left upwards of thirty people dead.

Indiscriminate air raids continue to terrorize the peoples of South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

While the UN expressed “cautious optimism” in November 2013 about South Sudan’s future, it remains to be seen to what extent the country will cooperate and subsequently reduce tensions with Sudan, especially as South Sudan has accused Khartoum of supporting a rebel resurrection in its own territory (see our page on South Sudan). The systematic human rights abuses throughout the country indicate that the numerous conflicts in Sudan have risen to the threshold of RtoP concern.

Special thanks to Michelle Rae Eberhard for her work on writing this page.