Forgotten Wars
Sudan’s Periphery Smolders with Focus on South Sudan

By Omer Ismail and Jacinth Planer, January 30, 2014

Escalating violence, displacement, and new political developments in the areas along Sudan’s periphery—Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile—are going largely unnoticed as international attention focuses on violence in South Sudan. Khartoum’s recent peace gestures toward separate rebel factions notwithstanding, a relentless, large-scale Sudanese military campaign in these three areas, first announced in November 2013, continues to exact a punishing toll on hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians within Sudan. Meanwhile, shifting political alliances in Darfur are raising new concerns about worsening violence. In the wake of a burgeoning conflict in South Sudan, global awareness of developments in Sudan has ebbed with less media coverage and a less concerted diplomatic focus. A recent warning by U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous that war in South Sudan’s could undermine efforts to bring peace to Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile should be heeded. Policymakers cannot afford to adopt a binary approach to conflict management in the two Sudans. Increased air strikes in Sudan, and worsening humanitarian conditions in camps demand renewed engagement on multiple fronts as conflict in both Sudan and South Sudan worsens.

Worsening air strikes and displacement

In Darfur, security has deteriorated significantly with heavy air strikes in late December. In a region where an estimated 400,000 people were displaced in 2013 alone, recent aerial bombardments have newly displaced thousands. The mountainous East Jebel Marra region and villages south of Nyala, South Darfur have been pummeled. Amid accounts of “continuous” air strikes in East Jebel Marra, one aerial attack in the area reportedly included the use of almost 30 “incendiary petrol bombs,” that killed large numbers of cattle and burned swathes of farm land in Wadi Toro. In addition, some 75 bombs were reportedly dropped on populous areas west of Jebel Marra, in Rokoro locality, killing and injuring residents and sending many fleeing to remote areas.

Darfur is not the only area in Sudan’s periphery that has suffered heavy aerial bombardment and witnessed the flight of thousands. The Sudanese government has intensified air strikes on civilians in Blue Nile and South Kordofan in the wake of government losses and stiff rebel resistance in the ground campaign in South Kordofan. South Kordofan has seen the highest number of bombings and civilian casualties in more than two years. One report estimates that almost 25,000 civilians in South Kordofan have fled their homes, particularly from the mountainous northeastern El Abassyia and Rashad counties, and the north-central Al Sunut and Delling counties. For instance, a combined ground and air attack on areas near Umm Cham Chaka, in Rashad county, reportedly killed 14, injured 18, and displaced 21,200 in early November.
Amid military difficulties on the ground across South Kordofan in November and December, in early January the Sudanese government forces suffered a particularly heavy loss of life and military equipment in clashes near the border area of Trogi (or Toroje), located along a road linking South Kordofan with South Sudan. The Sudanese government’s military focus has since shifted in recent weeks to Blue Nile. Increasingly frequent air strikes and ground attacks on civilian targets in residential areas are killing and injuring women and children. For instance, 18 bombs were counted in one reported attack in Khoradar, in Baw county, on December 13, 2013, that resulted in the deaths of seven people and injury of 20. Air strikes in Blue Nile increasingly feature the government’s use of deadly new tactics and military equipment, such as the Sukhoi fighter aircraft and parachute bombs.

Heavy air strikes and ground attacks in South Kordofan and Blue Nile have displaced hundreds of thousands, increasing both the number and vulnerability of people who are caught between expanding zones of a regional conflict system that transcends international boundaries. There is a critical need for international support for some 200,000 Sudanese refugees in South Sudan. Almost 77,000 Sudanese refugees from South Kordofan’s Nuba Mountains live in South Sudan’s Yida and Adjoung Thok camps, and more than 123,000 Sudanese from Blue Nile state are sheltering in Kaya, Yusuf Batil, Doro and Gendrassa camps in South Sudan. Thousands from Blue Nile have also sought refuge in Ethiopia. Sudanese refugees from South Kordofan and Blue Nile had previously been able to receive humanitarian assistance in South Sudan that is restricted in Sudan. The violence in South Sudan that erupted in December 2013, however, has caused many humanitarian groups, including the U.N. refugee agency, to withdraw or reduce staff in many border areas. Displaced people in those areas are stranded, surrounded by violent conflict on multiple sides, and they lack access to adequate humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian conditions are also worsening in Darfur, home to the world’s largest peacekeeping mission, which has witnessed the killings of civilians, aid workers, and peacekeepers who lack a peace to keep and are unable to protect local populations. Crime is increasing, as are clashes among many armed groups, including rebels and those with ties to the Sudanese government. As violence increases in South Sudan, many South Sudanese are fleeing toward Sudan, straining areas with large numbers of displaced populations who live in deteriorating humanitarian conditions.

The return of Musa Hilal

Amid escalating violence, increased displacement, and deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Sudan’s periphery, the reappearance of a familiar Sudanese figure has raised new concerns about Sudan’s conflicted political and security landscape. Musa Hilal—an influential Darfuri leader accused of participating the Sudanese government’s violent campaigns, who had joined but then left the government in Khartoum—has returned to Darfur. Hilal is a wild card in a region of shifting political and armed alliances. He could potentially turn against government forces; for this reason and others, some fear his return to the troubled region could spark greater violence.

Hilal has been accused of leading government-supported Janjaweed militia attacks against civilians in Darfur beginning in 2003, charges he denies. Hilal remains one of the few Sudanese leaders subject to a travel ban and asset freeze under the authority of the United Nations Sudan Sanctions Committee. In 2008 Hilal became an advisor on Darfur groups to the Sudanese Ministry of Federal Affairs, but he has recently broken with the government in Khartoum under circumstances that remain unclear. Since leaving Khartoum, Hilal has begun to criticize the Sudanese government, saying it has exploited the Arab
groups in Darfur. Hilal has levied particularly heavy criticism against potential political rival North Darfur governor Osman Mohamed Youssif Kibir, accusing him of fomenting violent conflict between Darfur’s Beni Hussein and Rezeigat communities.

Hilal’s criticism of the Sudanese federal government and regional authorities has culminated in the formation of a new political group, the Sudanese Awakening Revolutionary Council, which says it intends to establish a new state in Darfur. The group says it seeks to provide a civil governance structure that includes security agreements to legalize the status of Arab militias. It has also suggested it will coordinate efforts with the Sudan Revolutionary Front, or SRF, rebel alliance, particularly if its demands are not fully addressed. Hilal’s efforts to unify groups in Darfur suggest a bid to rebuild his political position and strengthen his influence among power brokers in Khartoum. He appears to be positioning himself as a reformist and champion of the rights of Darfuri residents who are resisting a government that has pitted communities and ethnic groups against one another. The government may seek to placate Hilal with a political appointment, but such gestures have in the past failed to provide a sustainable and satisfactory solution. Hilal remains an unpredictable actor who is capable of creating sources of pressure on the Sudanese government in Khartoum.

While Hilal’s interests could pressure the Sudanese government in ways that benefit the needs of those in Darfur, some fear that in pursuing political gains Hilal could also potentially resort to orchestrating violent acts against Darfuri civilians. Hilal’s influence on the national level is weak and has waned, but his influence at the local level is stronger and may become consolidated, perhaps by disrupting alliances between Khartoum and groups in Darfur and undermining local authorities. If Hilal pursues greater political power at the federal level through violent activities at the local level, hundreds of thousands of civilians who live in chronic insecurity and camps with worsening humanitarian conditions will pay the price.

Hilal has displayed his military force and potential for disruption in Darfur with his movements. He travels through northern Darfur in convoys of 30 to 40 vehicles, sparking alarm among civilians living in unprotected areas. Such convoys evoke memories of the genocidal attacks of a decade ago. Hilal and his forces have not renewed violent attacks, but their presence heralds the development of a new power dynamic in an insecure region that needs sustained international attention.

**A sustained focus on Sudan**

As attention centers on South Sudan, the international community risks failing to heed dangerous new developments in Sudan, in part because the violent conflicts tend to be viewed separately. Several million displaced and conflict-affected people in Sudan and South Sudan deserve a comprehensive and integrated, not disaggregated, international approach to the interwoven problems that form this conflict system. With many South Sudanese fleeing into Sudan and Sudanese fleeing into South Sudan, a disconnected perspective on one country, one area, and one group—to the exclusion of others—cannot work. The unions, disunions, and shifting alliances reverberate through conflict areas throughout both countries and directly shape the struggle for control of the state on both sides.

In a troubled region, a crisis response to the urgent security and political needs of South Sudan should not eclipse those of Sudan, which needs a continued focus. There must be a more robust effort aimed at building comprehensive peace processes in both countries that include all stakeholders and consider the
impact each country has on the other’s stability. Separate, stove-piped peace strategies pursued by local or international leaders that address the interests of some groups but not others, will not bring peace. Ultimately, if core drivers of violence are not addressed, the wars will continue, and spill across their common border, with dangerous and destabilizing consequences.

Endnotes


5 With 400,000 displaced in 2013—more than the combined displacement figures for the past two years—the total number of displaced people in the region has risen to nearly two million. See remarks by U.N. Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Hervé Ladsous, U.N. Security Council, “Reports of the Secretary-General on the Sudan and South Sudan,” U.N. Doc. S/PV.7100, p. 3.


SSRA, “Humanitarian and human rights situation of the IDPs and war affected civilians in the SPLM/A-North controlled area of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States,” p. 4.

SSRA, “Humanitarian and human rights situation of the IDPs and war affected civilians in the SPLM/A-North controlled area of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States,” p. 5.

See Sudan Consortium, “The Impact of Aerial Bombing of Civilian Settlements in Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile States, Republic of Sudan,” p. 1. For more detailed accounts of the incident in Trogi and photographs provided by the SRF of seized materiel see Radio Dabanga, “Rebels claim victory over army convoy in South Kordofan,” January 5, 2014, available at [https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/63460](https://www.radiodabanga.org/node/63460); Nuba Reports, “The Sudan Revolutionary Front has repulsed a massive assault on their southern territory in Sudan’s South Kordofan state.


14 SSRA, “Humanitarian and human rights situation of the IDPs and war affected civilians in the SPLM/A-North controlled area of South Kordofan and Blue Nile States,” p. 8.

15 An account released by Nuba Reports explains that the first FAB-500-SHN parachute-retarded bombs were observed in the Nuba Mountains in a November 17 attack on Tabanya that killed two and injured five. Twenty total parachute bombs have since been observed. The use of these bombs allows the fighter jets to fly more closely to the ground, drop bombs with greater precision, and then withdraw in the delay between the bomb’s release and its explosion. Civilians on the ground who had learned to recognize the size and timing of an aerial attack and take shelter are now being killed and injured with the new bombs that make little noise, fall for a longer period of time, and then explode without warning. See Nuba Reports, “Sudan’s Parachute Bombs,” January 15, 2014, available at http://nubareports.org/on-the-ground-update-parachute-bombs-and-new-offensives/; Robert Perkins, “Sudan: Parachute bombs mark a new threat to civilians,” January 16, 2014, report on file with Enough Project. On August 27, 2013, the Satellite Sentinel Project documented the appearance of at least three Sukhoi Su-24 “Fencer” fighter jets at the Sudanese government’s Wadi Seidna military air base north of Khartoum. Parts of Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile states are within the 600 kilometer operational range of the supersonic precision Sukhoi bomber. See Satellite Sentinel Project, “Sudan Adds Precision Bomber to Arsenal,” August 26, 2013, available at http://www.satellitensentinel.org/report/sudan-adds-precision-bomber-arsenal.


17 Najda Romeo Peter, December 31, 2013, statement from Yida refugee camp community on file with Enough Project. For exact UNHCR figures on the numbers of Sudanese refugees in camps see United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Refugees in South Sudan Information Sharing Portal,” available at https://data.unhcr.org/SouthSudan/region.php?id=26&country=251 (Unity state’s Adjoung Thok, Nyeeel, Pariang,


30 These demands include strong language on human rights protections and the right of internally displaced people to return to their homes, according to an anonymous Sudan analyst consulted by Enough Project.  

31 Anonymous Sudan analyst consulted by Enough Project.  

32 Ibid.  

33 Ibid.