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AFRICA

Power Struggle Between Sudan's Top Two Generals Turns Deadly

Clashes kill dozens of civilians, rattling a country courted by Middle East powers and Russia

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Smoke billows above residential buildings in Khartoum on Sunday as fighting in Sudan raged for a second day. ***
PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

A bitter rivalry between Sudan's top two generals erupted into open warfare this weekend, further destabilizing a country that has been at the center of geopolitical power competition from the Middle East, the U.S. and Russia.

For Sudan's more than 45 million people, the conflict between Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo is set to deepen an already intense economic and humanitarian crisis. It will also further delay a promised transition to civilian rule.

Heavy fighting between Sudan's military, commanded by Gen. Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces, a state-sponsored militia led by Gen. Dagalo, raged for a second day Sunday in the capital Khartoum and other parts of the country. Residents said the two factions exchanged gunfire and artillery, while the Sudanese air force bombed ground positions of the RSF, many near residential areas.

Video footage showed warplanes flying at low altitude over Khartoum, with plumes of smoke rising from the ground in several locations. Clashes between the military and the RSF were also reported in the Red Sea city of Port Sudan, Al Qadarif in the east and Darfur in the west.

The Committee of Sudanese Doctors, a medical union, said its members had counted at least 56 civilian deaths and nearly 600 injured by early Sunday, although the full scale of the casualties was impossible to assess as many parts of the country remained inaccessible to emergency services. The World Food Program said three of its staff had been killed and two others injured while working in Darfur, and one of its planes was damaged at Khartoum's international airport.

"We have been hearing gunfire throughout the night and this morning. We barely slept," said Rabie Tot, a 29-year-old IT expert who was sheltering at home with his wife and two children near the University of Khartoum. "It's so scary."

The United Nations Security Council, the African Union, the U.S. and the European Union urged an immediate end to the violence in Sudan, which sits on the Red Sea between Egypt and Ethiopia. Following an emergency meeting Sunday, the AU warned against "any external interference that could complicate the situation in Sudan" and said it would dispatch a field mission to the country to engage affected parties.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he has consulted with his counterparts in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, two countries that have large economic and political interests in the country.

"The dangerous fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Security Forces...threatens the security and safety of Sudanese civilians and undermines efforts to restore Sudan's democratic transition," Mr. Blinken said.



Representatives of the Arab League at the emergency meeting on Sunday. PHOTO: KHALED ELFIQI/SHUTTERSTOCK

Sudan's de facto leaders for the past few years, Gen. Burhan and his deputy, Gen. Dagalo, both rose to prominence under the country's longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir, and both were involved in the brutal repression of an uprising in the southwestern Darfur region. In 2019, they ousted Mr. Bashir after months of pro-democracy demonstrations. Two years later, they toppled a civilian-led transitional government that was meant to guide Sudan toward elections.

In recent months, Gens. Burhan and Dagalo have been maneuvering for an upper hand over who will ultimately control Sudan's armed forces and key sectors of the economy—from agriculture to gold mining—currently in the hands of the military and the RSF. On Tuesday, their ruling junta missed a deadline agreed on with the U.N., the U.S. and other foreign governments for restoring civilian rule following the 2021 coup.

Analysts have warned that failure to quickly end the fighting and restart talks with civilian leaders could see Sudan once again descend into civil war. That could further destabilize a region grappling with an Islamist insurgency in Somalia and where warring parties in Ethiopia only recently entered into a peace deal.

Within Sudan, the violence will worsen a debilitating economic crisis, including runaway inflation that has put basics such as bread and sugar out of reach for many people. The World Food Program has said that 15 million Sudanese, nearly a third of the population, are suffering from hunger.

Following the deaths of its employees, the WFP said it was temporarily suspending operations in the country.

Complicating a resolution to the conflict is a set of alliances forged by Gens. Burhan and Dagalo in recent years.

Gen. Dagalo has sent RSF personnel to fight as part of a Saudi- and U.A.E.-backed alliance in Yemen since 2015. Gen. Burhan, on the other hand, is a close ally of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi.

The Rapid Support Forces said on its Twitter account on Saturday that Egyptian soldiers at a military base in the country had “surrendered” after RSF forces entered the base. The paramilitary force said it didn't consider the Egyptian troops to be an enemy and was prepared to hand them over to the Egyptian government.

On Sunday, Mr. Sisi, together with the president of South Sudan, called for an immediate cease-fire.

The Gulf monarchies have deepened their involvement in Sudan since Mr. Bashir's ouster, buying up huge swaths of land to produce food crops and animal feeds such as alfalfa, which is crucial for raising cattle. Last year, the U.A.E. agreed to a \$6 billion investment in Sudan that includes building a new Red Sea port. It also purchased all of Sudan's legally exported gold in the first half of 2022, valued at around \$1.32 billion, according to Sudan's Central Bank.

Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry on Saturday called on Sudan's military and political leaders to "give priority to the language of dialogue, restraint, and wisdom" to find a solution to the crisis, the kingdom's state news agency said.

U.S. officials, meanwhile, are worried about a deal between Gen. Dagalo and the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group. In recent months the U.S. has encouraged Egypt to lobby Gen. Burhan to expel the group, according to current and former Western security officials.

"Washington is concerned Wagner is using Sudan to fund Russia's war in Ukraine," said Cameron Hudson, a former chief of staff to the U.S. special envoy for Sudan who is now a senior associate at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. "A Wagner takeover of Sudan would connect Wagner's presence from the Red Sea to landlocked central African nations. Sudan would be the crown jewel in Africa."

Gen. Dagalo's forces provide security to Meroe Gold, a mining company controlled by Wagner and the paramilitary group's owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, that has become a major player in Sudan's gold industry. In February, the EU sanctioned Meroe Gold, saying it exported Sudanese gold to Russia and was one of a set of Wagner entities that allegedly has funded torture and extrajudicial executions and killings in Ukraine and Africa.

—*Nicholas Bariyo and Summer Said contributed to this article.*

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Corrections & Amplifications

Yevgeny Prigozhin controls M Invest. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he controlled M M Invest. (April 16)

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