



# Instruments of Pain (II): Conflict and Famine in South Sudan

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## I. Overview

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As South Sudan's conflicts, which began in December 2013, have fragmented and expanded, the hunger crisis has deepened and widened. Over 40 per cent of the population is severely food insecure, 60 per cent higher than at this time last year. On 20 February, the UN declared that some 100,000 people are already living in famine conditions in Leer and Mayendit counties. But some 5.5 million are at risk unless urgent measures are taken to reduce conflict and enable humanitarians to deliver more aid safely.

Conflict among various factions has prompted massive displacement that in turn has prevented farming, while looting and cattle rustling have destroyed many people's assets. Some 1.9 million civilians are internally displaced persons (IDPs), 224,000 of whom have fled to UN peacekeeping bases. Another 1.6 million have found refuge in neighbouring countries. Currency depreciation, hyperinflation and insecurity have led to declining trade and soaring food prices.

Addressing the humanitarian crisis is hugely expensive. In its 2017 appeal, the UN requested \$1.6 billion; so far, only \$439 million has been pledged. Helping starving people also is perilous; 82 humanitarian workers have been killed. In the absence of bolder policy decisions to reduce fighting, humanitarian actors will remain at the forefront of the myriad internal conflicts and, with their lives at risks and budgets under pressure, be able to do less as needs continue to grow.

To mitigate the worst effects of the conflicts, the peace process oversight body – the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (JMEC) – and its partners need to support ceasefire implementation, as well as local dialogue and negotiations between the government and warring factions. To prevent famine in the meantime, however, the humanitarian appeal needs to be fully funded. To ensure that the aid reaches those most in need, all actors should avoid politicising it. Finally, the two existing and third needed humanitarian corridors through Sudan must be kept consistently open.

## II. Civil War in South Sudan<sup>1</sup>

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The origins and dynamics of the conflicts that are occurring across South Sudan differ dramatically.<sup>2</sup> At the war's outset, there were two main warring parties: the government and its allies on the one hand, and on the other, the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement/Army-In Opposition (SPLM/A-IO) and affiliated groups. Despite the signing in August 2015 of the Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (ARCSS), the disputes continue to evolve, with opposition groups simultaneously factionalising and localising. The government has offered amnesty to some armed groups, while maintaining military pressure on others. Though external policymakers have struggled to respond to these nuances, international political inertia prevails.

Fortunately, relatively few locations have experienced sustained warfare, as military dynamics tend to suspend fighting for months or years at a time. This means most IDPs and other civilians are in relatively stable camps or other refuges, and humanitarian actors can provide basic services. However, many of the worst humanitarian situations occur in areas with ongoing conflict, where civilians are often deliberately targeted, thus creating the conditions for famine. Warring parties tend to view civilians as integral elements of their enemy's economic, political and social support system. This is particularly evident during incidents of revenge violence, when civilians are likely to be treated not as distinct and protected but as part of an armed group. Following government combat operations or ambushes against government vehicles, it is common for soldiers to turn on local civilians. Rebels have also attacked civilians belonging to different ethnic communities.

The proliferation and fracturing of rebel groups give many of these conflicts increasingly local characteristics. The government's strategy is to militarily pressure the disparate groups into political accommodation. Its own experience, during the two-decade liberation struggle with the government in Khartoum, leads it to believe that attrition will eventually create conditions for a political resolution. It is prepared to

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<sup>1</sup> The UN has issued a warning of impending famine in four nations: Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and parts of Nigeria. "USG/ERC Stephen O'Brien Statement to the Security Council on Missions to Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia and Kenya and an Update on the Oslo Conference on Nigeria and the Lake Chad Region", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 10 March 2017. This briefing is the second of a series Crisis Group is issuing on the four situations. Crisis Group Statement, "Instruments of Pain: Conflict and Famine", 13 April 2017; Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°52, *Instruments of Pain (I): Conflict and Famine in Yemen*, 13 April 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group has produced an extensive body of work on conflict within South Sudan and Sudan, on relations between Khartoum and Juba and on overall regional dynamics. Major reports include: Crisis Group Africa Reports N°s 243, *South Sudan: Rearranging the Chessboard*, 20 December 2016; 236, *South Sudan's South: Conflict in the Equatorias*, 25 May 2016; 228, *South Sudan: Keeping Faith with the IGAD Peace Process*, 27 July 2015; 223, *Sudan and South Sudan's Merging Conflicts*, 29 January 2015; 217, *South Sudan: A Civil War by Any Other Name*, 10 April 2014; 204, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile*, 18 June 2013; 198, *Sudan's Spreading Conflict (I): War in South Kordofan*, 14 February 2013; 172, *Politics and Transition in the New South Sudan*, 4 April 2011; 159, *Sudan: Regional Perspectives on the Prospects of Southern Independence*, 6 May 2010; and Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°76, *Negotiating Sudan's North-South Future*, 23 November 2010. Our first report discussing the use of food as a weapon in South Sudan was Africa Report N°39, *God, Oil and Country: Changing the Logic of War in Sudan*, January 2002, pp. 147-149.

play a long game with what is seen as a predictable conflict trajectory, though one with an uncertain timeline.

As opposition groups fracture and multiply, there is often no higher rebel authority than the commander on the ground. The government's co-option of some former rebel leaders often divides communities, leading to a yet more chaotic situation, as in the ongoing conflict in Mayendit, one of the counties now experiencing famine.

### **III. The Man-made Crisis in Southern Leich State**

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Civilians in Leer, Mayendit and Koch counties in Southern Leich State (the former Unity state) have experienced extensive depredations since the civil war began. At its outset, the trigger to the humanitarian crisis was mistreatment by the armies of both sides, as well as their respective allies. Over the past year or so, the number of warring factions has multiplied, as the government has sought to peel off factions from the rebel coalition. The result is a host of armed groups, most nominally aligned with either the government army (the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army, SPLA) or an SPLA-In Opposition faction.<sup>3</sup> In the absence of tactical command and control, pillage and raiding is common, devastating communities and further complicating the search for local political solutions. Armed groups repeatedly attack civilians, leaving them without productive assets; towns are not safe; and food markets are devastated. The insecurity constrains aid groups' ability to sustain operations.

The gender dynamics of violence confront families and communities with impossible choices for feeding themselves and their children, over 30 per cent of whom in these counties are severely malnourished. Men face considerable risk from armed groups if they travel to seek food, as they are often shot if they encounter opposing forces. This has forced women to take enormous risks for their families. When they encounter opposing forces, they are often subject to horrific sexual violence, but their chances of survival are higher. Women were raped by fighters from several different armed groups – including fighters belonging to factions they supported – as they fled fighting in Southern Unity en route to safety at the UN base in Bentiu.<sup>4</sup> Violence in Southern Leich state has pushed many far into the southern swamps along the Nile River, where food is unavailable and leaving to seek it is to risk attack.

### **IV. War-exacerbated Drought and Economic Challenges**

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Beyond Southern Leich, even peaceful areas such as the Aweil region on the Sudanese border in the north are at risk of famine. This is the outcome not only of drought (in both South Sudan and neighbouring countries) and other climatic challenges, but also of fighting elsewhere in the country. South Sudan's economy deteriorated dramatically in 2016, as the government struggled to respond to the global

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<sup>3</sup> Some SPLA-IO members joined current First Vice President Taban Deng Gai, while others remain loyal to former First Vice President Riek Machar; there also are multiple locally-oriented armed youth groups with fluid allegiances.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group interviews, South Sudanese civilians, Bentiu and Juba, 2014-2016.

drop in oil prices and borrowed heavily to fight the war.<sup>5</sup> This triggered hyperinflation, even as spreading conflicts in places such as the formerly peaceful Equatorias contributed to 2017's 40 per cent national decline in food production from the same February-April period in the previous year.<sup>6</sup> More broadly, insecurity has increased costs for both traders and humanitarian actors. Poor people already living on the edge now face low food production due to erratic rainfall and far higher prices for what food there is in the markets.

After extensive negotiations with Khartoum, aid agencies opened two of three proposed humanitarian corridors through Sudan in an attempt to increase available imported food and reduce the cost of moving food aid to South Sudanese border areas.<sup>7</sup> Sudan's cooperation is a tangible, welcome outcome of its ongoing negotiations with the U.S. over sanctions relief. A priority now is to open a third corridor, to carry food into Aweil.

## V. Humanitarian Access

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The warring parties at times have sought to use humanitarian assistance as leverage over civilian populations by pressuring aid agencies to provide food for civilians in areas they control.<sup>8</sup> At others, they have refused to halt fighting to enable access to those populations. Many combatants believe aid inevitably will support not only civilians, but also the opposing side's fighting forces. Accordingly, both government and opposition groups have presented aid agencies with bureaucratic impediments. Still, South Sudan is one of the only conflict countries where humanitarian organisations are able to negotiate access directly and mostly successfully.<sup>9</sup>

It is not easy. In addition to the government, the negotiations must involve neighbouring countries and dozens of rebel leaders. Yet, in part thanks to joint pressure from neighbours – Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda – as well as from the U.S., China, the African Union (AU) and UN, all warring parties endorse the principle of impartial humanitarian access.

This further illustrates that the primary access constraint, as well as cause of the famine, is the conflict. Where active fighting takes place, humanitarian workers face looting and harassment. They must frequently evacuate staff who do not receive the special protection from warring groups to which they are entitled and which they negotiate with the government and rebel leaders. Sometimes they are directly prohib-

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<sup>5</sup> The price of oil dropped from \$97.80 per barrel in fiscal year 2013-2014 to a projected \$41.40 in 2016-2017. At the same time, production plummeted from 66.8 million barrels to 43.4 million barrels per year. External debt rose from an estimated 4.2 per cent to 38.7 per cent of GDP. "IMF Executive Board Concludes 2016 Article IV Consultation with the Republic of South Sudan", 23 March 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Negotiations were challenging because of the long history of conflict between Sudan and South Sudan and Sudan's sensitivities over humanitarian activities.

<sup>8</sup> For more on how armed groups have used non-governmental organisations for their own ends in South Sudan, see Zachariah Cheria Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca, 2011), pp. 129-166.

<sup>9</sup> In some other countries, warring groups are unwilling to grant aid agencies direct access to civilians or deliberately bar them from certain areas; in yet other countries facing severe humanitarian crisis, donors prohibit negotiations with terrorist groups.

ited access to locations during and immediately after fighting. As a result, assistance can be inadequate or delayed. Some civilians fleeing constant violence are unable to remain in one place long enough to receive sustained assistance.

There are other challenges as well. Food cannot be pre-positioned in conflict areas lest it be stolen. Humanitarian groups are the only international contacts some rebels have. In a handful of cases, humanitarian workers have brokered unpublicised local ceasefires in order to deliver aid. Negotiations take time and money, but more costly options can usually guarantee aid workers' security. In some cases credible security guarantees cannot be made to enable access across front lines, for example, so expensive airdrops are necessary. At a time of shrinking budgets, however, trade-offs directly impact how many people will receive assistance. It is thus imperative that the UN's humanitarian appeal be fully funded.

## **VI. International Political Paralysis**

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Following the bitter July 2016 fighting in Juba, international actors struggled to influence internal peace and conflict dynamics. While the overall policy is to support the government, there has been little tangible engagement other than with the international institutions related to the 2015 peace agreement. Most donor funding goes to international peace and ceasefire monitoring bodies which have relatively little impact, while that for South Sudanese institutions, such as the Joint Military Ceasefire Commission, is almost non-existent. There are no simple solutions in South Sudan, and moves toward genuine peace require compromises both among South Sudanese and between international actors and the government. Given the multiplicity of factions, peace is more likely to be a local affair, in which progress in some areas may occur at the same time as stagnation in others. There is little appetite beyond South Sudan's immediate neighbours to support local dialogue, however, whether to promote peace, reconciliation or humanitarian access.

Recent statements from President Salva Kiir and the government in support of dialogue and a unilateral ceasefire are a welcome change in rhetoric.<sup>10</sup> The modalities required for implementation are technically complex, however, and require direct international assistance as well as political will. Greater political support and ceasefire-oriented technical assistance could help mitigate the impact of the current crisis, provided they do not come at the expense of the funding and effort needed for humanitarian operations.

UN officials and diplomats outside South Sudan have made high-level calls for a ceasefire. Yet, they have not put forward realistic ideas on how it might be negotiated among the government and multiple opposition factions, and no tangible work on a ceasefire is being done in-country. Such focus as there is has been on how a ceasefire might enable temporary humanitarian access. That would be welcome but by definition have limited utility. Any ceasefire, whether national or local, should be developed in such a way as to create conditions for dialogue and with an aim of achieving sustainability.

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<sup>10</sup> "Communiqué of the 30th Extra-ordinary Summit of IGAD Assembly of Heads of State and Government on South Sudan", 25 March 2017.

## **VII. What Is Needed**

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To prevent further famine and related humanitarian catastrophe in South Sudan, the following steps are urgently needed:

- ❑ Donors should fully fund the UN's humanitarian appeal.
- ❑ Sudan and South Sudan should keep open, and increase, humanitarian corridors from Sudan.
- ❑ Domestic and international actors should avoid politicising humanitarian assistance and support aid agencies in their efforts to deliver assistance to civilians in locations where civilians feel safe receiving aid, based on impartial negotiated access, and refrain from using the humanitarian situation for political leverage.
- ❑ To support President Kiir's commitment to announce a unilateral ceasefire soon and hold the government to its word, the Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (JMEC) and its partners should provide technical assistance to the government to develop the modalities, with the aim of expanding that ceasefire to include opposition groups and become permanent.
- ❑ South Sudan's partners should support local dialogue and negotiations between the government and warring factions.

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Appendix A: Map of South Sudan





International Crisis Group

**Headquarters**

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

[brussels@crisisgroup.org](mailto:brussels@crisisgroup.org)

**New York Office**

[newyork@crisisgroup.org](mailto:newyork@crisisgroup.org)

**Washington Office**

[washington@crisisgroup.org](mailto:washington@crisisgroup.org)

**London Office**

[london@crisisgroup.org](mailto:london@crisisgroup.org)

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