

Updated December 28, 2018

South Sudan

Peace has been elusive in South Sudan, which became the world's newest country in 2011. Nearly 400,000 people are estimated to have died as a result of a civil war that began in 2013. The war has displaced over four million people, including 2.5 million refugees who have fled to neighboring countries. It is the largest refugee crisis in Africa.

Background and Context

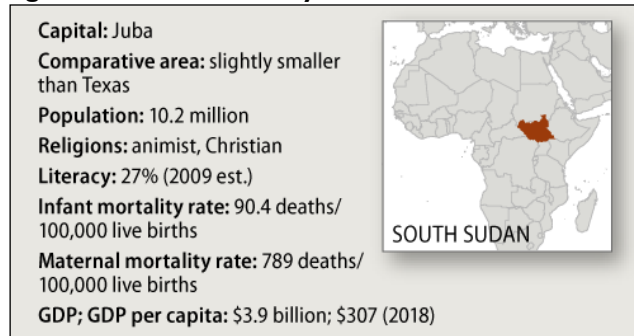
South Sudan's independence from Sudan, supported by the United States, came after a vote for secession in 2011, following almost 40 years of rebellion against the Sudanese government. That war, which displaced over four million people and led to as many as two million deaths, inhibited the development of basic infrastructure, human capital, and formal civilian institutions in the south. Humanitarian needs persisted after independence, despite abundant natural resources, including oil fields that once generated 75% of Sudan's oil production. Corruption and malfeasance slowed post-war recovery and development. With secession, South Sudan gained its sovereignty, but by many accounts its population lacked a common identity—despite a shared history of trauma and marginalization—and its leaders, former rebels, had little experience in governing.

South Sudan's current conflict reflects tensions among its leaders and ethnic groups that date back to Sudan's civil war. While that war was described broadly as a north-south struggle, it also featured infighting among southern rebel commanders in the 1990s that nearly derailed the southern bid for self-determination. Leaders in the insurgency, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA), competed for power and mobilized supporters along ethnic lines. All sides committed atrocities. The government in Khartoum fueled SPLM divisions by financing breakaway factions. The factions reconciled in the early 2000s, before Khartoum and the SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.

After the CPA, the SPLM became the south's ruling party. Ethnic tensions and interpersonal rivalries grew under the strain of new governing responsibilities, amid severe human, institutional, and infrastructure capacity constraints. The country was awash in small arms, and local ethnic violence was increasingly politicized. Maneuvering ahead of planned 2015 elections added to these dynamics. Work on a new constitution stalled, and a political struggle among senior officials unfolded. A July 2013 cabinet reshuffle, in which President Kiir dismissed his vice president, Riek Machar, and other key officials, formalized a major fissure in the ruling party. Tensions rose as Machar and others publicly accused Kiir of becoming increasingly dictatorial.

Those tensions erupted in December 2013. What began as a conflict among the presidential guard ultimately split the military, largely along ethnic lines. Ethnic militia mobilized behind their respective political leaders, and the country slipped into war. Uganda provided initial military support to the government and has facilitated arms imports.

Figure 1. South Sudan Key Facts



Source: CRS map. Facts from CIA and IMF reference databases.

The Return to War

The political dispute that triggered the crisis in 2013 was not based on ethnic identity, but it overlapped with existing ethnic and political grievances, spurring targeted ethnic killings and clashes in the capital, Juba, and then beyond. At the outbreak of the conflict, President Salva Kiir accused Machar of attempting a coup. Hundreds died in attacks reportedly targeting Machar's Nuer ethnic group in Juba. Revenge attacks against Kiir's group, the Dinka, followed. Machar and several senior Nuer military commanders subsequently declared a rebellion. The ensuing war pitted government forces and militia loyal to Kiir against those aligned with Machar, spurring a mass humanitarian crisis.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD; an East African regional body) sought to mediate a peace deal, but the parties repeatedly violated their commitments to cease hostilities. In August 2015, under threat of a proposed arms embargo and other sanctions, they finally signed a peace agreement. Kiir did so with reservations, calling the deal an attack on South Sudan's sovereignty.

The parties delayed implementation of the deal until April 2016, when they formed a new Transitional Government of National Unity (TGNU), six months behind schedule. Machar returned to Juba to become First Vice President and a new cabinet was appointed. Sporadic clashes continued, though, and violence spread to areas that had previously been comparatively stable. The deal collapsed in July 2016, when a series of incidents between the parties' forces in Juba sparked days of intense fighting. Machar and others in the opposition fled the country, pursued by Kiir's forces to the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Machar was subsequently airlifted to Sudan for medical treatment, and later traveled to South Africa, where by some accounts he was placed under de-facto house arrest.

The war resumed. Both sides claimed commitment to the 2015 deal, while accusing each other of abrogating it. Kiir sought to maintain the appearance of a unity government, replacing Machar with Machar's ally-turned-rival, Taban Deng, and dismissing opposition cabinet ministers and legislators loyal to Machar. Machar continued to lead the main armed opposition faction from exile. The insurgency

against Kiir's government spread and fractured, with new groups emerging and defections from both sides. The war moved into the southern Equatoria region, spurring a refugee surge into Uganda and affecting vital trade routes.

Another Peace Deal

The international community has deferred to IGAD on peace negotiations. The regional body has maintained a commitment to "revitalizing" the 2015 peace deal, and in late 2017 began efforts to bring the warring parties together again for talks. To the surprise of many, Sudan took on the role of lead mediator in mid-2018, with its former rival, Uganda, in a supporting role. In September, Kiir, Machar, and several other opposition leaders signed a new deal, reportedly under significant pressure from Sudan, which had struck its own deal with Juba over oil revenues. Other opposition leaders refused to sign, contending that the agreement failed to address the root causes of the war.

Experts debate whether the new deal is a viable framework for sustainable peace, and some question whether regional actors are willing to apply sufficient leverage on the government to ensure its full implementation, already behind schedule. Outstanding questions around the accord's security arrangements are of particular concern. The International Crisis Group describes the new arrangement as "peace on paper," rather than a real political settlement.

Impact of the Conflict

The humanitarian situation remains dire. Insecurity has disrupted farming cycles, grazing patterns, and trade routes; local markets have collapsed. Inflation has made basic goods unaffordable to many, even in urban areas. Relief supplies have been repeatedly looted. Seasonal rains, violence, and government restrictions hinder aid efforts. In early 2017, U.N. agencies declared 100,000 people to be in famine. A humanitarian surge alleviated the severity of the crisis, but experts warn famine could return should continued violence constrain humanitarian access. Of the estimated 10 million who remain in the country, more than 7 million need aid; over 6 million are acutely food insecure.

U.N. officials assert that targeted attacks against civilians, humanitarians, and U.N. personnel in South Sudan may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. The U.N. Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) reports that, from the outset of the conflict, "Civilians were not only caught up in the violence, they were directly targeted, often along ethnic lines." The U.N. Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan suggests that ethnic cleansing has occurred. Forces on both sides have reportedly committed widespread sexual violence. A July 2016 attack on a residence for aid workers in Juba, during which Americans were assaulted and a local journalist killed, highlighted the dangers facing aid workers and other expatriates. Per U.N. reports, over 100 aid workers (most local) have been killed. UNICEF estimates that as many as 19,000 child soldiers have been recruited.

Almost 200,000 people continue to seek refuge at UNMISS bases, including over 32,000 in Juba alone. Many reportedly fear that they may be targeted based on political or ethnic affiliation if they leave. A 2016 U.N. survey found that 70% of the women in the camp in Juba had been raped since the war began. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has described government efforts to hold perpetrators of abuses accountable as "few and inadequate."

U.N. sanctions monitors report that the war has caused a "systemic breakdown of South Sudanese society," and that "exclusion of competing tribal groups from political power has become a principal aim of many protagonists." While political reconciliation is possible, rebuilding trust among communities affected by ethnic violence will be a longer-term challenge. Grievances over abuses have fueled the conflict, and the public reportedly has little confidence in the justice system. An African Union Commission of Inquiry has emphasized the need for accountability for atrocities, a task for a proposed hybrid court per the 2015 peace deal. The government has delayed its establishment.

International Responses to the Crisis

The international community has mobilized humanitarian, peacekeeping, and diplomatic resources to respond to needs, protect civilians, and seek an end to the conflict. The United States is by far the largest donor, providing \$3.76 billion in humanitarian aid since the war began. The U.N. Security Council authorized the expansion of UNMISS when the war began, modifying its mandate to focus on four key tasks: protecting civilians, monitoring and investigating human rights abuses, facilitating aid delivery, and supporting a cessation of hostilities. The Council again increased UNMISS's troop ceiling after the war resumed in 2016, and authorized a new regional protection force within the mission to improve security in Juba. The government objected, citing sovereignty concerns, and slowed the force's deployment. In late 2018, UNMISS had just over 14,000 troops, well below its authorized size of 17,000. IGAD has controversially proposed filling the gap with troops from Sudan and Uganda, as well as Somalia.

The Security Council established a framework for targeted sanctions in early 2015 and has designated eight commanders, including the current and former army chiefs. It authorized an arms embargo in July 2018.

U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

The United States, which played a key role in facilitating the CPA and South Sudan's independence, is the country's largest bilateral aid donor and plays a lead role in U.N. Security Council deliberations. Congressional engagement has historically been driven by humanitarian and human rights concerns. The current conflict and prior allegations of corruption and human rights abuses have strained the bilateral relationship. The Trump Administration has expressed concern with the humanitarian crisis; outgoing U.S. Permanent Representative to the U.N. Nikki Haley has been a vocal critic of the Kiir regime, as has National Security Advisor John Bolton. Trump has not filled the special envoy post, vacant since late 2016. Twelve people have been designated for sanctions under Executive Order 13664, issued by President Obama in 2014. The Trump Administration has also sanctioned one of Kiir's business associates for corruption on authority granted under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act.

U.S. bilateral aid to South Sudan totaled over \$130 million in FY2017, in addition to almost \$750 million in emergency humanitarian aid. The State Department has requested \$86 million to support health and education programs, mitigate conflict, foster peace, and promote reforms in FY2019.

Lauren Ploch Blanchard,

IFI0218

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.