

Sudan and our collective responsibility to protect

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Summary

Sudan is facing the worst humanitarian crisis of the last decades. Calls for a temporary humanitarian truce and peace initiatives are multiplying, but so far without great commitment and with even less success. The collective responsibility to protect principle (R2P), adopted at the 2005 UN World Summit, seems forgotten, and the UN Security Council is paralysed in an ever more polarised world.

Regional and international geopolitical and geoeconomic interests complicate the search for a stop to the civil war. Continued fighting requires access to military equipment and arms. Short of a direct military intervention nobody wants, the supply and funding of those arms must be cut off as an absolute short-term priority.

The UN system should, at a minimum, ensure the consistent application of its own Security Council-imposed arms embargo and sanction those who violate it. Similarly, the resources funding the war must be drained, and the fight against all kinds of trafficking stepped up. The international community should impose the traceability of the trade in all high-value, low-volume raw materials, starting with gold, as this is, for the moment, by far the major funding source of the paramilitary militia terrorising Darfur.

Any measure taken to pacify Sudan must also be placed within the medium-term perspective of building sustainable peace. This is only possible through an inclusive process that involves all the driving forces within civil society and ensures a transition to civilian rule and democratic accountability.

The upcoming AU-EU summit can prove its relevance by addressing these issues and proposing concrete measures.

Introduction

Twenty years after the adoption of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) principle, the international community is failing the Sudanese population. Geopolitical and geoeconomic rivalries and distrust block any regional or international intervention that could bring the fighting to a halt in the Sudanese civil war, which has resulted in the most catastrophic humanitarian crisis worldwide. This implies alternatives have to be found to stop the ongoing mass atrocities and to restore humanitarian access.

The European Union (EU) has been supportive of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) since its launch in the early 2000s, and both regions have a long-standing (even if bumpy) peace and security partnership. The defence of a rules-based multilateral order and a more representative and effective global peace and security architecture are jointly identified priorities for both the EU and the African Union (AU) as they head into the next AU-EU Summit in Luanda on 24-25 November.

If the EU takes its partnership with the AU and its geopolitical ambitions seriously, the Sudan file should be addressed at the Summit and, based on lessons learned, concrete actions proposed elsewhere on the continent and globally.

Short of an unrealistic military intervention, the AU and EU should press the countries violating the arms embargo to comply with it. The systematic tracing of conflict-raw materials should also be a top priority to cut off the funding of the civil war and create conditions for a ceasefire. In parallel, the Sudanese civil society should be supported and enabled to participate in inclusive peace negotiations that can lead to a renewed democratic transition.

The most catastrophic humanitarian crisis of the XXIst century so far

On 26 October, after an 18-month-long siege, El Fasher, the capital city of North Darfur, fell into the hands of the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and allied militia. Generalised looting, horrendous conflict-related sexual violence and rape, ethnical cleansing and the killing of thousands who didn't have the time, resources or energy left to flee the town, [followed](#). The fall of El Fasher made even worse what the [EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy](#) had already described on 11 April 2025 as 'the most catastrophic humanitarian crisis of the XXIst century': massive destruction of social infrastructure, almost 13 million

forcefully displaced persons, 25 million in acute food insecurity and on the brink of famine, at least 150.000 people killed as a result of the ongoing war in Sudan.

The fall of El Fasher and its humanitarian consequences was predictable and predicted. [Genocide Watch](#) had already warned in June 2024 for the risks of genocidal actions in Darfur, similar to those conducted by the Janjaweed militia in the late 1990's. Numerous Sudanese and foreign civil society organisations, human rights defenders and humanitarian agencies tried, in vain, to sensitise the international community about the unfolding crisis in Sudan in general and in Darfur in particular. [Peace plans](#) and humanitarian truces were designed until weeks before the fall of El Fasher, but nothing stopped the warring parties. The crisis was not forgotten or neglected, but [tolerated and relegated](#).

Beyond some short-lived outcries, declarations, and not-respected renewed calls for temporary ceasefires and access to humanitarian aid, little has changed. On 27 October, the [AU Chairperson](#) condemned 'in the strongest terms the grave violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, including alleged war crimes and ethnically targeted killings of civilians'. The [EU](#) followed the next day, as did many others. Even the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) felt obliged to condemn the atrocities committed in El Fasher.

On 30 October, the [UN Security Council](#) convened in a special session and expressed 'grave concern over escalating violence', calling for all perpetrators to be held accountable and for member states to 'refrain from external interference which seeks to foment conflict and instability'. The Quad group of mediators in the Sudanese crisis (Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, UAE and the United States) called for a [humanitarian truce](#), which the RRF pretended to accept while the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) put forward unacceptable preconditions, both parties meanwhile continuing to prepare for prolonged war.

The fighting and abuses didn't de-escalate. A group of [like-minded Western countries](#) repeated the condemnation of 'atrocities and violations of humanitarian law' on 10 November, as well as the 'intolerable' use of starvation and famine as a method of warfare. But words alone do not suffice, and the 'intolerable' is still tolerated.

The responsibility to protect in international law

The genocide in Rwanda in spring 1994 and the genocidal killings in Srebrenica in former Yugoslavia in July 1995, provoked a wave of 'this never again' indignation and an international debate on the question of to what extent national

sovereignty is an absolute concept. As a State has as its first responsibility to protect its population against 'mass atrocities', defined as war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity (codified in the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court in 1998), the argument goes, failing to do so authorises the international community to intervene and 'restore' sovereignty.

The AU is the first regional body that foresaw in its Constitutive Act of 2000 (Article 4-h) the right of the Union to intervene in a member state in the event of mass atrocities. Such a decision can only be taken by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government and decided by consensus, or failing that, by a two-thirds majority of members (article 7-1).

At the [2005 UN World Summit](#), the UN General Assembly adopted the concept of a 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) (articles 138-139 of the outcome document). This embodied a political commitment to protect populations from the worst forms of violence, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity by 'appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means' and, when these peaceful means prove inadequate, by 'collective action, in a timely and decisive manner, through the Security Council (...) and in cooperation with relevant regional bodies as appropriate'.

On this basis, the UN Security Council ([UNSC](#)) authorised in March 2011 for the first time the use of military means to establish a no-fly zone aimed at protecting the civilians in the Libyan civil war. NATO took the lead of a 'coalition of the willing' to implement the resolution, but overstepped the UNSCR mandate, turning the intervention into a regime-change operation, ending in the extra-judicial killing of Muammar Gaddafi in October of that same year.

This abuse of the UNSC mandate undermined the international trust in the R2P concept. In an increasingly polarised multilateral order, with the UNSC in almost permanent gridlock, any significant new R2P initiative with a military dimension has been vetoed, including during the Syrian civil war or the repression of the Rohingya in Myanmar. We saw it also in Gaza; we see it now in Sudan.

The [report by the UN Secretary General on 20 years of R2P](#) concludes that 'when early warning, prevention and protection are fully integrated into the public policy agenda at the domestic and regional levels, effective prevention and protection become not only possible, but successful and sustainable'. To enhance the commitment to the R2P, he proposes the creation of permanent prevention mechanisms at national level, regional consultations sharing experiences and lessons learned and the development of a strategic and technical guidance. However, the main lesson learned is that parties to a (brewing) conflict are rarely

willing to integrate R2P into their public policy agenda, and therefore that the bureaucratic, process-related recommendations are rarely relevant.

Sudan, an unhappy marriage of geopolitical and selfish economic interests

Civil wars have multiple root causes and may be perceived as intractable by nature. That's why the international community often prefers to look away, in particular when one of the warring parties is perceived as an ally and donor darling or when the conflict has a regional dimension, adding complexity and conflicting interests. The murderous Tigray conflict in neighbouring Ethiopia is another recent and shameful example of international 'relegation'.

Sudan is of strategic relevance to the wider region, where religious and political rivalries play out. Many are looking for privileged access to its Red Sea harbours. The Nile basin is seen as an important breadbasket for the Gulf monarchies, ensuring food security through the diversification and near-shoring of supply chains. The Nile is also a critical lifeline for Egypt, with Sudan as a buffer state bordering the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

The United Arab Emirates ([UAE](#)) have given itself the mission to fight Iran-sponsored Islamist extremism, and in particular the Muslim Brotherhood, suspected of undermining the Gulf monarchies. Although the SAF contributed to the fall of Omar Al-Bashir, they are still suspected by some military and security actors in the region of sympathy with the former regime.

The UAE are also a well-known international hub in the gold trade, in particular of the illegal sort. According to conservative estimates, at least 450 tons of gold from uncertified African origin end up in the UAE yearly.

[Hemedti](#), commander of the RSF, was not only a member of the genocidal Janjaweed militia in the 1990s, but quickly became a dominant gold smuggler and trade partner of the UAE after the discovery of important gold deposits in North Darfur in 2011-2012, an important substitute for the loss of oil revenue after the independence of South Sudan. He also provided mercenaries in the fight against the Iran-sponsored Houthis in Yemen. A powerful figure, he became an influential member of the transitional military council after the downfall of the Omar al-Bashir regime in 2018.

[Lt Gen Abdelfattah El Burhan](#), commander of the SAF, is not a saint either. In February of this year, he had amendments adopted to the Constitutional Charter

for the Transitional Period negotiated in 2019, which guarantee the military leadership de facto impunity and give them control over the legislative, executive and judicial bodies. The amendments further erase not only all references to the RSF, but also to the Forces for Freedom and Change, the wide coalition of civilian organisations that forced the downfall of the al-Bashir regime and negotiated the power-sharing plan with the transitional military council, while opening the door to the return of members of the al-Bashir government.

A coup that was not a coup and its unintended consequences

In 2019, the transitional military council reluctantly and under international pressure handed over power to a civilian authority, while keeping key security positions in government. The international community only half-heartedly supported the civilian side of government, seeking security guarantees from the military, thereby consciously or inadvertently reinforcing their role in the conduct of state affairs, while weakening the civil society movements that had initiated the democratic transition.

When in 2021 the SAF and the RSF regained full control of the executive, the [international reactions were muted](#), hoping that the military would bring stability and block the return of Islamist radicals. [A coup that the international community tolerated in the name of stability](#).

The 'entente' between the regular army and the paramilitary couldn't last. They split in the spring of 2023, marking the start of a bloody civil war. Egypt chose the side of the official government and the SAF; the UAE chose the side of the RSF. The UAE's violation of the UN arms embargo to the warring parties is well-documented. These arms supplies and logistic support are largely funded through smuggled gold exports. Both arms and gold are channelled through Sudan's fragile neighbours, Libya, Chad, CAR, Uganda and South Sudan, which Western partners are unwilling to put under pressure, in light of the fight against jihadist terrorism and Russia's influence in the region.

Both Egypt and the UAE are seen as pro-Western, moderating forces in the Middle East. The UAE signed up to the Abraham Accords and has become an important commercial hub with which the EU is negotiating a trade deal (and the Trump family has conflicting commercial interests). Egypt serves as a frontline state in the EU's fight against irregular migration and contributes, among others, to the newly formed AU Stabilisation Support Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). These are some of the reasons why the EU tries to stay uncomfortably neutral in the conflict, while [searching](#) for its peaceful solution and hiding its geopolitical impotence and

bad conscience behind humanitarian conferences, supporting calls for humanitarian assistance that often do not even reach the most vulnerable, and clearly did not avoid the worst level of killing.

A crisis the EU (and the AU) cannot stop but cannot ignore

On 9 October, the [joint AU-EU Peace and Security Council](#) meeting reaffirmed its commitment to a rules-based international order and the respect of the sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity of Sudan, calling for an immediate ceasefire, a humanitarian truce and the return to the negotiation table followed by an 'inclusive national dialogue', and condemning external interference by state and non-state actors.

One week before the fall of El Fasher, the [EU Council](#) in turn adopted conclusions on Sudan, reiterating its commitment to increase its engagement with the parties to the conflict, provided there is credible progress towards achieving a ceasefire, humanitarian access, a return to civilian government and restoration of the rule of law. The Union was ready 'to continue to deploy, and where possible intensify, the use of the full range of foreign policy instruments at its disposal – including, where appropriate, targeted restrictive measures – to achieve a peaceful resolution to the crisis'.

Unsurprisingly, there was no reference to a possible military intervention or a concrete indication of how the EU (jointly with the AU) would deploy activities to edge away from the brink in Sudan. Nobody seems to have any appetite within the region or the continent for any kind of protective mission on the ground. But the fact that there was also no reference to other means to fulfil our collective responsibility to protect suggests that the R2P principle has lost most of its traction 20 years after its adoption.

The EU, but even the US, may not have direct [influence on the warring parties](#), but, in conjunction with the AU, they have the capacity to weigh in on regional players who have. Beyond the QUAD members and Sudan's direct neighbours, they also include [Türkiye and Qatar](#). This capacity to exert political (and economic) pressure (through sanctions and trade embargoes) has been underutilised so far, especially by an EU-AU tandem that is currently excluded from the Quad.

The AU rightly suspended Sudan from all AU activities in 2019 and again in 2024 until after the return of a civilian-led transition government. During the recent joint AU-EU Peace and Security Council, both regions indicated the need for more effective application of the arms embargo. The EU has a track record of imposing

sanctions. It currently [sanctions](#) ten individuals and eight entities in Sudan. But beyond individual restrictive measures, the EU has also experience with setting up schemes to trace conflict minerals, such as the system put in place to trace blood diamonds under the [Kimberley process](#) during the Liberia and Sierra Leone civil wars.

As [experts](#) noted, the economic, military and geopolitical gains for key warring parties remain too high. While a political solution has to be the end goal, measures with immediate effect to halt the fighting will have to include economic pressure. As a [2024 report](#) noted, any effective strategy in Sudan will need to blend political and sanctions tools and move beyond short-term quick fixes. Such a strategy should decisively constrain access to resources but also aim to coerce behavioural change and signal shared international norms against impunity and in support of the return to civilian rule and democracy. We cannot repeat the errors of 2021–2023 by focusing on the warring parties alone, giving them a political legitimacy they do not deserve. This is in line with the stated intention of both the EU and AU to uphold a rules-based order (underpinned by the R2P principle). For the EU, in the face of growing regional armament and securitisation, supporting a responsible approach to the circulation of arms will be a litmus test to how it will operate as a credible but principled geopolitical actor.

Recommendations

The international community can do a series of things short of military intervention, the latter clearly inconceivable for now. Carving out a response to the crisis in Sudan is not a question of capacity but of political will, priority and economic pressure.

As the reform of the multilateral architecture and the strengthening of APSA are high on the agenda of the next AU–EU summit, the Sudan crisis, our collective responsibility to protect and the fight against all forms of illegal trafficking and illicit financial flows funding conflicts should be put high on the agenda. Indifference or relegation are no longer an option. In the face of unspeakable horror, this is an opportunity to break the [usual summit rituals and cynicism](#), and to welcome indignation as a driver of concrete action.

1. The effective application of the [arms embargo](#), dating back to 2004 and repeatedly reconducted, should be considered as an absolute minimum. It implies the exercise of pressure on all countries involved in the violation of the arms embargo. This pressure can take different forms:

- Requirement to release flight records and disclosure of re-export of Western military equipment, and possible threats to suspend the export of Western military equipment to non-compliant nations.
 - Extend the EU's restrictive measures to more uncooperative individuals and entities, both inside and outside Sudan, who are responsible for the violation of the arms embargo.
 - Appropriate measures: the revision of the development cooperation with non-cooperative nations.
 - Suspension of the negotiations of a trade agreement with the UAE.
2. The imposition of the traceability of all trade in gold:
- Such traceability should be imposed systematically on all high-value raw materials whose illegal trade feeds wars and criminal gangs, including not only gold, but also, for example, coltan and other critical raw materials feeding the multiple conflicts in the Great Lakes region.
 - Countries downstream involved in the whitewashing of these raw materials should be added to the [FATF grey list](#) of uncooperative countries in the fight against money laundering and the financing of terrorism. This notably includes the UAE, that were delisted in 2024.
3. The EU and AU should adopt a more forceful strategy towards political settlement and address long-standing governance issues. Both partners should reach out to neighbouring countries and relevant players (notably the Quad) to establish a plan of action for a credible peace process:
- To operationalise the importance the EU attaches to solving the Sudan crisis, it could nominate a dedicated EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Sudan, complementary to the existing EUSR for the Horn of Africa.
 - In parallel with efforts to cut off the funding of the civil war, efforts should be continued and intensified to strengthen the Sudanese civil society and to enable it to participate in future peace negotiations, a return to a civilian government and a democratic transition.

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