

Conflicts in the Horn of Africa and their Consequences on Sudan's Stability and Security

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Abstract: *Armed conflicts in the Horn of Africa have been raging in that region for the last forty years with tragic consequences for human life and for economic advancement. These conflicts have three different, but overlapping dimensions: the intrastate, the interstate, and the global levels. The conflicts are of a decided relevance for the Sudan, and particularly to the rebellion in the southern Sudan. The lack of security and stability in southern Sudan forced hundreds of thousand southerners into neighbouring countries, especially Ethiopia and Uganda. Likewise, the Sudan hosted hundreds of thousands Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Ugandans caught in the crossfire of their national conflicts. This development not only created a heavy economic burden on these relatively poor and economically underdeveloped communities, but led to strained political relations among governments. The Sudan has deep-seated security concerns emanating from the tragic developments in that part of the world. It is argued that one practical step to defuse the situation is to look for political solutions for essentially political problems. The next step that follows logically from the first step is to establish economic cooperation arrangements with a view to creating a future economic community in that African region.*

The Horn of Africa—usually understood to comprise Djibouti, Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the northern region of Kenya—is a region of great strategic importance. It is a geographical region falling within that horn-shaped part of Africa that protrudes into the Indian Ocean like a rhino horn from the continent's landmass in northeastern Africa. It contains major crossroads of air and sea routes of international significance.

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Strictly speaking, only Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia fall within this geographical region; hence they comprise the core of the Horn. But since the issues and problems associated with the Horn go beyond the geographical confines, we cannot seriously discuss them without bringing in the immediate neighbours of Ethiopia and Somalia: Sudan and Kenya. Furthermore, the problems afflicting the Horn of Africa are incomprehensible without analytical recourse to the designs and ambitions of superpowers in the region, as manifested by direct intervention or through proxies.

The Nature of Conflict

For almost forty years now, armed conflicts have been raging in the Horn of Africa, with tragic consequences for human life and for economic development. With the exception of Kenya and Djibouti, the countries of this region have endured long periods of turmoil and civil war, which have resulted in great human suffering and the largest number of refugees on the African continent.

Perhaps the first substantive point that should be made is that there is not one conflict in the region but several interlocking ones. The conflicts in that region of Africa also have three main types. First, there are the intrastate or domestic dimensions. These are the armed insurgencies which effectively challenge the authority of the central governments in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia, more specially so during the reign of the dictators Nimeiri, Mengistu, and Barre, respectively. Somalia at the moment is showing the world the terrible consequences of the collapse of a state. There is no government, no law, no order; there is death, starvation, and war.

Second, there are the interstate or regional conflicts such as the Somali-Ethiopian armed hostilities in the Ogaden, the Somali-Kenyan conflict, and Ethiopian involvement during the Mengistu regime in the Sudanese civil war through support for the Sudan's People Liberation Movement (SPLM) and its military arm, the Sudan's People Liberation Army (SPLA), and Sudanese involvement in supporting the Eritreans during their struggle for independence against Ethiopia.

Third, there is the global dimension of conflicts in the Horn involving—before the dismemberment of the Soviet Union—the superpowers and other extra-African powers, together with the controversial United Nations peacekeeping and peacemaking role in Somalia.

The Horn is also a region bedeviled by natural calamities as well as

man-made disasters. The Horn's natural endowment is meagre and unevenly distributed; large parts of the region are not fit for settled human habitation. Man's adaptation to it is premised on movement, and the history of the area is marked by extensive migrations, population shifts, and the constant jostling and shoving of people in search of land, pasture, and water. Scarcity and mobility make conflict inevitable, consequently the Horn has never been a peaceful place.

Centralization, militarization, and authoritarianism in the countries of the region manifested the determination of ruling groups to maintain the status quo with all its inequities, using the power of the state. Demands for reform were refused, and the most serious conflicts in the region were the immediate result of such rejections: the civil war in southern Sudan was preceded by the rejection of a southern demand for federation; the Eritrean revolution began when a federal arrangement there was scrapped; and the internecine struggle of the Somali clans, which has led recently to the breaking up of the state there, reflects in part the misgivings of the sparsely populated and overwhelmingly pastoral north against the more populous and agriculturally developed south. The "dissident nationalism" which developed in northern Somalia led to the secession of that part of the country following the overthrow of the Barre regime in 1991.

It should be noted that the areas most wanting in development are also the ones where dissidence and rebellion have flourished. Incidentally, these areas are also the ones with the least access to state power.¹ There are struggles going on for national liberation in the region which one scholar correctly calls struggles for a "second independence" which might as well negate the existence of the postcolonial state.²

Major Issues

There are at least four major issues which constitute the core of the conflicts in the Horn. First, the Horn of Africa contains states which are not yet nations, like Ethiopia before the independence of Eritrea, and a nation in search of a single state (Somalia). Second, there was Ethiopia's imperial history and the expansionism that accompanied it on the one hand and the drive for autonomy by various ethnic communities in the Empire on the other. Even after the demise of the Ethiopian empire, the state of Ethiopia faced the same challenges. Third, although external interventions did not create the conflicts, they most definitely exacerbated the situation in the Horn.³ Fourth, the ecological balance and the economy of the region are in very poor condition. The industrial base

and the capacity for general economic development throughout the Horn are further destroyed by prolonged conflicts and the political instability caused by them.⁴

Major Consequences

As to major consequences of the conflicts, the regional arms race and the further impoverishment of the peoples of the Horn constitute a major consequence of the conflict there. Indeed, despite their relative poverty, the two major warring countries in the region, Ethiopia and Somalia, reportedly spent 14 percent of their national income on arms imports in 1977-79 (at the height of the Ogaden confrontation).⁵

Bleak as the prospects for the economic health of the Horn of Africa are, the greater consequence of the conflicts in the region is the displaced people and refugee problems. About one half of the entire world refugee population is believed to be in Africa. Out of the total African refugee population, estimated at between 5 to 6 million in the early 1990s, over 2.3 million of them are in the Horn of Africa alone.⁶

Relevance for Sudan

Having discussed briefly the different and interlocking dimensions of the conflicts in the Horn of Africa, the physical destruction which they have caused there, the negative impact which they have had on the economies of the region and the worsening of the human condition there, the key question Sudanese scholars and decision makers should address is: what are the relevance and the consequences of the developments in the Horn of Africa for the Sudan and its stability and security?

Perhaps the major consequence and relevance of the developments of the conflicts of the Horn of Africa region for the Sudan is its impact on the problem of the southern Sudan. The problems of ethnic relations and national integration in the Sudan are too complicated to be explained as being merely religious conflicts. Our perspective does not, however, discredit the importance of ethnic sentiments in intensifying the conflict. Our contention stresses the complexity and the multidimensional nature of the conflict in the Sudan.⁷

The mutiny of the southern Sudanese troops in August 1955 developed into a full-scale rebellion in the three southern provinces during the early 1960s, and the heavy-handed response by the military regime of General Ibrahim Abboud drove several hundred thousand southerners into neighbouring countries. This development not only

created a heavy economic burden on such a relatively poor country as Ethiopia, but also produced sympathies there for the rebel movement and dissonance with Khartoum. What probably saved the situation from further deterioration was the policy of the Khartoum government in refusing to aid the nascent Eritrean secessionist elements. As one scholar puts it, a thinly-veiled system of deterrence-by-mutual-hostages kept the peace between Khartoum and Addis Ababa.⁸

However with the overthrow of the Abboud regime and the advent of the left-oriented transitional government of Sir al-Khātīm al-Khalīfah, the Sudan followed the basic rule of thumb of reversing whatever policies the Abboud regime had followed. Consequently, Khartoum somewhat more covertly supported the Eritrean fighters against the regime of Emperor Haile Selassie by permitting the transshipment of weapons (officially disguised as medical supplies) to the Eritreans from abroad. Addis Ababa retaliated by aiding southern Sudanese rebels.

After the 1965 Parliamentary elections a more conservative coalition government under Mohamed Ahmed Mahgoub came to power. But that period was characterized by persistent factionalist partisan intrigues which left no time to formulate a coherent foreign policy towards the Horn of Africa or elsewhere.⁹

Foreign Policies Under Nimeiri

Under the Nimeiri regime (1969-1985) the Sudan's foreign policy towards Ethiopia followed a zigzag course, and in the latter years the twists and turns were sharper and more erratic.¹⁰ In its first two years the May revolution, because of ideological predilections, did not view favourably the conservative imperial government of Ethiopia. However following the leftist putsch of July 1971 the Sudan launched a vigorous campaign to repair bridges and restore confidence with Ethiopia. In fact, the Sudan was able to engage Ethiopia's support in the solution of southern problems, paving the way for the Addis Ababa Accord. 1972 witnessed one of the most important diplomatic feats: the conclusion of a definitive agreement on the Ethiopian-Sudanese borders. The agreement was also the cornerstone of a trilateral agreement that brought in Kenya along with her two neighbours. With Ethiopian help Sudan strove to achieve a boundary settlement with Kenya regarding the southeastern triangle of Allemy. However, relations between Sudan and Ethiopia deteriorated in the mid- and late Seventies following the heightening of the struggle against Ethiopia's new Marxist regime by Eritreans and the Ethiopian opposition. Ethiopia accused the Sudan of giving sanctuary to

these elements. Ethiopia, on the other hand, extended facilities to Sudanese opposition elements, including the SPLM/SPLA. Deterioration in relations continued as Nimeiri decided to redivide the South, thereby rekindling the southern rebellion and the influx of southern refugees into Ethiopia.

Ethiopia, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and Libya, under Soviet machination, joined hands in the Aden Alliance which was directed against Sudan and Egypt. The Soviets were trying to consolidate their position on the southern entrance to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, which was their major link between their Mediterranean and Indian Ocean fleets. The immediate goal seemed at the time to destabilize the Sudan's pro-western regime. The Sudan became part of the superpower rivalries.

Sudan's Security Concerns

The lack of security and stability in southern Sudan due to the escalation of military operations paralysed and brought to a halt work in the developmental projects in the region such as the Jonglei Canal and the development of oil production in Upper Nile Province. The war in southern Sudan heavily taxed the staggering economy of the Sudan.

It should be noted that more than 85 percent of the Nile waters originate in Ethiopia. As relations between the two countries worsened, it was feared in Khartoum that Ethiopia, probably with Soviet help, might build a number of dams inside its territory over rivers and streams that feed the Nile, which could prove suicidal for both Sudan and Egypt.

Another source of anxiety for the Sudan was the excessive militarization of Ethiopia. The armed forces of Ethiopia grew from 50,000 in 1975 to 250,000 in 1980, a fivefold increase, and by the mid-Eighties were in excess of 300,000. If we take into consideration police and security intelligence forces it would reach more than 400,000. Thus Ethiopia by the mid-Eighties had the largest standing army in black Africa, and next only to Egypt in the whole of Africa. With a total population of more than 42 million people and a GNP per capita of less than \$100, Ethiopia was one of the most militarized states in the world. Such thorough militarization understandably posed serious threats to its neighbours, particularly Somalia and Sudan.

The Eritrean Question

Until the advent of the national salvation revolution in the Sudan in June

1989, we can assume that the Sudan had never formulated a clear policy on the Eritrean question. Officially it supported the Organization of African Unity stand and did not recognize any right of independence for Eritrea. But Sudan also covertly permitted Eritrean organizations to operate from the Sudan, both politically and militarily, and served as the main channel through which external aid reached the different movements. The Sudan's Eritrean policy had vacillated with the political demands of the moment: it depended on relations-with Ethiopia, on the balance of political forces within the Sudan, and sometimes on external pressures as well. However, for most of the time relations with Ethiopia were tense, and the Sudan tended to sympathize with the Eritrean cause, an attitude generally supported by public opinion.¹¹

In spite of all the vacillation and confusion, the Sudan has been more consistent in its support of the Eritreans than any other country involved in the conflict. There was little doubt that Ethiopian diplomacy and military pressure were aimed at reaching an agreement with the Sudan whereby Ethiopia would cut its aid to the rebels of southern Sudan, while the Sudan would limit its support for the Eritrean guerrillas. However, the Sudanese government never completely banned the Eritrean organizations. That possibility faded completely as the military once again took over power in the Sudan in June 1989. The Ethiopians had stepped up their support to the SPLA, which enabled the rebel movement to control many centres and garrisons in the South. Simultaneously, the new regime in Khartoum stepped up its logistical and material support for the anti-Mengistu forces, especially the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) led by Issayas Afeworki and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led by Meles Zenawi and other minor dissident groups. That decision was made after Khartoum had rightly calculated that the air was heavy with the scent of decay in Addis Ababa. The adversaries of the Mengistu regime were multiplying and the energies and resources of the state were entirely consumed in its war with growing segments of its civil population. In May 1991 the Mengistu regime collapsed under its own heavy weight, which paved the way for Eritrean independence in 1993.

Among the first decisions of the new rulers in Ethiopia was the expulsion of the SPLM/SPLA from Ethiopian territory, thus denying the southern Sudanese rebel movement its major source of support and supply.

That dramatic development in the Horn of Africa paved the way for the Sudan for the first time to build a normal relationship with both

Ethiopia and independent Eritrea.

The Refugee Problem

The other issue with a decided relevance to the question of security and stability in the Sudan is refugees.

One of the most dramatic events of our time is the large extent of population movements within and across national boundaries. The causes of these movements include economic hardship due to natural calamities and political instabilities. Nowhere in the world have these movements been as dramatic as in Africa. Of the world's estimated 12.6 million refugees and internally displaced persons, about 50 percent are believed to be Africans.¹²

Until the 1960s Europe and Asia were the major producers of refugees. Since the 1960s, however, the focus has shifted to the Third World, especially to Africa which is now hosting about 50 percent of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons.¹³ It is an amazing fact that the majority of African refugees are produced by the independent African states. At the heart of this problem is the violation of human rights. There are now about six million refugees and internally displaced persons in Africa. About half of them are refugees, of whom 45 percent come from Ethiopia and are concentrated mainly in Somalia (700,000), Sudan (460,000) and Djibouti (35,000).¹⁴

The problem of refugees in the Sudan dates back to the mid-Fifties when southern Sudanese crossed the borders of the neighbouring countries to seek asylum from political instability which later developed into full scale rebellion. By the early Seventies, there were about 175,000 southern Sudanese refugees in the neighbouring countries. At the moment Uganda alone hosts about 300,000 Southern Sudanese refugees.

In 1965, following internal strife in the Congo about 7,000 Congolese refugees entered southern Sudan, but by 1970 about 4,000 of them had been repatriated voluntarily while the rest remained mostly in eastern Equatoria province.¹⁵

At the peak of the Chadian Civil war, Chadian refugees who crossed the Western borders of the Sudan reached 16,000 by 1982. Uganda suffered internal political instabilities which forced segments of Ugandans to cross the borders into the Sudan, reaching more than 200,000 by the year 1984.¹⁶

The first influx of Eritrean refugees occurred in 1967 when about

30,000 refugees crossed into the eastern borders of the Sudan following an offensive by the Ethiopian army. That figure, however, continued to grow, reaching 465,000 by the year 1984.¹⁷

Despite the massive influx of asylum seekers and the pressing economic problems, the Sudan has always maintained an open door policy to refugees. One observer described it as one of the most liberal asylum policies in the world.¹⁸ The provision of sanctuary includes legal protection, emergency relief such as clothing, shelter, medical care and water and, whenever voluntary repatriation is not foreseeable, Sudan collaborates with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP) and other voluntary agencies to settle the refugees in areas away from the border as stipulated by the OAU Convention. The Sudan's generous settlement policy has made large areas of agricultural land available to the refugees. Although the refugees are scattered throughout the country, Kassala province and Equatoria province have the highest concentrations. The refugees are also found in both the rural and the urban areas. Out of the 671,000 refugees, 165,000 have settled spontaneously in the urban areas (Kassala, Gedaref, Port Sudan, and Khartoum), 265,000 are in the organized settlements, and the rest have presumably settled spontaneously in the rural areas and in the other small towns.¹⁹

The Impact of Refugees

What is the impact of refugees on the Sudan? The Sudan has been positively as well as negatively affected by the influx of refugees. On the positive side, the refugees have been responsible for an expansion in demand as well as in the supply of labour. It is especially the wealthier sections of the Sudanese population who have benefited from the supply of cheap labour. But many Sudanese nationals have suffered from the competition posed by the Eritreans and Ethiopians, and have seen their incomes decline and employment opportunities diminish.

In the area of subsistence agriculture, the effect of refugees influx has been the most clearly negative. It has meant an enormous growth of the population in an area where natural resources are severely restricted, and consequently it has contributed to a deterioration of the environment.

In the sphere of consumption, the refugees have an impact on social services such as health and education. Also, the refugee influx has contributed, together with other factors, to a certain deterioration in average housing standards and to an increase in house rents. Some refugees, are regarded as corrupting morality: they are accused of loose

sexual mores. But on the whole, the social situation is still characterized by tolerance rather than conflict.

The most important negative impact refugees have had on the Sudan, however, has to do with security. Ethiopian intelligence organizations took punitive actions inside Sudanese territory on certain occasions, sometimes against politically active refugees, and at other times against Sudanese targets probably in a bid to undermine the Sudanese feeling of security and to destabilize the political system. From the standpoint of national interest, the refugees in this case represented a liability. Moreover, in 1984/85 Israel managed to transfer thousands of Ethiopian Falasha Jews from their centres of refuge in eastern Sudan to Israel. "Operation Moses," the code name of the operation, tarnished the image of the Sudan, especially in the Arab world, and was generally viewed as an embarrassment for the Sudan and its unwavering commitment for the Palestinian cause.

Chaos in Somalia

The poor performance of the Somali economy since independence in 1960 and the accompanying political repression under M. S. Barre exacerbated the viciousness of clan-based politics. As a result, when Barre's regime crumbled in February 1991, Somalia was thrown into a blood bath of the warring Somali clan factions. Chaos and starvation followed. The UN sent 28,000 troops, mostly Americans. But the UN mission soon changed from a popular humanitarian effort to a despised military action. In a sense the UN, for many Somalis, was acting like a new warlord.²⁰ The concept that the UN, with the might of the United States of America behind it, could bring peace to troubled countries around the world was fatally mauled, and as one source has correctly put it: Mogadishu is the place where the new world order finally ended.²¹

The Sudan's formal stance concerning the tragic developments in Somalia stipulates that an "African instrument" should be established to diffuse the Somali crisis. In his address to the fourth summit of the heads of state and government of the Inter-governmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) held in Addis Ababa in September 1993, President al-Bashīr warned against "foreign intervention."²²

The Sudan had deep-seated security concerns from the heavy American presence in Somalia following American accusations that the Sudan was aiding General M. Farah Aideed. In August 1993 the USA officially listed the Sudan as "sponsoring terrorism."²³ The American administration also accused the Sudan of "human rights violations."

From the Sudanese official perspective, such developments might pave the way for an American military action in southern Sudan analogous to the Somali example, as a prelude to overthrowing the Islamic government of the Sudan. However such a possibility has faded away following the Clinton administration's decision to withdraw American military personnel from Somalia in early 1995.

Conclusions

From the above analysis, the situation in the Horn of Africa presents the Sudan with serious security dilemmas. Having discussed the physical destruction caused by the conflicts in the Horn, and having demonstrated their negative impact on the economies of the region and having showed the worsening of the human conditions, the key question is: what is to be done?

The most obvious and yet difficult step is to stop the wars. Political solutions must be found for essentially political problems. Why not establish economic cooperation arrangements with a view to creating a future economic community in the region? Such a proposal would recognize existing sovereignties in the region but provide opportunities for enhanced capability for the various states to improve the living standards of all peoples in the Horn of Africa. There are, of course several obstacles to this proposal. There is no economic big power within the region to finance such an arrangement, all the countries of the region being very poor, and there is also the usual argument about competitive rather than complimentary export goods. However, international financial institutions and friendly foreign governments appear to be looking positively at enlarged markets and pooling of scarce resources in Third World countries. The IGADD, for instance, could prove a good starting point for channeling interstate energies towards cooperation for a change that will be in the higher interests of the people of the region.

Notes

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