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***The Current* podcast**

"The catastrophe in Sudan"

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Episode Summary:

The conflict in Sudan is the world's worst humanitarian crisis. More than 150,000 people have died; millions have fled their homes and are starving; and prospects for a ceasefire are bleak. To discuss the roots of the war, the humanitarian emergency, and prospects for peace, Visiting Fellow Jeffrey Feltman joins Michael O'Hanlon, director of research for Foreign Policy, on *The Current*.

FELTMAN: We've seen the imagery recently of just the depravity, the barbarism that came out of el-Fasher, a city in North Darfur that endured a 500-day siege by the RSF. And the the imagery that came out of there was a reminder of the Darfur massacres of 20 years ago. What's different is that 20 years ago, the world reacted. And we haven't seen the world react to the same level.

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O'HANLON: Hi, I'm Mike O'Hanlon in the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings and with Vanda Felbab-Brown I co-direct the Africa Security Initiative and therefore thrilled today to be talking with my good friend and colleague Jeff Feltman here on *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network, about the crisis in Sudan.

The topic is certainly sobering, but Jeff is a wonderful colleague who has a lot of experience in this and other areas of diplomacy and conflict resolution. He was President Biden's envoy for the Horn of Africa for part of the last presidential term. He also spent six years as the undersecretary general at the United Nations for political affairs and had been a U.S. diplomat for 30 years before that.

So Jeff, just an honor to be here with you today.

FELTMAN: Thanks, Mike. Glad to be here and glad to talk about this this particular topic.

[1:09] **O'HANLON:** Yeah, so this is one of the world's probably top three to five worst humanitarian crisis.

FELTMAN: It's the worst.

O'HANLON: It is the worst.

FELTMAN: It's the worst.

[1:15]

O'HANLON: Can you explain what made it the worst in recent times? But I know you and I also wanted to give a little historical context maybe to set up, because this is a part of the world and a country where we saw the Janjaweed militias back 20 years ago doing terrible things. There's been on and off civil violence ever since. Several UN peacekeeping missions have been in one part of the Sudan or another for many years. So maybe what caused the current crisis and made it so bad, but also what's a quick sketch of the history?

[1:42]

FELTMAN: Yeah, thanks Mike. Let's jump back to 2019 rather than going all the way back to Sudan's history. You may remember there were very large protests against the 30 year dictatorship of Omar Bashir. People from all walks of life, all parts of Sudan crossing racial ethnic regional, economic barriers coming together to demand the overthrow of of Omar Bashir.

And at the time, the two military organizations, the Sudanese Armed Forces, the SAF, and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces that came out of that Janjaweed militia you mentioned, they together worked together and and deposed Omar Bashir in response to the protests on the ground.

That started in 2019 a a very tentative, fragile civilian-military transition with the civilians and the military not seeing eye to eye, but the SAF, the Sudanese Armed Forces, and the RSF staying together, the paramilitary and the and the Sudanese Armed forces, up until October 2021 when the SAF and the RSF worked together to have a coup, overthrow the civilian part of the of the regime.

So then you had the RSF and the SAF, having overthrown the civilians, they started to go after each other, until finally there was open warfare between the two organizations starting in April 2023. That has led to the all-of-Sudan war that you see right now that has created the largest humanitarian catastrophe. It's, you know, over 21 million people in severe acute food security, including two areas of famine; half the country needing some kind of humanitarian assistance; 12 million or so displaced, the largest in the world.

We've seen the imagery recently of just the depravity, the barbarism that came out of el-Fasher a city in North Darfur that endured a 500-day siege by the RSF. It fell to the RSF on October 26th and the the imagery that came out of there was a reminder of the Darfur massacres of 20 years ago. and it's the same group, the the RSF is made up of the Janjaweed type militia, and the same victims that took place 20 years ago.

What's different is that 20 years ago, the world reacted. And we haven't seen the world react to the same level. Although on the margins of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince's visit to Washington, his meetings with President Trump, President Trump issued a very strong statement about Sudan, which suggests to me that the Saudis put Sudan on the agenda for their meeting with the president.

O'HANLON: Before we get to what these outside powers might be able to do to pressure the belligerents, a couple more words just to understand the war if we could. First of all, to what extent is this largely either a racial or ethnic war versus competing personalities who both want power?

[4:23]

FELTMAN: Both and all. You've got the, you know, the head the head of the the SAF, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan Abdelrahman al-Burhan and the head of the RSF, Mohamed Dagalo Hamdan, known as Hemedti. Those two are at each other's throats, The militias are at each other's throats.

But you've also got sort of an Arab versus versus non-Arab war going on. That's what we see in Darfur. We have the the riverine Arabs, the the sort of Khartoum, the elite that live along the Nile, going against the non-riverine Arabs. It's a multifaceted conflict, and you've ended up right now with basically a division of the country where you have the SAF that's in control of the the east and the north. Khartoum changed hands, the SAF has Khartoum now. And you have the RSF that's more or less in

control-- if you can call RSF, sort of the way that they rule in western and southern Sudan.

So you have a division of the country between two opposing forces, but there's lots and lots of layers of conflict, and it's more than just a two-sided civil war because you have other militias that are playing a role as well.

[5:28]

O'HANLON: What about the South Sudan element? Of course, that country became independent almost 15 years ago, as I recall. And there have been a number of conflicts within. Is South Sudan at all involved in this? And has it become at least a little bit of a relative, not good news story, but less bad news than it was?

FELTMAN: Well, they have their own problems right now in South Sudan. And there is some spillover from the RSF areas, the the paramilitary forces smuggling weapons into South Sudan. But the South Sudan problems are largely internal to the leadership struggles in South Sudan. Whereas the Sudan War is now, has now been hypercharged by outsiders in a way that South Sudan hasn't experienced.

[6:08]

O'HANLON: So now let's get to the major outside players. There are a number of Middle Eastern countries that support the, essentially, the the residual military, the the Sudanese armed forces, if you will. And then there's maybe one major player that's supporting the RSF, is that correct? The UAE.

FELTMAN: That's correct. The UAE will deny that it's arming and financing the RSF, but I think that most evidence suggests that they are in big time with the RSF.

And on the SAF side, on the Sudanese Armed Forces side, you have the Egyptians as the main broker, but you also have the Qataris, the Saudis, the Turks. The Iranians have been, have been selling drones and things to the Sudanese armed forces as well.

I should note that the Sudanese Armed Forces does posture as a government. They they hold the seat at the United Nations. I think it's preposterous given the war atrocities from the Sudanese Armed Forces too. You may not be able to see blood from the satellites like you can with the RSF atrocities, but both sides have been committing war crimes.

The basic fighting inside Sudan originated from inter-Sudan problems and personality clashes and and vying for power. But now with the external actors playing such a hard role, it complicates things because it enables each side to keep fighting.

[7:20]

O'HANLON: One last thing so I understand this as well as we can, and then I want to hear your thoughts on what we should be doing about this. Not to overplay the racial dimension, because as you point out, there are a lot of other things going on and a competition among personalities and different types of economies within

Sudan. But it's interesting to me that you have maybe a half dozen major outside players, most of them Arab countries. And most of them supporting the the African or the the Black contingent, if you will. I know it's not that simple, but you have said that the Rapid Support Forces are only being really helped by UAE. They're primarily Arab, primarily or largely related to the Janjaweed of years gone by. The Sudanese Armed Forces are more of a mix, right? of Arab and non-Arab, and yet they're getting most of the support from the Arab world. Is that a fair way to summarize?

[8:09]

FELTMAN: I would think that the SAF leadership is really pretty Arab. You know, they would look at themselves as pretty Arab. But there's also, there's there's the center versus the periphery I mentioned earlier, where where the periphery in Sudan since Sudan's independence-- and perhaps even during the British colonial period, I don't know-- but the periphery of Sudan has been greatly neglected. And so part of it is you have the SAF that's sort of representing the Nile Basin population that has traditionally neglected the periphery. And so part of it is is center versus periphery fighting as well.

[8:40]

O'HANLON: It's fascinating. So let's get to the discussion which you outlined in your excellent recent blog on the Brookings website, I should say Brookings dot edu website, about, and I think you called it "Sudan's Deadly Divide." It's actually Sudan's deadly divides as you're describing it now. But the hard question, of course, is what to do about it regardless. And you've talked about the ways in which the key outside players, including the United States, might pressure both parties. Could you explain a little bit about your concept there?

[9:07]

FELTMAN: Yeah. See, the U.S. position under the Trump administration has basically been what I called an "outside in." I don't know that they've used that term. But right now, General Burhan, the Sudanese Armed Forces, refuses any type of negotiations with the RSF. And the RSF is trying to take territory through the battlefield. So the negotiations of the parties themselves have faltered and basically it's non-existent right now between the parties.

So what the U.S. has said is, okay, we're friends with all these outside powers, and let's set up an initiative to try to come up with a common position among Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Two of them being backing the SAF and one being the primary backer of the RSF. And and then if we have a consensus, which which came out in what they call the Quad Statement in in late September on things like humanitarian ceasefire, and then move into political talks, then they can use their leverage on the parties.

So the paper came out, the statement came out in September that appeared as though the United States had gotten the three primary backers on the same page, that it's time for this war to stop. The trouble is it hasn't stopped, and we've seen the fall of El-Fasher and the atrocities there that took place afterwards.

So I think that what has to happen in terms of the "outside in" initiative of the United States is that the three capitals, Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, have to feel that the president himself expects them to use their leverage on the parties inside, expects them to stop shipping arms, facilitating a a solution. And that there will be consequences in the relationship if they don't.

The trouble is for all of these three countries, we have enormous agendas. The U.S. agenda with any of these three countries is very, very long. And so I was very concerned that Sudan would never rise high enough. Massad Boulos, the special presidential envoy for Africa, has been trying to get momentum behind this initiative. But you really need Mohammad bin Zayed, Mohammed bin Salman, Sisi to understand it's the president who's behind this.

[11:13]

O'HANLON: Can I follow up though with one thought, which is I can see how you could impose essentially a ceasefire in place if with enough leverage, enough outside pressure. It's hard for me, and you have a lot more experience in dealing with these things in real life than I do certainly, it's hard for me to imagine these two leaders being induced into a political dialogue where they would somehow form a government they could both live with or share power themselves. And we're also quite unlikely in this day and age, I think it's fair to say, to impose a peace with any kind of an outside peace imposition or peace enforcement mechanism. Sudan already has several peacekeeping missions, quote unquote, but the world is, you know, not in the mood to go in and forcibly disarm militias.

So what's the realistic political path forward?

[11:56]

FELTMAN: I'll even add another complication to to what you said, Mike, because you're right to point all this out. The other complication is that the Sudanese people, if to the extent that you can get opinion of the Sudanese people, very diverse population, they do agree on one thing, which is that there should be no political future for either the RSF or the SAF in governing institutions going forward.

Now how do you accomplish that? Who has credibility? The credibility belongs to these heroic Emergency Relief Rooms, that a grassroots network that have been doing soup kitchens, essential services to beleaguered population across Sudan since this war broke out. But they're decentralized.

So how do you translate this very strong credibility that the ERRs have into political power once you get to political negotiations? It's very complicated. We've seen this before where you have popular movements that lead to significant change, including in Sudan 2019, that then the power dissipates when you try to come up with a negotiating process.

So I think it's not only how do you get these two generals to deal with each other and then leave the scene. How do you build a credible civilian leadership out of, out of this diverse Emergency Relief Room network that has worked so heroically. So I think it's really tough.

But I was encouraged on the margins of Mohammad bin Salman's visit that President Trump himself issued a very strong statement about it's time for this war to stop, which suggests that the U.S. will work on trying to implement the Quad Initiative that on paper looks pretty good, but for reasons you point out it's really hard to implement in practice.

[13:31]

O'HANLON: So my very last question, and we'll wrap. It looks to me, based on what you just described about the political and military environment, that what you really need is something like what's being proposed now for Gaza, where you have an international force keep some kind of a peace that you induce the parties to accept, and then you build up institutions over a period of time when in effect Sudan becomes a trusteeship, maybe that's not a formal word that you would use.

But it looks to me like this problem's at least as hard as Gaza in the sense that you've had even more internecine violence within the territory itself. You don't have natural political leadership. You're gonna have to sort of grow that. And if you really try to solve this on the cheap and fly, you're more likely just to have a temporary ceasefire as opposed to a path towards peace. Is that fair?

[14:17]

FELTMAN: I mean, that's fair. And and right now, Sudan's heading toward being like Somalia. On the the map, it looks more like Libya, it looks more like divided. But but Libya has been relatively stable, even if divided. And it's worth remembering that even though we we look back on the UN peacekeeping efforts in Darfur with with mixed record, in fact, it did stop the killing. It did stop the killing 20 years ago. And so I think we do need some kind of force that has the power to enforce a peace that's that's derived off the battlefield.

[Music]

O'HANLON: Thank you very much. You can read more if you're interested or listen more at Brookings dot edu. I know Jeff's gonna stay involved on this issue and I want to thank you very much for the chance to have the conversation today.

FELTMAN: Yeah, thanks Mike.