

A hopeful yet fragile peace

How the UK can support Sudan's democratic transition and pursuit of justice

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Throughout 2019 Sudan's people led a peaceful revolution against the 30-year rule of former President Omar Al-Bashir and called for fundamental changes to governance. On 3 June 2019, government proxy militia, the Rapid Support Forces, stormed a popular sit-in site in the capital city, Khartoum, and killed hundreds, with evidence of mass rape and bodies dumped in the River Nile. In June 2019 [we wrote](#) that Sudan had created a window of opportunity to move away from dictatorship and towards democracy; and that the international community must support the country to prevent predictable escalations of identity-based violence.

Today, Sudan's transition is progressing but remains unstable. The UK must uphold its responsibilities towards Sudan, where hope for change is high but so too are the risks of a return to violence and mass atrocities. The UK must learn lessons from its failures in Myanmar, where an overemphasis on a democracy-first agenda and insufficient attention on atrocity prevention, contributed to a collective failure to prevent genocide and ethnic cleansing in Rakhine in 2017.

This briefing sets out how the UK can uphold its responsibilities to support democratic efforts and help prevent the conditions where mass atrocities can occur. We recommend the UK employs its diplomatic capacity on the world stage, applies a framework of atrocity prevention to its Sudan country strategy, and upholds its commitments to those in the UK impacted by Sudan's turmoil.

A year's tentative progress now at risk

In the last year, Sudan has established a joint civilian-military transitional government and secured important milestones on the path towards democracy. Former President Omar Al-Bashir is in prison in Khartoum and there is talk of cooperation with the International Criminal Court to see him finally face long-standing charges of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Sudan's Ministry of Justice is preparing an important transitional justice bill to begin the process of national healing after decades of violence, exclusion, and discrimination. A hopeful yet fragile process of law reform aimed at protecting women and minority groups is underway.

But Sudan's path to democratic transition is at risk of destabilisation. The historic experience of identity-based violence against racial, ethnic, religious, political, LGBTQ+ and other groups, including mass atrocities, means Sudan remains a country of high risk. A peace deal was signed on 3 October 2020, but so long as 'Hemetti', the Rapid Support Forces leader implicated in many atrocities, remains in high office, peace will be fragile as some armed groups refuse to participate. Violence is rising in Darfur and other periphery regions. The country is also facing an economic crisis. Sudan remains on the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list and cannot re-enter the international financial system until this is lifted. Sudan has been hit by COVID-19; with a failed health system and entire areas of the country with no ventilation or oxygenation capacity. Recent devastating flooding further impacts economic recovery, with 875,000 directly affected.

Responding on the global stage: Reprise the UK's role as Sudan's 'critical friend' in international fora

The international community has a responsibility to ensure Sudan's transition is peaceful and democratic. The exit of the hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping mission in Darfur (UNAMID) is scheduled to go ahead at the end of October, pending an update provided to the Security Council. This must be averted. Such a withdrawal will leave the protection of civilians entirely in the hands of Sudan's armed forces and their proxies – the very actors continuing to provoke violence and who are responsible for widespread repression and mass atrocities. Justice for these past injustices and atrocities, including the Darfur genocide and 3 June massacre, are crucial to ensuring a transition to a peaceful Sudan. An effective and inclusive transitional justice process in Sudan is fundamental, supported by international prosecutions where necessary. The United Nations, African Union and donor states must support the country in reforming legislation to protect human rights, particularly those of women and minorities; strengthening rule of law through building the capacity of the judiciary; ratifying international human rights treaties; and institutional reforms to the police and security services.

- The UK should raise urgently at the UN Security Council the need and responsibility for the UN to support Sudan in its transition, and not leave its people without the protection of UNAMID at a time of acute vulnerability and uncertainty, especially given that the signatories to the October peace deal are seeking the mission's help with implementation.
- The UK should continue to push for robust human rights monitoring and reporting in multilateral instruments like the UN Human Rights Council in support of building space for civil society, and push back against attempts to downgrade international support to technical assistance and capacity-building.
- The UK must prioritise [victim and survivor voices](#) and support a timely, effective and inclusive transitional justice process, supporting the mandate and instruments of the International Criminal Court where necessary, investing in the development of national justice mechanisms in Sudan, and leading by example in using its new Global Human Rights Sanctions powers against the perpetrators of human rights abuses in Sudan.

Learning lessons from Myanmar: Apply an atrocity prevention framework to UK's Sudan country strategy

When Myanmar began to open up after decades of dictatorship the UK pursued a democracy-first country strategy which failed to take account of the rising risks of mass atrocity crimes. Opportunities to interrupt and mitigate the trajectory of violence were missed. The UK should ensure its approach to Sudan learns from this experience and integrates an understanding of identity-based divisions, indicators of atrocity risks and training for all embassy staff on atrocity prevention.

- HMG must undertake urgent cross-departmental analysis of current UK policy on Sudan, including DIT and FCDO, to ensure that the UK's Sudan country strategy integrates an understanding of atrocity risks and ongoing monitoring of indicators of potential identity-based violence.
- The UK embassy in Khartoum should introduce an emergency communications protocol to connect UK staff in the field with London and New York to ensure rapid communication should red flags need to be raised.
- FCDO should collaborate with relevant civil society organisations on atrocity prevention and civilian protection issues, including through the UK Atrocity Prevention Working Group coordinated by Protection Approaches, and engagement with the UK-Sudan advocacy group and network of diaspora contacts coordinated by Waging Peace.

UK commitments to Sudan begin at home: Uphold obligations to Sudanese asylum-seekers, refugees and migrants

The responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from identity-based violence begins at home. The UK Government could do more to protect Sudanese nationals and diaspora communities resident in the UK who are deeply impacted by the continuing turmoil in Sudan, starting by engaging civil society working to support Sudanese communities in the UK and in Sudan.

The 2018 National Referral Mechanism statistics shows Sudan was the sixth largest country of origin for victims of modern slavery in the UK, with so many having been trafficked in Libya. Sudanese nationals form a large proportion of those who have made recent journeys to the UK, including on so-called 'small boats'. Waging Peace, which provides support for these groups, is experiencing unprecedented demand. New arrivals report insufficient access to legal representation; the confiscation of phones and property on arrival, with an unclear and chaotic method of retrieval; the removal of asylum support if housed in 'hotel detention'; holding in improper facilities like ex-army barracks; and harassment, hate crimes, and acts of terrorism from far-right groups.

- The UK should uphold refugee and asylum obligations and continue to offer sanctuary to non-Arab Darfuri asylum-seekers and other persecuted groups.
- The Home Office have an obligation to more accurately reflect the situation in Sudan in policy and information notes and other guidance issued to caseworkers; there is consensus among country experts that the transition is fragile, with little evidence of reduced risk to those returned to the country as rejected asylum-seekers.
- The UK must confront rising hate crime and identity-based violence in the UK against BAME communities, migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. The Home Office, and in particular the police, could start by tracking and collating incidents affecting asylum-seekers, their lawyers, and the wider refugee support sector.

For more information

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