News

People fleeing clashes between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the army gather a

People fleeing clashes between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the army gather at the bus station in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 19. (OSV News/Reuters/El-Tayeb Siddig)

Fredrick Nzwili

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Khartoum, Sudan — January 16, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Amid what a Catholic charity called "unimaginable" suffering of civilians trapped in civil war brutality in Sudan, the United States declared that one of the fighting factions is committing genocide in the country and slapped sanctions on its leader.

In one of the last decisions of the outgoing Biden administration, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken Jan. 7 sanctioned Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as "Hemedti," the leader of the Rapid Support Forces, "for his role in systematic atrocities committed against the Sudanese people" in a 20-month-old war.

Blinken said RSF and RSF-allied militia had continued direct attacks on civilians, systematically murdering men and boys — even infants — on ethnic bases and deliberately targeted women and girls from certain ethnic groups for rape and other forms of sexual violence.

After the notorious Darfur war, it's the second time in two decades that genocide has been declared in the northeast African nation, amid "unprecedented" famine and one of the most dire humanitarian situations on the planet.

According to the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, called the Genocide Convention, genocide means acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, by killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to its members, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Sudanese church leaders have remained tight-lipped on the sanctions and the genocide declarations, with some referring to them in the background as a "sensitive matter."

But Father Andrew Kaufa, coordinator of the Social Communication Department of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa, known as AMECEA, feared such sanctions may not punish the government or the rebels, but the common Sudanese.

"What could help the church in Sudan is to see the factions giving the church and humanitarian agencies access so that they deliver aid to alleviate the suffering of the innocent people," the Malawian priest told OSV News.

The war, which started in April 2023, has left over 638,000 people facing famine, millions in need of humanitarian assistance and 24,000 dead.

"My understanding of the situation is that Sudan is probably the worst humanitarian crisis" said the priest, noting 11 million displaced per U.N. figures and some 3.2 million others have fled to neighboring countries. "And the country is in a serious hunger crisis as well," said Kaufa on the war now officially branded a genocide.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, said in a report that famine in a displacement camp in North Darfur's Zamzan, "marks an unprecedented deepening and widening of the food and nutrition crisis, driven by the devastating conflict, which has triggered unprecedented mass displacement, a collapsing economy, the breakdown of essential social services, and severe societal disruptions, and poor humanitarian access."

Caritas partners in Sudan are reporting a cholera outbreak in the region, which is posing a new challenge to their work. Over 5,000 cases have been reported in the White Nile region. Since the outbreak of the war, the partners have worked North Darfur, Gedaref and the White Nile state, providing protection services, water, sanitation and health services, as well as cash assistance.

"The sheer scale of the suffering in Sudan is unimaginable. The number of displaced people is about half the population of Australia, with children making up the majority," Sally Thomas, humanitarian manager at Caritas Australia, said in a press release on Jan. 10.

Advertisement

Blinken said RSF and RSF-allied militia had targeted fleeing civilians, murdering innocent people escaping conflict, and prevented remaining civilians from accessing lifesaving supplies.

"Based on this information, I have now concluded that members of the RSF and allied militias have committed genocide in Sudan," he said.

At the same time, Blinken said the fact that the U.S. issued sanctions for only one party in the conflict doesn't mean support for the other.

"Both belligerents bear the responsibility for the violence and suffering in Sudan and the lack of legitimacy to govern future peaceful Sudan," he said.

The U.S. declaration came as the Sudanese bishops continued to reach out to the international community to use their influence and end the fighting in Sudan. They repeatedly urged the world that addressing the humanitarian situation in the northeast African country cannot wait for "tomorrow."

Since April 15, 2023, when the war between the RSF, led by Dagalo, and the Sudan Armed Forces, or SAF, under Gen. Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan, broke out, churches and church leaders have been targeted — one of the reasons why commenting on the genocide declaration may be sensitive.

In November, Bishop Yunan Tombe Trille Kuku Andali of El Obeid narrowly escaped execution after he was beaten up by opposing militaries.

Earlier in August, the army and the General Intelligence Service evacuated five Italian nuns, a priest and 20 South Sudanese nationals who had been trapped in Khartoum, the capital, for a year and four months.

In June, Andali had told the other bishops that there was not even a clue as to how dialogue could bring hope for the Sudanese, and this seems to still be the case as the genocide declaration is being called.

First Sudan genocide was declared in the early 2000s in the midst of over a decade-long civil war between the northern and southern regions of Sudan.

The northern region, centered on the capital of Khartoum, was predominantly made up of Muslims who are ethnically Arab, while groups of Christians and faithful of African traditional religions lived in the south.

To impose Gen. Omar al-Bashir's plan to create a more Islamic-based government, the Sudanese armed forces and the Arab militia known as the Janjaweed, or men on horseback, were conducting massacres, eventually called genocide, in which between 2003 and 2005, 200,000 were killed, women and girls raped and mutilated and infants sentenced to death in non-Arab villages.

The two-decade-long civil war that had resulted in more than 2 million deaths and 4 million displaced persons in the south — and ended only in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. In 2011, South Sudan gained independence from Sudan.

The current war is a consequence of clashes between internal Sudanese factions.