



How The World's Newest Country Went Awry

South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

John Prendergast
March 2017



How The World's Newest Country Went Awry

South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

By John Prendergast
March 2017

Introduction

War has been hell for South Sudan's people, but it has been very lucrative for the country's leaders and commercial collaborators, South Sudan's war profiteers. South Sudan has been torn apart by three wars in the last 60 years. Two and a half to three million people have perished as a result of these wars.¹ This legacy has finally caught up to the world's newest country, as the United Nations declared a full-blown famine in February 2017,² a rare declaration that the U.N. hadn't made for any part of the world since 2011, and multiple U.N. officials have asserted that South Sudan stands on the brink of genocide.³

As the former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. said in one of her last addresses to the Security Council, "*The people within the UN system whose job it is to sound the alarm have sounded it. History is going to show what each of us did, where each of us stood, when the sirens were blaring...*"⁴

The patterns of governance and causes of conflict in South Sudan today have not really changed much since Sudan's independence in 1956, at which time South Sudan was still part of the larger nation of Sudan, as South Sudan only became its own independent state in 2011. The history of conflict and mass atrocities in Sudan and South Sudan is driven in large part by unchecked greed, manifesting itself primarily in the accumulation of wealth and power by the country's leaders. Ethnicity has been used as the main mobilizer for organized violence, which has resulted in genocidal violence in Darfur and the Nuba Mountains in Sudan, and in parts of South Sudan even during the North-South War. The ultimate prize is control of a kleptocratic, winner-take-all state with institutions that have been hijacked by government officials and their commercial collaborators for the purposes of self-enrichment and brutal repression of dissent.

Corruption isn't an anomaly within the system; it is the system itself, the very purpose of the state.⁵

In 2013, the two main competing kleptocratic factions of South Sudan's ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) that had unified for the purposes of securing the independence of the country in 2011

1 [The Enough Project](http://TheEnoughProject.org) • enoughproject.org
How The World's Newest Country Went Awry:
South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

had another falling-out, plunging the country back into war, mass hunger, and the brink of state collapse. There has been total impunity for the resource theft, child soldier recruitment, abductions, mass rape, bombing of civilian targets, and the obstruction of humanitarian aid.



Refugees in Agok, on the border of Sudan and South Sudan, May 2011. Photo: Tim Freccia/Enough Project

How did South Sudan get to this point?

The area that is now independent South Sudan has been exploited by outsiders and their internal collaborators for centuries, thus warping its historical evolution. Those who have exploited the people and resources of the south developed different markets of corruption and exploitation but with striking similarities and similar consequences: brutal, protracted wars.

While modern-day Sudan was under Turco-Egyptian rule in the 1800s, the Turks, Egyptians, and the Arab Sudanese traders brought enslaved people, ivory, and ostrich feathers out of the south. This market of exploitation was characterized by brutality toward local populations and fierce competition among the exploiters. Egyptian, European, and local Sudanese merchants later dominated what had been the Turco-Egyptian slave trade. Under Anglo-Egyptian rule for the first half of the 1900s, slavery was banned but continued illegally and secretly in some parts of the country. Many areas of the south, however, received little attention during this time—beyond intervention to suppress uprisings or rebellions

The area that is now independent South Sudan has been exploited by outsiders and their internal collaborators for centuries.

2 The Enough Project • enoughproject.org

How The World's Newest Country Went Awry:
South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

against the colonial authorities. New actors and institutions emerged in reaction to the particular needs of the British colonial administration. British policies of isolation meant unequal economic development that favored certain parts of the north while neglecting the south, sowing further resentment.

Some of the exploiters and objects of exploitation in southern Sudan changed over time, but the practices and consequences were the same. Some of those most involved in exploiting the people and resources of the territory of southern Sudan were foreigners. Many others, however, were local and ultimately became the leaders of an independent Sudan that continued the exploitation that had developed during foreign rule. Throughout the history of South Sudan, each central authority that exercised the power to root out one form of exploitation became a tool for an even more troubling form of exploitation.

These are some of the most notable combinations of external and internal exploitation:

- Slave-raiding by the Egyptians and northern Sudanese merchants
- Colonization
- Gold extraction
- Exploitation stemming from Cold War competition between the United States and the former Soviet Union
- Nile River domination by the Egyptians
- Oil exploitation and destructive war tactics by leaders in Khartoum
- Exploitation by oil companies
- Natural resource exploitation and destructive war tactics by leaders in Juba

The history of any war is very complex, and it is too simple to overly focus on external causes. There are, of course, many unique internal factors that have fueled conflict in South Sudan:

- Pastoralism—preemptive strikes; paranoia over adversaries' plots; constantly shifting alliances; fear of losing everything in a single attack; the ever-present threat of violence.
- "Our turn to eat"—throughout Africa's post-colonial history, the first generation of liberation war heroes have felt entitled in many places to maximize personal benefits after years or decades of sacrifice.
- The carousel—the same leaders who dominated the long years of rebellion are in charge, with no room made for new faces or ideas.
- Absolute power corrupts absolutely—no checks and balances, weak institutions.

Southerners were given only 6 out of 800 civil service positions when colonial rule ended in Sudan.⁶ After having been colonized by the Egyptians and the British, upon independence in 1956 southerners were newly colonized by northern Sudanese leaders.

Scramble for South Sudan's resources

South Sudan has been at the epicenter of the scramble for Africa's resources, its leaders contributing to a veritable "looting machine," as the *Financial Times'* Tom Burgis called it. South Sudan may be one of the poorest countries in the world per capita, but it is fabulously wealthy resource-wise: oil, gold, livestock (which are sources of wealth, savings, status, and social standing), the Nile River, and land. The favored tactic for imposing will and exploiting resources throughout this history has been the recruitment and use of ethnic-based militias conducting scorched-earth operations.

3 The Enough Project • enoughproject.org

How The World's Newest Country Went Awry:

South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

Resources have been at the center of war and state violence in the territory comprising present-day South Sudan.

Resources have been at the center of war and state violence in the territory comprising present-day South Sudan. In 1983, at the outset of the second North-South war, the first two targets of the southern opposition Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) forces were the Chevron oil installations and the Jonglei Canal rig, which was digging a canal to increase water flow to Egypt. Some of the worst violence occurred during the 1990s as the Khartoum government and its allied ethnic-based militias

laid waste to the oilfield areas run by Chinese, Canadian, and Swedish oil companies in strategic population-clearing operations to repress resistance to oil development. These oilfields had been developed with heavy investment by Chinese, Malaysian, Swedish, and Canadian oil companies, some of which were accused of complicity with Bashir's regime in the pacification efforts. Oil exploitation was ultimately unlocked primarily by the deal between the Khartoum government and militias loyal to Riek Machar. Against all odds, in the middle of a war zone, the Khartoum government's oil consortium started pumping oil in 1999.

Comparative historical context

Many African countries became independent states in the past 50 to 60 years. South Sudan is five years old as an independent state. Sudan, the country from which it split five years ago, is 60. At the age of 60, the United States had a transatlantic slave trade fueling an economic boom, was ethnically clearing and cleansing its Native American populations, and had not yet fought its own civil war, one of the deadliest in per capita terms in the history of the world. Europe has an even deadlier history of state formation, marked by five centuries of border-defining conflict and genocide.

South Sudan and more broadly Africa is not so wildly different from the United States and Europe. Wars of state formation are just occurring later in Africa (because of colonialism) and with deadlier and more plentiful weapons, many of which are produced in countries with permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council. Well over half of the countries that emerge from wars eventually go back to war, especially when root causes remain unaddressed, so again South Sudan is not exceptional.



Children in Juba during South Sudan's independence celebrations, July 2011.
Photo: UN Photo/Paul Banks

Competing kleptocratic factions

When a peace deal was struck in 2005 ending the North-South war, the southerners were given authority over an interim administration in the southern third of the country, the part that would vote in an independence referendum six years later, in 2011. During that interim period, the two competing kleptocratic southern factions led by President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar had their own

4 The Enough Project • enoughproject.org

How The World's Newest Country Went Awry:
South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

ethnic militias, corruption schemes, and patronage networks, and neither side was genuinely interested in building democratic institutions, good governance, transparency, service delivery, women's empowerment, or economic development. Instead, the focus was on looting. The loyalties of different armed leaders and their fighters in different regions had to be purchased—or temporarily leased—to build a consolidated southern army and ensure a decisive vote for independence in 2011, including by those armed leaders who might have been inclined to oppose the separation and align with Khartoum against other southerners. The financial support for a consolidated army composed of former factions whose loyalties had been purchased continued for a time. Then the price of continued loyalty shifted with new security conditions in 2012 and less revenue from oil. When the supply of money fell, the demand for money rose, and competition among kleptocratic armed leaders in South Sudan grew more intensely violent.⁷

As the interim southern administration established its system of managing finances, leaders went from managing a budget of about \$100,000 to managing a budget of more than \$1.5 billion when the oil-sharing provisions of the peace deal were enacted. An oil-fueled gravy train was created and grew as the budget expanded in the years that followed.⁸ Beyond funding for the army and a few other government functions, nearly everything else appears to have been stolen, as there was no transparency with the oil income and where it went. When the independent state was established in 2011, looting increased. The temporarily unified armed factions consolidated power together and excluded other groups—political parties, civil society organizations, etc. Transparency International's 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks South Sudan 175 out of 176 countries.⁹

The horrors of war have
not deterred South
Sudan's leaders from
continuing to milk the
country's system.

A den of thieves had been created. The thieves had a falling out, first politically, then with open war in 2013, a scant two years after independence. The oil money and violence kept the system in place, and when one faction ejected the other faction from the government, thus removing that group from the feeding trough, they had no choice but to try to fight their way back into power. The abundance of resources and institutional weaknesses led to competitive looting and political recklessness, the height of which being the Juba government's decision to shut down oil production in 2012 over a dispute with Sudan over oil transit fees. This shutdown disrupted the established patterns of corruption, and once the pie had shrunk dramatically, the country plunged back into conflict. These competing armed factions have committed horrible atrocities over the past couple of years as they violently pursue the spoils of a hijacked and perverted state. The horrors of war, however, have not deterred the leaders from continuing to milk the country's system, as the initial report by The Sentry in 2016 demonstrated.¹⁰

Corrupt officials and their accomplices have found further ways to profit from war and instability. These are the war profiteers that fuel endless cycles of conflict.

African conflict context

Again, South Sudan is not wildly different here. The leading accelerator of most African conflict is greed-fueled kleptocracy in which state institutions have been hijacked for personal enrichment by a small group of leaders and their commercial collaborators internally and internationally, often using extreme violence.

The networks are usually composed of leading government officials, generals, businessmen, foreign investors, banks, oil and mining company representatives, money transfer entities, and others connected to the international financial system. They disempower and destroy the viability of those state institutions because they want to avoid both accountability and transparency, and they brutally suppress all forms of dissent and independent expression or political activity.

There is a concentration and abuse of power and wealth by a small elite network which controls all revenue streams. Political power is leveraged to secure wealth, primarily through natural resource exploitation, military spending overruns, contract and procurement fraud, and money laundering. Corruption becomes the lifeblood of politics. The state assets that are not diverted into private pockets are invested in repressive security entities, leaving most investment and social service delivery to international donors and local civil society. The resulting free-for-all is abetted by total impunity, with no checks and balances and little transparency.

The big prize

The competing kleptocratic factions are fighting over a lucrative prize: control of the state, which in turn brings control over oil and other natural resource revenues, patronage networks, some foreign aid, massive corruption opportunities, immunity from prosecution and accountability, control over the army and other security organs, the ability to control or manipulate banks and foreign exchange, the opportunity to manipulate government contracts, and the chance to dominate the commercial sector. Some estimate 90 percent of the resources and revenues stay in or go to Juba, the capital, making it a prize worth fighting over.

Identity as a mobilizer

In most genocides or other mass atrocities, leaders figure out a way to use identities to mobilize citizen sentiment and drive wedges between communities. This is an essential element of a divide-and-conquer war strategy.

In South Sudan (and Sudan), ethnic-based militias are recruited and armed to attack the communities perceived to be opponents. This practice goes back to the British colonial era, when identities were politicized, just as the Belgians did in colonial Rwanda, establishing “tribal authorities.” Even religion was politicized along ethnic lines in South Sudan by the British in the way missionary societies were deployed.

When militias are recruited and mobilized on an ethnic basis, a classic “drain the water to catch the fish” approach ensues, in which the population is targeted and cleared from the area, thus depriving opposition elements of a civilian base from which to recruit, resupply, and find sanctuary. War tactics include village burning, sexual slavery, burning of food stocks, denial of aid access, mass rape, forced conscription of children, and killing of civilians. Mass atrocities become routinized.

In the 1990s, the Sudanese government applied these techniques in its southern regions with great success, clearing the oilfield areas of indigenous populations in order to smooth the way for the development of a multi-billion-dollar oil extraction and pipeline infrastructure. Cattle-raiding and the stripping of other assets are central aspects of recruitment by politicians and generals for such a scorched-

earth strategy, which also exploits the lack of education and opportunity for young men and boys in frontline communities.



Left: Salva Kiir, President of the Republic of South Sudan, addresses the UN General Assembly, September 2011. Photo: UN Photo/Marco Castro. *Right:* Riek Machar, Vice President of the Republic of South Sudan, addresses the UN General Assembly, September 2012. Photo: UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

What results is an alphabet soup of ethnic-based militias full of child soldiers led by local warlords whose allegiances can be variable and whose armed rivalries ensure cycles of revenge killings and attacks that deepen the intercommunal nature of the conflict and split southern political identities along ethnic lines. The national-level version of this split is between President Salva Kiir, a Dinka, and former Vice President Riek Machar, a Nuer, whose original split in 1991 during the North-South war led to a war within a war between Dinka and Nuer communities throughout the south. This devastating conflict resulted in famine and mass atrocities, opened the door to Khartoum's exploitation

of the oil in the south, and deepened divisions that were the same fault lines that evolved and erupted into the war that escalated in late 2013. As the African Union's Commission of Inquiry report concluded, "the ghosts of 1991 have to be confronted."¹¹

Building leverage for peace

In South Sudan today, war crimes pay. There is no accountability for the atrocities and looting of state resources, or for the famine that results. Huge resources have been thrown at the problem for decades. Billions of dollars have supported peacekeeping forces, further billions have underwritten humanitarian assistance, and one peace process after another has tried to break the cycle of violence. But none of these efforts focus on the driving force of the mayhem. There is no attempt to dismantle or counter the kleptocratic networks that benefit more from instability than peace.

The missing ingredient in the international response is the creation of sufficient leverage or influence to shift the calculations of these violent kleptocrats from war to peace, from atrocities to human rights, from mass corruption to good governance. The surest way for the international community to build influence is to hit these "thieves of state"¹² in their wallets. Tying accountability and consequences to credible peace efforts aimed at root causes represents the most promising route to peace. The international community

The international community needs to help make war costlier than peace for South Sudan's leaders.

needs to help make war costlier than peace for the leaders, and change their cost-benefit analysis, creating targeted and personal consequences for corrupt war-mongers. The perverse incentives that reward violence and theft must be reoriented.

Follow the money and transform the conflict

What is needed is a hard-target search for the dirty money, the ill-gotten gains from the last decade of looting. Choking the illicit financial flows of the kleptocrats is the key point of leverage available to the international community, given the vulnerability of stolen assets that are offshored in neighboring countries or around the world in the form of houses, cars, buildings, businesses, and bank accounts. The kleptocrats are not hiding their money under their mattresses. The points of convergence where illicit financial schemes rely on legitimate global financial infrastructure are where policy, enforcement, and regulatory efforts should be focused. Dismantling the financial networks that enable and benefit from atrocities will give peacemaking and peacekeeping efforts a real chance of success.

Choking the illicit financial flows of the kleptocrats is the key point of leverage available to the international community.

True conflict transformation is possible when the war economy is dismantled and when marginalized communities are able to participate through freedom of assembly and speech for political parties and civil society groups. Conflict can be transformed when hijacked governing institutions—first and foremost the military, which is simply a mishmash of ethnic militias—are reformed. Establishing measures of accountability is key. There must be financial accountability for the stolen assets; legal accountability for crimes against humanity; and political accountability which could exclude those responsible for the worst abuses from a future government.

A new approach to countering atrocities and promoting peace

The most promising policy approach would combine creative anti-money laundering measures with targeted sanctions aimed at kleptocratic networks, the combination of which would be robustly enforced with the objective of not just freezing a few assets, but rather freezing those willing to commit mass atrocities out of the international financial system altogether.

Because of the dominance of dollar-denominated transactions internationally, this becomes a realistic objective, as banks do not want to be perceived to be laundering money for anyone given the extreme repercussions for them if they are perceived to be laundering money for terrorists. It suddenly becomes a core financial self-interest for banks to enforce measures that would be taken in support of human rights.

This is revolutionary, because it would suddenly give international policymakers and diplomats a major point of leverage to impact the calculations of those willing to commit mass atrocities to maintain or gain power.

Finding hope

8 The Enough Project • enoughproject.org

How The World's Newest Country Went Awry:
South Sudan's war, famine, and potential genocide

Many countries that were written off as hopelessly stuck in conflict and crisis over the last few decades have emerged and built new futures. Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Mozambique, Rwanda, and many others have emerged from deep crisis. Yes, they all have ongoing issues related to either corruption or restricting political space, but they are light years ahead of where they were just decades ago. More than half of the continent of Africa is at peace and growing economically. Many African countries are building democratic institutions and holding credible elections. Remember: Sudan is 60 years old, and South Sudan is five. It isn't an enticing message, but patience and the proper investments can lead to a turnaround there too.

America's special relationship

For decades, the United States has been connected to Sudan and particularly to its people in the south who fought and died for their right to independence. The United States imposed sanctions on the authoritarian Islamic regime in Khartoum that had ties to terrorists—including Osama bin Laden—and had persecuted the non-Muslim people of southern Sudan for years. The United States has provided billions of dollars in humanitarian aid to keep southern Sudanese people alive. The United States played a crucial role in ending the North-South war and in ensuring that the independence referendum was held on time and peacefully, leading to one of the most joyous moments in African history during the last 20 years when South Sudan finally became an independent country.

But the joy was short-lived, and even while the United States was the largest donor trying to build up the governing institutions of the world's newest state, South Sudan descended back into war. Again, the United States has also been the leading donor to the humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts, and the United States has strongly supported the African-led peace process.

Over the years, special relationships have been forged between American and South Sudanese churches, as well as between American host communities and the Lost Boys and Girls who have resettled throughout the United States. Ultimately, these U.S. investments have created real connections with the South Sudanese population, which expects and hopes that the United States can lead international efforts to alter the deadly status quo.

Given the dominant position of the United States in the international financial system, and the extreme vulnerability to which the assets of South Sudan's kleptocrats are exposed within that system, the United States is uniquely positioned to help alter the incentives for South Sudan's leaders away from grand corruption and war, and to give peace a chance in that embattled and long-suffering land.

South Sudanese leadership for the long road ahead

There are a number of internal conflicts within the broader war in South Sudan that will have to be resolved. External and internal change agents can work together to reform the kleptocratic system, build institutions of accountability, and create new incentives for better governance. Ultimately, South Sudanese people will drive reform and determine their future. From the outside, the United States, Europe, the United Nations, the African Union, and other concerned actors around the world can provide support and solidarity to the efforts of South Sudanese people who are on the front lines of efforts to build peace, good governance, and accountability.

However, in many cases it is the policies of external actors (countries, companies, banks, arms providers) that help provide a great deal of the fuel for the fires that burn in South Sudan and other war-torn African states. Therefore, some of the most meaningful actions that can be taken are focused on countering negative policies and commercial arrangements that originate from outside South Sudan and dramatically disadvantage South Sudan's civilian population.

War criminals and their international collaborators should pay a price for destroying so much of the hope that accompanied South Sudan's birth as an independent nation a mere five years ago. It's not too late for that hope to be restored.

Endnotes

¹ Since Sudan's independence in 1956, a series of brutal governments based in Khartoum have treated their opponents and the people in the country's peripheral regions in ways that have stoked violent conflict. The Khartoum-based governments have violently repressed dissent, excluded people from decision-making, and neglected economic development in most of the country. Following Sudan's independence, protests and resistance from the south in reaction to the repressive policies of Khartoum escalated into large-scale conflict. In 1972, following 17 years of brutal war that had claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced more than a million people from their homes in southern Sudan, leaders from Khartoum and the armed opposition of the south signed a peace accord in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This peace agreement did not, however, include provisions for justice and accountability to address the atrocity crimes that had been committed against civilians. As unresolved grievances simmered and grew, internal competition over power and wealth among southern Sudanese leaders soon presented an opportunity for then-President Jaafar Nimeiri to exploit divisions and abrogate the agreement in 1983. Khartoum's conflict with the south reignited and lasted for more than two decades, during which time there was also violent conflict among different armed groups within the south. The North-South war ended with the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which allowed southern Sudanese leaders to govern the southern region for six years. In 2011, a popular referendum took place, and the people of the south voted overwhelmingly for independence.

² U.N. News Centre, "Famine declared in region of South Sudan – UN," February 20, 2017, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=56205#.WLRKezsrJPY>.

³ U.N. Secretary-General, "Note to Correspondents: Media Briefing by Mr. Adama Dieng, United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide on his visit to South Sudan," November 11, 2016, available at <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-11-11/note-correspondents-media-briefing-mr-adama-dieng-united>; Ban Ki-moon, "The world has betrayed South Sudan," *Newsweek*, December 16, 2016, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/ban-ki-moon-south-sudan-people-betrayed-531932>.

⁴ U.S. Mission to the United Nations, "Remarks at a UN Security Council Briefing on the Situation in South Sudan," December 19, 2016, available at <https://2009-2017-usun.state.gov/remarks/7616>.

⁵ Our analysis has been informed by the work on corruption and instability led by Sarah Chayes at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. See Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015); Sarah Chayes, "Characteristics and Causes of Global Corruption," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 30, 2015, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/09/30/interview-sarah-chayes/iil5>; Working Group on Security and Corruption and Sarah Chayes, "Corruption: The Unrecognized Threat to International Security," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 6, 2014, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/06/corruption-unrecognized-threat-to-international-security/hcts>.

⁶ Issam AW Mohamed, *Oil and Development in the New South Sudan Nation* (2013): p. 24; Robert O. Collins, *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): p. 65.

⁷ Enough's in-depth research and report on this subject is forthcoming and will be published in early 2017.

⁸ World Bank, "Sudan Public Expenditure Review," p. vi, para. 13 (Washington: December 2007), available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/7672/418400SD.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁹ Transparency International, "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016," January 25, 2017, available at http://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016.

¹⁰ The Sentry, "War Crimes Shouldn't Pay: Stopping the looting and destruction in South Sudan" (Washington: September 2016), available at <https://thesentry.org/reports/warcrimesshouldntpay/>.

¹¹ African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan, "Final Report of the African Union Commission of Inquiry on South Sudan," p. 19, para 43, dated October 15 2014, released publicly October 27, 2015, available at <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/auciss.final.report.pdf>.

¹² Phrase used by Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015).