



South Sudan

Peace has been elusive in South Sudan, which became the world's newest country in 2011. The civil war that erupted there in late 2013 featured widespread sexual violence, mass killings, and other atrocities. It displaced over a third of the population, creating what is still Africa's largest refugee crisis. More than two million people who fled to neighboring countries remain refugees. Another two million are displaced internally. By one study, nearly 400,000 died as a result of the war before the latest peace deal was signed in 2018. The ongoing crisis has prompted congressional action, including, most recently, S.Res. 473 and S.Res. 380.

Whether the peace deal ended the war is debated. A ceasefire between the main signatories has largely held, but gains under the agreement are tenuous, and an insurgency in the southern Equatoria region continues. Communal violence, often tied to national political rivalries, has surged. The protracted humanitarian crisis is worsening: over two-thirds of the population—almost 9 million people, half of them children—are estimated to need aid. Facing multiple shocks and recurrent violence, much of the population have exhausted local coping mechanisms. Facing competing donor funding priorities and rising costs, aid agencies have had to reduce food aid, despite unprecedented need.

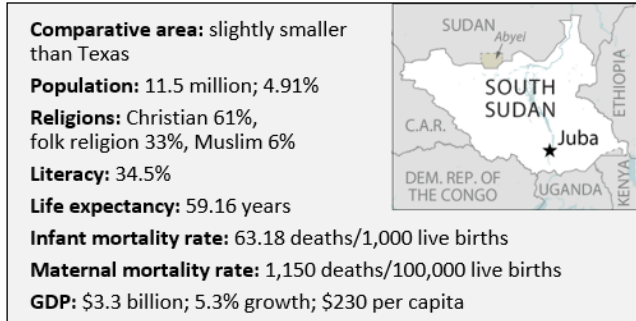
The International Crisis Group says the country is “failing,” and warns that conflict will continue until its leaders agree to broaden the peace deal and devolve power more widely. UN experts assess that “rather than breaking the violent cycle of elite political bargaining,” the deal has become part of it. “South Sudan is at a tipping point,” UN human rights monitors caution. Elections have not been held since independence, and plans for polls in 2023 risk fueling polarization. South Sudan ranks at the bottom of Freedom House's Global Freedom index, and there is little space for dissent. Security forces have “mutilated, tortured, beat, and harassed political opponents, journalists, and human rights workers,” per the State Department, and killed government critics in politically motivated reprisals. The top UN official in South Sudan told the UN Security Council in June that the window for meeting key benchmarks in the transitional period—scheduled to end in February 2023—is closing.

The UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), currently the world's largest UN peacekeeping mission, remains focused on protecting civilians, facilitating aid delivery, monitoring abuses, and supporting implementation of the peace deal.

Background and Context

South Sudan's independence followed a vote for secession, after almost 40 years of rebellion against Sudan's government. That war inhibited the development of basic infrastructure, human capital, and formal institutions in the south. Humanitarian needs persisted after independence, despite rich natural resources, including oil fields that once generated 75% of Sudan's oil production. South Sudan's leaders, former rebels, had little experience in governing, and corruption slowed post-war recovery and development.

Figure 1. South Sudan Key Facts



Source: CRS map. Facts from CIA and IMF reference databases.

South Sudan's subsequent conflict reflected tensions among leaders and ethnic groups that date back to Sudan's civil war. While that conflict is often described as a north-south struggle, infighting among southern rebel commanders in the 1990s nearly derailed the south's self-determination bid. Leaders in the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/ SPLA) competing for power mobilized supporters along ethnic lines. All sides committed atrocities. Sudan's government fueled SPLM divisions by financing breakaway factions. The factions reconciled in the early 2000s, before the government and SPLM signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005.

After the CPA, the SPLM became the south's ruling party. With SPLM leader John Garang's death just months after the CPA signing, the south lost its leading advocate for a united Sudan, and in 2011 over 98% of southern Sudanese voted to secede. The new country was awash in small arms, and local ethnic violence became increasingly politicized. Maneuvering ahead of elections planned for 2015 added to these dynamics. Work on a new constitution stalled, and a 2013 cabinet reshuffle, in which President Salva Kiir dismissed his vice president, Riek Machar, formalized a major fissure in the SPLM. Tensions rose as Machar and others accused Kiir of becoming increasingly dictatorial and erupted in December 2013, as the party convened to vote on whether Kiir would be their presidential candidate.

The Civil War

The political dispute that triggered the crisis in late 2013 was not based on ethnic identity, but it overlapped with existing ethnic and political grievances, spurring targeted ethnic killings and clashes in the capital, and then beyond. What began as a fight among the presidential guard ultimately split the military, largely along ethnic lines. Kiir accused Machar of attempting a coup. Hundreds died in attacks reportedly targeting Machar's Nuer ethnic group in Juba; and revenge attacks against Kiir's Dinka followed. Machar and several senior Nuer military commanders subsequently declared a rebellion. The ensuing war pitted government forces and ethnic militia loyal to Kiir against those aligned with Machar. Uganda provided initial military support to the government and facilitated its arms imports.

Over 200,000 people sought refuge at UN peacekeeping bases. Many who fled to the Protection of Civilians (POC) sites, as they became known, remained there throughout the war. One study assessed that the UN decision to open the sites saved tens of thousands of lives.

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD; an East African regional body) led efforts to mediate among the parties, but they repeatedly broke commitments to cease hostilities. Under threat of an arms embargo and other sanctions, they signed a peace deal in 2015. Kiir called the deal an attack on the country's sovereignty. The parties delayed its implementation until 2016, when they formed a transitional government. Machar returned to Juba as First Vice President and a new cabinet was named. Sporadic clashes continued, though, and violence spread to areas that were previously comparatively stable. The deal collapsed in July 2016, when confrontations between the parties' forces in Juba sparked intense fighting. Machar fled, pursued by Kiir's forces to the Congolese border. He was airlifted to Sudan for medical treatment and later traveled to South Africa, where he was put under de-facto house arrest.

The war resumed. In an apparent effort to maintain the appearance of a unity government, Kiir replaced Machar with his ally-turned-rival Taban Deng. He dismissed opposition cabinet ministers and legislators loyal to Machar, who continued to lead the main armed opposition faction from exile. The insurgency against Kiir's government spread and fractured, with new groups emerging and defections from both sides. The war moved into the southern Equatoria region, spurring a refugee surge into Uganda and affecting vital trade routes. Intercommunal tensions rose, including among the Dinka.

The UN Security Council, which established a targeted sanctions regime in early 2015—under which eight commanders, including the current and former army chiefs, have been designated—imposed an arms embargo in 2018.

The “Revitalized” Peace Deal

Sudan, to the surprise of many, assumed the role of lead mediator in 2018, with former rival Uganda in a supporting role. Kiir, Machar, and several other opposition leaders signed a new deal in September 2018, reportedly under pressure from Sudan, which had struck its own arrangement with Juba over oil revenues. Other groups rejected the deal, saying it failed to address the war's root causes.

A new ceasefire between the signatories brought a lull in fighting, but the parties failed to form a new transitional government until early 2020, and the legislature was not reconstituted until mid-2021. The lack of progress on a key component of the peace deal, the unification of forces into the army, has contributed to insecurity. Peace talks with non-signatory groups have made little progress.

The two main signatories have suffered internal divisions: Kiir faces discontent within his Dinka base and calls for new leadership, while Machar's top commander mounted a revolt against Machar in 2021 and aligned himself with Kiir. The further fragmentation of Machar's SPLM-IO (In Opposition) has fueled new violence. The UN Panel of Experts has described the defection of over a dozen senior IO commanders as part of a government strategy to erode opposition unity and weaken Machar's influence. The Panel has also reported on fresh recruitment by proxy forces.

Atrocities and Prospects for Peace

From the outset of the war, “civilians were not only caught up in the violence, they were directly targeted, often along ethnic lines,” per UNMISS, and UN officials say the attacks on civilians, humanitarians, and UN personnel in the past decade may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan asserts that ethnic cleansing occurred. The warring parties have been implicated in widespread sexual violence. A 2016 attack by government forces on a residence for aid workers in Juba, during which Americans were assaulted and a local journalist killed, highlighted the dangers facing aid workers and other expatriates. Over 130 aid workers, most South Sudanese, have been killed since 2013.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has described government efforts to hold perpetrators of abuses accountable as “few and inadequate.” UN experts say the war has caused a “systemic breakdown of South Sudanese society,” and that “exclusion of competing tribal groups from political power has become a principal aim of many protagonists.” An African Union Commission of Inquiry has emphasized the need for accountability for atrocities. The government agreed to the creation of a hybrid court in the peace deals but has delayed its establishment.

Oil Revenues and State Corruption

South Sudan has Sub-Saharan Africa's third-largest proven oil reserves. The oil sector dominates the economy but lacks transparency. Oil accounts for over a third of GDP, 90% of government revenue, and 95% of exports. (Production is roughly half what it was before the war.) UN reports document extensive state corruption, describing a highly informal system of oil revenue collection that enables the misappropriation of public funds and diversion to patronage networks.

U.S. Policy and Foreign Assistance

The United States, which played a lead role in facilitating the CPA and South Sudan's independence, is the country's largest bilateral aid donor and the penholder on the issue in the UN Security Council. Historically driven by human rights and humanitarian concerns, congressional interest has been prominent in shaping U.S. policy. The civil war and concerns about corruption and security force abuses have strained ties. By some accounts, U.S. engagement has been hampered by diplomatic vacancies and indecision. The new U.S. ambassador, Michael J. Adler, assumes the post after a four-year vacancy at the U.S. embassy in Juba.

The United States has sanctioned over a dozen people under Executive Order 13664, issued by President Obama in 2014. The Trump Administration sanctioned three business associates of senior government officials for corruption and five officials for the killing of human rights activists under authority granted by the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, and imposed sanctions on 15 South Sudanese oil operators in 2018. South Sudan is subject to aid restrictions based on the Child Soldiers Protection Act.

U.S. humanitarian aid totaled over \$700 million in FY2021 and \$585 million to date in FY2022. The Biden Administration's FY2023 budget request includes almost \$147 million in bilateral aid for South Sudan.

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