



A "win" for Dagalo's Rapid Support Force in the current fighting in Sudan could benefit Wagner - the "mining" mercenaries - to the disadvantage of other African nations - and add to Europe's refugee problems, writes Fidel Amakye Owusu.

Just when some West African states are uncomfortable with the presence of Wagner forces in Mali and most likely, Burkina Faso, the group has become a "major" player in the current crisis. It's also active in some Sudan's neighbouring states such as the Central African Republic and Libya.

The Wagner private military company (PMC), arguably an arm of the Russian state, especially given its role in the worst fighting in Ukraine, has shown immense interest in the natural resources in these states. Gold is one resource that has attracted the PMC's interest. Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and to some extent the CAR, are all gold exporters. The first three are major producers.

Apart from its potential to destabilise an already volatile region, the proximity of busy maritime traffic and the Arabian Peninsula to the country must raise significant international security concerns.

A major ramification of the situation in Sudan is its probability of creating a refugee crisis of its own and consequently worsen Europe's refugee problems. This is discussed further below.

How did this situation arise?

Despite all the complex events and processes that have contributed to the current mayhem in the Horn of Africa country, the most outstanding factor has been the determination of former President Omar Al Bashir to personalise power in Sudan.

During the Darfur conflicts in western Sudan in the 2000s, Khartoum had treated the situation as a major national security problem. Huge resources were therefore committed towards the war. Al Bashir had his own plans for waging it.

Instead of using the national army and resource it for the purpose, he created a militia of local fighters and loyalists. With this, the long time ruler had personalised the conflict and put it under his direct control. The regular forces had no command over these forces. That's the genesis of Rapid Support Forces (RSF)

The RSF is reported to have committed abuses and war crimes that included massacres during the war. A war economy was created out of Darfur where Al- Bashir allowed the RSF leadership, especially its current commander, to control mining and agricultural interest that empowered the militia.

When Sudan decided to fight on the side of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, Al Bashir used RSF instead of regular forces. This gave the RSF commander leverage among Gulf powers.

Unfortunately for Bashir, the RSF participated in the coup that ousted his government in 2019. It joined the transition government and suppressed pro-democracy protests. The current conflict is due to the group's determination to be independent from the Sudanese army and control resources.

Across Africa, many leaders have over the time build "private" armies and elite forces for their personal interest. These forces are often better equipped than the regular forces.

For this trend to stop, there must be efforts towards building strong institutions and a push by the masses for democracy.

After the ousting of Omar Al Bashir by the military and Dagalo-led RSF in 2019, the jostling for power between the two factions commenced. Knowing that he was leading a sub-state

institution that was not as legitimate as the regular army, Dagalo made moves to create allies beyond the borders of Sudan.

He had overtly supported the Saudi-led coalition in the war in Yemen. Notably, under al-Bashir, Wagner was invited into Sudan for multiple roles including protection of mines and general security support. Post-al Bashir, Dagalo had become a natural ally and perhaps client to Wagner.

Having mining interests of their own, the RSF and its leader found natural alliance with resource- hungry Wagner. The PMC sees itself as faring better under a Dagalo controlled Sudan. It likely sees other opposing interests being favoured by the Generals of the regular army should Degalo fail.

If Dagalo should come out victorious or stronger from the current crisis, Wagner could make Sudan a strategic base from where its interest in neighbouring states could be pursued.

So far, apart from Libya, most of the countries in which Wagner is active are landlocked. A firm presence in Sudan would give it a reliable sea port – not too far from Russia via the Black Sea – to expand its operations. A win for Dagalo could mean Wagner having it way in Sudan and the region.

In the meantime the regular army seems to be in firm control of the skies. This notwithstanding, continued hostilities would benefit no one in the long-term. When states fail, every one – no matter the level of armaments – becomes unsafe. Regional and international actors must act quickly before things get out of hand. Western media seems to be focussing on their nationals caught in the country. The issues are bigger than this, and it would be good for them to address them.

Why should Europe worry?

Sudan has a population of about 40 million which is youthful, like much of Africa. This makes any conflict situations potential causes of internal displacements. In many cases, internally

displaced persons tend to have the appetite to migrate outside the conflict state. When they are predominantly youth, it is more likely they will.

Even before the current conflagration in Sudan, the majority of the population was already facing socio-economic challenges that are by themselves push factors to migration. Many able-bodied youths who face unemployment and cannot afford the basic necessities of life will risk almost anything to leave the country.

Libyaâ€”a major transit point for African refugees trying to reach Southern Europeâ€”shares a direct overland border with Sudan. Already, Sudan's north-eastern corridor to Libya is a busy migration route for East African migrants trying to reach Europe.

If Eritrean, Ethiopians and other East African including Sudanese have used this corridor for decades, youth trying to flee the current mayhem will know what to do. The accessibility to Libya literally translates into seeing more refugees crossing the Mediterranean to reach Southern Europeâ€”yes Lampedusa could have more guests.

With European government often divided by questions related to refugees from Africa and looking for ways to mitigate them, peace in Sudan cannot be the business of Africans alone. Brussels must therefore support regional actors who are pursuing peace in Sudan to do so timeously and effectively. While Africans lead in finding solutions, global actors have roles to play. Europe's commitment to peace will benefit the two continents.

Most importantly, short term peace should not just be the goal of such efforts. Cease fires will not better the living conditions of the ordinary person in Sudan. For long term stability, local stake holders must be supported to institutionalize democratic governance in Sudan. The people will be better off if they allowed to participate in decisions that affect their lives.

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