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Commentary Today

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The rise of foreign militias and mercenaries in Sudan crisis: implications for Horn of Africa security

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The ongoing power struggle between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) commanded by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo continues to have far-reaching implications for both Sudan and the broader Horn of Africa (HoA) region. The conflict has led to over 800 people in casualties and a million others displaced. Despite signing of a one-week ceasefire in Saudi Arabia between the two warring parties on 20th May 2023, fighting continues in various parts of the capital, Khartoum.

A significant development in the crisis has been the increasing involvement of foreign militia and mercenaries. According to the United Nations (UN) special representative to Sudan, Volker Perthes, armed militias and mercenaries from Niger, Chad, and Mali are being recruited to join the fight between the two forces. Equally, Gen al-Burhan has accused the RSF of recruiting militias from Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, and Niger. Further, the presence of international mercenaries has complicated the crisis. For instance, the Russian mercenary group, Wagner, has been arming the RSF. Given the geostrategic

importance of Sudan, which lies at the intersection of HoA, the Sahel and the Arab world, recruiting foreign militias and mercenaries threatens regional security and stability.

Since 1980, successive governments in Sudan have used foreign militias and mercenaries to suppress internal conflicts, despite their contribution to the protracted armed conflicts. For instance, in the 2003-2005 Darfur conflict, former Sudanese president Omar Al-Bashir was accused of using foreign mercenaries associated with the Janjaweed militia to quash the conflict. Consequently, it led to actions of mass atrocities such as genocide and crimes against humanity. Nonetheless, the government continued using the Janjaweed militia, which became a paramilitary group known as the RSF in 2013. Through government support, it gained power and influence, controlling vast resources such as gold mines. After the war broke out in Sudan on 15th April, 2023, the RSF began mobilizing Arab militias from neighboring countries such as Libya, Niger, and CAR.



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To counter the RSF strategies, SAF has also sought military support from states such as Egypt, leading to increased tensions.

The presence of foreign militias in Sudan will increase the demand for small arms and weapons, aggravating their proliferation across the Sahel and HoA region. This has far-reaching consequences as these weapons could fuel security threats in the region, such as armed conflicts and terrorism. There are reports that both warring groups have received weapons from their allies. A case in point is that the Wagner Russian mercenary group has supplied weapons to RSF and foreign militias allied with them. This has been through proxies such as the CAR and the Eastern Libyan commander, Khalifa Haftar. The Russian group has provided military backing to RSF in exchange for Russian access to Sudan's gold sector. Possession of these arms by foreign militias allied to RSF poses a threat to the HoA as they may be trafficked across Sudan porous borders to neighbouring countries such as South Sudan and Ethiopia which have recently experienced political instability. This comes in the wake of renewed regional efforts to curb the flow of small arms in the HoA and Great Lakes region. For instance, on 16th May, 2023, UN and African states met in Kenya to discuss ways of curbing the menace.

Foreign militias and mercenaries will exacerbate the humanitarian situation in the HoA region as they primarily operate under no legal obligation. Targeting civilians as human shields and sources of their war financing and sustenance by foreign militia will lead to a rise in refugees in the Sahel and HoA regions, reigniting conflicts and competition



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over resources. More than 815,000 people are bound to flee Sudan. These include 580,000 from Sudan and 235,000 from neighboring states such as Ethiopia, South Sudan and Chad, who had settled in Sudan. Over 700,000 people have been internally displaced and nearly 200,000 have fled to neighboring countries. Equally, increased crimes and lootings in areas controlled by these militias has disrupted access to humanitarian aid for food, fuel, and water. It has been established that more than 17,000 metric tonnes of food stored in World Food Programme facilities in Sudan had been looted, resulting in about \$13 million in losses.

In addition, the fluid movement of militias and mercenaries across porous state borders in the HoA and the Sahel complicates the war on terrorism and violent extremism in the regions. The AL Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the Sahel and Al-Shabaab in the HoA will benefit from increased cross-border militias, arms proliferation, population militarization, and general regional fragility. This will backtrack gains made in the fight against these extremist groups.

The use of foreign militia in Sudan also risks emboldening other armed groups within the region, creating new conflict dynamics. Sudanese militias have cross-border identities and kinship ties with communities across the Sahel and HoA. For instance, the RSF has kinship ties with Chad, Libya, and CAR militias. As a result, the fighting in Sudan could spur tribal conflicts across the neighboring states, destabilizing them.





In conclusion, it is important to note that the role of foreign militia and mercenaries in the Sudan crisis and its impact on the HoA region is complex and multifaceted. Their participation carries the risk of destabilizing Sudan, which is already in a delicate situation, leading to its failed status. This outcome would have dire consequences on the stability of her neighbors. Therefore, a comprehensive and coordinated approach involving international and regional stakeholders is necessary to address

these challenges. With the support of the African Union, international partners such as the UN should impose an arms embargo on actors supporting activities of foreign militias and mercenaries operating in Sudan. Moreover, regional bodies, such as Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), should closely work with neighboring Sudan states to monitor and deter activities of foreign militia through enhanced interstate cooperation.

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