

Establishment of a high-level panel an opportunity for reinvigorating AU's role on Sudan

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The [ministerial meeting](#) of the Peace and Security Council (PSC), [AU's standing peace and security decision-making body](#), decided for the establishment of an AU dedicated mechanism for peace in Sudan. The communiqué of the session tasked the Chairperson of the AU Commission 'to set up a High-Level Ad hoc Panel on Sudan, that will work with all the Sudanese stakeholders including women and the youth, to ensure an all-inclusive process towards...civilian-led political transition'.

Such a dedicated mechanism, initially proposed by President Yoweri Museveni during [the heads of state and government session of the PSC on 27 May](#), will replace the existing arrangement that failed to facilitate the effective role of the AU in the search for ending the war in Sudan. Provided that the panel is constituted promptly and with members that have the gravitas and credibility, it will enable the AU to take its rightful place in dealing with this brutal war.

This decision also comes at a time when some encouraging developments are emerging in the diplomatic scene with respect to the peace effort in Sudan. Major among these is [the appointment](#) by UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, of Ramtane Lamamra as his Envoy for Sudan. The regional body, Inter-Governmental Authority on Sudan (IGAD), also seemed to

have overcome a major factor that stalled its role, the rejection by Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) (the internationally recognized authority of Sudan) of Kenya's role as Chairperson of the IGAD Quartet constituted to facilitate the peace process in Sudan.

Following a meeting held in Nairobi Kenya on 13 November, Kenya's President, William Ruto and SAF's chief and the head of Sudan's Sovereign Council, Abdel-Fattah Al Burhan, agreed on the need to speed up the Jeddah talks on ceasefire and to this end convene an IGAD summit. This summit is now scheduled to be held on 9 December 2023.

The urgency of an effective architecture for giving the peace-making effort in Sudan a fighting chance for success cannot be overemphasized. As the brutal war between the SAF and the paramilitary, Rapid Support Forces (RSF), that broke out on 15 April 2023 fast approaches its eighth month, every passing day brings the grim prospect of this brutal war becoming protracted, hence more difficult for speedy resolution.

Its geographic spread continues to expand. The pattern of mobilization of support and deployment of violence is aggravating the ethnic profile of the war. The damage being inflicted on the social, institutional and physical infrastructure of the state and the economy shows no abating.

The disregard of conflict parties to the rules of war and their resort to indiscriminate use of violence have rendered Sudan to be the world's fast growing humanitarian crisis. A [statement](#) by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) indicates that children are bearing the 'heaviest brunt of the violence' with a recorded 3 million children fleeing the violence in search of safety, food, shelter and health care. According to the UN agency, this figure makes Sudan the largest child displacement crisis in the world. UN's humanitarian chief, Martin Griffiths, warned that [War and hunger could destroy Sudan](#). In a statement he issued on 25

August 2023, Griffiths put the world on notice that the 'war in Sudan is fuelling a humanitarian emergency of epic proportions' and 'now threatens to consume the entire country.'

With RSF deepening its grip in Darfur and Khartoum and the SAF establishing its seat in Port Sudan, the fragmentation of the country similar to what Libya experienced is no longer a future scenario. All of these conditions stand to deepen the involvement of various state and non-state actors in the region and beyond. This entrenching downward spiral entails huge peril for not just Sudan itself but for international peace and security in the wider region as well.

What is most shocking about this war is not simply the geographic space where it is taking place and its implication for Sudan and the region. Nor are the scale of the violence, the mass atrocities and the humanitarian emergency ensuing from it. Indeed, some of these features of this war echoes the atrocious Darfur conflict of two decades earlier.

What is most shocking more than anything else is the absence of the kind of robust regional and international diplomatic mobilization that was on full display during the earlier Darfur war. While not unique to Sudan, today's brutal war in Sudan epitomizes the colossal consequences of the current [breakdown of peace and security diplomacy](#) both continentally and at the international levels.

Notwithstanding the continuing acts of violence being inflicted on the civilian population involving incidents of mass atrocities including acts amounting to those prohibited under Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act, the PSC and the AU in general did not go beyond expression of concern and condemnation of breaches of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

That the AU has been unable to take tangible measures & a

functional dedicated mediation structure are exposing it to legitimate charges of falling back to the old politics of indifference to mass atrocities that was characteristic of the now defunct its predecessor the Organization of African Unity. Sudanese and others are thus rightly asking whether the AU is betraying its founding commitment to the principle of non-indifference to the plight of people caught up in atrocious conflicts on the continent.

When the war broke out, the AU took a lead position. The PSC convened a day after the outbreak of the war. The Chairperson of the AU Commission mobilized an international ministerial meeting. AU also established an international platform involving all regional and international actors and a Core Group of major actors. AU's lead role ended there. The multiplicity of role players, lack of clear leadership and the destruction from other multiple roles of those expected to mobilize sustained engagement hobbled AU's engagement on this file.

Unable to bridge the widening gulf between peoples' expectation of it and its actual delivery, AU run into a serious legitimacy crisis in its response to the raging war in Sudan. President Museveni's proposal for the establishment of a dedicated mechanism taking the form of a high-level facilitator or panel of facilitators, during the PSC summit level meeting on Sudan held on 27 May 2023, did not find its way into the outcome document. There was no convening of the Core Group since June. When the US-Saudi led Jeddah process reconvened in late October – early November with expanded participation, AU's participation was delegated to the Executive Secretary of IGAD, who participated as co-facilitator on behalf **also** of the AU.

Coming against such a chequered background, the ministerial decision for the establishment of a high-level panel presents the AU with an opportunity to regain credibility and uphold its principle of non-indifference. It allows it to be equipped

with a dedicated mechanism that operates on a full-time basis on the search for finding a solution to the war in Sudan. For this, speed in acting on the decision and the credibility, impartiality and gravitas of the members of the high-level panel are crucial. Not any less significant is the identification of members other than those who are not assigned other roles in the AU system and hence can put their full attention and effort on the situation in Sudan.

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