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**The conflict in South Sudan, explained**

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Widespread ethnic cleansing, burning villages, looming starvation, and gang rape “so prevalent that it’s become ‘normal.’” This is what UN experts found when they took a 10-day trip to the African country of South Sudan in late November.

Since civil war broke out there in December 2013, as many as 50,000 people have been killed. More than 2.3 million people have been forced to flee their homes. Around 6 million people are currently at risk of going hungry, and 70 percent of schools have been closed due to the fighting.

So what is the conflict actually about? Who is fighting whom, and why? And does the US — which did more than any other country to help South Sudan win its independence — have any realistic way of stopping the carnage?

**An old style of war comes to the world’s newest country**

Bloodshed is nothing new for South Sudan, which didn’t gain its independence from the north until 2011. For 22 years, a brutal civil war raged in Sudan between the government in the predominantly Muslim, Arabic-speaking north and rebels from the south, where people are mostly Christian or follow more traditional religions.

Finally, in 2005, a comprehensive peace agreement was reached between the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the government of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir. The agreement was facilitated in part by a group of African nations known as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), as well as the United States, United Kingdom, Norway, and Italy. As Rebecca Hamilton writes in the Atlantic, the United States was particularly active in the peace process, thanks in part to the efforts of a small bipartisan coalition of members of Congress — known as the “Sudan Caucus” — who worked for decades to make Sudan a US foreign policy priority.

Christian groups in the US had also long championed the cause of the South Sudanese, seeing their struggle against the Muslim government in the north as a fundamental struggle against the Muslim oppression of Christians. When George W. Bush, himself an evangelical Christian, came into the White House in 2001, he made Sudan a top policy priority — and it was during his second term that the peace agreement was finally signed.

The 2005 agreement laid out a timetable for a referendum on whether Sudan should be split in two, with South Sudan becoming a separate country. That vote was held in January 2011 and passed overwhelmingly, with nearly 99 percent of South Sudanese voting in favor of independence. On July 9 of that year, the Republic of South Sudan formally came into existence.

Political leaders around the world hailed it as a triumph for peace. New Jersey Democratic Congress member Donald Payne, the co-founder of the Sudan Caucus, said it was "a victory for the oppressed." Then-US ambassador to the UN Susan Rice called it “a day of triumph for all who cherish the rights of all people to govern themselves in liberty and law.” And although President Obama was the one in the White House on that historic day, one South Sudanese man at the celebration in the capital, Juba, held up a sign that said “Thank You George Bush.”

And then everything fell apart.

That’s because during the final push for independence, many of the tensions among the more than 60 different ethnic groups in South Sudan — and particularly the two largest ethnic groups, the Dinka and the Nuer — were set aside without being resolved. People in the south more or less agreed to overlook or ignore or downplay these lesser conflicts in order to achieve what was seen as a far more important goal: independence from the north. But, of course, those underlying ethnic tensions never actually went away. And once the bigger fight for independence was essentially over, and it came time to actually get down to the business of building a brand new country, they came bubbling right back up.

“This liberation curse took hold where people felt entitled to power,” explained Hilde Johnson, the former head of the United Nations mission in South Sudan, at a recent event at the Brookings Institution think tank in Washington. “It was their turn to eat.”

**Meet the men at the center of the carnage**

In his speech marking South Sudan’s official independence on July 9, 2011, Salva Kiir, the country’s new president, proclaimed, “May this day mark a new beginning of tolerance, unity and love for one another. Let our cultural and ethnic diversity be a source of pride and strength, not parochialism and conflict… We are all South Sudanese. We may be Zande, Kakwa, Nuer, Toposa, Dinka, Lotuko, Anyuak, Bari and Shiluk, but remember you are South Sudanese first!”

And it seemed — at least at first — that Kiir really was committed to preventing ethnic tensions from splitting apart the fledging country. Kiir, a cowboy hat-wearing member of the ethnic Dinka tribe, appointed Riek Machar to be his vice president. Machar was an ethnic Nuer, the second-largest ethnic group in the country. He had also actually led a brutal massacre back in 1991 in which Nuer fighters slaughtered some 2,000 Dinka civilians in the town of Bor.

By appointing Machar to the second-highest political office in the country, Kiir was essentially trying to build a unity government in which the two rival ethnic groups shared power. But it didn’t last.

In early 2013, Machar began vocally criticizing Kiir’s leadership of the country and his handling of the economy, and announced his intention to challenge Kiir for the presidency in 2015. Kiir, not surprisingly, didn’t particularly appreciate that, and responded in July by firing Machar — as well as all 28 of Kiir’s cabinet ministers and their deputies, leaving government ministries in the hands of civil servants. Things remained relatively quiet for the rest of the year.

Then, in December 2013, all hell broke loose. Forces loyal to Machar clashed with forces loyal to Kiir. What actually happened is still in dispute: Kiir publicly accused Machar of having attempted a coup, but others say the violence broke out when presidential guards from Kiir’s majority Dinka tribe tried to disarm guards from the Nuer ethnic group of Machar.

Regardless of what really happened, the conflict soon escalated dramatically. Because the two men represented rival ethnic groups with longstanding tensions and a history of violence, the political fight quickly morphed into an all-out ethnic conflict, with people loyal to both sides taking up arms and slaughtering each other. More than 1,000 people were killed and another 100,000 were displaced in the just first week of fighting alone. Machar fled the capital city of Juba, and the Nuer elements of the army broke away and fled with him.

In August 2015, after tens of thousands had been killed and more than 1.6 million people had been displaced, a shaky peace agreement was reached between the two warring ethnic groups, once again facilitated by the IGAD, the organization of African countries that includes South Sudan and most of its neighbors. As part of the agreement, Riek Machar was to return to Juba to resume his post as the country’s vice president. That didn’t play out as planned. Princeton Lyman, the former US special envoy for Sudan and South Sudan, told me in an interview that Machar was so afraid for his life that he insisted on bringing a big contingent of his own fighters back to the capital with him. That, perhaps not surprisingly, turned out to be a recipe for disaster. In 2016, the two rival forces clashed once again in Juba, and Machar once again fled the city.

Also, in the middle of all this, Kiir decided to basically pick a fight with yet another ethnic group, the Equatorians. In October 2015, just a little over a month after the peace deal with Machar’s forces had been inked, Kiir issued an order to redraw the country’s internal boundaries, increasing the number of states from 10 to 28.

That set off boundary fights over who controlled what land. The Equatorians, who live mainly in the southern part of the country, saw Kiir’s move as little more than a naked land grab by the Dinka. There have been attacks by the government on the Equatorians, and the Equatorians are now taking up arms and promising vengeance on the Dinka. On Monday, the State Department said that more than 1,900 houses had been destroyed the Central Equatoria region since September. “So you now have a new element of ethnic hatred and conflict, adding to what had been going on before,” Lyman told me. “And that has added to the urgency and the worry from the UN and others, that we might see the country just descending into a hotbed of ethnic genocidal acts on all sides.” “It was like dropping a match into a pile of twigs,” he added.

**Why the violence probably won’t stop anytime soon**

Shortly after returning from South Sudan, Yasmin Sooka, the head of the UN commission that visited the country late last month, warned in a statement that “the stage is being set for a repeat of what happened in Rwanda and the international community is under an obligation to prevent it.”

Sooka said she and her team from the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan found disturbing indicators of potential impending genocide inside the country, including an increase in hate speech, a crackdown on the media and civil society, and deepening divisions among the country’s 64 tribal ethnic groups. “[E]verywhere we went across this country we heard villagers saying they are ready to shed blood to get their land back,” Sooka reported. “Many told us it’s already reached a point of no return.”

But despite Sooka’s call for international action to prevent the situation in South Sudan from escalating into full-scale genocide, it seems unlikely that much of anything can — or will — be done to stop it.

The United States is currently pushing for a UN arms embargo on South Sudan to try to limit the weapons flowing into the country, as well as further targeted sanctions, including against Machar and Paul Malong, the head of President Kiir's army, Reuters reports. However, the US may not be able to get enough votes at the UN Security Council to make it happen.

That’s in part because IGAD is once again in charge of the peace process. The problem is that each of the IGAD countries — Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, (north) Sudan, and Uganda — have their own vested interests in South Sudan, and they can’t seem to agree on what to do to stop the violence. Uganda, for instance, which has close ties to Kiir’s government, has been a vocal opponent of an arms embargo.

And unless the African countries in IGAD all agree that an arms embargo and sanctions are what they actually want the UN to do, neither Russia nor China — both of whom also happen to be top arms suppliers to South Sudan — will support such measures. “In the Security Council, if the Africans are divided, the Security Council is divided,” Lyman told me. “The Russians and the Chinese never want to vote for embargoes and sanctions,” he said. “They will only do it if the Africans are united in saying, ‘This is what we need.’”

This massive escalation in violence is also happening at the worst possible time, as it comes right at the end of President Obama’s presidency as well as Ban Ki-moon’s tenure as the UN’s secretary general. According to Lyman, those are perhaps the only two people in the world with enough clout to push the IGAD members into finally agreeing. And they’re both about to leave office.

This doesn’t mean that their successors wouldn’t be able to eventually make something happen, of course. But it does mean that there's a good chance that this conflict could end up falling through the cracks in the meantime. And every day that goes by is another day in which the people of South Sudan will see their brand-new country torn apart by truly horrific ethnic violence.

<https://www.vox.com/world/2016/12/8/13817072/south-sudan-crisis-explained-ethnic-cleansing-genocide>