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### THE CURRENT

“What can be done about Sudan’s deepening humanitarian catastrophe?”

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**DEWS:** You're listening to The Current part of the Brookings Podcast Network, found online at Brookings dot edu slash podcasts. I'm Fred Dews.

The Horn of Africa. Home to over 200 million people and countries including, among others, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia is experiencing high levels of fragility from both violence and climate change. The World Food Program says that the current conflict in Sudan is, quote, "risking the world's largest hunger crisis across the region, with nearly 18 million people facing acute hunger and over 9 million displaced," end quote.

Here to talk about the humanitarian and security crisis unfolding in specifically Sudan is Jeffrey Feltman, the John C. Whitehead Visiting Fellow in International Diplomacy in the Strobe Talbott Center for Security, Strategy, and Technology here at Brookings. His resume, which you can find on our website, is long, but I'll just say that from April 2021 to January 2022, he served as special envoy for the Horn of Africa at the U.S. State Department, was chief foreign policy advisor to two secretaries general of the United Nations, and previously served as U.S. ambassador to Lebanon.

Jeff, welcome to the current.

**FELTMAN:** Thanks for having me.

**DEWS:** It's a really tough issue that I've invited you on to talk about today, but it is very timely. I just gave a high-level gloss of what's happening in the Horn of Africa. But can you be a little more specific? How would you describe the current situation, especially with respect to the food crisis?

[1:32]

**FELTMAN:** I mean, there's a profound humanitarian and security crisis that stretches across several countries in the Horn of Africa, and these are related. The humanitarian crisis derives from internal conflicts, internal conflicts that have been internationalized with outside actors basically making things worse.

On Sudan itself: Sudan is the third largest country in Africa geographically. It's got 500 miles of coastline on the Red Sea, one of the most busy commercial transit areas in the world. And as you said, the World Food Program is now calling it the world's largest hunger crisis, where you have basically half the population in need of some kind of humanitarian assistance. There's a UN institute in The Hague, the Clingendael Institute, that predicts that you'll have something like 2.5 million people out of a population of almost 50 million that will be dead by starvation by the end of September. Now, that compares in four months to the numbers of people that died under the Khmer Rouge over four years in Cambodia. It's an appalling, appalling number.

You've also got 9 or 10 million people displaced inside the country. You've got over 2 million refugees in the countries around in places like the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, South Sudan, countries that really are not equipped to be handling this type of large displacement. It is the largest displacement crisis in the world, or perhaps vies with Syria in competition with Syria for that sad that sad thing.

AID, the U.S. Agency for International Development, has something called the Famine Early Warning System dot net, FEWS NET, they call it, and they show, as of May, the entire country of Sudan being in either crisis or emergency situation when it comes to food.

**DEWS:** It's it's shocking indeed. And, you know, we often think about food insecurity, if not famine, and we'll talk about that more in a minute, being caused by climate or, or weather conditions, drought and so on. Is that the case with today's hunger crisis, or is it driven by something else or a combination?

[3:30]

**FELTMAN:** This crisis in Sudan is a manmade crisis. And manmade is the right word, because you basically have two generals in their institutions that decide to turn on each other in a fratricidal, fratricidal war that has caused a displacement, has caused a famine that's preventing life-saving humanitarian assistance from reaching the population.

The two sides here—one side is the Sudanese Armed Forces under General Burhan, it postures as the legitimate government, and it's preventing assistance from getting to the areas that are under the control of the rival force, the RSA, for the the Rapid Support Forces. The Rapid Support Forces have been looting warehouses,

being basically paying for their rampage by by stealing livestock, grain, etcetera. So, you have the you have the Sudanese Armed Forces preventing humanitarian assistance from reaching areas under the RSF. You have the RSF looting the local areas, including the so-called breadbasket of Sudan, the province south south of Khartoum called Aj Jazirah, which now it's planting season so farmers are not able to get to their fields or to get the inputs to plant, making the the crisis worse. This is a manmade crisis.

**DEWS:** How long has this crisis, the political-military crisis, been going on in Sudan?

[4:44]

**FELTMAN:** Well, you could you can pick out many dates on the calendar. You know, Omar Bashir was the dictator of Sudan for 30 years. He was removed from power in 2019. There was a sort of a transitional arrangement set up in August 2019 between civilians and militaries. The military parts of this did a coup against the civilians in October 2021. But the real fighting that has led to the hunger crisis started in April of 2023, when the two security services basically turned on each other in a in a in a power grab.

**DEWS:** So, it sounds like a much different food crisis than we've seen over the decades in places like Ethiopia, Somalia, Darfur, and Ethiopia.

[5:24]

**FELTMAN:** Right now, you've still got famine, unfortunately. But its famine is mostly due to some of the residual conflict issues and to drought. In Somalia, we've seen conflict-related famines as well as drought-related famines. The one in Sudan right now is manmade. It came about because these two forces turned on each other at the expense of the population.

**DEWS:** I want to get to your views in a minute on what should or can be done. But first, I understand that the U.N. agency that focuses on food security is reluctant to declare the crisis a, quote, "famine." But it looks like that to a lot of people. Why is there hesitation on that designation?

[6:01]

**FELTMAN:** You know, there's there's, something called the the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification system. And this was set up as a result of a 2004 war in Somalia. It's basically 15, 16 different agencies, institutions that come together with national authorities to make what's called an acute food insecurity sort of picture, where they have five classifications. And famine is the fifth, and it's the worst.

But what happens is that the IPC, what the system is called, is trying to come up with objective, rigorous, fact-based, consensus-based information to put in the hands of policymakers, humanitarian actors, those that would, those that deliver food so that you have a so you have a objective, rigorous overview of food insecurity in particular place. The downside is, in a place like Sudan, the local authorities are part of making that consensus-based evaluation.

And the Sudanese Armed Forces, one of the one of the two belligerents in this war, postures as the government, meaning they don't want to see the IPC declare famine because then the pressure would be on the U.S., the Sudanese Armed Forces, even more than the U.S. now, to allow the aid to flow into the areas that are controlled by the opposing force. And that's mostly Darfur, that's mostly Darfur, and Khartoum is where the real risks are.

But I think that we can all agree that famine conditions are already present. You've seen U.S. officials say that, including the U.S. special envoy for Sudan. You've seen you've seen UN agency say this. So, it's a bureaucratic reason why famine hasn't been declared. But the famine-like conditions have been acknowledged already be present.

**DEWS:** So, what is the international community and what are African countries doing to address the crisis now, and is it enough?

[7:55]

**FELTMAN:** Oh, it's definitely not enough. It's not enough financially. It's not enough it's not enough politically. On the financial side, the the UN appeal for Sudan and for the surrounding countries to help to help with the refugee situation is a combined \$4.1 billion. And as of this week, they've collected something like 16% of that. So, financially, the money is not is not there.

But even if the money were there, there has not been the right type of pressure or decisions taken that would allow the humanitarian assistance to flow to the areas most in need. The acceptance by the international community, including the UN, of the preposterous notion that the Sudanese Armed Forces is a legitimate government means that when the Sudanese Armed Forces say, no, no, you can't deliver aid to that part of the country, the UN abides by that because of the so-called sovereign right of the state.

We have to find a way to get past the blockages that the Sudanese Armed Forces is purposely putting in place, and also find a way to really call out the other side, the RSF, for the type of looting, destruction that they're doing to grain warehouses, to to food markets, etcetera.

**DEWS:** I want to ask you to dive a little more deeply into solutions in just a second. But first, do you think that attention to the crises, say, between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and Ukraine, war between Ukraine and Russia and maybe some other global conflicts—you mentioned Syria—are those taking attention and resources away from the crisis in Sudan and the Horn of Africa?

[9:28]

**FELTMAN:** Certainly, Gaza has received more international attention than the crisis in Sudan. The sort of outrage that people are expressing about the death tolls and destruction in Gaza, there has been nothing like that when it comes when it comes to Sudan.

And I note, you know, there's been lots of talk in this day and age about double standards, double standards, Ukraine versus Gaza, all sorts of double standards that people talk about. Let me point out one that strikes me. Antonio Guterres, the secretary-general of the United Nations, went to the Rafah border crossing in Egypt in October and basically said, open the border. We've got to get humanitarian assistance.

And I think that was entirely appropriate for the secretary-general to do, given the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Why has he not gone to the border crossings between Chad and and Sudan to say, open this border, we have to get the food in to the starving people in Darfur? There are more people at risk of starvation in Darfur alone than in Gaza.

Also in December, the UN Security Council, in an unofficial trip that was sponsored by the United Arab Emirates, also went to Rafah. The Security Council has not gone to the border crossings with Darfur.

**DEWS:** I think it's also to say it's appropriate for them to bring attention to the crisis in Gaza and to the war in Ukraine and the crisis, but they should also ...

[10:45]

**FELTMAN:** Exactly, exactly. It's not to minimize the suffering in Gaza or to say they shouldn't they shouldn't be paying attention. Of course, they should be paying attention, attention to that. But there's not been a commensurate level of attention and action to a much larger humanitarian catastrophe which is unfolding in Sudan.

**DEWS:** Why do you think that is?

[11:06]

**FELTMAN:** Well, part of part of it is the, the reporting out of Gaza and out of Israel has been much more complete. I think that you've seen recently some more stories coming out of Sudan, but there's more of an awareness of the of the situation between Israel and the Palestinians, between the between Israel and the Gaza Strip. There's also, frankly, there's a sense of sort of politicization that comes with the Gaza-Israel fight, no matter which side you're on. I'm not pointing fingers here, but people tend to identify with one side more strongly than the other side. And in Sudan it looks like, you know, it's more like a pox on all their houses when it comes to the belligerents.

**DEWS:** So, you've you said that this crisis is just getting worse and worse. And so, what more do you think needs to be done? And when?

[11:59]

**FELTMAN:** First of all, we need to be acknowledging the answer to the question you asked me earlier, being up front: there are famine-like conditions, if not outright famine. And we need to be treating this as a multi-year famine. Now is the planting season in Sudan. Farmers can't plant. So, I said, this is not going to go away soon. Seventy percent of the hospitals and medical stores have been destroyed. If you are in malnutrition because of famine, you can't just suddenly start eating again. You

need special therapeutic food and things that would be available through medical facilities. They aren't there. We have to we're going to have to, to to figure all that, figure it out.

I also think that we need collectively to treat the country as it is, not as some purport it to be, which is which is to recognize the fact that the country right now is divided under at least two authorities, and that we need to work to get the humanitarian assistance in by any means possible. If it means that one agency can only deliver to this part of the country because because if they deliver to the other part, they'll be forbidden from entering at all, let's divide. Let's have some agencies work in one part of the country, some agencies, some NGOs work in the other part of the country. We need to deal with the country as it is, which is divided under at least two, if not, if not more authorities at this point. Don't allow the Sudanese Armed Forces to have veto power over who gets humanitarian assistance.

We also need to be more flexible in how we deliver assistance, because there are these really heroic civil society actors, what they call emergency response rooms, local humanitarian workers who are who are at great risk to themselves finding ways to get humanitarian assistance into the hands of those most in need. But these are not people who can apply for aid grants, you know. The bureaucracies often are not fit to the purpose. We need to have sort of take more risks in how do we get how we get assistance into the hands of those who are who are actually delivering.

And we need to really start putting pressure on those that are fueling the war from the outside. This is an internal conflict. This was not created by outside actors, but outside actors are now engaged, some of them close to the United States. And we need to be finding the right leverage to get them to reconsider their behavior about supporting this role.

And I also will say the Biden administration has appointed a UN special envoy for Sudan. The Biden administration last week through Samantha Power, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the head of AID and the U.S. ambassador to the UN, announced 300 plus million dollars more for the humanitarian appeal for for Sudan. So, the U.S. is doing things. I would just think that collectively, there's more that we should be doing, including pressuring the outside actors.

**DEWS:** Jeff, I'd like to finish this conversation by asking you to reflect more personally on what's at stake in Sudan and in the Horn of Africa. It would be very hard to overstate the extensive experience you have in diplomacy, working in North Africa and the Middle East, in the Horn of Africa. How do you think about this crisis personally, if you will?

[15:08]

**FELTMAN:** I mean, I look at Sudan with profound sadness, verging sometimes on anger at the lost opportunity. I was assistant secretary of state for Near East Affairs, which is the Middle East and North Africa when the Arab Spring, the so-called Arab Spring, broke out in 2011. Perhaps this reveals our own ignorance or or poor analysis, but we did not know that the Tunisians were suddenly, spontaneously going to go out onto the street and lead to the lead to the overthrow of of the longtime dictator Ben Ali in Tunisia in January 2011.

But in Sudan, you had a very heroic, organized civil society, grassroots movement that over the course of several years built a platform for peaceful resistance. This was not a surprise. They were looking for an opportunity, which they got in 2018, 2019, with bread price hikes in order to rise up against Omar Bashir. This was not something that just came out of the blue in the way that looked like, say something like Tunisia did. And those people are the ones who have been betrayed by their army commanders.

And I think, I mean, in hindsight, I look back at our own U.S. diplomacy and think we, you know, we probably did not engage civil society in a way that gave us a realistic view of what the intentions of the military guys really were, that the military guys never intended really, to have a transition to civilian rule. And they were they were basically playing us over, over a course of, of course of, of, of several years and through several different envoys. I was, I was just one.

And so, now how do we try to engage ourselves and others on behalf of those heroic grassroots movements that led to the overthrow of Omar Bashir, and that now are working to deliver lifesaving humanitarian assistance to those most in need?

I'm sort of haunted by the 2019 to 2024 history of history of Sudan and the history of, I think, well-intentioned engagement on all of us, but insufficient. Perhaps a bit naive when it came to how we dealt with the military.

**DEWS:** Well, Jeff, we're going to leave it at that. It's a tragic situation. Thank you for the role that you're playing in bringing attention to the problem and solutions. And I encourage listeners to find your bio on our website, follow your research and activities around this very important topic. So, thank you.

**FELTMAN:** Thanks for doing this, Fred.

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