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IN FOCUS

Tribal conflict in Blue Nile: Causes and Implications

AFRICA IN BRIEF

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COMMENTARY

Tribal conflict in Blue Nile: Root causes and implications

Several factors have contributed to the easily spreading tribal violence in the Blue Nile state of Sudan. Beyond being a tribal issue, its implications have the potential to escalate other issues in a politically unstable country like Sudan.

Anu Maria Joseph



Image Source: Sudan Tribune

On 20 July, the death toll from ethnic clashes between the Birta and Hausa tribes in Sudan's Blue Nile state rose to 105. At least 199 were wounded, dozens of shops burnt and properties damaged in al-Roseires town. The violence started in Bakuri village and spread to Genais East, Amura, Um Darfa, al-Roseires and Al-Damazin towns. In response, public gatherings and marches have been banned for one month and night curfew has been imposed in the state. Blue Nile governor Ahmed al-Omda said the authorities will "strike with an iron fist" against those inciting "racism, hatred and strife."

On 19 July, thousands of Hausa people took to the streets demanding "justice for Blue Nile martyrs." They blocked roads and attacked the government buildings in many towns and cities.

The violence between the Birta and Hausa tribes was sparked by a land dispute on 10 July. The UN says nearly 15,000 people have been displaced. UN Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan, said: "We are deeply concerned, lives have been lost, thousands of people had to flee and seek

safety and shelter, and lives of many others have been disrupted."

Tribal clashes over land, livestock, access to water and grazing rights are recurring events in Sudan. However, a number of other factors have contributed to the situation in Blue Nile. Besides, the conflict is beyond a regular tribal issue and has the potential to escalate the instabilities prevailing in Sudan.

What is behind the violence in Blue Nile?

First, the Hausa tribe and issue over land rights. The Hausa tribe in Sudan belongs to a larger Hausa ethnic group prominent in west Africa. There are three million Hausas living in Sudan, the majority of them follow Islam, are farmers and speak their native language rather than Arabic. Though it's unclear when the group reached Sudan, local tribes consider them outsiders. The initial cause behind the conflict reportedly dates back to January, when the Hausa tribe demanded involvement in regional administration.

The conflict escalated when the Hausa tribe chose a leader to manage the tribe's affairs. Several other tribes including the Birta and the Funj rejected the move. On 10 July, two people were killed in a clash between the Hausa farmers and Birta shepherds over land ownership near Qaisan city. Later the clashes spread to other regions. The above incidents indicate that the issue has its roots in the fight over the Hausa tribe's rights in Sudan's land.

Second, the coup in October 2021 and the failure of the Juba Peace Agreement 2020. Since the 25 October 2021 coup, led by army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan resulted in a security vacuum, tribal violence has escalated across the country. The pro-democracy protesters accuse the military leadership and the rebel leaders of using the Juba Peace Agreement 2020 for political gain. They say authorities favour the Hausa tribe as others supported the anti-government protests. Utilizing the traditional land ownership disputes as a cause, the military regime is using tribal leaders to confront the pro-democracy protests.

In addition, the October coup has considerably hindered the peace process of the Juba agreement. The Sudan Popular Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N), the largest rebel group active in Blue Nile, rejected the agreement, calling for a secular state, disbanding of al-Bashir's militias and revamping the country's military. Another major rebel group in the region, the Sudan Liberation Movement Army refused to participate in peace talks and denounced the transitional government.

Looking beyond the tribal issue

First, growing instabilities in Sudan. Since April, in West Darfur state, the Arab militias suspected of being backed by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) paramilitaries have been launching new waves of attacks on non-Arab ethnic groups near the border with Chad. The UN reported that the latest attack in Kulbus town and neighbouring village between 6 June and 11 June left nearly 125 people dead and 33,000 displaced.

On the other hand, since the October coup, thousands of Sudanese are protesting across the country demanding the return of

civilian rule. Subsequently, there is violent repression carried out against the protesters to hamper the movement. By July, more than 100 protesters had died during the protests. The violence in Blue Nile coincides with the conflict in Darfur and the pro-democratic protest movements, further escalating the political instability in the country.

Second, issues in Sudan-Ethiopia borders. For years, Sudan and Ethiopia have been in dispute over the border region of al-Fashaga. The recent escalation of tensions in al-Fashaga has threatened the stability of the entire region. At the same time, the tribal violence in Blue Nile could potentially spillover to Ethiopia's Benishangul-Gumuz region as both the Birta and Hausa tribes live on either sides of the border. Further, the conflict in Tigray, issues around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and militarization in Benishangul-Gumuz region raises a threat of wider border conflict between Sudan and Ethiopia.

Though predominantly a tribal issue, various factors are involved in the violence that is spreading in the Blue Nile state of Sudan. The short-lived democratic transition and the military takeover has consumed the existing agreements and mechanisms that controlled tribal conflicts. Tribal issue has become a tool for securing political ambitions. The violence in Blue Nile has enough capacity to elevate other surrounding issues in an unstable country like Sudan. As the political institutions in Sudan fail continuously, there needs to be a joint effort brokered by international and regional institutions- fundamentally, to establish a democratic civilian rule, subsequently, a mechanism to administer different tribes and ethnicities inclusively.

AFRICA IN BRIEF

12 July – 26 July

By Apoorva Sudhakar

TUNISIA

Citizens vote on referendum on new constitution

On 25 July, Tunisians voted on a referendum on the new constitution proposed by president Kais Saied; the date also marked one year of the suspension of the parliament and dismissal of the government by Saied. The new constitution will replace the previous one drafted in 2014 after the Arab Spring of 2011. After the voting, Saied said: “Our money and our wealth are enormous, and our will is even greater, to rebuild a new Tunisia and a new republic, one that breaks with the past.” The referendum was carried out amid massive countrywide protests led by the opposition parties. On 23 July, the head of an anti-referendum coalition said: “The Tunisian people will deal a major blow to Saied on the day of the illegal referendum and will prove to him that it is not interested in his populist path.” (Sebastian Usher, “[Tunisia referendum: Voters decide whether to increase president's powers](#),” BBC, 25 July 2022; “[Hundreds protest Tunisian referendum](#),” Reuters, 23 July 2022)

LIBYA

13 killed in clashes involving forces loyal to Presidency Council

On 22 July, 13 people were killed and 27 injured in capital Tripoli during clashes between rival factions in areas housing diplomatic missions, international and government agencies. An interior ministry spokesperson said the fighters involved were affiliated to the Presidency Council, the body acting as the transitional head of state. In response to the fighting, the prime minister’s office said the interior minister was replaced. (“[Fighting rips through](#)

[Libyan capital, killing 13](#),” Reuters, 22 July 2022)

MOROCCO

One casualty recorded as wildfires rage across northern mountain forests

On 15 July, Larache regional officials said one person had died in the wildfires sparked on 13 July. At least 1,600 hectares of woodland has been destroyed in Larache, Taza, Tetouan and Ouezzane provinces and 1,100 families have fled. The wildfires were preceded by a heatwave with temperature reaching 45 degrees Celsius. (“[One dead as Morocco forest fires rage](#),” France24, 15 July 2022)

UGANDA

At least 200 die of hunger across two districts in the northeast

On 19 July, Reuters reported over 200 people had died of hunger caused by drought and insecurity, in July in Uganda's northeast. The head of Kaabong district's local government said 184 people had died in the district and at least 22 had died in Kotido district. The news report attributes the starvation to lack of development and increasing raids on cattle by armed groups. A spokesperson from the prime minister's office did not mention the exact death toll but said the government had sent food trucks to the region earlier in July. (“[More Than 200 People Die as Drought Ravages Northeast Uganda](#),” US News, 19 July 2022)

CHAD

Rebel groups restart peace talks in Doha

On 22 July, rebel groups said they would restart the peace talks that they had temporarily withdrawn from in Doha. The

groups did not give any reason behind the willingness to resume talks. Previously, on 16 July, over 20 groups withdrew from the negotiations in Doha, claiming that the Chadian military government was sabotaging the peace efforts and accusing the latter of "harassments, intimidation, threats and disinformation." The groups' announcement came after president Mohamad Idris Deby set 20 August as the date for dialogue. On 18 July, the head of the Popular Front for National Renaissance mentioned that negotiations with the government since March have not been direct and said: "It takes two to negotiate, both to make peace and war. For the moment, we find ourselves alone." (["Over 20 rebel groups suspend participation in Chad peace talks," Al Jazeera, 18 July 2022](#); ["Chad rebels restart peace-building talks with interim military authorities," Reuters, 23 July 2022](#))

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Over 30 killed in clashes in the east
 On 14 July, BBC reported at least 31 people, including children, had been killed in renewed clashes between the DRC's armed forces and multiple rebel groups in Beni territory in the east. In 2022 so far, an estimated 700,000 people have been displaced in the Ituri and North Kivu provinces, thereby bringing the total number of displaced people in DRC to six million. (Emmanuel Iguna, "[Death toll in DR Congo violence rises to over 30," BBC, 14 July 2022](#))

IVORY COAST

President meets predecessors Gbagbo and Bédié

On 14 July, president Alassane Ouattara met with former presidents Laurent Gbagbo and Henri Konan Bédié, marking the first meeting between the three political rivals since 2010. Gbagbo termed the meeting "a reunion meeting to renew contact and exchange in truth their views." A government spokesperson said the

meeting was in line with recommendations for political dialogue involving the government, opposition and civil society. In 2010, Gbagbo's refusal to concede his presidential position to Ouattara had sparked violence leading to the death of over 3000 people. (Loucoumane Coulibaly, "[Ivory Coast President Ouattara meets predecessors in reconciliation drive," Reuters, 15 July 2022](#))

TOGO

Army admits to killing seven children in blast

On 14 July, the army admitted to carrying out a blast that killed seven children and wounded two on 9 July in Tone prefecture. The army said they had mistaken the civilians for jihadists after they received intelligence that warned of "infiltration by armed gangs wanting to conduct terrorist attacks" against local communities. The armed forces Chief of Staff said an investigation had been launched to identify the perpetrators. ("[Togo army says it was behind blast that killed several civilians," France24, 15 July 2022](#))

MALAWI

76 people arrested during protests

On 20 July, 76 people were arrested amid protests against the judiciary's slow processing of corruption cases and demands for the president's resignation. The protests were organised by the Human Rights Ambassadors group which maintained that the judiciary provided "selective justice" and accused the president of inaction against corruption and high cost of living. ("[Police in Malawi arrest 76 over anti-judiciary protests," Anadolu Agency, 20 July 2022](#))

REGIONAL

WHO concerned over rise in zoonotic disease outbreak

On 14 July, the World Health Organization said that in the 2012-2022 decade, Africa had witnessed a 63 per cent increase in zoonotic disease outbreaks, compared to

the 2001-2011 decade. Of the 1,843 public health events, 30 per cent were zoonotic outbreaks and Ebola accounts for 40 per cent of the zoonotic outbreaks, said WHO. The WHO statement came in the backdrop of the rising cases of monkeypox across the world. The rise in the number of cases is also attributed to better testing measures, especially in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (“[Africa sees 68% jump in zoonotic outbreaks over last decade](#),” *News24*, 14 July 2022)

Mali expels UN mission spokesperson

On 20 July, the military government asked the spokesperson of the UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to leave the country within three days after the UN official tweeted about the 49 Ivory Coast soldiers who had been arrested in Mali on 10 July. Following the arrest, the military government suspended the MINUSMA’s troop rotations. The MINUSMA spokesperson tweeted that the 49 soldiers had arrived in Mali as part of the rotation. However, the government asked for proof of authorisation and said the spokesperson failed to provide the same. (“[Mali junta expels U.N. peacekeeping mission spokesman over tweets](#),” *Reuters*, 20 July 2022)

INTERNATIONAL

Macron calls for rethinking strategy in Africa

On 13 July, France’s president Emmanuel Macron addressed French troops ahead of French officials’ visit to Niger on 15 July. Macron said he would want to “rethink” France’s military postures in Africa and called on ministers and army chiefs to deliberate the same. (“[France's Macron wants 'rethink' of French military postures in Africa](#),” *Reuters*, 14 July 2022)

EU announces EUR 25 million assistance; launches operational partnership to tackle migrant smuggling

On 18 July, the European Council announced an assistance of EUR 25 million to Niger “to strengthen the capabilities and resilience of the Nigerien Armed Forces” for civilian protection and defending territorial integrity. The assistance would be directed to the construction of an Armed Forces Technician Training Centre and a military operating base in the Tillaberi region on the border between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso. Previously, on 15 July, the EU and Niger launched an operational partnership to address migrant smuggling. Niger’s interior minister said the partnership would protect and improve the living conditions of migrants and their hosts. (“[European Peace Facility: Council adopts an assistance measure to support the Nigerien Armed Forces](#),” *Council of the European Union*, 18 July 2022; “[Strengthening cooperation in the fight against migrant smuggling: the European Union and Niger launch operational partnership to tackle migrant smuggling](#),” *European Commission*, 15 July 2022)

Home Office was warned against asylum policy, reveal documents in High Court

On 19 July, The Guardian reported the High Court proceedings on the UK’s policy to relocate asylum seekers to Rwanda. The documents submitted to the High Court indicate that several UK government officials had cautioned the Home Office against the policy on many grounds, including that Rwanda was accused of recruiting refugees to carry out armed operations in neighbouring countries and that the UK had placed Rwanda on the amber/red list over human rights concerns. One of the claimants in the court said: “The revelations at today’s hearing are extraordinary. They paint a picture of a home secretary desperate to

railroad this policy through even in the face of serious reservations being raised by senior departmental officials." (Diane Taylor, "[UK officials raised concerns over Rwanda policy, documents show](#)," *The Guardian*, 19 July 2022)

Mali government expels UN mission spokesperson

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UK envoy disowns predecessor's memo on asylum deal with Rwanda

On 20 July, the current UK High Commissioner to Rwanda Omar Daair tweeted that Rwanda is a safe country that supports asylum seekers and reiterated that the UK government is "committed to delivering this policy to break the business model of criminal gangs and save lives." Daair's tweet is a dismissal of the memo sent to the UK Home Office by his predecessor warning against the asylum deal with Rwanda, criticising the human rights situation in the country. ("[UK ambassador disowns memo on Rwanda asylum plan](#)," *BBC*, 21 July 2022)

African leaders welcome Russia-Ukraine deal on grains export

On 22 July, African Union chairman Macky Sall welcomed the deal between Russia and Ukraine to allow the export of wheat and maize from Ukraine's ports. South Africa's president echoed the same and said that the ongoing war in Ukraine was a wakeup call. The president said: "Our continued reliance on massive amounts of grains from that part of the world should be seen as a risk and a real danger to African countries' 1.3 billion people." Similarly, the Ivory Coast president insisted that Africa should be given priority during the grain export "because of the fragility of its economies and the social situation in many countries." ("[The Chairperson of the African Union Commission welcomes signing of Russia/Ukraine agreement to resume grain exports under auspices of Turkiye and United Nations](#)," *African Union*, 22 July 2022; "[African leaders welcome Ukraine wheat deal](#)," *BBC*, 22 July 2022)

Thousands of migrants from Libya and Tunisia arrive in Italy

On 25 July, BBC reported nearly 1,200 migrants, from Africa, Middle East and Asia had arrived in Italy in 24 hours by boats from Libya and Tunisia; 674 had been rescued from a fishing boat off the Calabria coast and five people were found dead. Another 522 were rescued from 15 boats and brought to Lampedusa port on 23 July. Lampedusa is a major arrival port for entering Europe. The rescued migrants included Afghans, Pakistanis, Somalis, Sudanese and Ethiopians. (Matt Murphy, "[Italy migrants: Nearly 1,200 arrive by boat in 24 hours](#)," *BBC*, 25 July 2022)

About the authors

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About NIAS Africa Studies

As a part of the area studies initiatives, the Institute started a focussed study on Pakistan in 2020. In 2021, it expanded the area studies to include Europe Studies, China Reader, and Maritime Studies. In 2022, the Science, Technology and International Relations (STIR) programme at the Institute is further expanding its area studies, to include Africa.

The primary focus of NIAS Africa studies would be on the following five verticals: contemporary political issues, colonial legacies, problems of governance, civil-military equations, and the rise of radical Islamic groups. The primary objective is to study Africa from an internal prism. ,

NIAS Africa Studies would include a series of expert lectures, workshops, publications and a weekly exclusively focussed on Africa. The initiative also aims to create a network of young scholars studying Africa and also African scholars studying in various Indian institutions.

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