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SUDAN: The role of Russia and Wagner in the Sudanese conflict and the EU

The role of Russia and Wagner in the Sudanese conflict and the EU

Speech at the Conference "Fostering Peace and Security in Sudan" hosted by MEP Fulvio Martusciello at the European Parliament, 18 July 2023

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

On 15 April 2023, an armed conflict broke out between rival factions of the military government in Sudan concentrated around the capital city, Khartoum, and the Darfur region.

As of 20 June, between 3,000 and 5,000 people have been killed

As of July 2023, 2.2 million were internally displaced and 645,000 others had fled the country as refugees.

The conflict opposes the paramilitary Rapid Support Force (RSF) led by [Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo](#) and Sudan's *de facto* leader and army chief [Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#).

In my presentation, I will try to answer three questions:

Is Wagner involved in the fighting in Sudan?

When did the Wagner Group appear in Sudan?

What is the role of the EU in the Sudanese crisis?

Is Wagner involved in the fighting in Sudan?

There is a lot of opacity about the role of Wagner in the fighting in Sudan and about its relations with the two leaders of the conflicting parties.

According to Ashok Swain, the head of the Peace and Conflict Research Department at Uppsala University in Sweden, the Wagner Group has a considerable interest in who wins the ongoing battle for power in the country and it is "very likely engaged in the current fight to keep its presence in Sudan and protect its huge business interests".

And according to the same source, "the US has recently pressured Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council to remove the mercenary group from the country." At the beginning of the conflict, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has also voiced concern about the prospect of Wagner's involvement in Sudan,

saying the group “simply brings more death and destruction” with it.

At the end of May, the United States accused the [Wagner Group](#) of providing surface-to-air missiles to the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

In an official statement, the US Treasury said “Those missiles have contributed to a prolonged armed conflict that only results in further chaos in the region.”

Two days before the conflict in Sudan satellite imagery showed an unusual uptick in activity on Wagner bases in a region on the other side of the border with Libya, which is held by a Wagner-backed general Khalifa Hiftar, leader of the eastern Libyan National Army. Combined with claims by Sudanese and regional diplomatic sources, this uptick in activity suggests that both Russia and the Libyan general may have been preparing to reinforce the fighting capacities of the Rapid Support Forces even before the eruption of violence in Sudan.

Before the simmering hostilities between the Sudanese militia and the army broke into open warfare in Khartoum and elsewhere, Wagner Group worked with both Sudanese leaders in conflict, to protect its own business interests all over the country.

In July 2022, [a Wagner-linked Telegram channel](#) distributed a video showing Wagner mercenaries conducting parachute-landing exercises for Sudanese forces.

The same source linked to the Instagram profile of an anonymous Russian mercenary, calling himself a “freelancer” and [sharing stories of his exploits in Sudan](#) in posts from August and October 2021.

Since 15 April, Wagner has offered military assistance to the Rapid Support Forces controlling some regions but it cannot be deduced that there is a potential alliance between both

militias or that Wagner is taking sides for one party in conflict against the other.

In the mining areas exploited by Wagner in partnership with the Sudanese militia, it is in Wagner's interest to make some arrangements for mutual assistance to secure their common business. In other areas controlled by the Sudanese army, it is not in the interest Wagner to stoke unrest. The protection of its business is its priority.

In conclusion, it can be said that Wagner's shifting allegiances with the various competing political and military powers in Sudan are only determined by its business interests.

When did Wagner Group appear in Sudan?

The Wagner Group first surfaced in Sudan in 2017 at the invitation of then-President Omar al-Bashir following a meeting between the Sudanese dictator and Putin in Moscow.

Initially, in 2018, Wagner had about 100 men actively training Sudanese military forces but soon that figure grew to about 500. They were mainly stationed in the south-west near Um Dafuq, close to Sudan's border with the Central African Republic (CAR).

The mission of Wagner mercenaries inside Sudan was then to act in various roles, including training Sudanese soldiers or allegedly helping the security forces crack down on protests.

Wagner also trained the Rapid Support Forces based in the Darfur region. This led to a partnership between Prigozhin and Hemedti in gold mining operations in the region.

In early 2022, just after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the head of the Rapid Support Forces flew to Moscow to put in place a smuggling route for the gold to be sent from Sudan to the Middle East where it could be laundered and then to Russia to help finance the military operations in

Ukraine.

On that trip to Russia, the plane Hemedti traveled in was also transporting gold bullion, according to the [New York Times](#), citing two senior Western officials. During the talks in Moscow, Hemedti reportedly requested help from Russian officials to acquire military equipment.

In 2021, as much as 32.7 tons of Sudanese gold worth about \$1.9 billion was unaccounted for, according to [a report by US broadcaster CNN](#). The report also found evidence that shows that Russia has worked closely with Sudan's military junta to ensure that billions of dollars in gold bypass the Sudanese treasury in exchange for the [Kremlin's political and military backing](#).

A Prigozhin-controlled company, Meroe Gold, was created in Sudan in summer 2017 at a time when Russia and Sudan were strengthening ties and signing cooperation agreements. The purpose of Meroe Gold was to run Prigozhin's economic and financial operations, in particular the exploitation of Sudan's gold resources, which is also said to be guarded by several Sudanese paramilitaries.

On 11 April 2019, the Sudanese pro-democracy movement toppled al-Bashir but Wagner maintained its relationship with the head of the Rapid Support Forces That relationship appeared to be instrumental in overthrowing the civilian-led government nearly two years later. Following the coup, army General Abdel Fattah Burhan took over as military leader Hemedti, making him his deputy.

Prigozhin tried to align himself with army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. However, the relationship deteriorated after the June 2019 Khartoum massacre when Sudanese security services [violently dispersed a sit-in](#), and pushed the Wagner Group back into a "guardianship" role protecting its mining interests.

What is the role of the EU in the Sudanese crisis?

The relations between Sudan and the European Union (EU) began in 1975. The EU is represented in Sudan by a fully accredited diplomatic mission. The EU Delegation is located in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum and is headed by an EU Ambassador.

Eight EU member states are officially accredited and residents in Sudan: Italy, Germany, France, Spain, Sweden, Netherlands, Romania and Hungary.

The European Union has always been concerned about the political and humanitarian situation in Sudan.

Concerning the latest political and humanitarian developments and the actors involved, it is worth noting that on 4 October 2016, several MEPs filed a written parliamentary question addressed to the European Commission. It concerned the suspected indirect EU financing of the Rapid Support Forces deployed by the government at the borders with Libya to prevent irregular migration and combat human trafficking. The project "Better Migration Management (Khartoum Process)" was indeed part of the EU-Sudan cooperation and the MEPs were reminding the EU Commission that the International Criminal Court and Amnesty International had documented crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated by the Sudanese militia.

The answer of the EU Commission was: "The Sudanese Rapid Support Forces are not benefitting and will not benefit from direct or indirect support under the Better Migration Management (BMM) project, or under any other current or future EU-funded project."

More recently, on 25 February, before the conflict, the Council of the European Union imposed [new sanctions on the Meroe gold mining company](#) linked to the Wagner group saying that the activities of the Russian mercenary group endanger international peace and security and threaten the people in

the countries where they operate and the European Union.

And a few days ago, the EEAS published a statement about the massacre of dozens of civilians in the Darfur saying:

“The European Union joins the UN High Commissioner for Human rights in condemning the killing in West Darfur of at least 87 people, allegedly by the Rapid Support Forces and their allied militia. We call on all parties to the conflict to allow searches for the dead and their collection and evacuation.

The EU also recalls that there is an obligation on all to cooperate with investigations by the International Criminal Court into this atrocity and all crimes committed during the current hostilities within the jurisdiction of the Court.”

In this conflict, the EU Council repeats in all its statements “The EU condemns the refusal of both Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict.

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