

Research Briefing

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South Sudan: A decade of independence

Timeline

9 July 2011: declares independence

2013: civil war breaks out

2018: peace agreement

2021: UN warns of risk of relapse into “large scale conflict.”¹

South Sudan commemorated its tenth anniversary as an independent state in early July 2021. The euphoria and optimism that accompanied South Sudan’s independence was soon shattered and the country descended into a devastating five-year civil war. Ongoing localised violence, and slow progress in implementing a 2018 peace agreement, has raised fears of renewed conflict at a national level. The UK says the present humanitarian crisis is “largely man-made and largely preventable.”²

An end to the civil war

In September 2018 the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan was signed in Addis Ababa by President Salva Kiir and main rebel leader Riek Machar, Kiir’s former deputy President. Machar was formally sworn in as First Vice President and a transitional government was formed in February 2020. Kiir leads the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) while Machar leads the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement in Opposition (SPLM/A-IO).

¹ A longer timeline can be found in “[South Sudan’s decade of independence: a timeline](#)”, Al Jazeera, 9 July 2021. For a more detailed discussion of the civil war, peace agreement and events in recent years see Commons Library papers “[Civil war in South Sudan: a primer](#)”, March 2015 and “[South Sudan: March 2019 update](#)”, March 2019. The UN quote is from [Final report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 2521 \(2020\)](#)”, UN Security Council, S/2020/365, 15 April 2021.

² “[Delivering the stable and prosperous nation the people of South Sudan deserve](#)”, FCDO, 21 June 2021

Slow progress in implementing the peace deal

However, progress on implementing the Revitalised Agreement remains slow. The UK has identified “the absence of political will” as one of the reasons for the slow implementation.³

“The first ten years of this young country’s history have seen much suffering due to conflict related abuses, famine, flooding and disease.”

Troika statement, 8 July 2021⁴

In February 2021, The Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan, established by the UN Human Rights Council in 2016, said that “persistent political grandstanding, disagreement, suspicion and distrust among the main parties... resulted in undue delays” in achieving key milestones. The Commission observed legislative functions had ground to a halt without the reconstitution of the Transitional National Legislative.⁵ The Legislative Assembly was reconstituted in May. A general election has been delayed from 2022 to 2023.

The Commission says delays in implementing the Revitalised Agreement has “left South Sudan still mired in conflict, heightened insecurity, a dire humanitarian situation and weak public institutions, infrastructure, laws, policies and political processes.”⁶ In July the chair of the Commission warned considerable work remains to ensure South Sudan “does not slide back into violent national conflict.”⁷

Ongoing violence and humanitarian crisis

The Commission has also reported an intensification of attacks on civilians, documenting “some of the most brutal attacks carried out over the past seven years.”⁸ The report notes sexual and gender-based violence has “persistently been a hallmark of the conflict in South Sudan.”⁹ The UK Government has said it intends to continue to press the South Sudan Government to tackle sexual and gender-based violence.¹⁰

The Commission also accuses government forces and armed groups of using starvation as a method of warfare.¹¹ Conflict, floods, drought and [locust plagues](#) have devastated crops and food supplies. UN OCHA (the Office for

³ “[Delivering the stable and prosperous nation the people of South Sudan deserve](#)”, FCDO, 21 June 2021

⁴ “[South Sudan 10 years of independence: Troika statement](#)”, FCDO, 8 July 2021

⁵ “[Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/46/53, 4 February 2021, para 15. Reports and statements from the Commission can be found on the [Commission’s website](#).

⁶ [Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/46/53, 4 February 2021, para 26

⁷ “[Ten years after gaining independence, civilians in South Sudan still longing for sustainable peace, national cohesion, and accountability – UN experts note](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, 9 July 2021

⁸ “[Despite renewed political commitment, staggering levels of violence continued across South Sudan for the second successive year, UN experts note](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, 19 February 2021

⁹ [Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/46/53, 4 February 2021, para 65

¹⁰ [Human Right and Democracy Report 2020](#), CP 458, 8 July 2021

¹¹ “[Ten years after gaining independence, civilians in South Sudan still longing for sustainable peace, national cohesion, and accountability – UN experts note](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, 9 July 2021

the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) has identified 8.3 million people as needing humanitarian assistance and 7.2 million as acutely food insecure, as of June 2021.¹² In June the World Food programme said food insecurity has reached the most extreme levels since independence ten years ago, with 60 per cent of the population struggling to find enough food each day. The WFP estimates over 100,000 people are on the very edge of famine.¹³

The Commission says rampant corruption and economic crimes “continue to foment grievances and drive conflict.”¹⁴ The UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan found government security forces and other armed groups are looking to generate their own sources of revenue, depriving the government of funds.¹⁵ This leaves South Sudan reliant on international donors.

South Sudan was the third highest African recipient of UK bilateral country-specific Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2019. The majority of the £207 million was allocated to the health sector.¹⁶ The FCDO has confirmed [bilateral ODA is allocated to South Sudan](#) in 2021/22.

Questions about current leadership

The leadership of Kiir and Machar, and the personal divisions between them, have been identified by some as a contributing factor to the slow implementation of the Reconciliation Agreement.

The UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan, in their report to the UN Security Council, says relationships between and within the two main signatories to the Agreement (the SPLM and the SPLM/A-IO) have frayed because of the gridlock over key decisions. Discontent with their respective leaders is evident, with splinter factions forming within the groups:

Multiple senior interlocutors in South Sudan have reiterated the position of the Jieng Council of Elders¹⁷ that Mr. Kiir and Mr. Machar have become obstacles to democracy, economic development and human progress in South Sudan and should step down to allow the country to explore other political alternatives and prevent new conflict.¹⁸

Andrews Atta-Asamoah, a former member of the UN Panel of Experts on South Sudan, and now with the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa,

¹² [South Sudan Humanitarian snapshot](#), UN OCHA, June 2021

¹³ [WFP South Sudan Situation Report #291](#), 16 July 2021.

¹⁴ [Report of the Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan](#)”, UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/46/53, 4 February 2021, para 22

¹⁵ [Final report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 2521 \(2020\)](#)”, UN Security Council, S/2020/365, 15 April 2021.

¹⁶ [Statistics on International Development: Final UK Aid Spend 2019](#), FCDO, updated 9 March 2021

¹⁷ The Jieng Council of Elders said in February 2021 that “President Kiir and Dr Riek Machar symbolise both failure of leadership and political deadlock.” Ibid annex 4.

¹⁸ [Final report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 2521 \(2020\)](#)”, UN Security Council, S/2020/365, 15 April 2021.

says fresh leadership is needed: “you should give room to a new crop of leaders who'll reflect with a new mindset the reality and the diversities of a post-conflict South Sudan.”¹⁹

Sanctions

In 2015 the UN Security Council introduced asset freezes and travel bans against several individuals (resolution 2206) and an arms embargo in 2018 (resolution 2428). These were renewed in May 2021 (resolution 2577) and the Security Council says it will review the embargo measures in light of progress on five key benchmarks:

- Completion by the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity of stages 1, 2 and 3 of the country’s strategic defence and security review;
- the formation of a unified command structure and redeployment of the Necessary Unified Forces;
- progress on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration;
- progress on properly managing existing arms and ammunition stockpiles;
- the implementation of the Joint Action Plan for the Armed Forces on addressing conflict-related sexual violence.²⁰

The [South Sudan \(Sanctions\) \(EU Exit\) Regulations 2019](#) gives effect to the UK’s obligations under these two resolutions. It came fully into force on 31 December 2020, replacing relevant existing EU legislation and related UK regulations. Further information can be found on Gov.uk: [The South Sudan sanctions regime](#). Individuals designated under this regime are included in the [UK sanctions list](#).

In addition, the Government has sanctioned a Sudanese businessman under the new Global Anti-Corruption regime. On 26 April the UK announced an asset freeze and travel ban on Ashraf Seed Ahmed Hussein Ali, widely known as Al Cardinal, for his involvement in the “[misappropriation of significant amounts of state assets](#).”²¹ In June the UK warned it could consider new sanctions listings if the South Sudanese authorities fails to guarantee the safety of humanitarian workers and to hold to account those responsible for the deaths of workers.²²

¹⁹ “[South Sudan: Dashed hopes after 10 years of independence](#)”, DW, 9 July 2021

²⁰ “[Security Council Extends Arms Embargo on South Sudan, Mandate of Expert Panel, Adopting Resolution 2577 \(2021\) by 13 Votes in Favour, 2 Abstentions](#)”, UN Security Council SC/14536, 28 May 2021

²¹ “[UK sanctions 22 individuals involved in serious international corruption](#)”, FCDO, 26 April 2021

²² “[Delivering the stable and prosperous nation the people of South Sudan deserve](#)”, FCDO, 21 June 2021

Future outlook

The tenth anniversary has prompted some reflections on South Sudan's journey from the world's newest state, its collapse into civil war, the brief hopes of a peace accord, to concern about ongoing violence and the willingness of its current leaders to deliver on the pledges made in the Revitalised Agreement.

The UN Secretary-General, looking ahead to the anniversary, called upon the leaders of South Sudan to “reinvigorate all efforts to achieve peace and stability” and to implement the key outstanding provisions of the Revitalised Agreement.²³

The head of the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General, echoed his comments:

We... urge the country's political leaders to seize this opportunity to make the hopes and dreams of a decade ago a reality by securing the sustainable peace needed to enable full recovery and development.²⁴

The UK, alongside its Troika partners of Norway and the US, similarly urged the signatories “to accept accountability for their commitments and go much further, much faster.”²⁵

Alan Boswell of the International Crisis Group says the country is “in a much worse spot that it was 10 years ago.”²⁶ Hara Mutasa, an Al Jazeera reporter, described a sense of disillusionment in the capital, Juba, on independence day. Contrasting that with the raucous celebrations that erupted a decade before, Al Jazeera says the country “remains in the grip of political instability, economic malaise and an acute hunger crisis.”²⁷

Alan Boswell worries about the prospects for elections in 2023 if further progress isn't made in unifying rival ethnic camps:

If the elections essentially become a showdown between the two main warring parties and it becomes clear that one side's going to win and one side's going to lose, that would be a recipe on its own, potentially they may go back to civil war.²⁸

²³ [“Situation in South Sudan: Report of the Secretary-General”](#), UN Security Council, S/2021/566, 14 June 2021, para 110

²⁴ [“10th anniversary of independence provides opportunity for fresh push for peace in South Sudan”](#), UNMISS, 8 July 2021

²⁵ [“South Sudan 10 years of independence: Troika statement”](#), FCDO, 8 July 2021

²⁶ [“Kiir pledges peace as South Sudan marks decade of independence”](#), Al Jazeera, 9 July 2021

²⁷ [“Kiir pledges peace as South Sudan marks decade of independence”](#), Al Jazeera, 9 July 2021

²⁸ [“South Sudan marks troubled decade of independence with little fanfare”](#), France 24, 9 July 2021

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