



[\[Back \]](#)

[USIPeace Briefing](#)

Peacemaking and Peacebuilding in Eastern Sudan

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- [Drivers of Conflict in Eastern Sudan](#)
- [Lessons from the Comprehensive and Darfur Peace Agreements](#)
- [Key Actors and their Roles and Responses to Eastern Sudan's Crises](#)
- [The Way Forward for Peace and Stability in Eastern Sudan](#)

The Beja Congress and Free Lions rebel movements in eastern Sudan¹ have waged a low-intensity conflict since 1997, alleging that the government has marginalized the region politically, socially, and economically. In January 2005, there were fears that the conflict would intensify (after the armed forces of the government of Sudan (GOS) killed demonstrators in the city of Port Sudan). Fortunately, the conflict did not escalate; on the whole violence in eastern Sudan has been kept to minimal levels. In June 2006, the Eastern Front—a coalition of the Beja Congress and the Free Lions—and the GOS entered into formal peace talks in Asmara, Eritrea. The government of Eritrea serves as mediator to the talks.

To understand the drivers of conflict and the keys to sustainable peace in eastern Sudan, the United States Institute of Peace, in partnership with the [Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa](#), hosted a workshop entitled "Listening to East Sudan: Assessing the Social and Economic Stresses, Mobilising Responses" in Nairobi, Kenya, from August 21 to 23, 2006. Seventeen representatives from a cross-section of Sudanese civil society organisations and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) attended. On September 20, a meeting of the Institute's Sudan Peace Forum, which comprises policy and academic experts on Sudan, took place as a follow-up to the Nairobi workshop. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the main discussions and recommendations of the participants of the workshop and the Sudan Peace Forum.

Drivers of Conflict in Eastern Sudan

The population of eastern Sudan suffers from dire economic and social conditions and political marginalization. The participants asserted that the residents of eastern Sudan have inadequate access to health care and education; suffer from high levels of unemployment and poverty; must contend with persistent drought, famine, land degradation, and diminished pasture area; and harbor deeply rooted grievances of neglect by the central government. For nine years, the Eastern Front waged a low-intensity war against the GOS to protest this state of affairs. A discussion of the economic and social conditions revealed the region's challenges, but also highlighted opportunities for peacebuilding.

Economic Inequities

Eastern Sudan has rich resources and is strategically located. It has fertile agricultural zones - especially in Gedarif; vast grazing areas; gum arabic resources; and minerals such as gold, oil, and natural gas. Port Sudan in Red Sea State is the region's only outlet to the sea, making the area strategically important to the country. Yet, the region remains among the poorest in Sudan. Even some of its positive attributes work

against the interests of its residents. The mechanisation of Port Sudan effectively excludes many of them from employment, because they lack the appropriate skills. Similarly, the gold mine and oil well projects that exist do not benefit residents; many complained of discriminatory hiring practices against local labor, who are viewed as less qualified.

The distorted policies of the federal government also contribute to the region's poverty. According to many, the region does not get financial transfers from the central government that reflect its rich natural resource base. Moreover, the government has invested considerably less in the development of the region's infrastructure as compared to other parts of Sudan. The government's policies for pricing, taxation, and financial re-distribution from the center to the regions lack transparency and accountability. Furthermore, the government also does not support the region's negotiations of cross-border trade agreements, which could boost development by taking advantage of the region's proximity to international markets, particularly across the Red Sea to the Gulf States. The cumulative result of these factors is not only a lack of development, but also a steady migration of labor from the rural to the urban areas.

Social constraints

Public services are greatly lacking in eastern Sudan. The residents of the region have poor access to healthcare and education, particularly in the rural areas. Participants pointed out that the politicization of the civil service, government institutions, tribal leaders, and public administration exacerbates these service deficiencies. Civil society, whose role is to advocate on behalf of improving living conditions, is weak. The displacement and poverty resulting from the lack of services has eroded the coping abilities of many families, participants emphasized. The paucity of services has resulted in migration, in many cases out of the region entirely.

In addition to public service deficiencies, there are also culturally based obstacles that militate against improving the standard of living in the region. For example, many participants pointed to the pervasive stereotype of the Beja, the dominant (and non-Arab) ethnic group of the region, as uncooperative, conservative, and resistant to change. This negative image, which is also perpetuated by the media, makes it difficult for the Beja to secure employment. Other participants also observed that women are not well represented in the decision-making processes. This is particularly true for women in rural areas.

Still, there are attributes that could, if coupled with strong development programs, provide opportunities for the region to improve its standard of living. First, migration to the urban areas, many noted, is usually not a permanent move for residents in eastern Sudan. Those who migrate to urban areas usually return to the rural areas when situations improve. Additionally, there are positive factors and trends that can be harnessed by policymakers to improve the standard of living. These include: the increasing number of educated youth; the presence of three universities; an increased awareness and concern with the issue of women; emerging and expanding civil society movements; and finally, a growing social awareness and consciousness at the local, regional, and national levels of the problems in the region.

Lessons from the Comprehensive and Darfur Peace Agreements

In June 2006, the Eastern Front entered into negotiations with the GOS, mediated by Eritrea, to find a political solution to the social, economic, and political grievances of the region. According to one expert, many felt that an Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (EPA) would be considerably easier to negotiate because the issues are not as contentious as in Darfur or between the North and South. Specifically, the East does not have a high level of violence or demands for self-determination. Rather, many of the grievances are related to development. The GOS and the Eastern Front agreed to a Declaration of Principles (DOP) in June 2006, as a first step to a peace agreement. The DOP, in part, states that any accord must contain provisions for wealth sharing and adequate social services; it uses the CPA as a basis for a peace agreement with the Eastern Front. Thus, during the workshop, participants deliberated on lessons to be learned from the contents and processes of the [Comprehensive Peace Agreement \(CPA\)](#) and the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) that could be applied to an EPA.

The most significant aspect of the CPA, according to the participants, is that it stopped the war, addressed the root causes of the North-South conflict, and was consultative. Of particular relevance for the East, the CPA reshaped relations between the center and the regions; provided for wealth and power sharing; recognised the problems of the marginalised areas; provided for democratic transformation, and contained a strong bill of rights that, importantly, includes gender equality. Participants also highlighted the CPA's peace process. Specifically, they praised the inclusion of civil society in the negotiating delegation; the selection and neutrality of mediators; the local, regional, and international guarantors; the Joint Assessment Mission to determine Sudan's economic, social, and developmental priorities; and an Assessment and Evaluation Commission (AEC) whose mandate is to monitor and investigate the roadblocks in the CPA's implementation.

Divergent opinions were offered on the state of the CPA's implementation. Some voiced concern about weakly implemented commissions, such as the AEC and the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC), or unimplemented commissions, such as the Human Rights Commission and the Electoral Commission. The AEC and CRC were deemed ineffectual because they were slow in organizing meetings and were poorly funded. On the other hand, others noted that even a few meetings were positive signs of the CPA's progress. Additionally, others expressed concern that the formula for political power sharing left the GOS in sufficient control to hinder the implementation of the CPA.

In contrast to the assessment of the CPA, the evaluation of the DPA was generally negative. While the land and economic commissions and the development fund were cited as important aspects of the DPA, the participants identified serious shortcomings. A key deficiency was the DPA's failure to deal effectively with the issues of wealth- and power-sharing. The DPA also did not unite the warring parties to a common quest for peace and has not stopped the war. In fact, the participants noted the situation is even worse. Additionally, participants criticized the current plan to organize a Darfur-Darfur dialogue after the peace agreement. As a process meant to build reconciliation and solicit the views of civil society groups and other stakeholders, it should have preceded the negotiations.

Key Actors and their Roles and Responses to Eastern Sudan's Crises

In extensive discussions, the participants examined the roles and responses of key actors in addressing the political and social crises in eastern Sudan. Emphasis was placed on the steps taken by the GOS to negotiate with the Eastern Front and invest in the region; the role of armed groups, civil society, the private sector, and the international community; and the regional implications of peace in eastern Sudan.

The Government of Sudan

The CPA seems to have served as the impetus for increased development assistance and political settlement in eastern Sudan. In the lead-up to the realization of the CPA and in its aftermath, the GOS began to increase investment in infrastructure projects in the region. The GOS has forged links with other actors to work on development, is collaborating with UN agencies on the issue of IDPs, and has allowed more participation at local and national levels. Although they generally welcomed this attention, some participants viewed it as a strategy to gain votes in the 2008 elections and criticized the GOS' focus on physical infrastructure projects rather than on badly needed social programs.

Although the most important effect of the CPA has been to initiate the peace talks for the East, participants were critical of the negotiation's closed process and exclusion of other political parties, civil society, and traditional leaders. While some groups, like tribal leaders, had participated in other talks, such as those held in Cairo, they are not part of the high-level talks in Asmara. Some felt that the government had successfully politicized the tribal leadership through patronage and coerced them to accept a minimal role. Consequently, some worried that government would make a tactical rather than a strategic agreement - in that the Eastern Front would be weakened through the exclusion of other relevant stakeholders. Others criticized the exclusion of international participation in the mediation and the dearth of information

from the peace talks. Indeed, the media is tightly controlled in Sudan. The private print media has been increasingly censored and the GOS does not permit the private ownership of radio stations (the most widespread medium). Thus, little independent information is available.

Armed Groups

Many participants feared that Darfur's instability might threaten peace in the East. There are new worries of infiltration by Darfur's Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) - which were alleged to have provided training to the Eastern Front rebels. The relationship between the three rebel movements is unclear, as is the influence of the JEM and SLA after a peace agreement is signed. However, some participants reported that the presence of the JEM and SLA disturbed residents; in retaliation, local security forces harassed internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Darfur by blaming them for the presence of Darfurian rebel groups.

Civil Society

Although civil society organizations (CSOs) exist in eastern Sudan, they are generally weak. Some are able to provide relief and social support and participate in the implementation of government and non-government programmes; however, most CSOs must contend with political, financial, and logistical constraints. Notably, CSOs cannot access accurate information to conduct their work; they face restrictions by the new NGO law, which requires organizations to register and obtain approval from government before operations can begin; they often subordinate their agenda to donors' demands in order to obtain funding, which can hinder their effectiveness; and finally, CSOs have a tendency to concentrate in urban areas, limiting their outreach to the much needier rural areas. Faith-based groups, also important service providers, are less constrained. They have more freedom to operate than other groups and work primarily in the areas controlled by the National Democratic Alliance, a long-time opposition party. Among the Islamic organizations working in Kassala, participants alleged that some are supported by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or other Gulf States.

Private Sector

Private enterprises contribute to the service sector, provide labor opportunities and invest in agriculture and industries, yet are also symbols and sources of inequitable access to resources. Many participants argued that the practice of mono-crop, mechanised farming by large-scale farms leads to the degradation of the land, depletion of forests, and displacement of pastoralists and small farmers. This indirectly encourages farmers and pastoralists to leave the rural areas for the cities. Thus, although these companies are flourishing, the local people are not benefiting from their presence. Furthermore, participants suspected that many of these companies had ties to the regime, which provided the necessary resources and political benefits to operate. Meanwhile, the majority of the small producers in farming and industry have no direct access to finance, which prevents them from fully developing.

The International Community

Participants distinguished between INGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies, and the donor community. INGOs primarily provide humanitarian assistance and support development plans in the region. They have been instrumental in helping the region cope with persistent drought; developing small-scale agriculture and food security programs; and providing health services and assistance to women. However, like CSOs, INGOs work in urban or semi-urban areas such as Port Sudan and Kassala town, paying little attention to the rural areas. The participants also criticized the lack of consistency in INGOs' projects; their heavy focus on humanitarian work, as opposed to recovery or development activities; the poor coordination between them; the lack of a comprehensive approach; and their poor information on the region.

In the same vein, participants charged that donors implement uncoordinated programs. Donor-sponsored projects seem to lack strategy, consistency, and consultation; concentrate on issues of governance to the

detriment of other more immediate concerns, such as poverty; direct only limited resources to the East; and fail to build partnerships with national CSOs. Donors also tend to provide funds based on their own political agendas, rather than addressing the needs of eastern Sudan.

Participants voiced more positive assessments of the UN agencies. The UN agencies were lauded for their collaboration with civil society on humanitarian and development issues such as feeding programmes, caring for IDPs and refugees, small-scale income generation schemes, and the creation of pasture development programmes.

Regional Actors

The regional dimension is critical in understanding the motivations behind the policy stances of the countries in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Especially important to eastern Sudan are Eritrea and Ethiopia. Less significant are the interests of Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

Eritrea is the most significant actor in eastern Sudan. According to one expert, its role as a mediator reflects both its security issues, as well as its philosophy that Africa's regional problems should be managed regionally. Moreover, a positive outcome would improve Eritrea's standing internationally, as well as with the United States. Still, there are questions about whether Eritrea can serve as a neutral mediator. In the past, Eritrea allowed the Eastern Front's rebels to live and train within its borders. For this reason, its foreign policy with Sudan has been strained; in fact in 2002, relations between the two countries were suspended. This makes the Eritrea-Sudan collaboration a significant win for both governments, but it strains Sudan-Ethiopia relations, in light of the hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Additionally, participants speculated that settlement of the conflict in eastern Sudan might bring back attention to some of the territorial disputes that exist along the Ethiopia-Sudan border.

Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait are indirectly involved in the region. Libya does not have a direct role in the conflict or the peace talks. However, in earlier attempts to broker an accord between the GOS and the insurgent groups, it contributed to a rift between the Free Lions and the Beja Congress, by inviting only the Free Lions to participate in peace talks. Participants thus viewed Libyan involvement with suspicion. Egypt's interest relates to concerns for its southern border with Sudan, but otherwise it does not interfere with the peace process. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were seen as having close cultural ties to eastern Sudan - especially through the Rashaida, who are considered "pure Arabs." Still, it was observed that Saudi support had visibly declined since the 1989 coup, as they tried to distance themselves from what was considered a radical Islamic regime.

The Way Forward for Peace and Stability in Eastern Sudan

Participants developed several recommendations to promote development, social equity, and peace and reconciliation.

Development of the region

Many emphasized strengthening economic development programs and practices for the region. Particular focus rested on clarifying land tenure policies and methodologies for resolving land disputes. In this regard, a number recommended developing long-term plans for supporting pastoral and agro-pastoral livelihoods and harmonizing customary and statutory laws on land use. Furthermore, participants advocated institutional reform to increase transparency and accountability in the use of public funds and building capacity to improve disaster preparedness. Finally, many recommended increasing the accessibility of financing for small-scale enterprises and developing closer links with the Arabic development institutions to assist with project financing.

Social Equity

Strong recommendations were issued for promoting social equity and reconciliation. Overall, participants advocated the equitable treatment and representation of eastern Sudanese (especially the Beja) in national institutions and projects. Many urged the protection of the cultural heritage and language of the people of the East. Appeals were specifically directed at the school system and the media: Schools must ensure that the curricula are relevant to both Arab and non-Arab groups and the media must promote linguistic and cultural diversity. To these ends, they recommended adopting lessons from other countries in protecting traditional practices and minorities.

Peace and Reconciliation

In light of the peace talks, participants recommended actions to increase the chances of durable peace and the population's support of any resulting peace agreement. Because the peace negotiations with the Eastern Front are based on the CPA, it is imperative that the commissions required in the CPA become operational - this will assist with the consolidation of peace in eastern Sudan. Of great significance to the East are the CPA's wealth and power-sharing provisions. The East must receive a fair share of the financial support from the central government and participate equitably in political decisions. Others also felt that the Eastern Front should broaden its conditions beyond developmental targets in order to achieve political parity.

To increase the buy-in from the population, the peace process must be more consultative and transparent: the international community must be allowed to observe the process, civil society and other relevant stakeholders must participate in the peace talks, and an intra-east dialogue should take place. Additionally, to build public trust, the GOS must release the findings of the killing of demonstrators in Port Sudan that occurred in January 2005 and punish the perpetrators. Equally important, the Darfur rebel groups that are present in the region must respect the ceasefire agreement in effect.

The difficulties of implementing the CPA and DPA raised concerns about the GOS to implement three agreements simultaneously. For this reason, a development conference on Sudan was proposed as a means to reconcile the issues of the three peace agreements (and others that may emerge) to increase their chances of implementation. Moreover, an international conference on Sudan would bring in greater involvement from the international community, which some felt could be important in guaranteeing the implementation of agreements.

Notes

1. Eastern Sudan comprises the states of Red Sea, Gedarif, and Kassala.

Of Related Interest

- [Sudanese-Chadian Relations](#)
USIPeace Briefing, April 2006
- [The Sudanese Hecatomb](#)
Peace Watch, April/May 2006
- [Emergent Insecurity in Eastern Sudan](#)
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Special Report, June 1999

- [A New Approach to Peace in Sudan: Report on a USIP Consultation](#)
Special Report, February 1999

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