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South Sudan's tragedy is the responsibility of the country's political elite

By Mark Furness,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

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South Sudan's tragedy is the responsibility of the country's political elite

Bonn, 7 May 2014. The South Sudan civil war that broke out on 15 December 2013 has left tens of thousands dead and forced more than one million people from their homes. Amid the chaos and killing, the wider tragedy is that the country's political elite have chosen violent conflict over peace and the development of a modern state.

A blank canvas

South Sudan has been the focus of international attention since the war with Sudan ended in 2005 and especially since independence in July 2011. Donors considered South Sudan to be a 'blank canvas' where past mistakes would be avoided. The United States saw itself as the new country's 'midwife' and invested serious political capital through Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry. China's interest in South Sudanese oil saw the intervention-shy great power take unprecedented steps to mediate between Khartoum and Juba. The UK, Germany and the Nordic countries had large bilateral development programmes in South Sudan aimed at diversifying the country's economy, building infrastructure and strengthening government capacity.

Despite the country's massive challenges, there was an atmosphere of hope that there would be a 21st century miracle. Juba was a boom town between 2011 and 2013, full of Western diplomats and aid workers, business people from Asia and the Middle East, and Kenyans, Ugandans and Rwandans providing services ranging from taxi driving to banking and IT. South African brewer SAB Miller invested more than \$US 50 million in a state-of-the-art brewery, and there was talk of new pipelines for exporting the oil that would pay for it all.

Troubling signs

Amid the post-independence euphoria, there were warning signs that all was not well. Relations with the Sudanese government in Khartoum were poor, and South Sudan's January 2012 suspension of oil exports over a transfer fees dispute alarmed the international community. Opaque governance in the Sudan Peoples' Liberation Movement (SPLM) was reflected in unaccountable 'national security' services with factional ties to senior politicians. There was the whiff of corruption as well connected individuals got rich from government contracts. Several violent cattle rustling incidents and stories that the army had committed atrocities in rural areas were condemned but accepted as inevitable in a fragile country with massive development challenges.

With hindsight, it is clear that the international community's trust in the SPLM was misplaced. Sudanese journalists warned of the consequences of the split in the SPLM between politicians with power-bases in

ethnic communities, especially following the sacking of former Vice President Riek Machar in July 2013. Although international experts were aware of the split, there was no contingency plan for the worst-case scenario that it would spark a civil war along ethnic lines.

So what does the international community do now?

The international community's options are limited so long as South Sudan's leaders choose violence over peace. Nevertheless, several measures to raise the costs of war to the elite have to be attempted. The USA, China, the EU and East African neighbours all have interests in stability and development. South Sudan's leaders need pressure to sort out their differences and start building their country for the benefit of all who live there. Targeted sanctions, such as individual travel bans and asset freezes, could incentivize this. The massacres and attacks on hospitals in Juba, Bor, Malakai and Bentiu are completely unacceptable and a UN resolution is needed to enable the International Criminal Court, which South Sudan does not recognize, to investigate these incidents. As perpetrators cannot be brought to justice without SPLM support, this would be a test of elite commitment to peace.

Short-term responses to the current crisis are urgently needed. Violence prevented planting before the rainy season, and the UN estimates that 7 million people – more than half the country's population – face famine by the end of 2014. A massive humanitarian response needs to be prepared now. Achieving this will be difficult, especially given that crises in Syria and Central African Republic also demand international attention and funds.

Long-term measures also need to be undertaken. South Sudan's independence provided a unique chance for a troubled region to escape its brutal past. South Sudan's East African Community neighbours have been considering extending membership to the new country, and they need to step up with a plan for regional development. Nile basin countries have comparative advantages that could become the basis for a northeast African deal involving Ethiopian hydroelectricity, South Sudanese oil, Sudanese agriculture and Egyptian investment.

Even if the political will to cooperate can be found, the fact remains that South Sudan's neighbours and international partners can only support what the country's elite wants to achieve. Rwanda and Kenya have relatively peaceful – if fragile – inter-ethnic cooperation following tragic violence. If South Sudan is to escape the curse of its conflicts and become a peaceful, prosperous country, its leaders have to choose this path, for the good of themselves and their people.