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FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

# Sudanese Priorities for a US-Sudan Policy Agenda



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## Introduction

On April 15, 2025, the war in Sudan will enter its third year. The conflict, which broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2023, has claimed the lives of [150,000 people](#) and displaced an additional [12 million](#); [3 million](#) of whom, mostly women and children, fled to neighboring countries.

As a result, the war in Sudan has become the world's largest humanitarian crisis. The conflict's humanitarian impacts are a direct result of both the SAF and the RSF's [weaponization](#) of food and humanitarian access, which has led to the destruction of food-production and halts to aid delivery, preventing Sudanese from receiving assistance where it is most needed. The humanitarian catastrophe has more recently been [exacerbated](#) by the devastating US foreign aid pause and the shuttering of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which has led to the closure of communal kitchens, the halting of cash provision, and a stop to food production and delivery.

The war in Sudan is one on civilians, and the fighting has been characterized by [conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence](#) and attacks on [civilians and civilian infrastructure](#), not limited to but including internally-displaced-persons (IDP) [camps](#), [hospitals](#), [schools](#), and [churches](#). Sudan's women and girls, [religious minorities](#), and [pro-democracy activists](#) have all been disproportionately targeted by both warring parties.

Over two years of fighting, the war has moved well-beyond fighting between two generals to include [allied militias](#) and foreign fighters. In addition, the intensity of the war has been exacerbated by interventions from both regional and global [external actors](#), such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, and Qatar.

At this point in the war, conflict dynamics have continued to change as both SAF and the RSF recapture different regions. All the while, civilians, human rights defenders, pro-democracy actors, and humanitarian workers have been [targeted](#), including in [mass-retaliatory killings](#). Following the Nairobi declaration, where the RSF and 23 allied entities—including the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North (SPLM-N) led by Abdelaziz al-Hilu—[signed a charter](#) to establish a parallel government in areas of the country under their control, Sudan is at risk of splintering.

Since April 2023, various state actors, including the United States, Saudi Arabia, and others, have attempted to mediate peace negotiations between the warring parties, and negotiations have taken place over the last two years in Jeddah, Manama, Geneva, and Cairo. However, these negotiations have failed to stop the fighting, and Sudanese civilians have critically been sidelined from mediation tables.

The United States took steps during the Biden administration to respond to the war in Sudan and its resulting humanitarian crisis, including by appointing Special Envoy for Sudan Tom Perriello, [convening](#) negotiations between the warring parties, and ultimately [securing](#) some

humanitarian access openings. The [US-designated](#) humanitarian assistance including funding for the country's Emergency Response Rooms (ERRS)—the Nobel Peace Prize [nominated](#), mutual aid groups which evolved out of Sudan's revolutionary pro-democracy Resistance Committees—have been critical to localized efforts to respond to the humanitarian crisis. In addition, the US sanctioned the leaders of [SAF](#) and the [RSF](#), and made [genocide](#) and [war crimes](#) determinations involving the RSF and SAF respectively.

In February 2025, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) convened a group of Sudanese advocates and policy experts in Washington, DC, to discuss the challenges and opportunities that the country faces as the war nears its third year, coalescing around policy recommendations which the Trump administration should prioritize on Sudan. Coupling the convening's key takeaways with research and interviews with experts, this policy paper presents critical context and recommendations implicating the humanitarian situation, the state of civilian protection, the status of negotiations, and the future of Sudan.

## The humanitarian situation in Sudan

Sudan is the world's largest humanitarian crisis, the world's largest [displacement crisis](#), and the world's worst [hunger crisis](#).

Nearly half of the population—[24.6 million people](#)—are facing acute food insecurity, with another [638,000](#) facing catastrophic levels of hunger. In December 2024, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) famine review committee [determined](#) that famine had spread to five areas across the country, projecting that it will spread to an additional five areas by May of 2025. The IPC has also identified that 17 additional areas in Sudan are at risk of famine.

According to one convening participant who is a Sudanese humanitarian advocate, the major humanitarian needs in Sudan include food assistance, addressing famine, tackling sexual and gender-based violence, as well as the provision of safe drinking water, sanitation, and the promotion of hygiene practices (WASH). Convening participants agreed that another major challenge in Sudan is the large-scale mental health crisis, spurred by the horrors of the war and generational trauma, which will have lasting impacts by hindering political dialogue and peace building efforts in the future.

Sudan's humanitarian crisis is the direct result of attacks on and manipulation of humanitarian assistance by both SAF and the RSF. Both warring parties have [blocked aid](#) from entering areas of the country under their control, [attacked](#) aid convoys, and bombed [medical facilities](#) and [IDP camps](#). Convening participants identified the protection of aid workers as a key humanitarian priority in Sudan, particularly civilians and youth working in voluntary ERRs. ERR workers have been [wounded, arrested, or kidnapped](#) by the warring parties, and at least [112 ERR members](#) have been killed since April 2023.

As both SAF and the RSF have recaptured territory throughout the war, convening participants noted that both parties have [circulated lists](#) which falsely accuse aid and medical workers, alongside human rights defenders, pro-democracy activists, and others, of being collaborators with the opposing warring faction. These individuals are at high risk of being targeted, arrested, tortured, and killed in retaliation for their role in the mutual aid response. One Sudanese convening participant described these as public executions. Alongside the physical risks of harm to aid workers, these attacks have had a [chilling effect](#) on those best positioned to organize and deliver Sudan's humanitarian response.

The [US foreign aid pause](#) was also identified as a major challenge exacerbating Sudan's humanitarian crisis. The United States was the largest humanitarian assistance provider to Sudan: it has provided more than [\\$2 billion](#) in emergency response funding since the outbreak of war. In 2024, the United States contributed [nearly half](#) of all humanitarian assistance to the country. The aid pause has been devastating for Sudan, as at least half of international NGOs and local groups delivering life-saving assistance [rely](#) on US funding.

The funding pause has [severely affected](#) key humanitarian sectors in Sudan, from protection services to healthcare and food provision, documentation, and more. Nearly [40 percent](#) of protection services, including but not limited to safe spaces for women and children, legal assistance, emergency aid for survivors, and more in Sudan were funded by USAID, and the suspension has impacted survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, children, and IDPs. The suspension has [forced shelters to close](#) and affected at least [335 healthcare facilities](#) and additional [WASH](#) activities, such as water systems management and sanitation services. More than [1,100 communal kitchens](#) have been forced to close and ERRs, which operate in regions of the country international agencies [cannot reach](#), now face a [77 percent funding gap](#).

A convening participant who is a Sudanese humanitarian advocate noted that the pause itself will pose an immediate threat to protection for ERRs and local response groups, as many of them have put forward a public profile to be eligible for US support since April 2023, now making them vulnerable to retaliatory attacks. Sudanese convening participants also described that shortly after the pause was announced, many humanitarian volunteers began sending their goodbyes out of fear that they would now be targeted even further.

Additionally, Sudanese convening participants noted that the United States is the only global leader capable of filling the humanitarian gap in Sudan, citing political unwillingness in Europe due to the war in Ukraine. Despite the State Department's [announcement](#) of emergency humanitarian waivers, US aid is [not flowing](#) to Sudan.

In response to the country's humanitarian crisis, convening participants emphasized the importance of supporting, funding, and protecting Sudan's ERRs and other local mutual aid networks. They highlighted mutual aid networks' local legitimacy and credibility, their role in local governance, their framework for local elections, and their key role in shaping Sudan's future. From an economic standpoint, one convening participant noted that, unlike major international humanitarian aid providers, ERRs support the local economy, therefore investing in them will support the sustainability of the country's economic recovery in the long term. The important role of ERRs in Sudan's democratic political transition was also emphasized throughout the convening.

## Toward a localized approach to civilian protection

The war in Sudan is a war on civilians; SAF, the RSF, and affiliated militias [indiscriminately target](#) civilians, including—but not limited to—IDPs in [protected camps](#), aid workers, pro-democracy activists, human rights defenders, [women and girls, religious and ethnic minorities](#), and [children](#).

In the months leading up to the second anniversary of the war, the RSF [killed](#) hundreds of civilians, including infants, in an attack in the White Nile State, as well as in the famine-stricken Zamzam IDP camp in [El Fasher](#). In addition to the RSF's targeting of civilians, convening participants also noted the more recent and concerning trend of SAF targeting civilians—including through killings, arrests, and disappearances—as it recaptures territory from the RSF. This includes recent massacres and retaliatory killings in [Wad Madani](#) and [Khartoum](#), as well as the targeting of civilians in [Gezira State](#) in early January 2025 by the Sudan Shield Forces, a SAF affiliate.

Convening participants agreed that civilian protection is urgently needed in Sudan. One Sudanese convening participant noted that civilians are being targeted even in regions where a ceasefire is in effect, necessitating urgent protection and monitoring efforts following local ceasefires. Participants also called for the decoupling of civilian protection initiatives from peace negotiations, stressing that while ongoing battles over areas such as [Khartoum](#) and [El Fasher](#) may delay peace negotiations, atrocities and human rights violations continue and must be urgently addressed.

Regarding the pressing need for civilian protection, a Sudanese convening participant critiqued the United Nations' reluctance to act despite the urgent needs of Sudanese civilians, referencing UN Secretary-General António Guterres' October 2024 [report](#) to the Security Council, which, despite acknowledging the dire conditions of civilians on the ground, concluded that “conditions do not exist” for the successful deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission to protect civilians. The participant described this approach as closing the door on the international conversation around civilian protection options in Sudan, rather than inviting discussions on how conducive conditions on the ground can be created.

Convening participants coalesced around the importance of monitoring and documenting human rights violations against civilians, highlighting the critical contributions of local Sudanese human rights groups. Many of these organizations have already been key partners in documenting and reporting violations to the [United Nations Independent International Fact-Finding Mission for the Sudan](#) (FFM), which has [documented](#) violations against civilians which may amount to war crimes by both SAF and the RSF, urging “urgent and immediate action to protect civilians.” One Sudanese convening participant suggested establishing

an international mechanism to coordinate documentation by local groups, the FFM, and the more recently [established](#) African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR)-African Union [Joint Fact-Finding Mission](#) for Sudan, to coalesce all findings into one place and to advance future accountability efforts. Some participants also proposed the African Union (AU) as a potential supporting body for this coordinating entity.

Given the critical role Sudanese civil society has played in human rights monitoring and documentation throughout the war, convening participants expressed unified concern over the impact of the US foreign pause on civilian protection and monitoring in Sudan. A Sudanese human rights lawyer at the convening stated that on-the-ground human rights organizations in Sudan have been forced to scale back their monitoring of violations due to funding cuts. Additionally, a participating Sudanese journalist noted that the country's journalists and independent media organizations—essential to both documentation and the fight against misinformation and disinformation, which have been [widespread](#) throughout the war—have already lost funding due to the pause.

Documentation is not only critical for future efforts at holding perpetrators accountable for the violations they commit throughout the war; it also sends strong signals to the belligerents that Sudanese stakeholders and the international community are closely watching and assembling a body of evidence for accountability efforts later, which can deter future violations.

Sudanese civilians and civil society have been vital partners to the United States and the international community in on-the-ground human rights documentation and civilian protection monitoring in Sudan. Convening participants emphasized that the country's future, including accountability efforts to hold perpetrators accountable, will depend on the renewed funding and support of these groups.

## Flipping the script on peace negotiations on Sudan: Building a civilian table

Since the outbreak of war in April 2023, the international community has made numerous attempts to negotiate peace between the belligerent parties and their external backers, convening peace talks in Jeddah, Manama, Cairo, and Geneva. This approach ultimately failed, and repeating it will, at best, result in precarious power-sharing agreements, and at worst, politically incentivize further violence for the belligerents. A new approach, which centers a Sudanese civilian-built negotiating table, can bring about a durable peace in Sudan.

The most recent major negotiation attempt took place at US-brokered talks in Geneva in August 2024. These discussions [led](#) to the establishment of the Aligned for Advancing Lifesaving and Peace in Sudan (ALPS) group, which has facilitated some humanitarian access, such as SAF's temporary [opening](#) of the Adre border crossing for humanitarian assistance. However, the talks ultimately failed to secure a lasting ceasefire or end the war. SAF [refused](#) to send a delegation, making direct discussions between the belligerents as initially planned impossible.

At present, there are no signs of upcoming internationally or otherwise-mediated peace negotiations. Convening participants do not foresee the belligerents coming to the table as long as major battles, such as that for Khartoum, are ongoing. Looking ahead, Sudanese convening participants agreed that the United States would likely broker future peace negotiations, but expressed their concerns that Sudan could become a bargaining chip in broader conversations on US policy with its Gulf allies, including portfolios such as the Abraham Accords or Saudi-Israeli normalization.

Alongside the failures of past negotiation attempts to secure a sustainable ceasefire, end the war, and ensure the protection of civilians, Sudanese civilians and civil society organizations have been completely sidelined from negotiation attempts. Convening participants noted that mediators such as the United States have taken some positive steps. These include former Special Envoy Perriello's [consistent meetings](#) with Sudanese civil society and the State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues [hosting](#) of Sudanese women on the side of the Geneva negotiations. However, Sudanese civilians and civil society, save for the heavily-criticized and RSF-aligned Taqadom coalition, have largely been kept to the side, rather than given a meaningful seat at the table.

In light of these shortcomings, convening participants agreed that the traditional approach to peacemaking in Sudan must be reimagined. Participants emphasized that the current model of attempted negotiated settlement between the two belligerent parties has further incentivized violence. One Sudanese political analyst at the convening described this dynamic as: "Picking up a gun buys you legitimacy, it buys you a seat at the negotiating table and the chance for a political future, so why wouldn't you pick up a gun?" Another described these repeated attempts as becoming "diluted," arguing peace negotiations have become avenues for political scoring by both sides.

Rather than [repeating past mistakes](#) by [negotiating political settlements](#) between generals, convening participants coalesced around a reimagined civilian-led transition in Sudan. They recommended that the international community, led by the United States, create a civilian negotiating table which can develop a political roadmap for Sudan with robust international backing—one that the belligerents would then be compelled to accept.

Building this civilian roadmap would require an inclusive process which convenes a diverse group of Sudanese civil society, including women’s groups, ERRs and pro-democracy activists, youth and victim-led groups, as well as ethnic and religious leaders. One Sudanese convening participant added there is a foundation for this bottom-up, civilian-led approach—Sudanese groups such as the Resistance Committees, the ERRs, and mutual aid humanitarian networks are a model of civilian governance that has been extremely effective at the local level; these groups also have local governing legitimacy.

Like any group of people, Sudanese civilians and civil society have diverse perspectives and experiences which will shape how they envision the future of their country. Sudanese convening participants emphasized that unlike the belligerent parties, they want to see an end to the war, so they will create spaces for different perspectives and find a way to coalesce around a roadmap for Sudan’s political future which engages comprehensively with different challenges and ensures that a number of viable solutions are on the table to create a durable peace. Furthermore, a Sudanese political analyst at the convening emphasized that these differences and the plurality of opinions could help build a strong civilian body capable of steering the country toward democratic transition. They noted that civilians have a constituency to serve, positioning them as a key partner for international mediators like the United States, who seek an end to the war.

Another key challenge identified by convening participants for civilian-led negotiations is how to bring the warring generals and their affiliates to the table. This point is particularly important given that one of the two main belligerents [skipped](#) the last round of negotiations in Geneva. To address this challenge, many of the convening participants coalesced around the United States as a key actor.

The United States is one of the only international actors with leverage over some of the most critical external actors fueling the war in Sudan, including its security partners in the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. These external actors will be critical to bringing both SAF and the RSF to any negotiating table. An expert on the Sudanese economy who also partook in the convening pointed to the conversation on the country’s reconstruction as another opportunity to create leverage and bring external actors to the table.

Moreover, the Trump administration has unique leverage over both SAF and the RSF following the Biden administration’s sanctions designations on [Abdel Fattah al-Burhan](#) and [Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo](#) (Hemedti) respectively. Under US policy, sanctions are a tool for behavioral change, and many convening participants, after noting that both Burhan and Hemedti are actively lobbying to have these designations lifted, agreed that the Trump administration can leverage these existing sanctions, among other things, to bring these belligerents to a civilian-led negotiating table. Participants suggested that this leverage also applies to the US sanctions on other entities, including [UAE-based companies](#), which can be used to incentivize UAE and RSF engagement with a new civilian-led process.

## The future of Sudan

What the future of Sudan looks like will be impacted by how the war continues to unfold and the manner in which it ultimately ends, and thereafter, the processes of accountability, economic recovery, and reconstruction.

Convening participants raised concerns about both SAF and the RSF consolidating control in particular areas of the country. Looking at SAF's advances in Khartoum and other areas of the country, convening participants expressed concerns that SAF could "win" the war, or that the international community could choose to back them against the RSF. Doing so would legitimize their political control once again without meaningfully addressing the sources of Sudan's instability or allowing for a durable political transition. Convening participants emphasized that supporting SAF to run the country cannot be the end goal, both because Sudanese stability and security necessitates a Sudanese civilian-led political transition and because SAF must be held accountable for its [war crimes](#). Convening participants also agreed that the idea of "choosing SAF" has become a misnomer, as the Sudanese army and its affiliates are fragmented and no longer have a monopoly on security. In other words, there is no unified SAF that would either win this war or be able to effectively govern thereafter.

Sudan is currently at risk of splintering further. On February 23, 2025, the RSF and 23 of its allies [signed](#) a charter in Nairobi to establish a parallel government in the areas it controls. Convening participants raised concerns about this potential fragmentation, with one Sudanese political analyst warning that any split would in reality result in the destabilizing fragmentation of the country. The analyst explained that though the split could appear attractive to external actors involved in Sudan for providing both belligerents with a sense of victory, this model would only contribute to long-term instability. Pointing to the historic split between Sudan and South Sudan, both of which remain unstable today, another Sudanese convening participant warned of a set of actions that would deliver a "third failed state". A Sudanese lawyer who participated in the convening further explained that the RSF has no political agreement with the other groups who signed the Nairobi charter, including SPLM-N, and that these political contradictions will ultimately cause this temporary unity to falter. Looking at Darfur and South Kordofan, the participant also made clear that the people in these regions would never accept rule by the RSF, SPLM-N, or other members of the newly-proposed parallel government. In other words, a new RSF-ruled parallel country in Sudan will result in further fighting, atrocities, and instability.

Neither major warring party is currently cohesive enough to unilaterally rule or restore order in Sudan. Rather than having both of these political alternatives which would result in a fragmented and unstable future Sudan, the convening participants agreed that a civilian-led political transition was the only viable path forward to stability.

Looking to the country's future beyond the end of the war, convening participants emphasized that the future of Sudan will also be shaped by the country's path to accountability, truth-seeking, and reconciliation. Participants agreed that the war is a product of impunity in Sudan's past, and that the country will require major accountability efforts which hold all Sudanese and external perpetrators to account.

Convening participants emphasized that for accountability to become successful, documentation is critical now, pointing again to the importance of funding local documentation and monitoring efforts on the ground as well as international and regional mechanisms such as the UN FFM and the ACHPR-AU Joint Fact-Finding Mission. One Sudanese participant added that in addition to supporting and engaging with these mechanisms, focusing on community-level truth and reconciliation could be a critical entry point to bring about greater social cohesion and end the war.

As for Sudan's reconstruction following the war, the economy and economic recovery will be a major issue. Sudanese convening participants highlighted major economic challenges, including the long-term neglect of local economies and humanitarian programs that only provide temporary funding and solutions. Additionally, a convening participant who is an expert on the Sudanese economy noted that economic recovery will require people at the local level who can provide responsible services in the post-war setting. They pointed to ERRs as a credible and committed example of local service provision, illustrating how these groups have already created economic networks. They also emphasized the need to build up the skills of the next generation of Sudanese alongside the critical importance of education.

Sudanese convening participants also warned of the risk of creating a permanent [war economy](#) that allows actors inside and outside of Sudan to profit from the atrocities and creates incentives to remain at war, something that will be increasingly difficult to unravel. One Sudanese political analyst at the convening added that future peacemaking efforts must address and dismantle the war economy to prevent further incentivizing this continuation of violence.

## Recommendations for US policymakers

In light of the analysis presented in this paper, TIMEP and convening participants have coalesced around the fact that the US has a critical role to play in ending the war in Sudan and in supporting Sudanese policy priorities for the country's future. Accordingly, we put forward the following key recommendations for US policymakers:

**1. Lift the foreign aid pause, and reinstate and surge humanitarian and civil society funding for Sudan:** Following nearly two years of war, Sudan requires billions in humanitarian assistance. The US government should lift its foreign aid pause, rescind suspensions for lifesaving humanitarian assistance, and urgently designate additional humanitarian funding, including to ERRs and local mutual aid networks.

Sudanese civil society has also been harmed by the funding pause. Sudanese NGOs, independent media outlets, and human rights and documenting organizations have been forced to lay off staff and halt monitoring operations critical to both civilian protection and accountability efforts during the war. Civil society will be critical to protecting civilians and to holding warring parties accountable for the genocide and war crimes occurring in the country—these organizations must have the capacity and the funding to do this work.

**2. Publicly condemn attacks on civilians and work toward civilian protection in Sudan:** US policymakers must condemn continued attacks by both warring parties on civilians, not limited to but including sexual and gender-based violence, attacks on minorities, including children and ethnic and religious minorities, and more. The US government should publicly call for civilian protection in Sudan, work with international partners to expand the United Nations Security Council Arms Embargo on Darfur to all of Sudan, and encourage and coordinate international discussions and action on civilian protection options for Sudan.

**3. Appoint high-level advisors on Sudan who can elevate the war to the highest levels of the US government:** Nearly three months into the Trump administration, the State Department lacks a Senate-confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and a Special Envoy for Sudan. In the interim, President Trump should appoint a Special Advisor for Sudan who can elevate the war to the highest levels of the US government, coordinate US agencies, convene peace negotiations, and coordinate with international partners, including the European Union, the African Union, and the Troika, which alongside the US government includes partners in the United Kingdom and Norway, to bring an end to the war. These appointments will also signal to the belligerents and their external backers, particularly US partners in the UAE and Egypt, that the United States is closely watching the atrocities and is committed to ending the war.

**4. Support a future, unified Sudan led by a civilian government:** The Trump administration must publicly condemn and actively oppose efforts to divide Sudan between the warring parties, as such actions will only result in further fragmentation, destabilization, and violence. The Trump administration must also continue to hold both main belligerents accountable.

**5. Build a negotiating table around Sudanese civilians in support of a political transition:** Traditional mediating efforts in Sudan, which have focused on negotiating political settlements between generals, have both failed and incentivized further violence to gain advantage in talks. The United States should convene Sudanese civilians and civil society, including but not limited to ERRs, women, youth, and victim-led groups, Resistance Committees, and diaspora networks to draft a civilian-led political roadmap for the future of Sudan.

**6. Use existing US sanctions and partners as leverage over the warring parties:** The Trump administration should leverage the existing US sanctions on Burhan and Hemedti, using them alongside other tools of leverage to bring both generals to the civilian-led negotiating table. The Trump administration should also use its relationships with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and other external supporters of the war to bring the warring parties to the table. In addition to participation in future mediation efforts, the existing sanctions can serve as leverage to secure concessions on humanitarian access, internet and telecommunications service, and more.

**7. Support accountability efforts in Sudan:** Impunity from past decades of violence in Sudan has resulted in the ongoing atrocities. The Trump administration must support accountability efforts for Sudan, including but not limited to funding and supporting local human rights, documentation, and monitoring efforts, international mechanisms such as the Fact-Finding Mission or universal jurisdiction cases, and local mechanisms. The US should also work with partners, such as the African Union, to support coordination of various accountability efforts. In addition, they must also work to hold external actors supporting the war, including its partners in the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, accountable for the atrocities being committed by belligerents they back.

Sudan faces many challenges to avoid marking a third anniversary of the war next year, but Sudanese civilians—both in Sudan and in exile—already have a roadmap for ending the war and stabilizing their country's future. Sudanese civilians are at the forefront of local governance, organizing, and accountability efforts, and the United States, alongside the international community, must support these efforts as they work to end the war and drive Sudan's democratic political transition.



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