

## South Sudan's Preventable Crisis

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Since December 2013, an estimated [10,000 people have been killed](#) in the conflict in the Republic of South Sudan, which has also [internally displaced more than one million people](#) and forced another [392,800 into neighboring countries as refugees](#). South Sudan became the world's newest nation on July 09, 2011, and three years after securing its independence, the country now faces the most significant political crisis to date.

I would like to pick up where [Alex de Waal left off](#), by looking at South Sudan's crisis as reflective of the predicaments facing many African countries that in turn restrict economic development. I will argue that the immediate challenge facing many countries in East Africa, specifically South Sudan, is political. The focus of the international community on building a state without investing in building a cohesive nation proved unwise: when South Sudan experienced its first significant political crisis, the country unravelled and disintegrated into a civil war.

The donor community assumption equates development with stability, leading to a focus on delivering services at the expense of aiding the growth of a stable nation. This [technical exercise failed](#) to view nation building for what it really is—a political process. In mid-December 2013, a falling out within the ruling political party, Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), and its military wing, Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), erupted into violence. The conflict has deep roots, due in part to the failed reform of the ruling party, the incomplete formation of a national army, and the international community's failure to prioritize nation building.

The donor community focused on the ruling elites despite mass corruption within the system, and continued to direct money at a government that lacked a proper national accounting system, accountability to its own citizens, and has failed to demilitarize, disarm, and reintegrate former combatants. There has been a complete lack of

emphasis on nation building activities such as promoting democratization, fostering social cohesion between communities, devolution of power to States, and strengthening the ongoing [National and Independent Reconciliation Process](#).

Very soon after South Sudan won its independence, a small group within the ruling party pushed for reform, calling for accountability, a new constitution, and checks and balances on executive power. Ignoring these efforts, in July 2013 President Salva Kiir set in motion a series of reforms designed to consolidate executive power, by firing the Deputy Vice-President and the Secretary General of the SPLM. Quickly, and not surprisingly, came the dissolution of the entire government and the leadership structure of the party. A brutal civil war has followed, waged along ethnic lines with more and more impunity.

The second dimension to the crisis is the fractured state of the army. South Sudan's national army is mainly comprised of [different factions that fought against the regime in Northern Sudan](#). When the crisis in South Sudan broke out last December, the army fragmented along ethnic lines. Ethnicity, so long a means of identity in South Sudan, surged to the front as a mobilizing tool superseding allegiance to the national army.

For the sake of the new nation, donor countries need to prioritize nation building. This means engaging local communities, building social cohesion, and opening a dialogue on the legacies of war. Instead of placing all the eggs in the state building basket, donors need to diversify the portfolio in South Sudan to include all South Sudanese and not just the ruling elites. The challenge in South Sudan is how to bring diverse peoples with a lingering history of hostility into a framework of one state. That is, how to create a pride in being South Sudanese while respecting the diversity within that term. This is less of a technical issue related to material development but more about developing the meaning of 'citizen.'

Finally, the conflicts in South Sudan tend to be dominated by those who resort to arms over those who choose non-violence. The latest crisis has seen two warring factions, government and the rebels, prioritized in the peace process, over the rest of society. Civilians have borne the cost of violence in both government and rebel-controlled territories. The international community has contributed to this militarist tendency by accepting these warring factions as representatives of society even when their legitimacy remains deeply questionable.

A few steps can be taken by countries that were signatories to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), the United Kingdom, the United States, Norway, the negotiating team represented by the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and the African Union to improve the likelihood for durable peace. They must help to build a broad-based coalition that is democratic and inclusive of all key stakeholders in South Sudan, including the military and civilian representatives. This effort must include the complete transformation of the liberation movement into a democratic political party. Lastly, there needs to be a greater emphasis on the political side of nation building, including National Reconciliation and democratization of the political process, rather than technical development measures.

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*This piece is part of The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs' [2014 Global Risk Forum](#). The Global Risk Forum is an effort to convene conversations around some of the most pressing issues we face as a global community in the year ahead: [the breakdown of climate change negotiations](#); [the spread of sectarian violence in the Middle East](#); [the credit crisis and economic slowdown in China](#); [the growth of cyber espionage](#); and [the unraveling of Africa's economic boom](#). We encourage you to read the conversations, participate with written responses or on [social media](#), and help us work together to produce constructive ideas that will reduce the aggregate risks we face.*