

The Extent of Tension between Northern and Southern Sudan

During the talks relating to the right of Southern Sudan to self-determination, the Sudanese President Omer al-Bashir repeatedly said, "Peace following secession is better than unity maintained through war". This was intended to justify giving the South the right to self-determination. This state never materialized, as secession did not yield the desired peace. Although it is now more than a year since South Sudan obtained independence, the border region between the states have not been quiet. Rather, they have witnessed several engagements. The most serious of these was the occupation and control of Heglig region, which is affiliated to the North. This led to a counter attack by northern troops and some important petroleum facilities were destroyed in the process.

In fact, these several engagements reflect numerous conflictual stances between the two parties. Until now the borders between the two countries have not been demarcated. This explains the attempt of each party to expand its geographical sphere, employing every possible means. Inevitably this led to several confrontations, which threaten the spillover of a wide-range border war unless both parties expedite the process of containing the situation via conciliatory political solutions.

If we look into the background of the current situation of escalating political tension between the two parties, we can cite many important issues. **Firstly**, there is the heavy burden of the pre-secession legacy. The Sudan witnessed a civil war between the north and the south, which had lasted for more than two-thirds of the age of the state. The civil war wasted a significant part of the human and material resources of the Sudan and inflicted plight on most of the Sudanese families, which still suffer from the scars of the bloody past. In this situation, the call of southerners for independence came to the foreground of the political landscape. A number of the northern political leaders, who thought that secession would rid the country of the burden of the south, endorsed this demand. They might have even entertained the idea that secession would drastically solve the perennial crises of the Sudan. With this call for secession, rosy expectations soared high on both sides. However, this optimism was not founded and it was soon replaced by remembrances of the crises of the past, which overloaded the present.

Secondly, it is difficult to achieve agreement as regards controversial issues. Although it is now more than a year since the South obtained its independence (January 9, 2011), the final borders between the two states have not been demarcated up to today. The main reason behind this is the fact that there are some important oil wells on the border areas of contiguity, or the regions near to these areas. The most important of these is **Abyei** region, which is both oil-rich and strategically important. These unresolved border problems require mutual compromises and a cooperative spirit in order to reach negotiated, conciliatory solutions, which will make the controversial border regions integrative domains. Yet, this presupposes the existence of a joint

political will and mutual trust. However, the pillars of this are non-existent in the current case of Sudan. The two parties to the conflict have not comprehended the ramifications and impacts of secession.

Thirdly, oil resources have been politicized and employed in exercising mutual pressures. The government of Sudan has imposed on the oil of the South transiting its borders fees that have been considered exaggerated and arbitrary by the government of South Sudan (\$32.2 per barrel to cover the fees of delivery/transport and processing in the refineries of the north). In response, the government of the south proposed \$0.63 per barrel, which, in turn, is a very low fee. The glaring gap between the two estimates brought the talks over this issue to a deadlock.

It is worth mentioning here that the fees imposed by the government of Sudan on the oil of the South were criticized even inside the Sudan. The leader of the opposition Umma party, al-Sadiq al-Mahdi, described the fees as being irrational and added that they represent an attempt to establish a partnership in the oil of the South rather than being a fee for refining, transporting and transiting. This problem could have been solved by technical arbitration; but Juba started to look for outlets to export its oil via other countries (the port of Mombasa in Kenya). However, it realized that this would take several years and incur huge financial costs. The crisis was reinforced by the refusal of the government of the South to bear its share of the external debts of the Sudan in the pre-secession era (estimated at \$ 38 billion). This was met with great indignation on the part of the government of the North.

On January 20, 2012, the government of South Sudan announced a resounding surprise: its decision to stop producing oil, which is exported via northern Sudan. This confused the calculations of the government of northern Sudan. Khartoum did not expect this according to global economic and financial logic. The revenue of oil exported from the Republic of South Sudan constitutes 98% of the earnings of the public treasury. Stopping the production of oil for a long period will mean economic asphyxia. However, what the government of Khartoum did not realize is that continuing to impede the exportation of the south oil, irrespective of the reasons and motives, will force Juba to opt eventually for mutual destruction of "Let me die with the Philistines" kind. This was recently demonstrated when the Armed Forces of the south, which are supposedly nascent and modest in terms of experience, occupied Heglig region and remained steadfast there for days. The military operations destroyed some petroleum facilities and revealed the role played by some international and regional parties in escalating the situation. According to some observers, it is difficult to distance the present Sudanese-Sudanese conflict from the American-Chinese struggle for energy.

Escalating the tension between the two parties was inseparable from the reality of the crisis-ridden internal situation in both countries. Both regimes have failed to honor their promises as to meeting the urgent daily issues of life of a nation that has suffered a great deal in the past.

This has led to strengthening the opposition factions on both sides; these factions now exhibit ferocity in confronting both regimes. Instead of employing the revenue of oil resources in the best possible way to meet the problems of development and improve the living conditions of the citizens, the politicization of employing these resources in the domain of mutual pressures led to their loss and suspension. This complicated the economic and financial crisis in both states and exposed them to increasing political, social and economic instability. Thus the brothers/foes found themselves in a predicament of their own making and offered greedy external parties an opportunity to intervene and push the two parties towards intransigence and unresponsiveness to half-way house solutions.

To my thinking, the two parties are no longer capable of affording the long no peace, no war state they had lived. In the absence of conciliatory solutions or refusal to accept them, the two parties have resorted to military means to reshuffle issues and reach a new state of balance prompted by a belief in the weakness of the other party. This is a dangerous game, which is very easy to slip into, but its end is difficult to tell. However, it is clear that the people of the two countries are going to pay for this and bear its ramifications and burdens.

The President of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, announced his readiness to withdraw from Heglig region. He started to withdraw the southern troops voluntarily without any commitment on the part of the northern government to accept the conditions he had previously set, which required sending neutral troops affiliated to the United Nations to the region and evacuating northern troops. However, all indicators clearly point to the fact that the crisis between the two countries is poised on the edge of an abyss. Khartoum has declared that Juba is an "enemy and has decided to mobilize its forces to oust its government. The Sudanese Parliament has embodied this in a decree. On the other hand, the government of South Sudan has described the regime of al-Bashir as a regime of a new "Saddam Hussein" and threatened to send troops to occupy Abyei region. Unless this crisis is handled with wisdom and prudence- "accepting halfway house solutions", the Sudan will be transformed into an arena for conflicting international and regional interests, whose ultimate aim is to control its oil and resources.

The current crisis stemmed from the misjudgment of the points of weakness and strength of the other party by the political leadership in both countries. Each party believed that it could settle unresolved problems between them in accordance with a zero-sum game. In reality, the crisis requires conciliatory solutions, mutual compromises and learning the lessons of the past and its painful experiences. Unless third parties urgently intervene to find an exit from the current predicament, the present situation is destined to worsen. This will not be in favor of southern or northern Sudan; it will plague both of them.