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NOTE

From: Presidency
To: Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject: The current situation in Sudan and its impact on the region
- Presidency paper

1. General context

As one of the seven horizontal priorities of the Hungarian Presidency, the external dimension of migration and asylum, will play a key role in the six months ahead, as we believe that addressing the root causes of migration and forced displacement, as well as facilitating and developing cooperation with key countries of origin and transit, are essential for addressing the long-term challenges posed by migration and displacement. Actions in the external dimension, such as facilitating and developing cooperation with countries of origin and transit, addressing the root causes of migration and forced displacement, and ensuring effective border management, returns and readmissions, have always played a key role in achieving this goal. There is consensus among Member States that balanced cooperation with key countries of origin and transit and building partnerships based on mutual trust and common objectives are essential for preventing emerging challenges and addressing unfolding situations. Continuous monitoring of the migratory routes is now a permanent item on our agendas, although the presidency considers it essential to draw greater attention to the countries and regions affected by conflicts, and to jointly analyse the potential impact of the crisis situations on the European Union and the tools we have at our disposal to improve our resilience.

The aim of the discussion in the EMWP is to focus on the impact of the situation in Sudan on the neighbouring countries, with the aim of giving Member States a deeper insight into the current reality of a country of origin and transit that deserves more attention. The Sudan crisis is having a substantial negative impact not only on its neighbours, but also on the wider region and on the European Union.

2. The current situation in Sudan

Sudan has been facing instability at political, economic and social level for many decades. Internal conflicts with tribal undertones in various regions of the country, but particularly in Darfur and in the south, have led to serious humanitarian crises. Political turmoil and changes of government have frequently resulted in violent clashes, forcing millions of people to flee their homes.

Today, the war in Sudan between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which broke out more than a year ago, has reached a stalemate with profound domestic and regional implications. Given the persistent influx of external military support to both sides (to the RSF from UAE and mercenaries from Chad, South Sudan, Libya, Niger, Yemen and Wagner; to the SAF from Saudi Arabia and Iran, and with weapons supplied by China and Turkey), neither side has been able to achieve a decisive victory. This deadlock not only threatens the integrity of Sudan's statehood but also bears the risk of the further polarisation and multiplication of armed actors (both warring factions have a multiplicity of affiliated militias), further undermining the chances of a durable ceasefire. The war in Sudan is poised to escalate into a wider regionalisation, with SAF having deepened links to Russia and Iran. A stalling mediation process (the flurry of mediation tracks - AU, IGAD, the US-KSA 'Jeddah process', an initiative by neighbouring countries - having resulted in multiple failures), inadequate international coordination and the slow progress on the unification of civilian actors, is allowing hostile actors to further fuel the conflict.

In the meantime, the war has been ravaging the country (the economy contracted by 40 % in 2023, and the prospects for this year remain bleak) and destroying the social fabric to a catastrophic degree. Over 25 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and over 10 million people have been displaced since April 2023 (over 2 million crossed international borders), making Sudan the largest displacement crisis in the world. Over 70 % of health facilities in conflict-affected areas are closed, of which many are severely damaged, over half of Sudanese pupils are out of school and 14 areas are at risk of famine, potentially impacting 750 000 people, who might die of starvation within the next three months (based on the latest IPC report). In addition, Sudan is currently one of the most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian workers (22 killed so far).

The number of Sudanese nationals arriving in the EU has also increased. Between April 2023 and May 2024, Frontex detected a total of 8 162 illegal border crossings of Sudanese nationals at the EU's external borders, three times more than during the same period in 2022-2023. However, considering the scale of the conflict in Sudan, those figures are still relatively low. More than three quarters of migrants arrived via the Central Mediterranean route. Since October 2023, the situation has been constantly changing, with the RSF recently reinforcing its positions around the capital, Khartoum, and forcing the SAF to move its bases to the coastal city of Port Sudan. The RSF has been making steady progress in gaining control of the Darfur region and advancing south and east against the SAF forces. In contrast, the SAF continues to control the other half of the areas around Khartoum, the Nile River, the main strategic route to Egypt, the Red Sea coast and the eastern borders with Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The EU has been at the forefront of supporting the civilian-led transition in Sudan from 2019 to October 2021 – when a coup d’Etat by General Burhan and General Hemedti (who collaborated at the time) derailed the political transition in the country. The changing geo-political context makes Sudan even more important for the EU’s geo-strategic interests. The EU remains strongly engaged in this file, adopting a neutral stance in the conflict. With regard to development aid, further funding has been contracted with international implementing partners (following the no policy engagement with state authorities, meaning that no funding is being provided to the de facto authorities). The EU remains a critical humanitarian partner, providing one third of total humanitarian aid to the country. Mid-April 2024 the EU, together with France and Germany, co-organised an international humanitarian conference for Sudan and its neighbours. The conference mobilised over EUR 2 billion for Sudan and its neighbouring countries. The EU and its Member States pledged nearly EUR 900 million; the EU itself pledged over EUR 350 million, of which EUR 150 million from DG INTPA (EUR 95 million to Sudan, EUR 55 million for South Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia and CAR), but also played a key role on the political front as an honest broker and guarantor of regional initiatives such as the Horn of Africa Initiative.

3. Impact of the conflict on the global migratory situation

The conflict in Sudan has triggered large-scale forced displacement. Millions of people have been forced to flee their homes to safer areas, mainly in neighbouring countries. Since the outbreak of the armed conflict, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Sudan has gone beyond 7 million, and the mass outflow of refugees has posed serious humanitarian and political challenges for the neighbouring countries, which are responding to this situation in different ways, but are also making joint efforts to provide safe accommodation and humanitarian assistance with support from the international community. People fleeing from Darfur region cross primarily to neighbouring Chad, while Egypt remains the top destination for people fleeing from northern and central Sudan, including the Khartoum region. According to the IOM Displacement Tracking Matrix data, as of 23 June an estimated 2 196 355 individuals have crossed borders from Sudan into neighbouring countries since the outbreak of the conflict on 15 April 2023. The majority reportedly crossed into Chad (36 %), South Sudan (33 %), and Egypt (23 %). Of these individuals, an estimated 62 % were Sudanese nationals, while 38 % were foreign nationals or returnees – however, the proportions vary by country.

These flows have created a humanitarian crisis, overstressing the capacities of the hosting communities and refugee camps in the region. The regional spill-over effects of the war in Sudan are increasing political instability in neighbouring countries, and furthermore the war is creating a breeding ground for the spread of extremist ideas and terrorist groups. The displacement crisis has further contributed to instability and social tensions; therefore the international community's assistance and cooperation are key in advancing stabilisation and sustainable solutions for these countries.

A) Impact of the conflict on Chad

The refugee crises and conflicts of the past decades have made Chad the fifth largest refugee hosting country in the world on a per capita basis. Even before the armed conflict in Sudan erupted on 15 April 2023, Chad was already hosting more than 1 million people from different countries, the majority being refugees from Sudan who arrived a decade ago during the first Darfur war. Chad hosted more than 170 000 refugees from the Central African Republic, Cameroon and Nigeria, in addition to more than 200 000 IDPs living in the south of the country, mainly near Lake Chad.

Chad is hosting nearly 40 % of people who have fled since the conflict broke out last year: more than 610 000 Sudanese refugees had arrived along with an estimated 200 000 Chadian returnees, who have spent the majority of their lives in Sudan and therefore have nowhere to return to in Chad. The reason for such high numbers is the ongoing conflict and food insecurity in Darfur, due to the current suspension of the humanitarian corridor between Chad and Darfur. The influx from Sudan into Chad shows no signs of abating, with an average of 630 people crossing the Adré border each day over the last month, as reported by UNHCR. Adré, near the border with Darfur and originally home to 40 000 people, is struggling to accommodate a sixfold increase in its population, and in Eastern Chad one in three people are considered refugees. The refugee camps are full and only temporary shelters remain available; one-third of the new arrivals are living in dire conditions at spontaneous sites along the border. The priority for Chad is to preserve the country's stability in the long term. Chad is particularly exposed to the effects of the Sudan crisis, and the EU's contribution to addressing the humanitarian crisis in eastern Chad through the triple nexus of humanitarian aid, development and peace is seen as a priority.

B) Current migration flows to other neighbouring countries

Egypt is one of the main host countries after Chad, with 719 000 refugees and asylum seekers from 62 nationalities registered by UNHCR as of 3 July 2024. The majority of newly registered refugees are Sudanese, accounting for more than half (an estimated 407 720) of the total number of refugees in Egypt.

South Sudan is also facing a significant influx of refugees, hosting around 151 962 Sudanese and 3 690 refugees of other nationalities, in addition to some 566 661 South Sudanese nationals who have been forced to return. Due to the high number of daily arrivals, the transit and reception centres are severely overcrowded and returnees are accommodated in extremely difficult conditions.

Ethiopia, the Central African Republic, Uganda and Libya also continue to receive new arrivals from Sudan, albeit in much smaller numbers. Ethiopia currently hosts over 1 million refugees and asylum seekers, 9 % of whom are Sudanese. Although Eritrea continues to welcome Sudanese nationals with open doors, it remains a negligible host country.

There are no formal restrictions on crossing the borders into Chad, South Sudan, Ethiopia or the Central African Republic. Although the two land border crossings between Egypt and Sudan are open, Sudanese nationals are still required to hold a valid travel document and apply for a visa at the Egyptian consulates in Sudan. Moreover, the long period before obtaining a residency permit (13-16 months) is hardly sustainable, as Sudanese refugees in Egypt remain illegal until then, which exposes some to deportation. Migrant smugglers and human traffickers towards Egypt are particularly active. For the Sudanese crossing the border, the percentage of men, women and children is almost identical, which can be explained by the fact that people are fleeing to neighbouring countries with their families in order to avoid armed conflict and the dire humanitarian situation in Sudan. The increasing number of Sudanese refugees in the border areas, growing health problems (e.g. outbreaks of epidemics), severe food shortages, limited access to clean water as well as escalating security incidents, an increased risk of refugees becoming victims of trafficking in human beings and the approaching rainy season call for immediate action.