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Current Crisis in Sudan and Indian Response

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Background

The present conflict in Sudan was preceded by a military coup to overthrow the tyrant President Omar al-Bashir by military generals in April 2019. This resulted in widespread protests, which ultimately led to an agreement between the military and protesters and the Sovereignty Council was set up. This council is a power-sharing body created to smoothly lead Sudan into general elections by the end of 2023. However, the military again overthrew the interim government led by Abdalla Hamdok in October 2021. Soon after this, a power struggle ensued between two military Generals, one from the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the other from the Rapid Support Force (RSF). This resulted in a preliminary deal in December 2021 for a political transition. Still, negotiations could not proceed due to the irritants involved in the integration of the RSF with the SAF, mainly due to differences in the approach towards control of resources and security sector reforms. As a result, matters worsened, and this led to open clashes, indirectly interrupting the smooth transition of Sudan into general elections as contemplated.

Indo-Sudan Ties

By virtue of its strategic location by the Red Sea in northeast Africa, Sudan is the third-largest African nation. It not only enjoys easy access to the Nile but is also blessed with a vast belt of gold reserves and agricultural potential. For this reason, Sudan has been the apple of the eyes of a number of nationalities, including the Gulf countries, Russia, some Western nations, and India.

India has been a major investor in the development of Sudan, especially in the energy sector, with US \$2.4 billion devoted to the petroleum sector alone. Since 2021, India has established 49 bilateral projects in Sudan on concessional credit terms, totalling approximately US \$612 million, in the areas of energy, transport, and agribusiness. Apart from this, India offered 290 scholarships to Sudan for capacity building under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. India was also a pioneer in offering humanitarian assistance to Sudan in 2020.¹ The bilateral trade between India and Sudan has also witnessed phenomenal growth, from US \$327.27 million in 2005-06 to US \$1502.57 million in 2018-19.²

India has also been supporting Sudan's efforts in the formation of an interim government, besides facilitating the implementation of the Juba Peace Agreement signed by the Sudanese government in October 2020 with Chad, the UAE, and an Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) as guarantors, with Egypt and Qatar as witnesses. This agreement covered diverse aspects related to governance, security, and justice, besides laying the foundation for future constitutional negotiations. India also agreed to support the Sudanese movement for democracy in

the negotiation process and in the formulation of a national plan for the protection of the lives and properties of civilians.

This apart, India offered 290 scholarships to Sudan towards capacity building under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) program. India was also a pioneer in offering Humanitarian Assistance to Sudan in 2020.³ It is also worth mentioning here that the bilateral trade between India and Sudan witnessed a phenomenal growth from \$ 327.27 million as in 2005-06 to \$ 1502.57 million in 2018-19.⁴ India invested approximately \$ 3 billion US Dollars in Sudan out of which \$ 2.4 billion was devoted to the petroleum sector alone.

Owing to such long-standing trade and commercial relations, the presence of Indians in Sudan was imperative. As per an estimate, close to 4,000 Indian nationals have been stuck in Sudan.⁵ As per reports, there are about 2,800 Indian nationals in Sudan, in addition to a settled Indian diaspora of about 1,200.⁶

In a bid to diversify its energy dependence, India has been making conscious efforts to foster amicable relations with African states like Sudan, Nigeria, and Angola, which possess huge oil reserves and are, therefore, capable of meeting India's mounting energy demands.

Indian Response to Recent Crisis

The evacuation of the Indian diaspora in Sudan, therefore, became a priority for India amidst the recent conflict. Towards this, India launched 'Operation Kaveri' by deploying INS Sumedha, a stealth offshore patrol vessel, in addition to two C-130J aircraft of the IAF on hot standby in Jeddah as a precursor to evacuate the Indian nationals stranded in Sudan.⁷

With a dedicated focus on safety and security of Indians in Sudan India has set up 24/7 control room in New Delhi and is in touch with other countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt besides other UN echelons deployed in Sudan.⁸

On April 20, the Indian Minister for External Affairs Dr. S Jaishankar, met UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and underscored the need for successful diplomatic dialogue in resolving the brewing trouble in Sudan.⁹ India always followed the approach of using effective diplomatic dialogue to resolve the dilemma.

The Indian EAM Dr. Jaishankar also made a statement that "Op Kaveri gets under way to bring back our citizens stranded in Sudan. About 500 Indians have reached Port Sudan. More on their way. Our ships and aircraft are set to bring them back home. Committed to assist all our

brethren in Sudan and constant interaction is in place with all the stakeholders involved in the conflict. We also urged them for a ceasefire to ensure speedy evacuation of Indians. This apart, a WhatsApp group was created on April 16 to coordinate for safety and possible evacuation.”¹⁰

The MEA, while briefing the media on April 23, 2023, stated that the Government of India is leaving no stone unturned to ensure the safety of Indians who got stuck in Sudan. India has been monitoring the complex and dynamic security situation in Sudan. India had also been in touch with various affected countries to ensure the safe passage of the Indians stranded in Sudan who needed to be rescued. Apart from the Sudanese authorities, the Indian MEA and the Indian Embassy in Sudan were also maintaining regular contact with the UN, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and the US, among other countries.¹¹ As stated above, to monitor the developments more objectively and meaningfully, India is managing the operations through a 24x7 control room established in New Delhi.¹²

There is no misgiving about the fact that contingency plans do exist. But any move of the ground forces by the surface routes would depend on the allowances accorded by the security environment. The situation on the ground continues to be unpredictable amidst fierce fighting in and around the Sudanese capital. Sudanese airspace had recently been closed for all international air traffic. Movement by surface routes is grappled with the risks and logistical tests and trials. The Indian embassy has been maintaining regular contact with the Indian nationals stranded in Sudan. The Indian Embassy has also been coordinating possible exits from the capital city of Khartoum to ensure that the movement is restored as and when the security situation permits safe movement.¹³

The Way Forward

India has huge stakes in Sudan in terms of investments and human resource working there to further its strategic interests. This apart, the Red Sea region is crucial to India's maritime security strategy. Also, taking into account the prevailing ties between India and Sudan, it would be an important imperative for India to work towards promoting its strategic interests in the region.

It would also be worthwhile for India to continue protecting its nationals at all costs in every corner of the world, which has been the tradition followed by every superpower, especially the USA. Even sending specialised Indian armed forces on a peacekeeping mission to Sudan may be an option worth considering at this point in time, albeit at the cost of being slightly cumbersome logistically.

India may also consider the option of entering into military alliances with like-minded countries to form and send the joint forces to Sudan with mandate to establish peace in the trouble-torn country.

As an important imperative, India while carrying out evacuation, may consider utilising its external intelligence agency to gather intel about possible Anti National Elements (ANE) / enemy spies who may try to intrude into India amidst hustle bustle of rescue operations and calculate their suspected moves and handle it through a well-planned strategy to tackle the situation on one hand and establish peace in Sudan on the other.

In addition, India should also consider providing humanitarian aid in terms of medical aid and food supplies to provide succour to the troubled Sudanese population amidst the present crisis.

In fact, the situation in Sudan provides ample scope for India to exhibit its diplomatic and humanitarian capabilities and contribute maximum with an all-encompassing approach. This would not only resolve an ongoing crisis in a troubled nation but would also help India to eventually emerge as a benevolent protector thereby expanding the umbrella of Indian clout also in Africa in addition to other parts of the world.

Notes:

¹ [https://indembjuba.gov.in/development-assistance-partnership.php#:~:text=Humanitarian%20Assistance%20%26%20Disaster%20Relief%20\(HA%26%20DR\)&text=In%20December%202020%2C%20Government%20of.essential%20medicines%20to%20South%20Sudan](https://indembjuba.gov.in/development-assistance-partnership.php#:~:text=Humanitarian%20Assistance%20%26%20Disaster%20Relief%20(HA%26%20DR)&text=In%20December%202020%2C%20Government%20of.essential%20medicines%20to%20South%20Sudan). Accessed on April 26, 2023.

² https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_Sudan_2019.pdf. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

³ [https://indembjuba.gov.in/development-assistance-partnership.php#:~:text=Humanitarian%20Assistance%20%26%20Disaster%20Relief%20\(HA%26%20DR\)&text=In%20December%202020%2C%20Government%20of.essential%20medicines%20to%20South%20Sudan](https://indembjuba.gov.in/development-assistance-partnership.php#:~:text=Humanitarian%20Assistance%20%26%20Disaster%20Relief%20(HA%26%20DR)&text=In%20December%202020%2C%20Government%20of.essential%20medicines%20to%20South%20Sudan). Accessed on April 26, 2023.

⁴ https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_Sudan_2019.pdf. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

⁵ Prepare evacuation plans for stranded Indians: PM at meeting over Sudan crisis, India Today April 21, 2023, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sudan-conflict-pm-modi-to-chair-high-level-meet-indians-stuck-crisis-hit-nation-2362857-2023-04-21>. Accessed on May 03, 2023.

⁶ Operation Kaveri': IAF evacuates 1,400 Indians from Sudan. One aged 102 years, Hindustan Times, May 01, 2023 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/operation-kaveri-iaf-evacuates-1-400-indians-from-sudan-one-aged-102-years-101682920813713.html>. Accessed on May 03, 2023.

⁷ https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36504/Situation_in_Sudan. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sudan-situation-tense-focusing-on-safety-of-indians-mea/articleshow/99641794.cms>. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

⁹ The Hindu (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-launches-operation-kaveri-to-evacuate-stranded-citizens-from-war-hit-sudan/article66773499.ece>). Accessed on April 26, 2023.

¹⁰ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-launches-operation-kaveri-to-evacuate-stranded-citizens-from-war-hit-sudan/article66773499.ece>. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

¹¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/operation-kaveri-around-500-indians-have-reached-port-sudan-for-evacuation-says-mea/articleshow/99732606.cms>. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

¹² <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/sudan-situation-tense-focusing-on-safety-of-indians-mea/articleshow/99641794.cms>. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

¹³ https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/36504/Situation_in_Sudan. Accessed on April 26, 2023.

