



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa

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As the crossroads of most of the world trade flowing through the Suez Canal and immediately adjacent to west Asia -the so-called Persian Gulf- and the relationship it has with the rest of African countries, the region of the Horn of Africa is geo-strategically crucial for the world. It attracts foreign powers. In the Twentieth Century foreign engagement came from Italy, the United Kingdom and the United States. Today new military bases there have been established by China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and United Arab Emirates.

The region's perfect location, at the crossroads between the Middle East and Africa and the Red Sea, ensure its increasing strategic importance to outside actors, anxious to ensure the safety of oil exports through the Red Sea, fight terrorist movements and support sympathetic regional governments. Hence, foreign military bases and ports continue multiplying in the region's coastal areas.

Humanitarian and development leaders see other problems that require other solutions. Above all, the people of the Horn of Africa require peace and security to facilitate economic development. They need investment in industry and social

services, as well as the infrastructure to support those. And they need leadership to facilitate adaptation to climate change.¹

The Horn is home to eight countries, all UN Member States, all of which have been involved in armed conflicts since the year 2000. One Horn country, Somalia, is a synonym for lack of government and terrorist control. Uganda also has been challenged by major insurgencies. Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan have witnessed major wars in recent years. Hanging over the entire region is the threat of state-to-state conflict. The last such war, the 1999-2003 war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, was one of the bloodiest in African history.

The problems of the region are humanitarian and strategic, with deep implications for the Horn's residents, and the global community. As ODUMUNC meets, some 60 million of the region's 290 million people live in extreme poverty, internally displaced, as international refugees in neighboring countries, or in areas of active fighting.²

The Horn of Africa can mean just the four eastern-most countries of the region: Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. In UN practice, the region usually includes four more neighboring countries which interact continuously, including in economic, geographic and human relations. With the inclusion of Kenya, South Sudan, Sudan and Uganda, the Horn of Africa covers two million square miles--roughly half the size of Canada, China or the United States--with a population of 290 million.

¹ 'Horn of Africa: Around 60 million in urgent humanitarian need', *United Nations News Centre*, 26

June 2023,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/06/1138087>

² *UN News*, *Ibid*.



The Horn of Africa is an important and strategic region, located in the northeast continent of Africa. With its young and dynamic population, strategic geopolitical location, and immense development potential, the region has immense historical, political, and economic significance. While many of its countries have witnessed significant growth and development, the region's potential suffers from civil wars, poverty and famine. The Horn is, in fact, one of the most conflict-affected areas on the planet, with each country experiencing violent political conflicts.

There is a lot to fight over. Strategically essential waters triangularly enclose it: the Nile River originating from Ethiopia and Uganda, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean.³ Severe drought

has exacerbated the impact of these conflicts, resulting in increased challenges and demands for the United Nations and international humanitarian aid. In Somalia, for instance, the combination of the two atrocities resulted in 7.7 million Somalis needing humanitarian assistance and protection and more than 2.9 million displaced in the last 30 years.⁴ In Ethiopia, the Tigray civil war has resulted in more than 25 million people needing urgent protection and assistance, with thousands turned to refuge in Sudan.⁵

This issue brief focuses on conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia and Somalia.⁶ There are other major conflicts in the region, including the intermittent wars and atrocities in South Sudan since it became independent in 2011, deadly insurgencies in Uganda, and ethnic clashes in Kenya. All are worthy of serious attention at ODUMUNC.

Sudan

The largest country in Africa geographically, with a population of 43 million, has seen a series of crises, alternating between deadly ethnic and regional strife, religious extremism, democratization and military rivalries. Recently, these rivalries led to full-scale civil war, a fight for control of the country, between Sudanese

³ Macharia Munene, 'How Somalia slowly disintegrated into small pieces of troubled nations', *African Review*, 2010; and Macharia Munene, 'Geopolitical dynamics in the horn of Africa region', *The Horn Bulletin*, January-February 2022. <https://horninstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/HORN-Bulletin-Vol-V-Iss-I-January-February-2022.pdf>

⁴ Jacob Kurtzer, Sierra Ballard and Hareem Fatima Abdullah, *Concurrent crises in the Horn of Africa*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2022,

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/concurrent-crises-horn-africa>

⁵ Kurtzer, et al., *ibid*.

⁶ Sarah Johnson, 'Starvation being used as a weapon of war in South Sudan, report reveals', *Guardian*, 25 November 2022,

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/nov/25/starvation-weapon-war-crimes-south-sudan-report>; 'Uganda school attack: Dozens of pupils killed by militants linked to Islamic State group', *BBC News*, 17 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-65937484>

army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).



It started in 1989 when Omar al-Bashir seized power with a coup and secured his place as head of state for over three decades. His government perpetuated the Sudanese civil war, a long-standing conflict between non-Muslim minorities in the south and the predominantly Muslim central government that eventually resulted in the country's division and the creation of South Sudan in 2011. Subsequently, al Bashir reignited the protracted war in Darfur, despite a previous peace agreement. According to the United Nations, al-Bashir's Government has killed more than 300,000 Darfuri people and caused millions of refugees and displaced. Al-Bashir was ousted by the Sudanese military in 2019, arrested and delivered for prosecution over his role in genocidal violence to the International Criminal Court one year later.

After ousting al-Bashir, the military declared a state of emergency, taking total control over the country. After negotiations, military leaders agreed that a civilian leader would replace the

military by November 2021, followed by a democratic election in 2022. This pledge collapsed when the military staged another coup in October 2021, led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the current President, with the support of the RSF. Massive protests erupted, which military opposed by deploying its forces, killing hundreds of protestors. After months of violent protestations, the protestors, and the military leaders finally agreed in December 2022.

On 15 April 2023, a power struggle between General al-Burhan and his former deputy, RSF Commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, burst into an all-out war. The stalemated conflict has killed at least 3,000 and displaced more than three million people. To escape the urban warfare and looting, 1.7 million people fled the capital of Khartoum alone, according to the United Nations, out of pre-war population of roughly 5 million. National some 3 million out of a population of 43 million fled.⁷

Ethiopia



The second most populous country in Africa, Ethiopia was seen as dynamic and thriving, with

⁷ 'Sudan army returns for talks in Jeddah as war enters fourth month', *Al Jazeera*, 15 July 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/15/sudan->

[army-returns-for-talks-in-jeddah-as-war-enters-fourth-month](#)

a booming economy and a Nobel peace prize-winning leader. This changed dramatically in 2020 when civil war fueled by ethnic divisions arose.

The Tigray War lasted from November 2020 to November 2022. The war was essentially a battle for control of the country, as the government in Addis Ababa fought Tigrayan rebels—who had previously governed the entire country. As the war continued the Tigray Defense Forces were gradually defeated by the Ethiopian National Defense Force. As a result, Tigrayan leaders reduced their goals from controlling the entire country to independence for their province of Tigray. The war ended with Ethiopian federal forces in complete control of the country. Total casualties are not known, but are thought to number thousands of soldiers. Estimates of civilian deaths range from several thousand to over 100,00 thousand. During the conflict, 7 million people needed humanitarian aid in all of Ethiopia and more than 5 million faced famine in Tigray.⁸

The UN Security Council was unable to agree on measures to end the conflict. Although there was widespread support for the national government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, his military and tactics were criticized for restricting UN humanitarian assistance from reaching civilian in Tigray.⁹

The Security Council met repeatedly on the Tigrayan War, but was unable to agree on action. China and Russia, joining by African members, were unwilling to accept peacekeeping or sanction on military supplies.



Western Security council members were unwilling to send peacekeepers to protect delivery of humanitarian assistance. Unable to agree on terms that would favor either Ethiopia or Tigray, and unable to agree on a peacekeeping mission, the Security Council made a statement:

The members of the Security Council expressed deep concern about the expansion and intensification of military clashes in northern Ethiopia. The Members of the Security Council further expressed serious concern about the impact of the conflict on the humanitarian situation in Ethiopia, as well as the stability of the country and the wider region... The members of the Security Council reiterated their support for the role of regional organizations, namely the African Union, in resolving conflicts and sustaining regional peace and security.

These words are well intended, but conceal strong disagreements. Essentially the Security council members refused to get involved, demonstrated important limits on what the Council can do, especially in a situation involving a government with strong support

⁸ Martin Plaut, "Updated assessment of civilian starvation deaths during the Tigray war", Emnet Negash, 24 May 2023, <https://martinplaut.com/2023/05/24/updated->

[assessment-of-civilian-starvation-deaths-during-the-tigray-war/](https://martinplaut.com/2023/05/24/updated-assessment-of-civilian-starvation-deaths-during-the-tigray-war/)

⁹ 'Tigray War', *Wikipedia*, n.d.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tigray_War



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa

from one or more of the five Permanent Members.¹⁰

Somalia

Somalia's long-lasting civil war has devastated the country's potential, making it a dangerous and unstable area. The failure of the "greater Somalia dream" resulted in the Somalian society's fragmentation, eventually leading to civil war between competing entities.¹¹ In addition to the civil war, the country was attacked by a terrorist group, self-named Al Shabab, that spread terror and committed attacks on civilians, Genocides, Abuse against children, sexual violence, and many other atrocities resulting in a critical country for the country.

Every regional conflict risks escalating beyond control, especially as parties find allies elsewhere in the region for arms and financing, and as refugees move aboard, often spreading the conflict with them. The 2020-22 conflict between the federal government of Ethiopia and the secessionist province of Tigray recently showed the seriousness of these worries (Abbink, 2003). Ethnic profiling and massacres have been reported to be taking place on both sides for years now, with both sides being accused of committing many atrocities.

In neighboring Somalia, over 30 years without a countrywide government left the country not just ungoverned, but seemingly ungovernable. It faces the threat of take-over by the Islamist terrorist movement al Shebab. The lack of a functioning central government to fight these groups have led the country to extreme poverty, famine, displacement, and piracy.

With the civil war that began on 15 April 2023, Sudan also became victim to domestic fighting. The war comes on top of government instability, an unsuccessful democratization process, political repression, and human rights abuses. The worst is in Sudan's western province of Darfur, where ethnic violence has forced most of the population into refugee camps for over fifteen years.

Role of the UN Security Council

Created in 1945 under the United Nations charter, the Security Council works to resolve conflicts and disputes peacefully with peacekeeping missions or imposing sanctions. However, it can also authorize military actions in extreme cases. With resolutions binding on all members of the UN, the Security Council is the only body that can enforce its decisions on Member States. Other UN bodies, like the General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, and Human Rights Council, only can make recommendations to the Member States with no ability to enforce them.

The Council has ten non-permanent, rotating members elected on regional bases and five Permanent Members, France, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and United States, who have the power to veto any vote on substance, according to Article 23 of the United Nations Charter, which establishes the requirements for Permanent Security Council Member unanimity.

The Council also investigates, mediates, appoints envoys, and takes extra steps to address threats to peace by meeting any time, to deliberate on resolutions proposed by its various

¹⁰ Security Council press statement on Ethiopia', *UN Security Council*, 5 November 2021, <https://press.un.org/en/2021/sc14691.doc.htm> ; Michelle Nichols, 'U.N. Security Council calls for end

to Ethiopia conflict', *Reuters*, 6 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-security-council-calls-end-ethiopia-conflict-2021-11-05/>

¹¹ Munene, 2010, op. cit.



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa



members. The Council's presidency rotates between the member states, each holding the position for a month before the position is passed on to the next nation in line. Although the presidency is predominantly symbolic, presidents occasionally leverage their positions to advance specific national interests. While any member state retains the prerogative to request the Council's attention towards a particular issue, the Council can introduce an agenda item through a straightforward majority vote.

The Security Council, aware of the threats facing Horn countries, has been deeply involved in preserving and restoring peace in the region to help advance sustainable development. Despite the underlying factors indicating that most countries in the region are currently grappling with the same challenges of living in peace and stability as an indirect consequence of ethnic diversity, the Security Council tends to address each country's issue individually and with distinct measures.

To address the challenges faced by Somalia with the extremist group al-Shabaab, the security council has been directly monitoring the rise of insecurity and instability, and terror by authorizing the deployment of several peacekeeping missions, with some as a result of a partnership with the African Union (AMISOM) created especially to conduct peacekeeping operations, to ensure security. The Council has also taken further measures by imposing sanctions on individuals and entities accused of directly or indirectly supporting the terrorists.

While in Ethiopia, the Council has shown, on several occasions, its concerns over the conflict between Ethiopia's Government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) that led to a devastating humanitarian crisis and brutal massacres since its start in November 2020. Initially paralyzed by its internal disagreements, eventually the Security Council passed a resolution stressing principles. It called for an immediate end to atrocities and hostilities,

protecting civilians and providing humanitarian aid to the affected. It also invited the two parties concerned to dialogue and resort to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. For reasons explained below, though, it did not call for action by the Security Council itself. Moreover, Eritrea also has endured sanctions from the UN body because of meddling in the recent Ethiopian war. Moreover, the Council addressed disputes in Sudan and South Sudan over their border after their separation in 2011.

UN mandates and resolutions

Different parts of the UN system have different mandates. This means some bodies can act without a new resolution, based only on their charter, while others must wait for the Security council to tell them exactly what is to be done.

Humanitarian organizations like the UN Development Fund (UNDP), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) have mandates—their founding documents—which allow and encourage them to get involved wherever they see a need. When people are suffering due to climatic catastrophe or lack of economic development, UNDP can act. With funding from the UN Member States, it has resources to deal with such emergencies. In the Horn of Africa, it often works in cooperation with the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) and other agencies to assure people's basic needs can be met.

These UN agencies cannot do whatever they like, though. They require funding, which can only come from donations by Member States. More than 43 million people across the region currently suffer from one of the worst droughts in recent history, caused by five consecutive seasons of poor rains. Donors have pledged USD 2.4 billion for aid project to alleviate the crisis. But UN agencies note the



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa



USD 7 billion is needed to address just the problems they have prioritized.¹²

No less important than money is permission. They can work in a country with the support of the host country government. That government—not the UN agencies—is sovereign with power over the country. UN agencies must respect any limits host country governments create. This can lead to serious tensions. For example, in the Sudan province of Darfur, where ethnic Arab militias are responsible for ethnic cleansing—forced migration—of African people, UN agencies try to publicize and alleviate the suffering, even to force the Sudanese government to oppose the militias. But if they antagonize the Sudan government, those same agencies could be forced to leave the country. They must constantly balance their mandated preferences and responsibilities with the expectations and limits of what host country governments will accept.

To do more, to be able to serve humanitarian needs under any circumstances, they require new mandates from the UN Security Council. That would mean the power of the five Permanent Members—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States—directly support their work, even in opposition to the relevant host governments. For example, to ensure humanitarian assistance to the people of Darfur in Sudan or Tigray in Ethiopia, only a Security Council resolution can overcome the restrictions from the Sudan or Ethiopia government.

The Security Council is most effective when all five Permanent Members agree on action. In Somalia, it has been much easier to agree. The result is a series of successful Security Council resolutions. Recent examples include:

- The situation in Somalia, [S/RES/2670 \(2022\)](#)
- The situation in Somalia, [S/RES/2662 \(2022\)](#)
- The situation in Somalia, [S/RES/2657 \(2022\)](#)

These resolutions stress support for the national government, which is recognized by the UN and all Security Council Member States. All five Permanent Members and all Rotating Members agree on the importance of supporting the UN-supported government in Mogadishu, against the Islamist rebels of al-Shabaab. They also support an arms embargo on the country. Security is maintained by a peacekeeping force, staffed largely by the countries of the African Union, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM).

On Sudan, the Council is unable to agree to as much. China, Russia and several African members of the Council refuse to permit action against the military government. They only allow humanitarian assistance. The one thing everybody can agree to do is to stay informed by carefully monitoring the situation. This resulted in a series of resolutions ordering reports from the UN Secretary-General. For example:

- Reports of the Secretary-General on the Sudan and South Sudan, [S/RES/2685 \(2023\)](#)
- Reports of the Secretary-General on the Sudan and South Sudan (South Sudan sanctions), [S/RES/2683 \(2023\)](#)
- Reports of the Secretary-General on the Sudan and South Sudan (UNMISS), [S/RES/2677 \(2023\)](#)
- Reports of the Secretary-General on the Sudan and South Sudan, [S/RES/2676 \(2023\)](#)

¹² 'UN and partners seek \$7 billion to prevent catastrophe in the Horn of Africa', United Nations News Centre,

24 May 2023,
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/05/1136977>



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa



A casual observer might think the response on Sudan and South Sudan unimpressive, but it looks brilliant compared to what could be agreed on Ethiopia. In the Ethiopian Tigray War, the Security Council was largely paralyzed by differences between its members. A peacekeeping force was impossible for the Council to agree on. Sanctions to stop the flow of military equipment also was impossible. The Security Council could not even agree on mediation by the UN Secretary-General. As a result, international action on Tigray depended more on the mediation efforts of the African Union and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD).¹³

Some proposals for action

Once of the biggest questions facing the UN is how to address the problems of stability in the Horn of Africa. The economic, humanitarian and strategic problems of all eight countries are related; they affect each other and no major issue in one country can be resolved without affecting the others. Logically, the most effective responses will be collective, addressing the entire region, all eight countries together.

But the Security Council tends to focus on one country at a time. Because of the sharp differences among Security Council members, cooperation among Council member is largely impossible on countries like Ethiopia, Eritrea, South Sudan and Sudan. Collective action would make it impossible for Permanent Members to shield their favored clients. The logic of effectiveness says address all eight together, collectively. The logic of political reality says address them individually, doing what you can.

The Security Council can invite other countries it is considering to join its debate, such as inviting a statement from Sudan when debating

Sudan issues. But this is not required, nor is it always practical. It also can work with regional organizations like the African Union, but this too is not required and may not be practical either.

A major disagreement is the importance of protecting civilians in conflict areas. Among the Permanent Five Veto countries, France, the United Kingdom and United States often make protecting civilians their highest goal. China favors commercial interests above all, including maintaining good relations with regional governments. It will accept language that doesn't address civilian priorities if it serves important economic goals of China companies. Russia can be contemptuous of civilian interests, favoring military solutions, such as deployment of Wagner mercenaries and strengthening regional militaries, giving them the freedom they need to solve local security threats through unrestrained violence.

Other Security Council Member States tend to follow one or two of the Permanent Five. Among African countries, there is an historic interest in balancing Western concern with civilians and China and Russian interest in the stability of existing governments.

Develop a comprehensive plan for peace, stability and development in the Horn of Africa. This plan would cover all eight countries, acknowledging the interrelated nature of their security, economic and humanitarian problems. Such a plan would be especially welcome if it came from countries in the region or in Africa. If pushed primarily by outside powers, like the five Permanent Members, it will be viewed more suspiciously.

Address the problems of one or two regional countries at a time. Rather than try to solve the great complexity of all regional difficulties together, the Security Council can continue to follow its preference for segmented, country-

¹³ Kurtzer, et al., op cit.



Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa



specific action. This approach is politically much simpler, avoids the difficulties of pleased everybody simultaneously, but it also is more limited in what it can achieve. Under this approach, the Council would choose to focus on one particular country or issue at a time. If ambitious, it might address more than one, but in sequence, not simultaneously; separately, not together.

Focus on principles. Rather than trying to actually solve regional problems, which requires the coordination and cooperation of many antagonistic suspicious countries and regional actors, the Security Council can aim more modestly. Establishing principles, such as urging peaceful resolution of conflicts, power sharing between antagonists, or generous foreign assistance, is an important step. It might not

solve problems, but shows the international community and Horn countries which directions are most promising, most desirable.

Stress fact-finding. Sometimes the UN doesn't have the ability to end conflict, to eliminate human suffering or ensure a strong future. When Member States disagree on basics, action stops. Instead, the best the UN can do may be just keeping track of these situations. The Security Council can commission report on any Horn of Africa problem from the Secretary-General or a Group of Experts it commission. The Security Council would need to establish the purpose and goals of the study. And even a study requires funding, which the Security Council would have to provide, probably by turning to its Member States.

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Restoring and preserving peace in the Horn of Africa



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