



# What next for Sudan's peace process?

## *Evolving political and security dynamics in the Two Areas*

This briefing considers the changing political situation in Sudan with a particular focus on the future of the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) and the evolving political and security dynamics in the Two Areas.<sup>1</sup> It is the third in a series of rapid response updates by the Rift Valley Institute for the UK government's XCEPT (Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends) programme. See Update 1 'What Next for the Juba Peace Agreement?' and Update 2 'What Next for the Juba Peace Agreement? Evolving political and security dynamics in Darfur'.

### Key points

- Long-term conflict in the Two Areas, falling largely along ethnic lines, has caused deep-rooted grievances, in particular around governance. There has never been an inclusive process to address these grievances and reach a consensus on how people should be ruled.
- The National Congress Party (NCP) regime's collapse created a vacuum and political competition, to which communities responded by adopting different strategies to defend their interests, and which are playing out in tandem with peace efforts in the Two Areas.
- These efforts, which could have started a process of addressing conflict drivers and finding consensual governance solutions, have so far not been inclusive or widely supported.
- After the October 2021 military coup, the state of the peace efforts is uncertain, which could lead to further discontent in the Two Areas. Different communities and political actors are dealing with the uncertainties in different ways:
  - Former NCP allies in South Kordofan are using different strategies to ensure their political survival. Some are engaging with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) as a way to ensure their interests are protected, while others are opting for a confrontational approach and perceive any gains by the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) as harmful to them.
  - In West Kordofan the Misseriya – currently in control of the State level administration – were a strong NCP ally, but due to their refusal to fight the government's war against the SPLM/A-N after 2011, their relationship with the Nuba is not as strained as it might otherwise be. If future peace deals do not threaten their interests, the Misseriya are less likely to compete with others, including the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).
  - In Blue Nile, since the Juba peace process the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has become the dominant political power. However, the peace process has failed to include many communities, including SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) supporters, and groups not aligned with either SPLM/A-N faction. Many conflict drivers therefore remain unaddressed and could lead to a resumption in violence between communities that fear for their future.
- It is highly unlikely that the Mil-TG (military component of the transitional government) will resume a peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) without an independent Civ-TG (civilian component of the transitional government) urging it to do so. What is more, given that the SPLM/A-N (SRF) has reached many of its goals through the JPA, they are unlikely to support the resumption of a process that could politically empower their rival.
- The most likely outcome of the alignment of Mil-TG and SRF interests is that there are no incentives to pursue peace efforts in the Two Areas.

<sup>1</sup> The JPA refers to South Kordofan, West Kordofan, and Blue Nile as the Two Areas. West Kordofan was abolished in August 2005 before being reestablished in July 2013.

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## Introduction

Sudan's South Kordofan and Blue Nile states – known as the Two Areas – have been plagued by periods of conflict and insecurity since the 1980s. Many people from the Two Areas joined the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) rebellion in southern Sudan, with which they shared many political, social and economic grievances, as part of Sudan's Second Civil War (1983 – 2005). In particular, people from the Two Areas felt that only by increasing their control over local governance would they be able to address long-standing grievances. Under the control of Prime Minister Sadiq el-Mahdi, the government retaliated with a violent counterinsurgency that employed national security forces as well as local militias recruited mainly along ethnic lines.

After coming to power in a military coup in 1989, what became the National Congress Party (NCP) regime continued the practice of recruiting local ethnic forces, which it integrated into a nationwide militia called the Popular Defense Forces (PDF).<sup>2</sup> The PDF were a key instrument through which the NCP sought, as part of its so-called Civilization Project, to promote an Arab and Islamic identity across Sudan through violence if necessary.<sup>3</sup> In practice, this meant that in the Two Areas the NCP's allies were mainly drawn from Arab communities, and that the SPLM/A was increasingly supported by non-Arab communities. Fighting during the war permanently displaced many SPLM/A supporters who lost access to their land in favor of NCP allies, who the regime had empowered not only to fight the SPLM/A, but also to pursue their own land claims.

The government's divide and rule practices in the Two Areas, and the local conflicts they caused, set the stage for decades of communal distrust, suspicion and violence. Today, communities are still competing over how land should be allocated and used, and also about how and who should determine local governance and

political representation – essential to determining who has access to land. The peace efforts initiated by the transitional government from 2019 could have helped address conflict drivers in the Two Areas. However, they failed to include all the necessary voices, which created opposition to the process, and would mean that implementation of even its best provisions would prove complicated. Following the October 2021 military coup, it is not clear where peace efforts stand and there are few incentives for the military elites and dominant political forces in the Two Areas to support genuine peace talks through a consensus building process. This uncertainty and unaddressed conflict drivers could lead to violence.

## Background

In 2005, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) ended over 20 years of civil war but failed to address conflict drivers in the Two Areas. After South Sudan's independence six years later, tensions between the government and the now SPLM/A-North (SPLM/A-N) reignited the civil war in South Kordofan in June 2011 and in Blue Nile three months later.<sup>4</sup> In response, the SPLM/A-, together with the three strongest Darfuri rebel groups, formed the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF) with the aim of overthrowing President Omar al-Bashir and creating a Sudan where previously marginalized groups and regions were better represented at the political centre.<sup>5</sup> Heavy fighting continued in the Two Areas from 2011 until June 2016, when the SPLM/A-N and the NCP government agreed to a cessation of hostilities. While formal military engagements ceased, and renewed ceasefires largely kept the peace, there has yet to be a formal resolution to the conflict and an uneasy 'no war, no peace' dynamic remained in the Two Areas during the final years of the NCP regime and since under the transitional arrangements.

As hostilities between the SPLM/A-N and the NCP regime were coming to an end, political divisions between the former and the SRF and within the SPLM/

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<sup>2</sup> Initially referred to as the National Islamic Front (NIF) the regime formed the NCP in 1998. The Mil-TG officially disbanded the PDF after Omar al-Bashir's removal in 2019 and made them part of its reserve forces. However, in many parts of the Two Areas the structures of the PDF remain and take part in local violence.

<sup>3</sup> The 'Civilization Project' (*Al-Mashru Al-Hadari*), and its associated 'comprehensive call' (*Al-Dawa Al-Shamila*), intended to Islamize (through violence, if necessary) all religious and cultural aspects of life for non-Muslims living in Sudan. See Abdullahi A. Gallab, *The First Islamist Republic: Development and Disintegration of Islamism in the Sudan*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008: 11.

<sup>4</sup> The Sudanese government sought to expel SPLM/A soldiers from the Two Areas into what was to become South Sudan. SPLM/A and the communities they represented strongly opposed this as they viewed these soldiers as necessary for their protection. As tensions rose, clashes between Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and SPLM/A-N soldiers broke out and violence quickly spread, reigniting the civil war in South Kordofan and Blue Nile.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew McCutchen, 'The Sudan Revolutionary Front: Its Formation and Development', Human Security Baseline Assessment (HSBA) Working Paper 33, *Small Arms Survey*, 2014: 5.

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A-N surfaced. In 2015, mistrust within the SRF coalition led the SPLM/A-N to leave the coalition. That same year, divisions within the SPLM/A-N became apparent in Blue Nile between supporters and detractors of Malik Agar, the Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the SPLM/A-N. By 2017, the divisions had widened, and a rift formed within the movement's leadership, with Malik and Secretary General Yasir Arman on the one side, and Deputy Chairman Abdelaziz al-Hilu on the other.<sup>6</sup> In 2017, violent clashes broke out in Blue Nile between communities supporting Malik and al-Hilu and led to the SPLM/A-N's split and numerous casualties on either side.

Ultimately, Malik and his supporters were driven out of Blue Nile and into South Sudan's Maban County. In October 2017, the SPLM-N held an Extraordinary General Convention, boycotted by Malik and Yasir, which elected al-Hilu as the Chairman and Commander-in-Chief of the now SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).<sup>7</sup> During the following years, Malik and his supporters tried to rebuild a political and military movement in the Two Areas but had limited success. Although Malik re-joined the SRF that same year, his movement – now known as the SPLM/A-N (SRF) – remained side-lined in Two Areas politics until the Juba peace process started in September 2019.

## **NCP collapse and the peace process**

In April 2019, the NCP regime collapsed after months of popular unrest. It left a political vacuum in areas outside of Khartoum, which the newly established transitional government sought to fill, in part, through a peace process to find solutions to the root causes of Sudan's violence. It was agreed that the government would launch two separate processes: a process with the SRF, which would be national in scope and include a specific track for the Two Areas, and a peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). The latter focused on the Two Areas but also on issues such as governance and security sector reform, which would have country-wide implications.

As part of the Juba peace process with the SRF, Malik was designated as the movement's representative in the Two Areas, which included West Kordofan. Through the peace process and the resultant Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) that was adopted in October 2020,<sup>8</sup> Malik was able to increase his political power, especially in Blue Nile. His efforts to build a social base of support in West and South Kordofan, however, were met with limited success. Through the JPA, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) was granted the right to appoint the governor and cabinet in Blue Nile and the deputy governors in West and South Kordofan. It also granted the SRF 30 per cent of state government positions (both executive and legislative) in the Two Areas.<sup>9</sup>

Al-Hilu adopted a cautious and wary approach towards the transitional government and especially its military wing (Mil-TG), which was effectively leading the peace processes on behalf of the government.<sup>10</sup> The Mil-TG also felt threatened by the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu)'s call for a wholesale change to how Sudan's security forces are organized and run (whereas the SRF agreed, as part of the Juba peace process, to integrate their forces into the SAF). This, and the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu)'s call for a secular state, along with significant devolution of political power and resource control from Khartoum to the peripheries, would severely threaten the military's political and economic interests. This meant that even before the coup, a peace process with al-Hilu was always going to be difficult.

The decision to hold two separate peace processes meant that no consensus could be built on key issues of concern and that agreements would prove challenging to align – especially with regards to governance. This would prove particularly problematic in Blue Nile, where the fallout from the 2017 SPLM/A-N split continues to impact communal relations and the interests of leaders from each side (discussed below). In addition, the fact that the JPA was adopted before the process with SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) could produce any outcomes, also gives Malik an upper hand in Two Areas politics, as well as say over how the current government would pursue peace efforts with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu).

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<sup>6</sup> 'Spilling Over: Conflict Dynamics in and Around Blue Nile State, 2015-2019', *Small Arms Survey*, 2020: 34-38.

<sup>7</sup> 'Spilling Over: Conflict Dynamics in and Around Blue Nile State', 37.

<sup>8</sup> PILPG, 'Juba Peace Agreement – Official English Translation', 3 October 2020.

<sup>9</sup> 'Juba Peace Agreement', 98.

<sup>10</sup> See, 'What Next for the Juba Peace Agreement?', Sudan Rapid Response Update #1, Rift Valley Institute, December 2021. (<https://riftvalley.net/publication/what-next-juba-peace-agreement-after-coup-sudan>)

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## A. West and South Kordofan

Most of the people living in West and South Kordofan can loosely be broken down into two main ethno-linguistic identity groups. The first are the Baggara (cattle-herding) Arab communities, which moved into the Kordofan region approximately two hundred years ago and began to displace Nuba communities.<sup>11</sup> In **South Kordofan**, the greater Hawazma community lives in a large ark of fertile lowland plains that stretch from Kadugli north through Dilling before turning east and then south towards Talodi. The Kenana, Kawahla and Awlad Hemet live in the eastern part of the state. In **West Kordofan**, the Misseriya Humr live across much of the southern part of the state and down into Abyei, while the Misseriya Zurg live in the eastern area northwest of Lagawa. The Hamar community lives in the northern part of the state. These Arab communities consist of a wide variety of people but they share a common historical practice of pastoralism, speak Arabic, and identify as descendants of people who migrated from the Arabian Peninsula. They were also often allied to the NCP and formed the majority of the armed proxies who fought against the SPLM/A(-N) and associated communities. Through this, they acquired land that they now consider to be theirs and depend on for their livelihoods.

The second group consists of Nuba people, who are composed of more than fifty distinct communities.<sup>12</sup> In spite of their differences, they are connected by a practice of agropastoralism and their use of 'African' languages. They also identify as non-Arab and claim to be the indigenous people of much of the central areas of what is now West and South Kordofan – in and around the main mountainous areas. The Nuba historically lived on fertile plains, but as Arab communities expanded into the area during the past two hundred years, they were gradually forced to live or take refuge in mountainous areas.<sup>13</sup> During their rebellion, the SPLM/A(-N) drew most of their support from these communities.

The collapse of the NCP regime created a vacuum that fueled political competition in the region, which often takes on ethnic dimensions. Those, largely Arab, communities formerly associated with the NCP have become worried about losing the political privileges and land that they acquired under the former regime. Many Nuba communities, especially those associated with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), have seen the regime change as an opportunity to regain land and political representation. After years of NCP political manipulation and mobilization along ethnic lines, most people view politics through a communal lens and are wary of any process, including a peace process, that might empower their rivals – and would be seen as threatening their interests.

**In South Kordofan**, former NCP allies have adopted different approaches to ensure their survival following the regime change. Some have decided to engage with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu), which controls large areas and commands significant support in the state. Among these are the Kenana, Kawahla and Longon (the latter a Nuba community). They feel that the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu)'s relative popularity in the state will eventually translate to significant political representation and that, by starting to reconcile with it, they will be in a better position to protect their interests in the future.<sup>14</sup>

Other communities see any gains made by the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) as being detrimental to them and have instead pursued a policy of confrontation. Among these are members of the Hawazma community who were strong NCP allies and PDF supporters, and have shown no inclination towards reconciliation since 2016.<sup>15</sup> Now, they are particularly worried by the possible changes a peace deal with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) may bring,<sup>16</sup> but also that they would not be included in any decision-making process around governance. This is why, following the regime change in 2019, some sections of the Hawazma community have come into conflict not only with Nuba communities from SPLM/A-N controlled areas, but also with Kenana, Kawahla and Longon

<sup>11</sup> See: Simon Harragin, 'Nuba Mountains Land and Natural Resources Study – Part 1: Land Study', USAID, 200): 11.

<sup>12</sup> 'Facing genocide: the Nuba of Sudan', *African Rights*: London, 1995: 5.

<sup>13</sup> Harragin, 'Nuba Mountains Land', 11.

<sup>14</sup> Engagement between these communities is also driven by and manifests through increased economic links and locally-led peacebuilding efforts created in an environment of reduced national-level elite manipulation following the NCP regime's collapse.

<sup>15</sup> Some sub-sections of the Hawazma community however have started engaging with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) since 2019. For instance, the Dar Niyela (from the Abdel Ali section), who migrate through Habila, clashed heavily with Nuba communities from SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) controlled areas in 2018 and 2019, and have since engaged in a locally-led reconciliation process that has held so far.

<sup>16</sup> Hawazma community members are also concerned by changes the full implementation of the JPA could bring, but this is a secondary concern due to the SRF's lower level of influence in South Kordofan.

communities.<sup>17</sup> They are concerned that a rapprochement between these communities and the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) would disempower them politically and threaten their interests.<sup>18</sup> For instance, the Dar Ali and Al-Sira Hawazma sub-sections have engaged in a violent conflict with the Kenana, Kawahla and Longon communities in Abu Jubaiyah and Talodi localities, which led to hundreds of casualties since 2020. Numerous casualties have also been reported because of Dar Ali and Al-Sira attacks on Nuba villages aligned with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) in Dalami and Rashad localities driven by similar political reasons.

**In West Kordofan**, the Misseriya were a strong NCP regime ally and made up a large proportion of the PDF who fought against the SPLM/A in the 1990s. However, when the war failed to fulfill many of the promises the NCP made to the Misseriya people, their support wavered and many refused to fight the government's war against the SPLM/A-N after 2011. This has meant that the relationship between the Misseriya and the Nuba is not as bad as it might otherwise have been. Furthermore, the Misseriya currently control the West Kordofan State administration, which they see as vital to protecting their interests.<sup>19</sup> As long as they do not feel like their political power is under threat, they are less likely to compete with other groups, especially the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu). However, if a prospective peace deal between the latter and the government risked threatening their interests, this could negatively impact communal and political relations between the two.<sup>20</sup>

## B. Blue Nile

The people of Blue Nile consist of communities referred to as either non-Arab 'indigenous' communities, 'newcomers' consisting of both Arab and non-Arab

tribes, and a combination of the two resulting from their intermarriage. The indigenous communities include the Gumuz, Hamaj and Kadalo in Roseires, the Ingessana in Tadamon and Bau, the Berta in Geissan and Kurmuk, as well as Uduk, Jumjum, Koma and Ganza in southern Kurmuk. The newcomers include traders who came from northern Arabized communities in the 1800s and under the NCP regime,<sup>21</sup> and Arab pastoralists, especially from the Kenana and Rufaa al Hoy, who migrated from White Nile and Sennar states. Other newcomers include the Fellata and Hausa, non-Arabs originally from West Africa, who began settling in Blue Nile a hundred years ago.<sup>22</sup> A third group has developed from the descendants of the northern Arabized traders who arrived in the 1800s and inter-married with the local population, usually Berta speaking communities. Their descendants established fiefdoms in what is now Blue Nile and Ethiopia. Since then, they have occupied local political and security roles in both countries, especially in Blue Nile under the NCP. Locally many people refer to them as 'Watawit', but they prefer to use either the Berta subsection name (Dawala, Rakabiya, Harakin, etc.)<sup>23</sup> or refer to themselves as descendants from the northern Nile Valley.

In Blue Nile, the SPLM/A historically drew most of its support from indigenous communities, especially the Uduk, Ingessana, and Berta, who felt marginalized and without a say over how they were governed. The NCP regime, on the other hand, mobilized supporters mainly from among the newcomers, especially the Fellata and Arab pastoralists. It also gained some support from among the Berta and the 'Watawit' elite. Similar to West and South Kordofan, inter-communal violence caused a lot of suffering and created numerous grievances that left behind a torn social fabric. For instance, conflict in the 1980s – 90s and again after 2011 caused the displacement

<sup>17</sup> The Hawazma are a large community with three main sections: Rowowga (Kadugli area), Abdel Ali (Habla area), and Halafa (Dalami and Rashad area) each with their own sub-sections. Currently the sub-sections from the Halafa are the most aggressive towards the SPLM/A-N and others.

<sup>18</sup> There are also economic and land tensions, which sometimes lead to violence.

<sup>19</sup> During the Juba Peace Process, Malik sought to court the Misseriya community through one of his senior leaders Adam Karshom, a Misseriya from the el-Fula area, who was recently appointed West Kordofan deputy governor. However, most of the Misseriya community was not interested in being represented through him, preferring to have a direct link to Khartoum instead. See International Crisis Group, 'The Rebels Come to Khartoum: How to Implement Sudan's New Peace Agreement', Africa Briefing, Number 168, 2021, 6 – 7.

<sup>20</sup> Competition over land has already given way to conflict in the West Kordofan. For instance, some Misseriya and Hamar communities have recently clashed over land claims, such as in 2021 in Abu Zabad locality. These tensions are largely political, with the Hamar considering themselves to be the largest group in West Kordofan and feeling that political representation at the state level should reflect this, while the NCP's preference was for the Misseriya.

<sup>21</sup> This includes the Jaaliyin, Shagaiya, and the Danagla, who are Arabized Nubian groups from northern Sudan, especially the Nile River valley.

<sup>22</sup> Gunnar M., Sørbø and Abdel Ghaffar M. Ahmed, *Sudan Divided: continuing conflict in a contested state*, Springer, 2013, 226.

<sup>23</sup> International Crisis Group, 'Sudan's Spreading Conflict (II): War in Blue Nile', Africa Report, Number 204, 2013, 4.

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of Uduk communities, and to a lesser extent Ingessana and Berta, into neighboring countries – with tens of thousands still living in refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

The post-NCP period saw significant political changes in Blue Nile. Following the Juba peace process, the SPLM/A-N (SRF) became the dominant political power in the state, with much of its support stemming from Malik’s Ingessana community as well as the Fellata.<sup>24</sup> However, the peace process failed to include many communities, including SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) supporters<sup>25</sup> and groups that have not aligned with either SPLM/A-N faction, that have different views about the state’s governance.<sup>26</sup> This means that many conflict drivers remain unaddressed and could, as in West and South Kordofan, lead to a resumption in violence between communities that fear for their future. This is especially true for communities aligned with either SPLM/A-N faction, the split of which left behind deep animosity. Although the two sides largely keep to their respective areas and do not interact, the longer this situation continues without resolution, the greater the chances are that tensions lead to violence.

**24** The Fellata were interested in aligning with the SPLM/A-N (SRF) as they were seeking a new political patron to preserve the political prestige they acquired under the NCP regime.

**25** SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) draws most of its support from Uduk, Berta and other indigenous groups, has increased its support by growing closer to the Gumuz, Kadalo, and Hamaj communities in Roseires.

**26** For instance, the ‘Watawit’ have not developed a political relationship with either SPLM/A-N faction – although some of its leaders have strong links to the Mil-TG.

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## Conclusion: After the coup

Following the 25 October 2021 coup in Sudan, which saw the military component of the transitional government (Mil-TG) assert itself over its civilian counterpart (Civ-TG), peace efforts in the Two Areas are at risk and, as highlighted above, discontent could turn violent.

First, the implementation of the JPA is uncertain. Following the coup, Malik – like other SRF leaders – chose to align himself with the Mil-TG to protect his political power and enhance his patronage network. As a result, Malik accepted his reappointment to the Sovereign Council, and his party continues to run the Blue Nile government. While the JPA is flawed, as was the process that led to its adoption, it does include important measures on land distribution, revenue sharing, and security sector reform.<sup>27</sup> However, now that Malik has been able to consolidate his political power through the JPA by appointing the governor and ministers of Blue Nile and the deputy governors of West and South Kordofan on 18 February 2022, he is unlikely to push for the implementation of JPA provisions that might threaten the Mil-TG's interests and undermine his precarious position.

Second, the government established following the coup is unlikely to pursue efforts to reach a consensus on governance with those left out of the JPA. In particular, the Mil-TG will almost certainly not resume a peace process with the SPLM/A-N (al-Hilu) without the presence of an independent Civ-TG compelling it to do so. Similarly, Malik, who got what he wanted through the JPA, is unlikely to support the resumption of a process that could bolster his rivals' political power. This alignment of military junta and SRF interests ultimately means that there are no incentives to pursue peace efforts in the Two Areas (as is largely the case elsewhere).

Deep-rooted conflict drivers will thus likely remain unaddressed for the time being, with the negative consequences this may have on conflict dynamics in the

Two Areas. At the same time, uncertainty around the peace processes following the coup is leading many to grow impatient, be it those who have an interest in seeing the JPA's full implementation, those who have yet to be included in a peace process, or those who were content with how things were before the NCP's fall. An unstable situation thus that could become explosive under the leadership of the Mil-TG, which, if it feels threatened, could increasingly interfere and use violence against its opponents in the Two Areas, adding fuel to the fire.

<sup>27</sup> See 'What Next for the Juba Peace Agreement?', Sudan Rapid Response Update #1; and 'What next for the Juba Peace Agreement? Evolving political and security dynamics in Darfur', Sudan Rapid Response Update #2, Rift Valley Institute, February 2022. (<https://riftvalley.net/publication/what-next-juba-peace-agreement-evolving-political-and-security-dynamics-darfur>)



## Credits

This briefing is a product of FCDO's Cross-Border Conflict Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) programme. XCEPT brings together leading experts to examine conflict-affected borderlands, how conflicts connect across borders, and the factors that shape violent and peaceful behaviour. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

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