



**THE STATE OF THE SUDANS:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES COPNALL**

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A prolific writer and reporter, James Copnall was the BBC's Sudan correspondent from 2009-12 and covered South Sudan's independence, the Darfur war, rebellions, and clashes between both the Sudans. He has also reported from over twenty other African nations. His latest book, A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts - Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce deals extensively with the conflict engulfing the Sudans from various perspectives. Earlier this year, he sat down with the Fletcher Security Review to give some perspective on recent developments.

## 1 Money and Conflict

**FSR:** Some view that economic considerations were predominant in the separation of South Sudan from Sudan. Do you agree with them?

**Copnall:** Resources and economic aspects could have been an important part of the bifurcation, in the sense, many felt that South Sudan could be potentially a viable country because of its oil reserves, with a potential to produce 350,000 barrels per day for a considerable time. And certainly, oil played a key role in the civil war in the erstwhile united Sudan. Human rights abuses were committed over oil. But I think for ordinary South Sudanese, their desire for independence was not really about oil as such. It was about a feeling of being treated as second class citizens. Oil money did not facilitate development in the area so there was a desire to have their own country.

**FSR:** Even with natural resources, why do you think South Sudan is facing troubles?

**Copnall:** South Sudan is probably the least developed place on Earth, partly because of conflict, and partly because of neglect. When it got independence, South Sudan had practically next to nothing. So, although there are oil reserves and that brought money into the economy, South Sudan was starting from a very low base. People were not educated, and the (*money from*) oil was never going to be enough.

Diversification into agriculture and other fields is the need of the hour, but lack of infrastructure is creating hurdles. The oil revenue did not benefit the ordinary people due to corruption and a bloated military, which employs about 300,000 persons. Top commanders too creamed-off some of the money. Even after independence, South Sudan followed the earlier Sudanese model, which they fought against, and all the money and resources were concentrated in the capital, Juba. After independence, oil also became very controversial. South Sudan is dependent on Sudan in the sense that, to export its oil it has to use pipelines, refineries and the export terminal that Sudan has. It wants to build a new pipeline, but that will cost billions of dollars and will take a long period of time.

**FSR:** What is the situation now? Will this dependence force South Sudan to negotiate with Sudan?

**Copnall:** That has happened already – in September, 2012 nine agreements were signed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and they were under proper implementation by August-September 2013. The key agreement was about the amount of money that South Sudan should pay for transporting oil through Sudan's oil infrastructure. The political elites in both Juba and Khartoum came to the decision that they needed oil to keep money supply in the economies of both countries.

Another important agreement was on trade. The trade through border areas is more important for the citizens as they did not benefit from oil money. When the border from Sudan was closed, the price of sorghum went up in South Sudan because getting it from other places

in East Africa was very expensive. So there is a certain economic mutual dependency. Problems between the two countries still exist, but because of the economic crisis, both countries realized that they needed each other to a certain extent, to survive.

**FSR:** You said that Sudan's economy has been centered towards the capital. How did economic considerations evolve in the past and did they have any role in triggering conflicts and concomitant massacres?

**Copnall:** Yes, there is a direct correlation, or connection, between economic marginalization and conflict throughout Sudan's history. It's a structural problem. Peripheral areas were neglected even during the time of the Anglo-Egyptian colonizers and by successive Sudanese governments - democratic or military, and of course under President Omar Bashir over the last 25 years or so.

Now, in defense of people in control of Khartoum, Sudan at the time was a colossal country, a million square miles strewn with desert and forests. It is extremely difficult to move around in Southern Sudan as roads cannot be used, particularly in rainy season. Leaders too failed to spread what relatively little wealth and development was possible around the country. Due to this, peripheral areas were traditionally under conflict as they felt discriminated in terms of development. Also, there's a loose racial-religious hierarchy, where Arabs or Muslims are at the top of this hierarchy and closely connected to the benefits of the state, while at the bottom you'd find people who describe themselves as African and follow traditional religions or maybe Christianity. It's loose, it's not written, but certainly the lower down you are on the hierarchy, the more likely you were to come from the periphery, the more likely there would be conflict. Regarding mass atrocities, one of the tactics successive governments in Khartoum have used is fairly brutal counterinsurgency methods. Alex de Waal mentions this aspect in his article "Counter-Insurgency on the Cheap."

**FSR:** What was the reason for the insurgency? Were these people in the periphery resenting economic exploitation?

**Copnall:** Yes, that has a part to play. The other part is disagreements about the way the state should be governed. People in the peripheries disliked the 'Arabizing' and 'Islamizing' policies they felt were coming from Khartoum, from successive governments, from Aboud in the 1960s to Bashir at a later date. So I think one cannot find a simplistic reason. There is not one cause.

## 2 Challenges in South Sudan

**FSR:** Do you think that the out-of-control growth of the security sector is gobbling up all of South Sudan's budget? Do you accept Alex de Waal's characterization (in his forthcoming book *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, Guns, and the Business of Power*) of the situation in this regard? And do you think there is any way to stop it?

**Copnall:** The military-security budget is even higher in Sudan than it is in South Sudan. Sudanese economists often talk about 60-70% of the budget going to the military-security apparatus. But Sudan is also probably richer than South Sudan, and does not have the same desperate needs. Once the oil billions started flowing-in after 2005, huge amounts of money went to the military and also the security partly as a sort of welfare system, partly to keep social peace as money was the only way to keep the people with guns quiet.

In this regard, I agree with de Waal's characterization. In militarized system like South Sudan, political legitimacy comes from military accomplishments, and what you did during

the war is what gives you legitimacy to govern, not your democratic credentials. The term - 'liberation curse', that is, a good liberation fighter need not be a good democratic leader, affects a lot of liberation movements. So this growth of the military state is in part self-preservation, in part following the Sudanese model, and part a sense of entitlement from people who spent most of their lives in the bush fighting and wanted something in return. Interestingly there is a level of self criticism that has come into South Sudanese society and among political elite. While a couple of years ago no one in Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) or Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) wanted to hear any criticism, now they are open. Everyone accepts that the post-independence period has been a political failure and that does create an opportunity for reigning in a little bit the excesses of the militarized state, albeit with limited resources and how much of the oil has been sold off in advance to deal with current crises. I think that divorcing military from politics may be unlikely. What is likely to happen is some sort of power sharing deal where militant people from both sides will have to be compensated for giving up fighting.

**FSR:** Does South Sudan have a viable, stable government? Is there a possibility that warring factions will be brought under one umbrella?

**Copnall:** The lack of stability in South Sudan is due to the civil war where rebels are fighting in 10 states and threatening a couple of other states. This situation is primarily because of the tensions within governing party, SPLM. The post-independence period has been marked by the dominance of the single party with no space for the opposition and conflicts within SPLM are tearing the country apart. There is possibility that a power-sharing deal might be arrived at, but such a deal would bring other problems in its wake. South Sudan's constitution gives too much power to the President, even power to sack elected state governors, which is aggravating the problems. There is a raging debate in South Sudan about federalism, a key demand of the rebels. Federalism can be an answer to the country's problems.

**FSR:** Can federalism stabilize the country?

**Copnall:** The concept of federalism has become much politicized in South Sudan. For a period, the government didn't allow radio stations and newspapers to discuss the issue. I think it will be a good idea for South Sudan to have a debate about the merits of federalism. Then there is a danger of demands for federalism on ethnic lines, which might increase the problems of lack of national unity.

**FSR:** Do you see ethnic divisions becoming stronger in South Sudan?

**Copnall:** Yes, ethnic lines are hardening in South Sudan. I think the conflict, when it began in December, is often wrongly described as an ethnic war and I don't think it was. I think it was a war that came through politics, and ambitions, and rivalry, and so on. But politicians in South Sudan have ethnic constituencies. In the beginning of the conflict in particular, those belonging to Nuer ethnic group (*main rebel leader Riek Machar's ethnic group*) were killed in Juba. Civilians were gunned down on the basis of their ethnicity. And that pushed a lot of Nuer in the army, and those who were not in the army, to take up weapons and fight on behalf of Riek Machar. Though this was really in revenge for what happened in Juba, ethnic tensions have been stoked and that is something the country will have to deal with. The conflict is not entirely ethnic even now, but there is an ethnic dimension that is difficult to ignore.

**FSR:** Is there any trans-border ethnic overlap which may be inflamed?

**Copnall:** Historically trans-border ethnic overlap played important role in Sudan. One example would be the Zaghawa community in Darfur. Chadian President Idriss Deby is a Zaghawa and many of the Darfur rebels are Zaghawa too. And at one point he was supporting

them and particularly JEM, the Justice and Equality Movement, against Khartoum and Khartoum was supporting rebels against Chad. So you had rebels against Djemine and Khartoum in 2008 that were essentially sponsored by the rival states and that was in part due to those cross border ties, which you see a lot of in Darfur. In South Sudan, the situation is similar with the Azande community, who are also in Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Western Equatorial in South Sudan, and there was a claim for an independent Azande state. It may not be very significance now, but who knows what could happen in the future. The complex ethnic composition that the African states have can play a major role in future conflicts.

**FSR:** What sort of ramifications will the fighting have on the region itself and on economic stability?

**Copnall:** The most obvious ramification has been the displacement of people. During the second north-south civil war in Sudan, there were 1.4 million South Sudanese who were forced to live abroad. There were 4 million people largely in Kenya and Ethiopia and a few other countries in the region.

**FSR:** Which countries are most affected by this refugee influx?

**Copnall:** Kenya and Ethiopia have faced the most brunt, historically. Also, in Sudan you have about 100,000 South Sudanese fleeing the conflict, and in-turn there are about 300,000 fleeing from Sudan into South Sudan because of the conflict in South Kordofan and Blue Nile. This new crisis has displaced about 1.8 million people. Most of them within the country and around 400,000 who went to Kenya, among other countries. Such displacements have effect on the economies of the host countries.

**FSR:** With the demise of South Sudan's (*pre-independence*) rebel leader John Garang (*who died in a plane crash in 2005*), has there been anyone able to replace him? In the absence of such a person, does South Sudan tear itself apart, or come to some sort of uneasy, extremely unstable, expensive, or temporary power-sharing arrangement?

**Copnall:** Apart from being a visionary, John Garang was also a divisive man. When he died in 2005, a major portion of South Sudanese forces were probably under the control of Paulino Matip<sup>1</sup> and were opposed to the SPLA. It was another leader, Salva Kiir Mayardit, who signed the Juba Declaration with Paulino Matip in January 2006 to bring all the South Sudanese troops essentially under one banner. So, actually it wasn't Garang who brought about that unity, it was Salva Kiir. On the contrary, its possible to argue that if Garang was alive, there would have been continued problems in South Sudan because he would not have signed that deal with others.

### 3 State of the North

**FSR:** In the North, President Bashir has been holding a firm grip on Sudan for long. What are the reasons for his success?

**Copnall:** It's a difficult question. For the first 10 years or so, you can argue that he wasn't really in control. Hassan al-Turabi was essentially calling the shots. That was the point when Sudan traced a very radical course, when Osama bin Laden was invited in and when there were goals of revolutionizing Sudanese society. From 1990, Bashir held power after he

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<sup>1</sup>Paulino Matip led the South Sudan Defense Forces (for a period affiliated with the government in Khartoum) before merging with the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA).

wrestled power from Turabi. His ability to stay in power is due to an unwieldy coalition he maintains - with Islamists, pragmatists, the military, and the security forces. Bashir is more or less acceptable to all these actors and he is very skilled at playing off different parts of the regime against the others. The current worry for most is about what would happen when he leaves as there will be jostling for power.

**FSR:** So there is no viable alternative for President Bashir at this moment?

**Copnall:** There's always a viable alternative. I've always rejected the notion - 'it's me or no one else' - used by powerful autocrats. There are alternatives, but those alternatives appear too tricky or haven't materialized.

**FSR:** What was the prime motivator for the student protests in Khartoum?

**Copnall:** There were a number of different protests. The first ones in January 2012 were quite closely inspired by the Arab Spring movement. It was mostly young people who hated the Bashir government and wanted to protest against it. In July 2012 there were ones that were more economic in nature, with political undertones too, when fuel subsidies were removed and prices rose. The most dramatic and important ones were in September, 2013. Which happened first in Wad Medani and then in Khartoum and Omdurman when fuel subsidies were removed completely and it was clear that prices were going to rise. Protests were spontaneous and were carried out by disenchanted, mainly young people without much political mobilization or direction. The major reason for the protests not gaining traction is simply because security forces shooting, which according to Amnesty, killed over 180 people. Though violent repressions are common in Sudan, they happened mainly in the periphery and not in Khartoum.

**FSR:** If the main reason for recent student protests were economical, will President Bashir consider changing his policy towards managing economics. Will he take care of the periphery?

**Copnall:** The protests, the street demonstrations, did not happen in the peripheral areas. In Sudanese history, whenever peripheral areas were ignored, there were wars, but they did not threaten the security of the center. So the current regime is changing its tactics in dealing with the issues. There is a definite push towards implementing western backed economic decision like reduction in fuel subsidies.

## 4 The Future & the Wider World

**FSR:** What do you think the younger generation wants in this part of the world?

**Copnall:** In South Sudan, a number of people, youngsters included, are prepared for conflict and want it to continue until their chosen leader comes to power or remains unopposed in power. Here people have experienced conflicts for such a long time that it became a normal part of life. Most, even children, are exposed to violent incidents like bomb blasts, so I think there is a willingness to entertain the possibility of more violence. When it comes to Sudan, the young population in Khartoum is far more connected with the outside world than their parents are. The mobile messaging application, WhatsApp, is very popular in Sudan. That means people see that things can be done in different ways. They are also learning from satellite televisions and other aspects of communication. A lot of young Sudanese are disillusioned with politics. They may dislike Bashir, but are not convinced that the opposition would be any better. I think the majority will remain aloof and would try to carry on with their lives till the time economy completely disintegrates.

**FSR:** What about international community? Is China supporting Sudanese and South Sudanese governments?

**Copnall:** China supported Khartoum and was willing to invest heavily in infrastructure including oil infrastructure, dams, and roads in Sudan. When South Sudan seceded, its position changed. It went from almost unconditional support of Khartoum to aiming for a more balanced relationship between Juba and Khartoum because Juba had the oil. China must be unhappy with the current situation because this conflict is stopping the oil production, and at one point the oil from united Sudan was 5% of Chinese oil imports. So for China, a peaceful South Sudan and good relationships between both Sudan and South Sudan are important. China has committed seven hundred peacekeepers to the UN mission to Juba, and rebel leaders from South Sudan went to Beijing to talk to the Chinese leaders. China in general is not that open and vocal about its position, but it clearly doesn't want conflict to continue. So it is working at least behind the scenes to try and resolve the problems.

**FSR:** What is Egypt's role?

**Copnall:** The relationship between Egypt and Sudan has often been difficult. Even during most difficult phases of this relationship, Sudan played the card of Nile River,<sup>2</sup> an issue of prime importance for Egyptian national survival. While Sudan's view about the Nile is changing due to construction of the Ethiopian dam, this change is an irritant to Egypt. With a backlash on the Islamic Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the new government in Cairo disapproves of the government in Sudan, which is Islamist at least in name, and that too is causing tensions between Khartoum and Cairo.

**FSR:** Would Egypt go so far as to support South Sudan as against Sudan?

**Copnall:** I think if there is support its only limited. There has been some economic cooperation between both and it might extend slightly further than that, but no, I think that Egypt is culturally closer to Sudan than South Sudan. Egypt never wanted South Sudan to secede, as South Sudan has been rather open in its rejection of the Nile water agreements. One of the South Sudan's development plans involves a dam built on the White Nile, which Egypt would not be in favor of. There are the reasons why, I think, Egypt would not be too keen backing South Sudan currently.

**FSR:** Can you tell us about your book, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts*?

**Copnall:** Poisons have antidotes, I guess. Essentially, through this title, I wanted to convey the difficulties that arose in the relationship between the two countries and the damage that they did to each other in the post-independence period. I think the relationship did get better and can get better. It will never be a very good relationship as long as the current political elites are in power in both countries because they fought against each other for most of their lives and that mistrust will always be there. There is a sort of acknowledgment by both sides that they need each other economically, but they are never going to love each other.

**FSR:** What is the role of organized crime in this region?

**Copnall:** It's not something I looked into, but I don't think that organized crime has a real grip, partly because there is so much conflict. If you look at drug smuggling in West Africa, it flourishes in countries where there is limited infrastructure, which is certainly the case with South Sudan, but organized crime cannot thrive where there is so much of conflict. Though

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<sup>2</sup>The Nile River flows through Sudan to reach Egypt, a fact that has long given Sudan leverage over its upstream neighbor while causing tensions between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt over water rights.

there is corruption at the moment, international organized crime will not be able to thrive on a large scale.

**FSR:** What role does international aid play?

**Copnall:** In South Sudan, corruption is a real problem when it comes to international aid. South Sudanese fighting forces and forces around the world have used resources, including resources for humanitarian aid, as tools of war. The warring factions want humanitarian aid going into their areas because they will be able to feed their soldiers. I think this is an unavoidable price that humanitarian aid faces. The donors can try to control and reduce this practice, but ultimately if you want to feed hungry people you have to accept that some of that money is going elsewhere.

Corruption, on the other hand, is a little bit different. There are ways in which money can be given to local organizations directly to avoid large-scale corruption. But again, you probably have to accept the fact that it is such a terribly corrupt society that some of that donor money is going to be stolen. And then there are the Western countries, the troika - 'the US, the UK and Norway'. The popular opinion in the US – that Khartoum is bad and everything against Khartoum is good, is a very simplistic narrative of Sudan. There is a need for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of both Sudan and South Sudan if any meaningful help is to be extended.

*\* Editorial clarifications indicated in italics throughout.*