

AFRICA

Brutal Sudanese Militia Leader Plays a Bigger Role in War-Torn Nation

General known as Hemedti, who guided force that cracked down on Darfur and pro-democracy movements, is a major player after military ousted longtime president

By Julia Steers

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The leader of a militia that carried out a deadly crackdown on a resistance movement in Sudan's Darfur province has emerged as a major player in the country months after the ouster of its longtime president.

Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo commands the state-sponsored paramilitary group known as the Rapid Support Forces and is deputy head of the transitional military council that removed Omar al-Bashir from office in April after months of protests, sparking hopes for a democratic transition.

On June 3, the RSF attacked a sit-in by pro-democracy activists outside military headquarters in the capital Khartoum, killing more than 100 people, protest leaders and rights groups said. The site has been empty of protesters since the crackdown and the RSF continues to target public gatherings and activists throughout Khartoum.

Some analysts call the man known as Hemedti—a former camel herder with no formal military training who has become rich with interests in gold mining and other sectors—the most powerful of the generals now ruling the country.

Mr. Bashir—who is facing corruption-related charges—played military leaders off each other during his time in office, but the strength of Hemedti's militia has made him a force in Sudan's unfolding power struggle.

“He is the biggest power in town. It's obvious he's become too powerful. Even the military council has no choice but to accommodate him,” said Dalia Haj-Omar, an independent political analyst.



RSF chief Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, also known as Hemedti, waved a baton while riding in a vehicle surrounded by RSF members and crowds of supporters in the village of Qarri on June 15. PHOTO: ASHRAF SHAZLY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Bashir in 2003 tapped Hemedti to raise a militia that became known as the Janjaweed—loosely translated as bandits—to fight the Darfur rebellion.

The RSF crushed the resistance after a scorched-earth campaign targeting non-Arab Sudanese civilians in the west of the country left 300,000 people dead, in what the International Criminal Court labeled genocide.

After more than a decade of carrying out well-documented atrocities, Janjaweed fighters were absorbed into the RSF.

Since 2015, the RSF has fought the Houthis in Yemen as part of a Saudi-led coalition.

The RSF's growing profile is a stark reminder of the military's clout, which strengthened during Mr. Bashir's three-decade rule.

The current regime is a close ally of Arab rulers in Egypt and the Gulf states, who also favor a hard-line solution to Sudan's political standoff. In the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and their allies have sought to back dependable non-Islamist strongmen when the possibility of democratic change looms.

"The military council and [the RSF] are seen all as one, and the diplomatic corps in Khartoum were too fast to go and shake hands with Hemedti," said Ms. Haj-Omar, the political analyst, referencing diplomatic meetings Hemedti conducted in April with the U.S. chargé d'affaires and ambassadors from the U.K. and European Union countries. "They have enabled Hemedti to the extent that he can enact a massacre in the capital."

On June 12, the Trump administration responded to months of protest leaders’ complaints over a lack of U.S. engagement by sending two senior officials to Khartoum to show support for an African Union-led mediation between the military council and opposition leaders.



Pro-democracy protesters used burning tires to erect a barricade on a street in Khartoum on June 3. PHOTO: REUTERS

Tibor Nagy, U.S. assistant secretary of state for Africa, on Friday called for an

“independent and credible” investigation into the alleged “murder, rape, [and] pillaging by members of the security forces” on June 3.

The opposition—a coalition of political parties and protest-movement leaders—had sought to use mass demonstrations as leverage in negotiations with the military, intended to lay out a framework to transition to civilian rule. But the military brass has been unwilling to accept terms that don’t include a joint council led primarily by military officers.

Some analysts say regional powers have much to lose if the military loses power. Gulf nations have given the RSF financial and political backing.

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The military council’s official head, Lt. Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, oversaw the 2015 deal with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to deploy 10,000 Sudanese troops to fight in

Yemen.

Shortly after Mr. Bashir’s ouster, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi pledged \$3 billion in aid to strengthen the military council.

In May, Hemedti met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, while Gen. Burhan spoke with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and U.A.E. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. The meetings yielded broad statements of support for security and stability in Sudan from the leaders of U.A.E. and Egypt and a reaffirmation of close ties with Saudi Arabia.

Tensions remain high in this country of 40 million people. The internet has been shut off, murals depicting Mr. Bashir's ouster have been painted over and military Humvees roam the streets.



An injured man is carried on a stretcher during protests in Khartoum on June 3. PHOTO:SUDAN CONGRESS PARTY/REUTERS

Some Khartoum residents have barricaded streets as RSF and the police increasingly use live ammunition against acts of resistance.

Amnesty International says the RSF is using the same heavy-handed tactics in Khartoum as it employed in Darfur.

"This is a militia. RSF is not trained to do policing activities," said Ahmed Elozbier the rights group's Sudan researcher. "It's a philosophy of shoot to kill."

Sayab Noureldaim, a 30-year-old Khartoum resident, joined his neighbors grieving and singing protest chants after the June 3 crackdown. Days later, he said, the RSF detained and tortured him, demanding the whereabouts of protest leaders. He said his brother distracted the men and Mr. Noureldaim was able to escape with severe injuries from lashes.

"They whipped me, hitting me while they questioned me, with cocked AK-47s on my back," he said. "They kept saying they would shoot me in the head, arguing over who would do it."

Despite the death of several close friends during the June 3 raid, Mr. Noureldaim remains determined in the face of the military's firepower. "The [military council] is not our righteous ruler. I'll keep fighting for the government that represents us, the government that a lot of my friends gave their lives and blood for. Civil government is the only thing I'll ever settle for."



Protesters gathered on a railway bridge in Khartoum during demonstrations against the military regime on April 26. **PHOTO:** FREDRIK LERNERYD/GETTY IMAGES

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