



# South Sudan: An African Tragedy where Looting is the Name of the Game

By Rasna Warah



The signing of a peace agreement by the Government of South Sudan and opposition groups on November 20<sup>th</sup> 2019 has signaled to the international community that there is a real possibility of peace in Africa's youngest country. But I am not hopeful, nor do I believe that the current leaders of this war-ravaged country, Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, are committed to a peace process, despite being humbled by Pope Francis (who kissed their feet last year—a gesture that spoke more about the Pope's humility and generosity than it did about South Sudan leaders' leadership).

I also believe that the two leaders should be held accountable for the violence and other atrocities they have inflicted on their people. As a new report has shown, not only are Kiir and Machar war criminals but they have been systematically looting their country for their own personal benefit for years. The report by The Sentry titled "The Taking of South Sudan: The Tycoons, Brokers and Multinational Corporations Complicit in Hijacking the World's Newest State", which was released in September last year, states:

"The men who liberated South Sudan proceeded to hijack the country's fledgling governing institutions, loot its resources, and launched a war in 2013 that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and displaced millions of people. They did not act alone. The South Sudanese politicians and military officials ravaging the world's newest nation received essential support from individuals and

corporations from across the world who have reaped profits from those dealings.”

The report documents what is often described as Africa’s “resource curse”—a never-ending cycle of killing and looting that leaves an African state impoverished and in a permanent state of political instability, and which creates a kleptocratic class of politicians and generals at the top with deep ties to international partners who benefit from the conflict and whose names and faces often remain hidden. These politicians and their partners in crime are wined and dined by these international “partners” who are keen to have their fingers in South Sudan’s resource pie—oil, in this case.

The report claims that local politicians and their “international partners”, which include Chinese-Malaysian oil giants, British tycoons, and networks of traders from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya and Uganda, have plundered billions of dollars from the people of South Sudan, who remain mired in conflict, poverty and underdevelopment. It says that the largest multinational consortium in South Sudan, which is controlled by the China National Petroleum Corporation and Malaysia’s state-owned oil company, Petronas, provided material support to a pro-government militia that burnt entire villages and committed atrocities against civilians. South African and American arms dealers and mercenaries also seem to have benefitted from the conflict. It is believed that Kiir’s and Machar’s armies could be responsible for the deaths of up to 300,000 people.

Some of these “investors” formed companies with President Salva Kiir’s family members. (Former President Daniel arap Moi’s son, Gideon Moi, is mentioned in the report as one of the Kenyan individuals who formed a company with Salva Kiir’s daughter Adut.) In all, individuals and firms from 13 countries, including India and Canada, are implicated.

This African tragedy is being played out even as the international community tries to bring together warring factions in the hope that South Sudan will eventually become a functioning state with a thriving democracy. Why the two warlords, Kiir and Machar, have not been hauled before the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity is one of those enigmas whose answer lies in the geopolitical and financial motives of the international community, including South Sudan’s neighbours.

Both Kiir and Machar should be referred to the ICC, but neither the United Nations Security Council nor the African Union is likely to do this. The United States and other countries that financially supported South Sudan’s independence from the Arab-dominated north will also not admit that South Sudan has been unable to have the kind of leadership that can sustain peace and democracy.

But were we too quick to assume that South Sudan would one day become Botswana—a resource-rich country whose leadership did not go on a looting spree, and which managed its natural resources in a way that did not lead to conflict? I think so, because South Sudan was never intended to be a peaceful and stable democracy. And influential forces in neighbouring countries like Kenya were eager to take part in the looting.

### **Safe haven**

In their latest report, The Sentry calls on the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Uganda and Kenya to enforce and enact sanctions against individuals involved in the plunder of South Sudan and in human rights violations against civilians. These sanctions, it says, should include travel bans and the freezing of assets held abroad by these individuals.

This week the US finally imposed sanctions, including freezing of assets, on two senior South Sudanese officials, not because they looted South Sudan or inflicted violence on its people, but because they were perceived to be “disrupting efforts to end the conflict”. Kiir and Machar are not

on the sanctions list. In essence, the sanctions are against “spoilers” of the peace deal between Kiir and Machar, which began in 2015, but which has been stalling mainly because both leaders have not agreed to all aspects of it. Machar, for instance, insists on his security being assured before he forms a transitional government. It is assumed that peace will return when Kiir and Machar form a government together. But past experience has proved this to be difficult.

The recommendations by Sentry are also not likely to be enforced for a variety of reasons.

One, Kenya’s capital Nairobi has for years been a safe haven for warlords from the region, and this has benefitted Kenyan politicians and businesses. Nairobi seems to be the preferred destination of criminals and warlords from neighbouring conflict-prone countries who want to quickly launder their money or make deals with corrupt Kenyan politicians or businessmen.

Kenya’s “bandit economy” has benefitted enormously from conflicts in the region, not just in terms of the illicit money that pours into the country, but also with regard to humanitarian agencies. The conflicts in Somalia and South Sudan generated enormous amounts of funds for Nairobi-based aid and humanitarian agencies, and private companies that transported or distributed aid to these countries.

We must also remember that the Mwai Kibaki administration’s support for a liberated South Sudan was predicated on the administration’s ambitions to link oil from South Sudan to a port in Lamu through the Lamu Port, South Sudan, Ethiopia Transport corridor (LAPSSET). So Kenya was already eyeing South Sudan’s oil long before the country seceded from Sudan and achieved independence in 2011.

Nairobi is also the preferred residence of many South Sudanese warlords. South Sudanese leaders are known to own houses in the poshest parts of Nairobi. Their children go to school here and their relatives come here for medical treatment.

According to an earlier investigative report by The Sentry titled “War Crimes Shouldn’t Pay” (foreword by George Clooney and John Prendergast), both President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar, and top military officers in the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army and South Sudan’s armed forces, own or rent luxurious homes in Nairobi and have accounts in Kenyan banks through which they have laundered millions of dollars. Kenya’s property market and banking sector thus appear to have been big beneficiaries of South Sudan’s conflict.

The report confirmed that the rivalry between Kiir and Machar was not so much about ethnic divisions as about competition over the country’s vast natural resources. South Sudan’s leaders are enjoying first-class lifestyles in Nairobi while at least half of South Sudan’s population faces starvation and more than 2 million people are internally displaced.

Another reason why South Sudan’s leaders are not likely to be brought to account is that for years South Sudan was the darling of the United States, which mistakenly believed that South Sudan’s war of secession with the north was about religion, not greed. Western countries have provided billions of dollars in aid to South Sudan in the belief that they were helping a budding Christian nation that wanted to be free of Muslim hegemony. After having financially and morally supported secessionist armies in South Sudan, the United States is unlikely to acknowledge that it has created a monster.

The recurrence of conflict in South Sudan has shown us what happens when the international community confuses clannism with nationalism and does not make the distinction between leadership and gluttony. The truth that is becoming increasingly apparent is that neither Kiir nor Machar should have ascended to leadership positions in South Sudan because both have blood on

their hands. Both are incapable of seeing beyond their Dinka and Nuer clans, and both have shown no remorse for the thousands of men, women and children who have died, been displaced or been raped in their name. Independence in 2011 did not end the conflict in South Sudan; on the contrary, the conflict became more protracted.

And while Salva Kiir claims that he does not have the money to solve his country's myriad problems, he seems to have a lot of money to improve his image. According to a report published by Vice News and the Center for Public Integrity, the Sudanese president spent more than \$2 million on lobbying and public relations firms in Washington between 2014 and 2015. These firms were paid to boost his image, to keep US aid flowing and to prevent any criticism of the South Sudanese government's atrocities against its own people that might have resulted in sanctions.

A large chunk of this money went to the Podesta lobby group, which included high-level officials who served in Bill Clinton's and Barack Obama's administrations. When a United Nations report accused the South Sudanese government of failing to end violence, protect civilians and punish perpetrators, Podesta issued press releases that discouraged sanctions against South Sudan, claiming that such sanctions could lead to the collapse of the fragile peace agreement.

South Sudan is not the only country that relies on PR firms to stave off criticism. Increasingly, rogue African states and leaders are turning to PR firms in the West to whitewash the atrocities they are inflicting on their people. Many countries, including Egypt, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Iraq and Azerbaijan, have recruited lobbyists in the West to influence public policy and opinion. The spin-doctoring is so successful in some cases that human rights abusers turn into human rights defenders overnight.

South Sudan was bound to be a failed state straight from birth. In other countries, the "resource curse" strikes when stable countries discover oil or other resources and then descend into conflict over competition for those resources. In the case of South Sudan, the "resource curse" was brewing even before the country was liberated.

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