

# **Protection by Presence (PP)**

## **Could Sudan's Devastation Have Been Reduced Through Sustained International Presence?**

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### **Introduction**

When war erupted in Sudan in April 2023, many governments and international organizations quickly evacuated their citizens, diplomatic personnel and non-essential staff as the security situation rapidly deteriorated. While these decisions were understandable from a security perspective, millions of Sudanese civilians were left to endure one of the world's worst humanitarian crises with limited international presence on the ground.

This raises an important policy question: *Could a sustained international presence have reduced civilian casualties, deterred human rights violations and limited the widespread destruction of Sudan?*

Many observers argue that the international response focused primarily on evacuations rather than civilian protection. Others contend that the extreme insecurity, restrictions on humanitarian access and the complexity of the conflict made meaningful international engagement exceedingly difficult. Regardless of these differing perspectives, the war has resulted in devastating human losses, mass displacement, destruction of infrastructure and widespread violations of international humanitarian law.

The concept of Protection by Presence (PP) suggests that the continued physical presence of international organizations, humanitarian agencies, diplomatic missions and independent observers can itself provide a measure of protection by deterring abuses, documenting violations, facilitating humanitarian assistance and maintaining international attention on affected populations.

### **The Role of the International Community in Protecting Civilians**

The international community plays a vital role in protecting civilians during armed conflict through the presence of international and regional organizations, including United Nations agencies, humanitarian organizations, diplomatic missions and, where mandated, UN peace operations. Their work extends beyond emergency relief to supporting peace, promoting accountability, strengthening institutions and helping communities recover from conflict.

#### **1. Providing Humanitarian Assistance**

International organizations work to provide lifesaving assistance, including food, clean water, healthcare, shelter, sanitation, education and protection services for internally displaced persons, refugees and conflict-affected communities. Their continued presence enables humanitarian actors to respond more effectively to urgent needs.

## **2. Supporting Ceasefire and Peace Efforts**

Regional and international organizations facilitate dialogue between parties to the conflict, encourage ceasefire agreements and support mediation initiatives. These efforts create opportunities for humanitarian access, reduce violence and lay the groundwork for long-term peace.

## **3. Monitoring Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law**

International organizations monitor, document and report human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law. Their independent reporting strengthens accountability mechanisms, preserves evidence and supports future transitional justice processes.

## **4. Protecting Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees**

Millions of Sudanese have been displaced by the conflict. International agencies provide protection services, emergency assistance, healthcare, education and psychosocial support while working with governments and communities to promote safe, voluntary, and dignified return when conditions allow.

## **5. Supporting State Institutions and Peacebuilding**

The international community assists national institutions through technical support, capacity building, governance reforms, justice sector strengthening and peacebuilding initiatives. These efforts contribute to rebuilding public trust, reinforcing the rule of law and reducing the likelihood of renewed conflict.

## **Could Protection by Presence Have Reduced Sudan's Destruction?**

Although no international presence could have completely prevented the outbreak of war, maintaining a stronger and more sustained presence inside Sudan may have reduced some of its most devastating consequences.

### **A continued international presence could have:**

- Enhanced humanitarian access to vulnerable populations.
- Improved monitoring and reporting of human rights violations.
- Increased diplomatic engagement with conflict parties.
- Strengthened coordination among humanitarian organizations.
- Maintained greater international attention on civilian protection.
- Supported early warning systems and rapid humanitarian responses.
- Potentially deterred some violations through continuous international observation and documentation.

However, international presence alone cannot stop a war. Effective civilian protection also depends on the commitment of conflict parties to respect international humanitarian law, sustained political dialogue, regional cooperation and strong international leadership.

## **Final Thoughts**

The experience of Sudan demonstrates that protecting civilians requires more than humanitarian assistance, it requires sustained international engagement, political commitment and a meaningful presence alongside affected communities.

While no international presence could have completely prevented the conflict or its devastating consequences, remaining engaged on the ground could have helped reduce civilian suffering, improve humanitarian access, strengthen the documentation of human rights violations and reinforce accountability.

The concept of Protection by Presence (PP) offers an important lesson for future conflicts: maintaining a visible and active international presence can help deter abuses, support humanitarian operations, preserve international attention and reassure affected communities that they have not been abandoned.

Although international presence alone cannot end a war, it can significantly reduce its human cost and create a stronger foundation for peace, justice, recovery and long-term stability. Future responses to armed conflicts should therefore prioritize sustained international engagement as a key pillar of civilian protection and peacebuilding.

Ultimately, the measure of the international community's commitment should not be judged solely by how quickly it evacuates during crises, but also by how steadfastly it remains engaged in protecting the lives, dignity and rights of those who cannot leave.

The lessons from Sudan should inspire a renewed global commitment to ensuring that civilians are never left without protection in times of war.