



# Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan and Refugee Concerns: Exploring the centrality of structural nonviolence to secure people's lives

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Received: 15 Sept., 2023

Revised: 29 Nov., 2023

Accepted: 08 Dec., 2023

## ABSTRACT

The worsening violence in Sudan is creating an equally catastrophic humanitarian crisis in the country. It is almost seven months since the disastrous conflict erupted between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces. The violent conflict has led to cross-border displacement, massive migration of lakh of Sudanese people; the situation has now taken shape of a full-scale civil war, genocide of innocent civilians and extreme violence against women. It is in this backdrop, there is critical and emergent need of major intervention to not only end the violent conflict, but also mount a major humanitarian mission as the entire health infrastructure has crumbled and the move towards a famine-like condition where people are deprived of even their basic needs. It is also here we are reminded of Mahatma Gandhi's principles of nonviolence and most importantly his ideas of structural nonviolence. This paper is an attempt to explore the essence of Gandhian structural nonviolence in conflict situations as that in Sudan. It also delves through interviews of Sudanese refugees in Chad, a neighbouring country on the breakdown of lives of the innocent civilians and their dreams of a peaceful and nonviolent Sudan.

**Keywords:** Dialogues, structural nonviolence, humanitarian crisis

A UN Security Council meeting in September 2023 on the worsening violence and humanitarian crisis in Sudan noted 'at least 5,000 people have been killed since the start of the conflict – and that over 12,000 have been injured – the actual number is likely much higher.' Edem Wosornu, Director of Operations and Advocacy in the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in his briefing at the meeting shared details of the costs as he pointed out, "About 1 million newly displaced people every month, distressing levels of sexual violence, a complete breakdown of the health system and more than 6 million people now one step away from famine. With these enormous challenges, the humanitarian community is struggling to scale-up

operations and meet growing needs." (<https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15409.doc.htm>)

Mayada Adil, representing Sudanese women and girls speaking in the meeting discussed the grim condition of women as there were rampant cases of "those who were raped, sexually assaulted and exploited as sex slaves". Underlining the role of Sudanese women as peace advocates, Adil said now there were severe restrictions in women's participation in dialogues and demonstrations.

**How to cite this article:** Adam, M. (2023). Humanitarian Crisis in Sudan and Refugee Concerns: Exploring the centrality of structural nonviolence to secure people's lives. *Int. J. Peace, Edu. Dev.*, 11(02): 79-82.

**Source of Support:** None; **Conflict of Interest:** None



She said the political space for women in Sudan has been diminishing ever since the violent conflict begun. In the context of the role of women as peace advocates in Sudan, Issa Altom (2019) observed on how 'young women felt equal participation of women in peace-building was critical as it would ensure greater economic and political opportunities.'

Issa Altom reached out to young women in Sudan for her study and an overarching dimension of the interviews revealed, "The resilience and determination of women across Sudan to play a pivotal role in resolution of conflict through nonviolent means and ensure 'a fair and just country' is reflected by the perspectives of many young people in the country. They all want to be the catalysts to promote peace and reconciliation." Unfortunately in the present conflict, women in Sudan find themselves excluded from any initiatives for peace; instead they are now victims of brutal sexual violence.

Meanwhile in the same Security Council meeting, the representative of Ghana, Harold Adlai Agyeman reiterated that there was no military solution to the conflict as he called on the parties to "silence the guns and resort to dialogue" (<https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15409.doc.htm>).

The grim situation can be explained by an International Organization for Migration Displacement Tracking Matrix (IOM DTM) report highlighted in ReliefWeb. It says, "About 4.57 million people have been displaced by fighting within Sudan and have sought refuge in 4,658 locations across all 18 states. The displaced are from eight states, with the majority - about 3.1 million people (69 per cent of all internally displaced) - originally from Khartoum." The ReliefWeb report (2023) on Sudan has also discussed how the entire health system has collapsed, livelihoods have been devastated and how children have been forced out of schools. It notes, "This devastating conflict - coupled with acute food insecurity, disease outbreaks, civilian displacement, and destruction of livelihoods - threatens to consume the entire country. About 15 million people - 31 per cent of the population - are acutely food insecure between

October 2023 and February 2024. This is almost double the 7.7 million people who were acutely food insecure between October 2022 and February 2023. This implies that the conflict and other aggravating factors have made an additional 7.3 million acutely food insecure."

The violent conflict has serious impact in neighbouring countries. Rondos (2023) points out on how the conflict is impacting countries like Chad, South Sudan and Egypt due to the flow of lakhs of refugees. For instance, Sy (2023) talking about the refugee situation in Chad, one of the poorest countries in the world says, "Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, Chad is now hosting the largest share of the more than 800,000 people who have fled Sudan, in addition to the 180,000 refugees it was already hosting, mainly from the Central African Republic, Cameroon and Nigeria. Now, one in 17 people living in the country is a refugee." Sy talks about the enormous needs in terms of protection and material assistance; and in terms of shelter, water and sanitation in the refugee camps.

This paper will explore the challenges faced by the Sudanese refugees in the Abashi town of Chad. It will try to capture the views of these refugees and then further explore the nonviolent alternatives that were needed to be pursued so that these hapless people didn't have to become refugees in the first place. As part of the reality check study, about 20 refugees both male and females were interviewed. On the request of the refugees, the names that appear in this paper have been changed.

## **The Study and discussions**

A questionnaire with specific questions was developed to gauge how the refugees in Abashi town of Chad were faring under extreme circumstances. The questions ranged from the challenges of having being forced to flee from their home country in a foreign country, the problems faced by them, their dreams of future, mental health issues, alternatives which could have made their lives livable.

All the individuals who were interviewed reflected on a bleak future they were envisaging. With their

homes gone in their native country, they were totally uncertain of what they could do for the future. All their possessions in Sudan were gone and they were not sure of what they were going to do. They were concerned that their children also faced a future which entailed poor health and no education. Abass Hamza, a middle-aged man questioned if they had any rights to even dream. When everything is finished, how a person could even dare to dream, he asked. His views were endorsed by all those who were interviewed. The extremely volatile situation in Sudan and the sudden spurt of refugees in Chad which was becoming very difficult to manage has led the refugees to a 'dark unchartered territory' which they had never imagined before. Those interviewed felt that since they were in such a hopeless and desperate situation, they had stopped to dream.

Those interviewed said they had never experienced being refugees before. They had earlier heard the trauma of refugees in different countries and had never imagined they themselves would be refugees like the condition they were in. It was found that they were two types of refugees- those who were in camps and those who managed to be in town. Many of those in towns had managed to take shelter in houses of distant relatives. It was not easy to manage as most of these relatives were living in poor conditions themselves. The author himself has taken refuge in the house of a distant relative. A few people who had managed even with their meager resources to take a house on rent were facing the prospects of the crisis prolonging which would pose a challenge to their continuing in these rented houses.

All those who were interviewed were concerned about their livelihood as they were jobless in a foreign country. They were not sure how they were going to raise their children and live the rest of their lives. Msab Mohammed who has five children said both in the short-term and long term, the situation looks extremely bleak. Majority of the refugees have lost all hope.

There are severe limitations of resources in the refugee camps. Besides poor sanitation facilities, being arid area even water is in extremely short

supply. Synenko (2023) gives an expansive account of the challenges of serious water scarcity in the camps. She talks about how the inmates set up long line of jerrycans and plastic buckets right from five in the morning. She quotes one refugee, Zuhail who said, "I leave my jerry can in line, then check on it every couple of hours so as not to miss my turn."

As the onslaught of refugees' crossing over to safely continues, majority of them are forced to stay in places where there is little protection against heat and rain. Hawoa Zakaria, a 21-year old young woman said she has never experienced such a situation before. She said she is from Darfur, was studying the local college and had a fairly good life. "This is not something we could ever imagine. We had a proper house and here in this dilapidated condition having thatched roof where rain water can easily seep," she said.

An important dimension to these sufferings which was echoed by all the respondents was the desire to see the end of the brutal violence in their country and promotion of nonviolent alternatives in the resolution of the conflict. They felt there should have been a system in place in Sudan where dialogues could have been promoted when the conflict broke. Dialogues are extremely important and form part of nonviolent alternatives for resolution of conflicts. In this context, Kundu and Shah (2023) discuss on 'how dialogues can be powerful strategies for not only individual transformation and but also social transformation'. They use the Gandhian framework to underline the essence of dialogue in conflict situations as they note, "When we are engaged in genuine dialogue, we are learning from each other with humility. So from the Gandhian principles of truth, nonviolence, love, compassion and justice, we learn to enter into dialogues that mutually enriching leading to enhancement of our personhood, engaging with each other at the deepest level, overcome the possible divisions that exist between those who are in conflict which distinguishes between 'us' vs 'them'."

The respondents observed that the spirit of dialogue was missing in almost every level which had led to trust deficit and very low level of tolerance.

On the issue of structural violence which plagued their society, the respondents felt basic deprivations, stark inequalities, lack of justice systems were some of the significant reasons for the frequent conflict in Sudanese society. Amna Ahamd, a 25-year old woman who used to work in the community felt the continued lack of deprivations and non fulfillment of basic needs in Sudanese society was an important basis on how divisiveness and conflicts had taken deep roots. It was only possible by having structures which addressed these deprivations, she observed.

## CONCLUSION

The author has been following the ideas and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi since college days. Based on the violent conflict and human sufferings of lakhs of Sudanese people and the interviews of refugees who were forced to flee to Chad, it can argued that the Gandhian principles of nonviolence was the only way forward for a peaceful society in Sudan. Mahatma Gandhi was clear that practicing nonviolence was not just a personal project, but has to be an initiative of the society as a whole. He had said, "I hold that nonviolence is not merely a personal virtue. It is also a social virtue to be cultivated like the other virtues. Surely society is largely regulated by the expression of non-violence in its mutual dealings. What I ask for is an extension of it on a larger, national and international scale (Harijan, 7-1-1939). This is what is needed in Sudan today on an emergent basis.

Further to tackle the issues of structural violence, a human approach to meet the basic needs of Sudanese people was an important pillar to take the society away from the continuing vicious cycle of violent conflicts. Issues of inequalities, deprivations and injustice will continue to haunt the people indefinitely. In Gandhian parlance this can be explained as an attempt to promote structural nonviolence. Structural violence can be addressed only by encouraging and promoting structural nonviolence. Also the Gandhian approach to dialogue as noted above should be assimilated so that a healthy environment of dialogues can be created. Besides, what is needed is a serious healing

touch with love and compassion which should be the guiding force of any action to resolve the crisis. In the end amidst the unending suffering of the people of Sudan who have been displaced from their homes, this idea of Mahatma Gandhi should have been assimilated amongst the conflicting parties which could have averted this carnage:

The force of love is the same as the force of the soul or truth. We have evidence of its working at every step. The universe would disappear without the existence of that force.... Thousands, indeed tens of thousands, depend for their existence on a very active working of this force. Little quarrels of millions of families in their daily lives disappear before the exercise of this force. ...Two brothers quarrel; one of them repents and reawakens the love that was lying dormant in him; the two again begin to live in peace (Mahatma Gandhi, Hind Swaraj).

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