

Fresh From Battles Won With U.A.E. Arms, Sudanese General Takes Victory Lap

Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan was greeted by African leaders as if he had already won Sudan's civil war. His forces have secretly been armed by the United Arab Emirates, an as-yet unpublished U.N. report found.



By Declan Walsh

Reporting from Nairobi, Kenya

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Lt. Gen. Mohamed Hamdan, the leader of a notorious paramilitary force fighting for supremacy in Sudan's civil war, is not the president of his country. Yet on a recent whirlwind tour of six African nations, he was treated just like one.

Some of the continent's most powerful leaders rolled out the red carpet for General Hamdan after he arrived on a luxury jet for meetings in late December and early January, having swapped his military fatigues for business suits. In Kenya, traditional dancers waited at the plane steps. In South Africa, he sank into an armchair beside a smiling President Cyril Ramaphosa.

And in Rwanda, General Hamdan posed solemnly at a memorial to victims of the 1994 genocide — even though his own troops have faced accusations of genocide in Sudan's Darfur region.

The surprise tour was a remarkable comeback for a commander often rumored dead or wounded since Sudan plunged into war in April. General Hamdan's Rapid Support Forces are steamrolling across Sudan, beating the country's regular army into retreat — in large part thanks to military backing from the United Arab Emirates, a Persian Gulf petrostate that is emerging as a kingmaker in the Horn of Africa region, according to a new report by United Nations investigators.

The as-yet unpublished report, obtained by The New York Times, offers new detail about how the Emirates has been smuggling powerful weapons to General Hamdan's forces, known as the R.S.F., through Chad since last summer — armed

drones, howitzers and anti-aircraft missiles, sent via secretive cargo flights and desert smuggling routes. The supplies have boosted his forces to a succession of victories that in recent months have altered the course of the war.

“This new R.S.F. firepower had a massive impact on the balance of forces, both in Darfur and other regions of Sudan,” the report says.

War has brought utter catastrophe to Sudan, killing at least 12,000 people since April and displacing another 7.4 million from their homes, the United Nations estimates. Fighting has laid waste to large parts of the capital, Khartoum, and 25 million of Sudan’s 45 million people need relief aid to survive.

A photograph posted on General Hamdan’s X account on Jan. 7, 2024 shows him visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial in Rwanda. His own forces have been accused of genocide in Sudan’s Darfur region.

Experts say the Emirates is using its vast wealth and sophisticated weapons to steer the course of a turbulent region of Africa dogged by conflict but endowed with vast natural wealth and a lengthy Red Sea coastline.

Its motivations are ambiguous; experts point to the Emirates’ desire for port deals and agricultural land in a part of Africa that it increasingly sees as its strategic back yard, and its longstanding hostility to Islamist forces.

But the latest U.N. report, compiled by experts monitoring a 2005 arms embargo on Darfur, highlights the cost of those ambitions. It documents widespread violence against civilians that has accompanied the advance of Gen. Hamdan’s

forces — massacres, bombings and reports of hundreds of rapes that echo the genocide in Darfur of two decades ago.

That pattern of atrocities prompted the U.S. secretary of state, Antony J. Blinken, to formally accuse the R.S.F. on Dec. 6 of war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. (Mr. Blinken said the other side in the war — the Sudanese military — had also committed war crimes through indiscriminate bombings.)

Weeks later General Hamdan, also known as Hemeti, boarded a Boeing provided by Royal Jet, a company run by an adviser to the president of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

In a statement, the Emirates said it was “not supplying arms and ammunition to any of the warring parties” and denied it had breached the arms embargo. It said that its priority was to protect civilians and, through diplomacy with American, Arab and African partners, to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Those denials are meeting increasingly vocal skepticism from American officials, however, who fear that Sudan is sliding toward famine, genocide or a new round of brutal, autocratic rule if the Rapid Support Forces win the war.

The R.S.F. did not respond to questions for this article.

In early December, the Biden administration made it known that Vice President Kamala Harris had raised the war in Sudan directly with Sheikh Mohamed on the sidelines of a U.N. climate summit. Over Christmas, Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, raised it more forcefully during a call to his Emirati counterpart, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed, according to a senior American official with knowledge of the call who spoke anonymously to discuss private conversations.

Vice President Kamala Harris meets with Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates, at the COP28 climate conference in Dubai last month, in a photo posted by the Emirati government. Ryan Carter/UAE Presidential Court, via Reuters

Yet many American lawmakers — and privately, even some senior Biden administration officials — say the effort is still too timid, faulting the State Department for failing to come up with a plan to end the war despite months of diplomatic effort, alongside Saudi Arabia.

The C.I.A. recently circulated to President Biden and other senior officials its assessment of an outright R.S.F. victory in Sudan, saying it would spread abuses and impede the spread of democracy in the region, American officials said. The United States is also concerned about General Hamdan's ties to Russia's Wagner mercenaries, who supplied him with anti-aircraft missiles in the early months of the war.

Those concerns parallel growing outside calls for a more urgent American intervention in Sudan, including a stronger stance toward Emirati meddling that critics call disastrous.

“In pursuit of influence and security, the U.A.E. may end up tipping the entire region into chaos,” Michelle Gavin, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote recently.

General Hamdan, a one-time camel trader, rose to prominence in the late 2000s as a commander of the brutal militia known as the janjaweed in Darfur. He amassed a war chest by building a business empire — at first by controlling gold mines, then as an ally of the Emirates.

From about 2016, General Hamdan sent fighters to Yemen, on the Emirati payroll, and later invested those profits in a network of about 50 businesses, headquartered in Dubai, in the Emirates, that are still funding his war machine, U.N. investigators found.

Last July, the Emirates doubled down on General Hamdan. A new, Emirati-built hospital appeared in Amdjarass, a remote town in eastern Chad, offering medical treatment to Sudanese refugees. But Western intelligence services soon realized

that cargo planes landing on a nearby airstrip were in fact carrying arms destined for the R.S.F.

In its statement, the Emirates called the field hospital “a critical lifeline for civilians in need of medical care” and said it had invited U.N. inspectors to visit it.

A photograph from Emirates state media purporting to show a scene from an Emirati field hospital in Amdjarass, a remote town in Chad, in August. Intelligence sources say an airfield in the town is being used to send weapons to the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces. Emirati News Agency

Within weeks, General Hamdan’s soldiers began to sweep across Darfur, eventually seizing four of five regional capitals. But it was the capture of Wad Madani, a city in the breadbasket of central Sudan, on Dec. 15, that caused the war’s greatest upset.

The sudden rout dealt a humiliating blow to Sudan’s military in its political heartland, drawing calls for its leader, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, to resign. It also stoked fears that General Hamdan could capture the entire country.

In recent weeks, ethnic militias have formed across eastern Sudan, to fend off possible R.S.F. advances, Sudanese media reported. And Islamist hard-liners, largely absent from public view in recent years, have re-emerged to become a loud voice in Sudanese politics.

The Emirati operation to support General Hamdan has been a source of alarm at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, a global network that prides itself on neutrality. Red Cross officials are concerned about

Emirati news releases featuring the Red Crescent logo, on aid operations in Amdjarass that are said to be run by the Emirates Red Crescent.

In response to questions, the International Federation, which oversees 191 national societies, said it had sent a “fact-finding mission” to Chad in October, and will send another one next month. “If any allegation is substantiated, I.F.R.C. will launch an investigation,” a spokesman, Tommaso Della Longa, said in an email.

A photograph released by U.A.E. state media shows pallets of relief supplies at an airfield in Amdjarass, Chad, in November. Emirates News Agency

Several U.S. officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter said the Biden administration has tapped Tom Perriello, a former diplomat and Democratic Party congressman, as a special envoy for Sudan. But the appointment has been delayed over a dispute about who Mr. Perriello would report to and how much authority he would wield — especially when dealing with the Emirates, one of the officials said.

General Hamdan continued his diplomatic offensive on Thursday, meeting in Uganda with Ramtane Lamamra, the new U.N. envoy to Sudan. To Sudanese critics, the smart suits and smooth talk are just a tactic as General Hamdan prepares for the next round of battle, pointing to his New Year’s Day speech as evidence his bad faith.

In a videotaped address, General Hamdan wished a happy Christmas to Sudan’s Christians, days before his troops burned a church. Then he railed against “killings based on race” despite the massacres in Darfur.

But the commander did hit one note that many Sudanese could relate to. “One question is pressing in the minds of the Sudanese people,” General Hamdan said. “Where are we heading?”

Displaced people riding on the back of a truck near the Sudanese town of Wad Madani last month, after it was overrun by fighters with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Julian E. Barnes contributed reporting from Washington.

Declan Walsh is the chief Africa correspondent for The Times. He was previously based in Egypt, covering the Middle East, and in Pakistan. He previously worked at The Guardian and is the author of “The Nine Lives of Pakistan.” More about Declan Walsh