

Thoughts on Sudan: *Understanding A Noncombatant Evacuation Operation*

We have all seen the news and the daring overnight operation into Sudan to evacuate almost 100 American diplomats and their families from the embassy. The operation conducted by the Department of Defense at the request of the State Department has become all too routine for Americans in the Middle East and Africa. In recent years, the US military has conducted NEOs (Noncombatant Evacuation Operations) in countries such as Libya, South Sudan, and the Central African Republic to evacuate American citizens. The African continent has been marred by instability, political upheaval, civil wars, and natural disasters for many years that has forced these operations to become a routine occurrence to protect Americans abroad. But what about the 16,000 Americans remaining in the country?



What Happened in Sudan?

What we are witnessing in Sudan is not an isolated incident relegated to April 2023. This is another episode in a long history of upheaval and political turmoil. People might not realize that the Sudanese Civil War began over 30 years ago with events that created the genocide in Darfur.ⁱ Marginalization and economic pillaging of the Sudanese people continued, and according to Douglas Johnston of *The Guardian*, "Sudan's longest civil war, from 1983 to 2005, involved not just southern Sudan but the people of the Nuba mountains, Blue Nile, and eastern Sudan as well, and the peace agreement of 2005 left those other conflicts unresolved."ⁱⁱⁱ This led to the next phase of civil war which saw South Sudan break away and required a Department of Defense NEO to safely remove Americans from the area in 2016.

The beginning of the current saga that we see playing out today started in 2019 with the ousting of President Al-Bashir in a military coup. The interesting thing about this coup is that it was conducted by the military with the help of the Rapid Support Force. These are the two entities fighting for control in Sudan at this very moment. These two factions have been waging a war for control ever since the power vacuum was created with the removal of Al-Bashir. Tensions came to a head amid disagreements over how and when to integrate Hemedti's RSF into the regular Sudanese military.^{iv} This brings us to April 2023 and the events of the past week, when the struggle became dynamic and outright warfare rapidly consumed the 46 million residents of Khartoum. The American Embassy, the diplomats, and their families stationed there were caught in the crossfire, forcing the State Department to call for Department of Defense assistance.

Understanding a Noncombatant Evacuation Operation

The crisis in Sudan should be a warning to any business that is looking to or already conducts business abroad in areas of potential instability: You may have to find a way to get yourself out. While the US will attempt to do everything it can to protect its citizens abroad, the African continent is one of the hardest to conduct large scale Noncombatant Evacuations Operations (NEOs). Sub-Saharan Africa has very minimal official US presence which creates a small and disjointed network of support in the region. We often think of large embassy structures in robust population centers with easy access to diplomatic personnel and Marines for safety. In Africa, this is seldom the case and the distance between countries as well as poor infrastructure make creating a highly functional network to support Americans impossible. The US maintains a low profile in many African countries to ensure political favor in and remain a guest of that country in an official capacity.



US Marines conduct a NEO in Juba, South Sudan on January 3, 2014*

A NEO is, when conditions in a foreign country deteriorate to the point that Americans in that country are at an extremely high risk of becoming entangled in the upheaval. The American embassy will attempt to stay functioning for as long as possible (see the Afghanistan withdrawal). In cases like Sudan where the embassy comes under direct fire and jeopardizes the lives of American diplomats, the State Department will call the Department of Defense to initiate a NEO on their behalf. Eventually, when officials who are living and working in these countries are evacuated, the State Department will inform the DoD how many US civilians remain and begin to create a plan to assist in evacuating them. This is where we stand today with Americans stuck in Sudan, potentially in positions of peril and at risk of not being able to safely evacuate.

Conducting NEOs in Africa can be particularly challenging due to a number of factors. First, the sheer size of the continent makes it difficult to quickly move people and resources to the affected areas. Additionally, many areas of Africa lack the necessary infrastructure to support large-scale evacuation efforts, such as airports, roads, and transportation systems. Finally, security concerns can also pose a significant challenge, particularly in areas affected by conflict or terrorist activity. In Sudan, this means that if an American is in Khartoum and wants out of the country, they would have to move 416 miles over a heavily patrolled road with no security to the Port of Sudan on the Red Sea. This is all contingent on the individual or group's ability to maintain communications with the embassy, their company, or any link to the US in the face of failing infrastructure.

All executives should take note that this problem will not solve itself and only prudent planning can relieve the burden of ensuring your people make it safely out of harm's way. Planning includes understanding potential ports of evacuation, secondary and tertiary methods to safe harbor, and taking steps to safeguard personnel with resources and information. Coordination with the State Department is a must. Planning for recovery of your most valuable resource, your people, should be one of the first things considered when planning to conduct business abroad with the potential for uncertainty.

Lastly, and one of the most important distinctions in a NEO: The Americans coming to get you will be armed and prepared to defend you with their lives. They are not coming because things are safe. This means that the potential exists for things to go terribly wrong even after they show up. The US military will arrive with a large enough force to fight its way in and out if needed. Cooperation and understanding of what's expected of a civilian in these situations is extremely important. They will not expect you to carry a gun, take unnecessary risks, or demand more than you are capable of. Below are a few pointers for safe return:

- ***You haven't met these men and women before, don't act like the enemy.*** Stay where you are and listen to the commands that are being directed at you. This ensures their safety and yours. We all want to go home, together.
- ***Stay calm.*** We know you are scared. We know you are stressed. Remaining in control of your emotions until a more appropriate time is key to safely being extracted.
- ***Prepare to move, quickly, and help if asked.*** You may be asked to run, you may be asked to move faster. You may be asked to help with others who may be injured or slow. Remember, they are there to protect you and cannot do this efficiently if the people they rescue aren't willing to help. Children and elderly people may need additional support.

ⁱ Janet Loehrke, USA TODAY/GoogleEarth. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/graphics/2023/04/24/how-us-embassy-evacuated-sudan/11727079002/>

ⁱⁱ Malik, Nesrine. 23 April, 2023, The Guardian. "*The Seeds of Sudan's Collapse Were Sown Decades Ago.*" <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/apr/23/sudan-conflict-power-struggle-darfur-genocide>

ⁱⁱⁱ Johnson, Douglas H. 26 April, 2023, The Guardian. "*The Long History of Civil War in Sudan.*" <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/apr/26/the-long-history-of-civil-war-in-sudan>

^{iv} Tharoor, Ishaan. 23 April, 2023, Washington Post. "*Sudan Slides Towards Civil War and State Collapse.*" <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/sudan-civil-war-violence-future/>

^v COL Dixon, George K. 1 April, 2017, NDU Press. "The Need for a Joint Support Element in Noncombatant Evacuation Operations." <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/1130662/the-need-for-a-joint-support-element-in-noncombatant-evacuation-operations/>

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