



Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The situation in Sudan, HC 1312

Tuesday 25 April 2023

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Members present: Alicia Kearns (Chair); Saqib Bhatti; Sir Chris Bryant; Liam Byrne; Neil Coyle; Bob Seely; Henry Smith; Royston Smith.

Questions 1-65

Witnesses

I: Martin Plaut, Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London; and Alan Boswell, Project Director, Horn of Africa, International Crisis Group.

II: Dame Rosalind Marsden, Former EU Special Representative for Sudan and former British Ambassador to Sudan, and Associate Fellow at Africa Programme, Chatham House; and Mohammed Hassan al-Ta'ishi, Former Member of the Sudan Transitional Sovereignty Council and Senior Peace Fellow at The Public International Law & Policy Group.

III: The Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP, Minister of State (Development and Africa) at Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Martin Plaut and Alan Boswell.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee focused on the current situation in Sudan. Can you introduce yourselves?

Martin Plaut: I am Martin Plaut. I was the Africa editor at BBC World Service News until I retired in 2013, and I am now a senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

Alan Boswell: Hi, I am Alan Boswell, the horn of Africa director at the International Crisis Group. We are a global organisation for conflict prevention and conflict resolution, headquartered in Brussels.

Q2 **Chair:** Martin, to kick us off, should we have seen this coming?

Martin Plaut: Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that it was increasingly clear that you could not have, to use an African metaphor, two bulls in the same field. The increasing strength of Hemedti against the army and the RSF as opposed to the army meant that they were getting to a point where it was no longer compatible to have them both, in a sense, exercising power. The state is supposed to be the only arbiter of armed force, and it was getting to a point where that was no longer the case. I think that the army just decided that, in the end, they could not really tolerate someone like Hemedti—General Dagalo—being in that kind of position any longer.

Alan Boswell: I would concur with Martin's analysis. Obviously, there had been escalations. Part of the challenge was that we had seen a number of escalatory moves and escalatory cycles. Just a month earlier, in early March, we had seen a massive escalation that required a de-escalation agreement and for one of these sides—Hemedti, the paramilitary leader—to pull his forces out of Khartoum. One of the reasons this was a bit difficult to predict, although everyone knew that tensions were rising, was that we had seen this cycle of escalation and de-escalation quite a few times. There was high-level mediation being done both on the Sudanese level and on the international level in the days leading up to this, so people were aware that it was getting quite tense, but it was hard to predict that fighting would break out exactly when it did.

Q3 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So where are we at now? Do you want to give us a brief outline of who is in control of what, who is running the infrastructure and so on?

Martin Plaut: Hemedti and the RSF seem to be in a more powerful position. I was speaking to somebody this morning who was saying that they were all over Khartoum. But the problem is that we are concentrating on this as if it is a Khartoum issue, and of course, this is a huge country, and a lot of the fighting is outside of it, in the periphery. You would have to know literally almost village by village who is on top and who is, so to speak, doing well in this conflict. Both of them have vast quantities of



arms and ammunition, and Hemedti has had supplementary supplies flown into him from Libya, which has assisted him in his position. I do not think it is possible to tell at this stage who is going to get the upper hand in any of this.

Q4 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Why is Libya providing arms?

Martin Plaut: In a sense, there are two camps. You have Haftar, who runs eastern Libya, and he is in bed, so to speak, with the Wagner Group. The Wagner Group is backing Hemedti, and Hemedti is, in return, allowing gold to be flown out from the mines that he controls in Sudan to help pay for Putin's war in Ukraine, to put it really bluntly.

Q5 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You said to me earlier that this is basically a war over gold. Is that right?

Martin Plaut: Well, that is certainly one of the major issues. There was an absolutely fascinating little snippet that Bloomberg put out earlier this month. If I may, I will read you this one paragraph very briefly. It says: "About three dozen Russians were among 58 Al-Sawlaj workers questioned on accusations of gold smuggling earlier this year"—this is a front for the Wagner Group—"The probe was seen as a potential setback for Moscow's ambitions in the resource-rich North African state. It also signaled an escalation in a simmering power struggle between Sudan's military and a rival militia whose leader has forged close ties with Russia." You don't have to be a genius to know that the person who has forged close ties with Russia is Hemedti.

Alan Boswell: To answer your question about the state of play, the situation has been remarkably fluid. We have seen fighting across the country—Darfur, the north, the east—throughout this war, but one of the remarkable things, compared to what we thought we would see if this worst-case scenario broke out, is that we thought we would see something looking more like all-out nationwide conflict, and that has occurred, but what we are actually seeing is that both these forces are very focused on control of Khartoum. This is essentially a battle for Khartoum. They are pulling their forces from other parts of the country to Khartoum. This looks very much like a battle between two men who both ultimately want to be the top dog in Sudan.

In terms of who controls what, again, it is very fluid. Most of the reports suggest that SAF might have more control at the moment of strategic locations in Khartoum, but as Martin alluded to, RSF has essentially swarmed the capital with tens of thousands of militiamen, and there has been a lot of give and take.

Q6 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Do you agree with Martin's analysis about Libya and Russia?

Alan Boswell: We have seen the reports. We do not think that right now Russia or Wagner is a major actor in the conflict, but we are watching the reports. We have some sources of our own that suggest there might have been some cross-border shipments that came from Libya. Thus far, we



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have been surprised that we have not seen more external involvement in this, but of course it is impossible to know whether we are seeing the full picture. I should also say that Hemedti is being heavily pressured by the West as well not to accept any arms from Wagner, so it is difficult to say exactly how that would play out.

- Q7 **Henry Smith:** Following on from that, would you say that this is essentially a conflict between two individuals and their personal ambitions, almost, rather than a conflict of ideologies or cultures?

Martin Plaut: There are many things you can say about it: first, that it is personal between the two men; and, secondly, that it is also the traditional divide, so to speak, in Sudanese society, which is between people who live along the Nile and people who live in the periphery. That goes back many, many years. In that sense, you can look at someone like Hemedti as representing the periphery, but only one section of the periphery, because his family comes from Chad. He is a Rizeigat and essentially an Arab who was involved in the Darfur massacres, some of which were straightforwardly racist, frankly. You cannot say that he represents everyone in the periphery, but that is the way that it is seen, while the Army is led by people who are traditionalists and, so to speak, represent the traditional system of going up through the Army and coming from the centre of the country. That is one of the major divisions that we are seeing now.

- Q8 **Henry Smith:** Alan, is your opinion that this is a coup or that it is the start of a civil war?

Alan Boswell: This looks to us more like the start of a civil war than a coup. I would just say that we have not yet seen clear evidence of exactly how it started, and so we would not call it a coup.

- Q9 **Henry Smith:** How does the situation potentially cause instability in the wider region, such as in the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Libya, Somalia or South Sudan? Is it likely to cause greater instability in neighbouring states?

Alan Boswell: Yes. If we do not see this stopped and arrested soon, it is basically guaranteed that we will see it suck in a variety of other armed groups in Sudan—there are many other armed groups in Sudan, some of whom are rebels, some of whom are community militias and some of whom are aligned to the Government—but for the most part we have seen remarkable solidarity among those other groups rejecting this war. Everyone—pretty much all Sudanese who are not the two parties—sees this as catastrophic and a mistake.

If this drags on, we will see it fragment and all sorts of different struggles around the periphery, and that will affect Chad, South Sudan, Libya, the CAR and Ethiopia; those are all places that cannot really afford more instability. Also, if this drags on, the risk is quite high that we will see major external intervention, so it could become a regional war. That, as we all know, would not only make the situation worse, but make it a lot harder to resolve once it hits that point. So, we have been very focused on



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how to get a ceasefire soon, because once this gets much worse and much more multi-sided, it will become much more difficult to stop.

- Q10 **Henry Smith:** Finally, Martin, to follow on from what you were saying earlier in terms of the different bases, does the RSF have a regional base that could sustain it, were this to become a longer-term civil war?

Martin Plaut: They did grow out of the Janjaweed. They did grow out of Darfur. That is where Hemedti grew his base, and where he still gets a lot of his support from. It is not only from there; he gets it from other areas. I very much agree with what was said about the spread. One of his allies is the Eritrean Government. President Isaias has had a finger in every single one of his neighbours' pies, and he received Hemedti earlier this year. They are very close. The one thing that links him, Hemedti and Haftar is their relationship with the Russians.

I am not trying to say that this is a Russian plot. I think the Russians fish in stormy seas, to mix a metaphor, and this is a real storm. The flights bringing the weapons into Libya, and then from Libya into Darfur, have been tracked. They have been shown on satellites. They are available, and so it is the relationship between the region and the internal players that will affect how this develops and plays out.

- Q11 **Chair:** On that point, Martin, you were talking about how the gold coming out of Sudan is essentially funding Putin's illegal renewed invasion of Ukraine. I presume that hostilities will harm him, because they will interrupt the ability to get gold out, or have we not seen any cessation of that during the last 10 days?

Martin Plaut: Sudan is such an enormous country. As long as you control the gold mines and the means of getting gold out, I do not think that it is going to really stop the flows. It is interesting that Bloomberg reckons that only 20% of all gold goes through official means. That leaves a huge amount to go through unofficial means, and we are talking about something like \$4 billion. This is a vast amount of money in a country that has a tiny budget. These are the kinds of sums of money. If you put that into weapons, it really makes a huge difference.

Don't forget that there are already three countries in Africa that are almost completely dominated by the Wagner Group. We are talking about Mali, the CAR and Libya. They have a really strong hold. They have a big say in perhaps nine, 10 or more, and they do not just work at the physical level; they work at the social level. They use all the strengths that the Russians have in social media, and they use all of these extremely effectively. They have actually forced the French to leave Mali, which is an amazing achievement from their point of view.

- Q12 **Neil Coyle:** I have a quick question. Given the situation on the ground both right now and in the coming days and weeks, how crucial is reliable, accurate information, and the role of the BBC World Service?

Martin Plaut: As somebody who worked for the BBC World Service for 30 years, I think it is vital. To be honest, the most important bit of it would



be the Arabic service, not the English service, although I worked in the English service all that time. People rely on it, and they know that it is a trustworthy source. It is something that goes down generations. It isn't just something that people pick up. I have walked through markets in South Sudan, not north, and heard people listening to it. In fact, I have had people coming up to me and saying, "Oh, you're Martin Plaut," only because they knew my voice, which is a bit surprising.

Q13 Chair: Alan, you touched on the ceasefire. Can I ask what your assessment is of the likelihood of the ceasefire holding? Although it is holding in name at the moment, there are reports of jets flying over and of interrupted fire. What is your assessment?

Alan Boswell: The ceasefires to date—of course, they also agreed to a ceasefire for the three days leading up to today—have been patchy. It is correct that our information is that there has been some breaking of the ceasefire already in the Khartoum area, primarily in Omdurman, and also possibly in West Darfur and South Darfur. Generally, the feeling among diplomats is that it will be harder, probably, to get the army to fully agree. They have been more resistant to the talks than the RSF side has been. But we have to be realistic about the immediate chances of ceasefires, because they keep breaking down. I think the important thing is to just keep pressing towards a ceasefire and hope one sticks.

Chair: Martin, do you have any views on this?

Martin Plaut: I don't believe a ceasefire until it happens. This one seems to be very patchy, as Alan was saying. It does not sound as if it is holding, except in particular areas. But it is a huge country. In 99% of the country, there is nothing going on. It is so huge. I remember standing on top of a jeep and looking around in Sudan and seeing nothing but grass—not even one tree. That is what the country is like. It is absolutely enormous. So in most of the country, nothing will be happening. It is in very specific areas, where there are key settlements, that the fighting is happening. In most of the country, I presume, there is nothing going on. The real struggle for people now, particularly in trying to get out of Khartoum, is getting fuel and money. And of course, for quite a lot of them, their passports are in the safes of the embassies, because they would have been looking for visas or for renewals. Of course, they cannot get them out now because there aren't any staff left.

Q14 Royston Smith: I was going to ask about Russia, but I think Henry and Alicia have covered that. You have talked about the Wagner Group, Haftar in Libya and their support for the RSF, but what about Chinese involvement? They are Sudan's biggest trading partner in oil, agriculture, health and infrastructure. They will have a view, but do they have any influence and is there any evidence of them having any involvement?

Martin Plaut: I have seen nothing that suggests that they have any involvement. While the Russians, for example, would very much like to have a base in Port Sudan, I do not think the Chinese are interested, because they already have one in Djibouti. So I don't think there's that



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kind of pressure. One of the things that Omar al-Bashir, who was overthrown by the current participants in the conflict, was offering the Russians was a base from which they could operate. I haven't seen anything that suggests any Chinese involvement at the moment.

Q15 **Royston Smith:** And no evidence of them picking a side at all?

Martin Plaut: Not that I'm aware of, but I don't know. I would be interested to hear what Alan says.

Alan Boswell: We haven't seen any signs of particular Chinese attempts at mediation or picking sides. China has supported the ceasefire calls at the UN Security Council, as has Russia, actually. The one interesting thing we have seen from China is that the state media or state-aligned media have been blaming US meddling for the conflict.

Q16 **Chair:** Martin, you mentioned Omar al-Bashir. There are reports that he was broken out of Kober prison over the weekend, when there appears to have been a mass escape. I would be very interested in your assessment as to where he sits within all of this and what the risks are of him being out on the loose.

Martin Plaut: I would assume that he would align himself with the army, but really I am not in a position to make that assessment. I genuinely don't know.

Alan Boswell: We are following those reports with great interest, but we don't have any specific intel on that. I will just say that if he was freed and popped up again as a political actor, it could be a very strange wildcard in the midst of this. I agree with Martin that if he was to choose a side in this, he would definitely end up falling more on the army side, but he could just as well be on his own side.

Q17 **Chair:** It would be very helpful, for those of us who haven't necessarily followed Sudan as closely as we would have liked, to hear answers to this question. Since he was removed from power, how much of a radicalising figure—a figure that can bring people together—has he been? How much did his being put in prison reduce his ability to effect support, to maintain support, to group and rally people? Alan, do you want to kick this off?

Alan Boswell: Yes, sure. Bashir and his party have been ostracised and marginalised and have not really been given a platform to continue politicking. There have been quite a lot of accusations from the sort of civilian political elite who were overthrown in this coup, accusing Burhan, the army chief, of essentially rehabilitating the old Bashir regime. There is a lot of suspicion of essentially a counter-revolution, if you will. However, he is not a figure that is continuing to have popular support—for himself generally or for people rallying to bring him back into politics. I think that, if he was free, it would just be something that you would have to watch.

Q18 **Chair:** Martin, do you want to add anything on that, or on how the lack of accountability around Bashir impacts on the scenes that are unfolding?



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Martin Plaut: I do not honestly think that people really assumed that there was going to be much accountability. I mean, he has been put in jail, but it has been a very comfy jail, shall we say. He has not really struggled very much in that position. I think he is just seen as part of the scene, rather than anything else.

I do not know whether this is anything that you have thought about, but the slogan is, "African solutions to African problems", which people come up with all the time. The real question is, what are the African Union and the Arab League doing about this, since Sudan is a member of both of those organisations. It is extraordinary that the African Union has appointed mediators, and the mediators, as far as I can see, have not done anything. They have not arrived in the country; they have not managed to get through at all. They may have tried hard—it is Djibouti, South Sudan and Kenya—but they are not on the ground. They are not, as far as I can see, actually involved in this. They may be behind the scenes, but they are not.

The other thing is, you may remember that that Britain, along with many other countries, tried to assist the African Union in getting a standby brigade going. That has been around since 2010, but where is it? It is just nowhere on the scene. If anybody was going to intervene in this, it would probably have to be the Egyptians, who have a really substantial army, but there is no indication that anybody in the region is prepared to lift a finger to really intervene. I do not think that there is any appetite to do it. They all are prepared to put a bit of money here or there, whether it is the United Arab Emirates, the Saudis, or whoever, but not to actually do the hard lifting, which would turn "African solutions to African problems" from a slogan into a reality.

Q19 **Sir Chris Bryant:** What is your estimation of the humanitarian situation at the minute? Obviously, quite a few NGOs have effectively stopped operating. How important is it to get them back in full operation?

Martin Plaut: It is catastrophic. Everything is going down. People are talking about a lack of medicines and water. The hospitals are not working. I think there were something like 50 hospitals in Khartoum, and only five were operating a couple of days ago. It is probably fewer now. They are running out of everything that they need. It is an atrocious situation.

People are doing what they always do, which is to rely on each other and to flee, and people are already moving. I think it was 10,000 to 20,000 people who have moved into Chad, joining other people who had fled into Chad before. They are also moving into South Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia. So, people are moving out of the country, despite it being so enormous. I think that is the response.

However, I think that the heroic efforts are with the doctors' and lawyers' groups—the civilians who were behind the revolution and were trying to persuade the army and the RSF to hand over power to a civilian authority. Those groups are still active and doing whatever they can in the



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circumstances. If there is anything that one could do, it would be to strengthen their hand. That, I think, is the only way towards some kind of resolution of this crisis. However, it will be extremely difficult when the men with the guns really rule the streets.

Q20 Sir Chris Bryant: Alan, do you share that view?

Alan Boswell: Yes. This is the fastest-growing humanitarian crisis from man-made circumstances that I have ever seen. You have essentially seen, within a matter of days, a collapse of an entire city—a greater city of some 10 million people. That is just in Khartoum, where we have reports from.

The humanitarian situation was not good before the conflict broke out. Bashir was overthrown in 2019 partly because the economy was so poor and living costs were so high, and it has only got worse since. A lot of economic assistance has been cut off for over a year now, as a pressure tool to get the military to hand over. So yes, in Khartoum you essentially have very sparse electricity, temperatures are in the 40s, a lot of people are out of clean drinking water and food, and there has been widespread looting. RSF fighters have lost a lot of their logistical supply chains and warehouses, which have been bombed, and are doing widespread looting across the city. It is a really terrible situation.

Q21 Liam Byrne: To follow that up, do you think there is a likelihood that NGOs will be forced to constrain or restrict support for the work they are doing? I am conscious that something like three quarters of the hospitals have already been knocked out. Do you see NGOs basically having to pull back just to safeguard their own people?

Alan Boswell: Yes, they already are pulling back. The security situation does not allow for a humanitarian response, especially in a context without any sort of peacekeepers or a third party. The UN has talked about forming a hub for humanitarian work in Port Sudan, but that is in a different part of the country. These are still the very early hours of what could be a very long civil war. If it continues, I think we will see the logistics of a humanitarian operation set up, but at the moment it has not been able to get off the ground because the security situation in Khartoum has not allowed it.

Q22 Liam Byrne: What do you think the consequences will be? Is there the risk of famine and disease outbreaks?

Alan Boswell: We hope that we will get a ceasefire soon so the situation does not descend into those scenarios. It is difficult to say what it would look like if we continued to have an all-out battle for Khartoum. We are already seeing Khartoum start to empty of residents; people who can afford to are getting on buses and trying to flee in basically any direction. I will not speculate about what the long-term consequences would be in terms of a potential famine.

It is an unusual crisis. Normally these wars take place in rural areas; there are people who have their crops destroyed and things like that. This is



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something different; it is a collapse of a city of millions of people who cannot access basic services, food or water. It is very unusual.

Q23 Liam Byrne: Martin, do you think there are things that we could do to at least support refugee flows in neighbouring countries?

Martin Plaut: We can certainly back the efforts of the UNHCR to try and deal with the influx that is coming. The other thing that we have to remember is that there has been a report today that the World Health Organisation says a laboratory with viruses in Khartoum has fallen to the RSF and they are using it as an operational base. The WHO is extremely worried about what this could do if it really becomes a battleground. I do not know what is in that laboratory, but if the World Health Organisation is saying it is worrying, I think we should be worried too.

Q24 Liam Byrne: Are you worried that there are pathogens in that laboratory that could be loosed?

Martin Plaut: I don't know. I have no further information about it; I simply saw there was a report.

Chair: I think we have been told that there is polio and other diseases like that.

Q25 Saqib Bhatti: Building on that, Martin, you spoke about the flow of refugees to countries like Chad. Could you elaborate on the impact it is having on the surrounding countries and on infrastructure in places such as Chad? Is there sufficient infrastructure to take on such a load?

Martin Plaut: There certainly won't be the infrastructure, but people will make do. I was in Chad when there was an influx from fighting in Darfur. You suddenly see, 50,000, 80,000 or 100,000 people coming across the border on to what is, effectively, a sand dune, and people just start making do. The UNHCR brings in support very rapidly; it is very used to this. Local people come and help in any way they can—although it does cause tensions with local people. People get by. The other thing that was quite extraordinary was on the third day that the camp was in existence, I think, the first trucks arrived from across the Sahara. People had heard that people were fleeing there and thought, "Oh, there must be some money to make." They actually brought goods to sell to the refugees and were there within a week, perhaps. It is extraordinary how fast people respond. We tend to look at the Sahara as a barrier, but for many people it is just a sea to sail in and find something to trade in, and that goes back hundreds if not thousands of years. People will respond very rapidly.

The other thing one must not forget is that this is a region that is very used to refugees. I cannot remember how many millions of refugees Sudan has had, but it has had Eritrean refugees since the 1960s. Sudan has been very hospitable to them and has put them up and looked after them, or at least given them a space to live in. It has not always been satisfactory, but they have given them the space. I think people will just say, "Well this is what happens in the region. It's not that unusual."

Saqib Bhatti: Alan, did you want to add something?



Alan Boswell: Those with means are travelling to Egypt, which is really the only stable country that you might want to go to within the region if you have a choice. They are going either to Egypt, or to Port Sudan and then looking to leave Sudan out of Port Sudan. The refugees who fleeing into the other countries will be people who probably have no other choice but to go there.

Q26 **Royston Smith:** This is not ideological; it is a conflict between two people, both of whom think they should be in charge. How fluid is the situation? Are people moving from the RSF to the military or vice versa?

Martin Plaut: I have not seen any indication of that. I think there is a lot of bitterness. As I said, it is partly because they have different constituent elements. One of them is drawn mainly from the periphery, and the other is drawn mainly from the peoples of the centre and the Nilotic peoples. I do not think there is a swap-over. There may be some—I'm not saying that nobody is swapping over.

Royston Smith: Do you have anything to add, Alan?

Alan Boswell: It remains quite fluid in terms of battlefield dynamics, but the lines are quite set. These are very different institutions. SAF has an air force and a long institutional history, whereas the RSF is essentially a collection of militias and is run basically like a family corporate empire—it comes from one family and is tightly controlled—so they are very, very different. Like Martin said, there is not a lot of crossover. Where things get fluid is in potential external support and attempts to back one of these sides, or if we see one of them essentially kicked out of Khartoum or lose the battle of Khartoum. Then there are all sorts of scenarios. Depending on how that goes, we could see state collapse, or see this expand into a much wider civil war.

Chair: Thank you both very much. Those are incredibly informative and helpful answers. Can I also thank you for your forbearance with the process of democracy and allowing us to vote? We will suspend briefly while we change witnesses. Thank you both ever so much.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Dame Rosalind Marsden and Mohammed Hassan al-Ta'ishi.

Q27 **Chair:** Welcome back to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee. For those just joining us, we are unfortunately not able to contact one of the members of our panel. We will continue to try to contact them, but they are in Khartoum. As we all know, although internet improved overnight, it is still patchy. Dame Rosalind, could you kindly introduce yourself?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: Thank you very much. My name is Rosalind Marsden. I am an associate fellow at Chatham House. I was previously the British ambassador to Sudan. After that I was the European Union special representative for Sudan and South Sudan.

Q28 **Chair:** Thank you ever so much for joining us today. I would love it if you



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talked us through how you have seen the last week or so unfold. Can you particularly comment on where you think that leaves us and what it is feasible to achieve in the current circumstances? As you know, in the Foreign Office, the training is always that Foreign Office officials are last out the door and are there until every last British national who can be removed has been. I would welcome your views on the fact that British embassy staff had to be evacuated due to the immediate and severe threat to their lives.

Dame Rosalind Marsden: As your previous panellists mentioned, it is unusual to see a major war taking place in the national capital, Khartoum. Sudan has of course been plagued by conflicts for many, many years, but they have always taken place in the peripheries, and people from the peripheries have fled to Khartoum to seek relative safety. We are now seeing the complete reverse: large-scale fighting going on in the capital, and people trying to flee out of the capital.

As we know from the reporting on the ground, the situation is extremely serious, having dragged into the 11th day of fighting. The efforts by the US Secretary of State and partners to broker a ceasefire, to try to give another opportunity to get foreign nationals out, obviously raised some hopes that maybe this time it would hold. As we are seeing, it is holding here and there in a patchy way, but that is making it extremely difficult and complex for the Foreign Office to try to evacuate British nationals, because they are being advised to make their own way to the evacuation point somewhere outside Khartoum. Of course, trying to get there under their own steam through streets full of armed men fighting—obviously, artillery shelling is going on and the fighting is moving around different parts of the city—is extremely hazardous.

One thing I would like to highlight is that some of the local neighbourhood resistance committees—the young people who have been driving the revolution—have been doing their very best to help people in their neighbourhoods, including the foreign nationals, by sharing information about escape routes, where roadblocks are and how the fighting is moving around. They have also been extremely helpful in this process. We are also hearing from the Sudanese side that many Sudanese are absolutely terrified that once international efforts to get their nationals out have come to an end, the real fighting will resume and, of course, they will be the victims.

In terms of the evacuation of diplomats taking place before getting out the civilians, we understand that the diplomats, like everybody else, were basically locked down in their houses in a very dangerous situation with patchy communications. They were not really able to fulfil their job. They were not able to get out and meet anyone; they were simply sheltering in place. I think there was a feeling that if they were to contribute to helping the rest of the British community, they could probably do so better if they were out of the country.

Of course, it was also necessary for the embassy to try to establish how many nationals are in Khartoum and where they are. It seems that these



days the embassy doesn't automatically register all the British nationals, so that has taken some time. It is good to see that it seems that, from today, there has been a serious effort to try to start evacuating people. We saw that the UN managed to get hundreds of people out over land in a big convoy to Port Sudan. That was a major undertaking. I think it took 24 hours to get that huge convoy to Port Sudan, but it did get there safely. I think that was UN international staff and a number of the international NGO workers.

Q29 Chair: The British Government have said that they could not or did not assess it to be safe enough to evacuate without a ceasefire in place. Many of us had very little confidence that a ceasefire would be put in place—indeed, the last one held for only three hours. What is your view of the British Government's position of waiting until there was a ceasefire to evacuate?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: I think the Foreign Office has slightly changed its advice in the last 24 hours or so to say that it recognises that some British nationals will use their own judgment and get out under their own steam. Since it has become apparent to everyone that this succession of ceasefires brokered by the international community has not been anything but very partially successful, people are just getting desperate and leaving.

Clearly, from the Government's point of view, if they were to supervise an evacuation process, they hoped that there would be a moment when a humanitarian ceasefire was put in place and safe evacuation corridors could be established, which would minimise the risk of attempting this operation. As we have seen, however, even with the latest exercise, it still leaves a very dangerous situation. The feeling now, with people running out of food and water and the fighting continuing, is that we will have to weigh up the risks and at least make an effort to give our people an opportunity to get out and get to an airfield from which they could be evacuated.

Q30 Chair: One of the challenges is that British nationals are having to make their own way to the airstrip, as you mentioned, which is incredibly dangerous, because no diplomatic staff are left on the ground. If we were to find out in the next few days or weeks that the majority of British nationals had taken it upon themselves to evacuate rather than using and waiting for a British evacuation, would you see that as a failure of the British state?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: It is a very difficult judgment. Clearly, it is much easier to evacuate 30 diplomats whose whereabouts we know, and to get them out, than it is to tackle the evacuation of—we understand—4,000 British nationals, including dual nationals, 2,000 of whom have now registered with the embassy, with the Foreign Office, to say that they are interested in being evacuated. Trying to take on that kind of an evacuation operation on that scale, given the intensity of the fighting that was going on, was going to be incredibly difficult, so I can understand why the Government put their main effort into trying to broker a ceasefire—or if



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not a complete ceasefire, at least some evacuation corridors that could be used—because that would be the safest option. Despite persistent efforts, however, although we have seen some temporary lull in the fighting, which enabled some other countries to get a number of their nationals out, it has not so far resulted in a sufficient ceasefire to be able to do what I am sure the Government would have liked to have done to provide a safer environment for the exercise.

There is also the issue of communication. Some British nationals have said that they have now heard that an evacuation operation is starting, but they are all worried about missing a communication. How will they hear what is going on?

- Q31 **Chair:** To confirm, for those who are not aware, the first evacuation flight has landed successfully, but the travel advice has changed: it is now that British nationals should make their own way to the airstrip, no longer waiting to be called forward. I presume, based on your comments, that you would agree that that is likely because of the concerns about the inability to communicate, owing to the poor telecoms infrastructure.

Dame Rosalind Marsden: Yes. We know that the internet is down frequently. People might be worried that if they sit in their houses waiting to get an email from the Foreign Office, it may not come through. I think that may be the reason for the change of advice.

- Q32 **Chair:** This is a final question from me, before I turn to Royston. The US has adopted the position that they will not be evacuating their nationals from Sudan in any circumstances. What is your assessment of that? Do you feel that would have shaped the British Government's response in the early days, when they too would not confirm that they would evacuate British nationals?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: The Americans were saying that they have something like 16,000 nationals, including dual nationals, in Sudan, which is far more than the UK seems to have. Nevertheless, the UK probably has the second largest number of nationals, and the largest among all the European countries. I do not know how that fact influenced the British Government's decision. Clearly, the US and the UK worked closely together in the initial decision to evacuate their diplomats and, perhaps, to do that first and then to see what could be done in the very dangerous situation to help everyone else.

- Q33 **Royston Smith:** This is a difficult question for you, I suppose, given that you are not on the ground now, but do you think that a long-term ceasefire is possible? What should the UK and its partners do to help to bring that about?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: There are several things that we can do. The first is to continue to work very hard to build up a co-ordinated international response—a co-ordinated international coalition—to put pressure on these generals, perhaps making clear to them that they will be held personally accountable if they do not abide by the commitments they have made. We need also to work very closely with regional countries



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that have leverage on one side or the other to exert that leverage and, importantly, not to provide any military or financial support to either side.

When it comes to whether we can get a ceasefire that will be more sustainable than what we have seen so far, the diplomatic efforts need to be intensified. There has been a limited degree of success that enabled diplomats and some foreign nationals to be evacuated over the weekend. The hope was that that could be built upon. The UK should be in a good position to exert its diplomatic pressure on international and regional partners because the UK has been working very closely with the United States, and with the US and Norway in the so-called troika; and it has been working in recent months with the Saudis and the Emiratis in the so-called quad. All of that work has been to support the political process, to try to move to democratic transition. We need to continue to work with those countries and with other regional countries like South Sudan, Kenya and Djibouti, which have been mandated by the regional organisation IGAD to try to broker a ceasefire.

A lot needs to be done to keep all these efforts together and coherent, so that everyone is giving the same message to the two generals and the whole process does not start fragmenting. We are now seeing a number of countries volunteering to mediate; we have seen Turkey mentioned, as well as Israel and Algeria. It is really important to try to keep this effort coherent.

Q34 **Royston Smith:** I was going to ask you about mediation. Martin mentioned that there were no obvious signs of any Chinese involvement, but I suppose we do not mind who the people mediating are, as long as they get to the position that we want to see, which is a ceasefire. Do you think that they would be involved in any of those mediation conversations?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: We have not seen that sort of involvement by the Chinese so far. Of course, during the Bashir era, they had a very close strategic partnership with the Bashir Government, particularly during the oil boom years in the first decade of this century. But Chinese interest in Sudan declined quite a bit after South Sudan's independence in 2011, when most of the oil remained in the south. China's role in recent years has been more low-key. Chinese companies have taken some interest in Sudan's gold reserves, but so far we have not seen them really looking as if they are going to volunteer to play a mediation role.

Q35 **Saqib Bhatti:** Thank you for your evidence so far. Given your experience, do you think there were opportunities missed by the UK or its partners to try to stop this conflict developing into violence?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: One thing I would preface the answer to that question with—and it is a point that did not really come out from your first two panellists—is that what we are seeing at the moment is, of course, a power struggle between two generals, but it is also an attempt to derail Sudan's democratic transition and to return Sudan to the control of the former regime. This is a point that is being emphasised extremely strongly



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by Sudan's pro-democracy civilian and political leaders, and they have been warning the international community and, indeed, their fellow Sudanese for quite some time that elements of the old regime were trying to widen the rift between the army and the Rapid Support Forces because they wanted to destabilise the transition process. That point has to be properly understood by international Governments, including the British Government, in order to understand the situation properly. There was a very important statement put out about three days ago, signed by Sudan's main pro-democratic political parties, many national figures and intellectuals, basically announcing a united civilian front to resist the return of the former regime, and this statement needs to be taken seriously.

During Ramadan, we also saw some members of the former National Congress Party—the ruling party under Bashir—calling for the release of President Bashir from prison, and sort of mobilising both their members but also the so-called Islamist shadow battalions. This is not just propaganda from Hemedti, although of course he is using it, but it is certainly a strongly held view by the pro-democracy movement.

On the one hand, I think the British Government and its partners perhaps should have taken those warnings more seriously. The UK was working extremely actively with its partners to support the political process based on the framework agreement at 5 December. This was in its final stages to move towards appointing a civilian Prime Minister, a civilian Cabinet and a civilian head of state. There were high hopes; although the agreement was far from perfect, it was certainly a big positive move in the right direction. But of course, as always with this kind of political process, it's the last stages that are the most dangerous—where the spoilers are likely to step up their efforts. Again, there were warnings that this might be the case.

I wrote an article for Chatham House towards the end of March, highlighting the fact that high-level international intervention was required at that critical moment to increase the pressure, particularly on the two military leaders who were arguing over security sector reform and how long it should take to integrate the Rapid Support Forces into the army. On the American side, Molly Phee, the Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, picked up the phone and spoke to Hemedti, to Burhan and to one of the civilian political leaders. I don't know whether any British Ministers picked up the phone, but there was, I think, that crucial window where it was really a case that high-level attention should have been focused on the final stage of the political process.

Of course, now that the war has broken out, there is very high-level attention from the British Government here and from other Governments. But in a way that is necessary sometimes when you don't have a war but you are at a crucial stage of a political process—and I think that is where more might have been done.

- Q36 **Chair:** Given that the UK Government was the UN Security Council penholder, would you specifically have expected them to have done more during that period?



Dame Rosalind Marsden: The UK managed in the very early stage of the war to get a press statement quickly out of the UN Security Council—obviously, condemning the fighting and calling for an immediate ceasefire—which, given the current climate in the Security Council with the Russians, was quite an achievement. They managed to get the Russians and the Chinese to sign up to this, and I think they did actually use their position as penholder to move quickly to achieve that.

Q37 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I wonder about other regional battles that are going on. Are different countries in the region seeking more authority and more power? How is that playing out in Sudan?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: A number of regional countries have interests in Sudan. The one I would highlight is perhaps Egypt, which has obviously strong historical links with Sudan going back centuries. Sudan was also a part of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium in the first half of the last century. The Egyptians regard Sudan very much as a national security issue, and policy on Sudan is made by the Egyptian intelligence service rather than the foreign ministry.

Egypt has been a very strong backer of the Sudanese army and General Burhan. There are very close links between the two armies. Many Sudanese army officers train in the Egyptian military academies. Since March 2021, there has been a military co-operation agreement between the Sudanese army and the Egyptian army, and they have been conducting military air and naval drills.

There is also a strong interest on the Egyptian side in trying to keep Sudan as an ally in its negotiations with Ethiopia over the Grand Renaissance dam, which is seen as a sort of existential issue from the Egyptians' point of view. It would seem that the Government in Egypt would certainly have a strong preference to see a military officer like Burhan in control in Sudan, certainly rather than a militia leader like Hemedti, and also rather than a civilian democratic Government, which might not be so easy to influence.

It has also been clear that the Egyptians have been intervening in Sudanese political affairs. Earlier this year, they invited a number of Sudanese political actors to Cairo to help to form a broader political grouping, which many Sudanese and some international actors saw as an attempt to create a rather parallel political process to the one that the United Nations, the AU and IGAD were already facilitating with support from the western Governments. The Egyptians were a major player, but it means that they do have leverage, particularly on General Burhan and the army. Therefore, it is important for the UK to be in close touch with the Egyptians to try to encourage them to work together with the rest of the international community.

The United Arab Emirates are also worth mentioning because they have had close ties with General Hemedti, particularly because of the Yemen war. Hemedti put a big military contingent into the Yemen war on the side of the Saudi-led coalition. The army has also put soldiers in, but not so



many. The Emiratis have an interest in trying to get control of a commercial port on the Red Sea, and have a big interest in Sudan from the point of view of food security. They had just announced a \$6 billion investment in a new port on the Red Sea that would be linked to a massive agricultural project. But I do not think that the UAE are completely on one side; they also have quite good links with General Burhan and the army, so they have links with both sides.

Then, of course, there is Saudi Arabia, which, if anything, is probably more neutral between the two. It has been with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that the UK has been working, together with the Americans, to try to leverage their influence on the military leaders, through their huge financial power, to try to prevent this escalation, which has so sadly gone ahead.

Q38 Sir Chris Bryant: Any Russian meddling?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: Well, as has been mentioned already, the Russians have obviously been trying to expand their footprint in that part of Africa, and Sudan has been one of their target countries. Their interests are primarily in trying to secure a Russian naval base on the Red Sea coast, which they had negotiated with President Bashir in 2017, before he was overthrown. They are still pushing to try to get that agreement to be implemented. But General Burhan is very well aware of regional resistance to that from Egypt and some other countries.

Through the Wagner Group, the Russians have been working closely with Hemedti and the Rapid Support Force, providing, we understand, some training and social media advice. They are also working closely to exploit some of the gold mining operations.

In the UN Security Council, the Russians have tended to always protect the interests of the military junta, so to speak, especially after the October 2021 coup, vis-à-vis the civilians. They have also always tended to oppose international intervention.

The Russians have also been a major supplier of military hardware to the Sudanese army. Lavrov was in Khartoum just a couple of months ago. On that occasion, he met both Burhan and Hemedti, so the Russians have links to both sides, which may be one of the reasons why, in the Security Council, they were willing to at least work with everyone else to call for a ceasefire, rather than trying to stoke the fighting.

Chair: We are just waiting for the Minister to arrive, so I will try to get two more colleagues in. Henry and Saqib, please.

Q39 Henry Smith: Thank you very much, Dame Rosalind. If the instability continues in Sudan, what impact will that have in terms of a greater risk of terrorist recruitment? What is the impact of that on UK security and foreign policy interests?

Dame Rosalind Marsden: If the war continues and spreads into a protracted civil war, drawing in domestic and probably regional actors,



there is obviously a risk that you will have breakdown of law and order, and ungoverned space into which there could be scope for terrorist groups to move. This has always been one of the big concerns. There is obviously the concern that it could lead to a much greater increase in migration, but I think terrorism is another issue. In the past, in the early days of the Bashir regime in the 1990s, the National Islamic Front and Hassan al-Turabi actively invited terrorists from all over the world—Osama bin Laden and many others—to Khartoum. I think the question is whether we see elements of that regime and, if they were to come back into greater power than they've had for the last four years, whether that will lead to the risk of terrorist groups being allowed to come in.

Chair: We are going to wrap up there, I'm afraid. Thank you ever so much, Dame Rosalind. As I said, we sadly had to cut every session down to half an hour, but I'm very pleased we were able to have that half hour with you. Please do feel free to keep the Committee updated as things go on. I am sure you left a part of your heart in Sudan when you left, so you will be interested to see how it goes forward. Thank you ever so much. We will suspend briefly in public to allow us to change over.

Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Andrew Mitchell MP.

Q40 **Chair:** Welcome back to this session of the Foreign Affairs Committee, where we are now joined by the Africa Minister, Andrew Mitchell. Minister, first of all, can I thank you? I know many Ministers would probably have said that they were too busy in the crisis centre to come at this time to speak to us, so I am grateful to you for your time.

I would be very grateful if you could start with an update on the evacuation for us. How many British nationals do we believe we've managed to get out at this time?

Mr Mitchell: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you also for agreeing that this will be a very quick session. If the Committee wants to invite me back in slow time, I hope I might get an invitation. I apologise to the Committee that this is only a 20-minute slot.

The position is that the UK is supporting the departure of British nationals from Sudan. We are asking British nationals to travel to Wadi Saeedna airfield before 8 o'clock Khartoum time today to be processed for supported departure. Seats will be allocated on a priority basis, starting with family groups with children and/or the elderly or individuals with documented medical conditions. People should continue to ensure that they have logged locations and contact details with the Foreign Office. We are continuing to work up other options to assist British nationals wanting to leave Sudan, including at other points of exit. Travel within Sudan is conducted at British nationals' own risk and plans may change depending on the security situation. That is an update on where we stand.

Q41 **Chair:** Thank you. Do you still believe it to be the right assessment not to have evacuated at an earlier point, before the ceasefire was in place?



Mr Mitchell: Yes. We have been in crisis mode now for more than a week, and we have at all times been exploring every possible option for all British nationals and, of course, for our own embassy staff, to whom we owe a specific duty of care as their employer. We have at all times been working 24/7. You will remember from your own knowledge of the Foreign Office the way the crisis centre operates. There is now a crisis centre with 200 people, joined across Government at the hip.

The Prime Minister has just made a visit to thank our staff in the crisis centre. They have been working flat out, day and night, to look after and contact British nationals and to make sure we look at all conceivable options. We try to advance every option as quickly as we can.

Q42 **Chair:** Did the US's very early decision not to evacuate any of their nationals impact our decision making?

Mr Mitchell: No, although I have to say that we talked very closely to our long-established partners about those options, so I am sure there was some cross-fertilisation of thinking. We made the decision to evacuate the British mission in Khartoum because of the extreme danger that our diplomats were in. As I told the House yesterday, we were really positioned between the two sides. It was extremely dangerous, and we made the decision that we should evacuate them when we did.

Q43 **Chair:** Do we have an assessment of how many British nationals have taken it on their own back to try to get themselves out of Khartoum because they didn't believe that an evacuation was coming?

Mr Mitchell: No, we have no assessment of that. Of course, there will be British nationals who know the local area and the territory extremely well, and they may have disregarded the advice of the Foreign Office. Indeed, they may have accepted the advice yesterday, which changed from, "You should stay indoors in safety because it is simply too dangerous out on the streets of Khartoum"—as all subsequent events suggested—to, "If you do decide that you are going to move, you do so very much at your own risk." I accept that there will have been people who know the area very well who will have made that calculation.

Q44 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Can I ask you about a point that was made by Martin Plaut earlier? He said that some British nationals' passports might be in the British embassy safe. What are you going to do about people who turn up unable to be documented?

Mr Mitchell: They should have already been the subject of a call from the Foreign Office, and no doubt will have explained that position. Ultimately, it will be for the officials who are now on the ground there from the Home Office and the Foreign Office, who are running the facility that is processing people, to make that decision on the ground. We have given an order of priority, and that order will pertain. One would hope that the Foreign Office will already have been aware of these circumstances, and that the RDT would take a reasonable view.

Q45 **Sir Chris Bryant:** One would hope? That is quite a dangerous



assumption.

Mr Mitchell: Well, it is the nature of these things, Sir Christopher. We have this clear order in which we are going to seek to evacuate people. There is a 72-hour ceasefire, which so far has held. We must hope and pray that it continues to do so.

Q46 **Sir Chris Bryant:** We have heard different views about whether it is holding and whether it is holding very convincingly. Your view is that it is holding?

Mr Mitchell: I have no recent updates to suggest that it isn't. As you know, a large number of previous ceasefires did not hold at all. This one has certainly held since it started at midnight.

Q47 **Sir Chris Bryant:** It is possible that an event such as this will lead to a significant amount of migration, both to neighbouring countries and potentially much further on. People might end up coming across in boats. They might end up crossing into Europe on a boat and might end up coming through to the UK on a boat. Would they then be deported to Rwanda?

Mr Mitchell: That is, at least at the moment, a hypothetical question. If you turned up at the airstrip in Khartoum seeking to be an asylum seeker, you would not be eligible because you cannot be an asylum seeker from your own country. That is the first and most significant point to make. I imagine the Border Force would say that they have an order of priority that they are allowed to accept. That was the order laid down by the Government. That would mean that they wouldn't be eligible anyway, but you cannot be asylum seeker from your own country.

Q48 **Chair:** Minister, I had not seen it publicly confirmed that we have deployed RDTs but it sounded there like we have.

Mr Mitchell: Yes, we have. They arrived at the airstrip earlier this morning, and they are in action there.

Q49 **Saqib Bhatti:** Thank you for your time today, Minister, and thank you for all you are doing. I have a couple of constituents who are stuck in Sudan at the moment. I have just received information that they think it is too risky, because of the fuel shortage, to make it to the airstrip. Is there any other avenue by alternative means for them to get there or to the port of Sudan?

Mr Mitchell: Some have already been evacuated and have left, but all those who have come have come under their own steam. We have adopted the same procedure that the Germans adopted successfully yesterday. They came under their own steam, and we are asking people to do the same.

Q50 **Liam Byrne:** Eltigani Abdelaal is an NHS cardiologist who has told *The Times* that he was trying to get in touch with the Foreign Office and others, and has been greeted by radio silence. A British staff member of the Khartoum American School said that they were directed to a Foreign



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Office website and have filled in the forms. They say, "I did what the British Government asked me to do, I phoned up, I got my name on the consulate list, I filled in their forms, but not once did I get a personalised email. The only thing you get is a link to the website with travel advice about Sudan."

Alice Lehtinen, a dual British-Finnish national hit by a bullet in the foot, says that she has been in constant touch through phone and WhatsApp with the Finnish embassy but has been ignored by UK officials, and says many of these people have turned to the French in order to escape the country. Do you think that the French are doing a better job at evacuating their citizens than the UK?

Mr Mitchell: No, I do not. I think everyone is going about this in their own way. We have a much larger number of citizens to get out. I have enormous sympathy with the difficulties that those British citizens you have just mentioned are facing, but the travel advice from the Foreign Office is extremely important because it does change. It changed yesterday and it has changed again today. Keeping in touch with the travel advice is not an insignificant matter.

We have tried to ensure that anyone who has registered with the Foreign Office has received—or should receive—a message at least once a day. The problem is that the atmospherics in Khartoum hinder that sort of communication. Yesterday there was only 2% internet, and that does make communicating extremely difficult. But in principle, that is what we have tried to achieve. I spent a lot of time in recent days in the crisis centre, and I have seen what our staff are doing so well, both speaking to and comforting those who are in a state of great anxiety, which I completely understand. The system is working, but it is spasmodic, as you described.

Q51 **Liam Byrne:** Presumably because we have more nationals to evacuate, we are surging in more evacuation capacity than other countries such as France. Do you think that by the end of tomorrow we will have evacuated more of our citizens than, say, the French have?

Mr Mitchell: I am not going to get into numbers, because I could not do so with confidence, but what I can say is that we are, as we have been for the last week, extremely focused on every single conceivable way of extracting our citizens and every single type of help that we can give them. We are exploring other options as well at the moment, but for the moment we are evacuating people from the airstrip north of Khartoum, and that operation is going well so far.

Q52 **Liam Byrne:** So we cannot give any assurances? What documents are being accepted by means of identity at the airport?

Mr Mitchell: Most people who are coming up there have ideally already been pre-cleared, because they have told us about their documents and we have been able, therefore, to tell them to come. When they come, they will be waved through by the officials who are there. Otherwise, we are



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expecting them to have a British passport. So far, I am not aware of any problems in that process.

Q53 Liam Byrne: If families come with dependants who are not British nationals or British citizens, are they being accepted on to the outbound flights?

Mr Mitchell: There is a categorisation of different groupings. They are the families with children, elder folk and people with medical conditions, and there is a sort of prioritisation order in that respect. If you arrive at the airport with children under the age of 18 who do not have documents, so long as the Border Force officers who are there are content that you are a family unit, you will get on the plane.

Q54 Liam Byrne: How are they making that judgment?

Mr Mitchell: Well, if the travel documents are not complete, they just have to satisfy themselves that the children are who they are told they are. There hasn't been an issue with that.

Q55 Liam Byrne: And if someone presenting themselves wants to claim asylum because their life is in jeopardy in Sudan, at what stage in this evacuation process should they make that claim for asylum?

Mr Mitchell: As you will know, Mr Byrne, you can't make an application from Sudan if you're a Sudanese citizen, so the international regulations that govern these things would not work for you.

Q56 Liam Byrne: But if they make that claim for asylum when they land in the UK, what will happen to their claim?

Mr Mitchell: Well, it will be—coming by some other means at the moment. It depends how they arrive, but it would be assessed in the normal way.

Q57 Liam Byrne: If they're a Sudanese citizen who has come on to a flight, for example, with a British parent and they land in this country and they want to claim asylum, will that asylum claim be processed in a normal way?

Mr Mitchell: It's very difficult to conceive how a Sudanese citizen today would arrive by plane from Sudan in the UK.

Liam Byrne: With a British parent.

Mr Mitchell: They won't get on the flight unless we are satisfied about their documents.

Q58 Liam Byrne: But there may be some who have a legitimate claim to asylum who are left on the tarmac in Sudan.

Mr Mitchell: I think, Mr Byrne, we are going round in circles. They would not have eligibility to claim asylum if they were to come and seek to be evacuated by the British evacuation mission at the moment.

Q59 Chair: We've only got seven minutes left. I think the clarification point is



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that if somebody comes as a dependant, when they arrive in the UK what is their asylum status? They are not seeking asylum necessarily, as they have come as a direct dependant. Would they be required to apply for asylum to be able to stay here in the long term?

Mr Mitchell: I am not an expert on this area of law, but if I have understood your question correctly, Chair, if they can get on the flight out from the airstrip north of Khartoum, on the basis that they get on that flight they will be able to be trans plane in Cyprus and come to the UK.

Q60 **Chair:** Very briefly, on your point about prioritisation, there will be some British nationals who will be unable to get to the airstrip because they do not have fuel, or because they are so unwell from having not had enough food and drink, or because they haven't been able to access medical aid. We do not have diplomats on the ground to go and get them in a convoy. Has the RDT got permission to go and extract British nationals?

Mr Mitchell: No. The RDT is based at the airstrip and it is from there that they will operate. But of all the people who have registered, I am not aware of anyone who falls into that category.

Q61 **Henry Smith:** Minister, the UK is, of course, the penholder in the Security Council at the UN on Sudan. What are the next steps that the Government are planning at the UN on this issue?

Mr Mitchell: You put your finger on the critical point, which is that what is urgently required is a ceasefire—for the combatants to lay down their arms and return to barracks—and for the political process, which was moving forward significantly before the second week of April, to reassert itself.

Britain will do everything it can. Through holding the pen at the United Nations, we are in a special position and we have already exercised that at the United Nations since this crisis started. We will do everything we can, together with our colleagues at the United Nations, our friends and colleagues in Europe, and the regional powers. The Foreign Secretary has been on the phone to colleagues in the region ceaselessly since this crisis started, to try to move people towards the possibility and then the actuality of a ceasefire. But that is the critical thing that is required.

There is going to be a humanitarian catastrophe there, with the position at the moment in terms of food and humanitarian relief. Most humanitarian workers are leaving and will not be able to come back until there is a ceasefire and there is some degree of safety on the ground. Five of them have already been murdered.

Q62 **Royston Smith:** I understand why you evacuated Foreign Office staff; I have no reason to doubt your intelligence that their lives were in danger. I wonder, though—I thought this at the weekend—about the optics of senior Cabinet members tweeting that 1,200 military are involved in taking our people out, while British citizens were left in Khartoum wondering what was going to happen to them. I am pleased that we now have moved on and things are gathering pace, but do you think that was



a sensible way to promote that?

Mr Mitchell: I think you have to accept that the decision was made. The Prime Minister chaired COBRA last Saturday at 3.15 in the morning. I think that gives a feeling of the urgency and the tense critical complexity of the situation. We then decided that the people for whom we had a specific responsibility—I emphasise that the Government feel a responsibility for all British citizens in Sudan, including the people who were our own employees, the diplomats and their dependants, people who were in British houses and the residents in the embassy—were in sufficient jeopardy for us to know that military operations should be launched.

No Government puts men and women of our military into harm's way lightly, and I pay great tribute to their bravery. I think the tweet to which you are referring reflects the pride and admiration of the Defence Secretary in the remarkable work that the British armed forces conducted, getting all our embassy staff out—bar one who is now out and in Djibouti—successfully, and also getting all the troops who were involved in the operation safely back to Cyprus.

Q63 Sir Chris Bryant: We have heard this afternoon in our evidence two different answers to the question, "Should we have known that this was a possibility?" with one going, "Well, it would have been very difficult," but others saying, "Well, actually, the alarm bells should have been ringing, because we knew this was getting into a very tense moment in the process towards democracy, and lots of people did not want to go back to democracy." Where do you fall on that spectrum? If there could have been any alarm bells ringing, would it not have been good to have garnered information about how many British nationals there were in Sudan rather earlier, so that we would have been ready to put something in place?

Mr Mitchell: On the second point, we only know if people tell us, and quite often British nationals do not tell the embassy, so the embassy has to make a judgment. The judgments we have made in terms of British nationals and those with dual passports are in the public domain.

On the basis of the first question that Sir Christopher asked me, which is, "Should we have known?" I think that is very difficult. My answer is no. Obviously, there has been work done in the Foreign Office, which has a very good ambassador there. That work monitors and works very closely with the different people involved—in particular, of course, with civil society and the politicians rather than the military. But this is not an ideological battle; this is a battle between two generals for power. There is no ideology involved; it is raw power being fought over, and one might have hoped that that would never happen, given the appalling humanitarian jeopardy it has placed so many people in.

Q64 Sir Chris Bryant: But what we heard earlier was quite a lot of engagement from other countries outside wanting to meddle, including possibly the Wagner Group, Russia, Libya and Egypt. All these things were available for us to know. There is a bit of my mind that is just



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going, "Well, we have taken our eye off the ball when we know we have quite a lot of British citizens in Sudan."

Mr Mitchell: I don't think so. We were watching very carefully over the peace process. It did appear to be making progress. One has to remember that throughout most of the time after the British protectorate in the Sudan, I think it was, there has been a military Government in Sudan. The progress we were working towards was that there might be a civilian Government, for which there was huge hope. Enormous bravery was shown by the people who were standing up for democracy and the political leaders in Sudan. We were very close to them, we knew what was going on, and we hoped that progress would continue to be made in respect of those negotiations. As I say, I think we would not have expected that these two generals would have slugged it out in this way on a totally non-ideological issue, let alone deployed heavy weapons in built-up areas.

Q65 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I just urge you to read the evidence that we have had earlier afterwards. I think it might be quite revealing for you.

Mr Mitchell: I always look at the evidence that is published.

Chair: Minister, I am aware that you need to leave us, but we will be taking you up on your offer to come back to us—I hope in the near future. I would also like to put on the record that the hearts and thoughts of this entire Committee go out to the people of Sudan, and to all the British nationals who have been caught up and lived through an unbearably scary few days. I also put on the record our thanks to staff at the Foreign Office, the MOD, the Border Force and now those RDTs on the ground. We all hope that the ceasefire holds, but we urge that we try to get as many British nationals out as we can. Just to reiterate those who may be joining us late: the message is that any British national should travel immediately to the airstrip so that they can be evacuated. Thank you ever so much, Minister.