

Sudan: Repression Intensifies after Border Violence
Human Rights Watch
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Sudan has stepped up harassment of journalists, censorship, and arrests of political opponents in the wake of recent fighting with South Sudan, Human Rights Watch said today.

"Sudan is cracking down on civil and political rights in the face of conflict and opposition," said Daniel Bekele, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. "But locking up critics and silencing dissent will not solve Sudan's problems."

Fighting in mid-April, 2012, between Sudan and South Sudan, which became independent on July 9, 2011, along their disputed border provoked an atmosphere of heightened hostility accompanied by increased repression in Sudan. Security officials have harassed and threatened journalists and political opposition members and more than 15 journalists have been banned from working in recent months, according to journalist groups in Sudan.

In one high-profile example, National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) officials summoned a prominent Sudanese journalist and human rights defender, Faisal Mohamed Salih, to their office in Khartoum for several hours of questioning on the night of April 25 about comments he made on Al Jazeera's Arabic television. Salih teaches journalism and is known as an independent, non-partisan commentator.

NISS released Salih at midnight but ordered him to report back daily to its office. He sat in the reception area all day each day for nearly two weeks, a strategy "to humiliate me and obstruct my work," Salih wrote in a statement about his ordeal on May 7. After he refused to appear voluntarily, security officials went to his home and compelled his appearance twice, on May 8 and May 9. Officials lodged criminal charges against him on May 15 for refusing to cooperate with their orders. If convicted, he faces up to a month in jail.

"It is clear he is being targeted only because he criticized the government policies," Faisal al-Baqir, a Sudanese advocate for media freedoms, told Human Rights Watch. "They want to deny him his right to talk."

Salih had commented on a speech by President Omar al-Bashir on April 19 in which al-Bashir vowed to take over South Sudan and referred to the southern Sudan People's Liberation Movement as "insects."

Al-Bashir delivered the widely-publicized speech the day South Sudan announced its withdrawal from Heglig, the oil-producing area near the disputed territory of Abyei that the South claims. The two armies fought in the Heglig area for more than a week in mid-April, while Sudanese air forces bombed strategic locations in South Sudan.

While government officials engaged in war talk and conservative newspapers such as Intibaha published hostile rhetoric toward the south and toward non-Muslims, authorities clamped down on writings critical of the government, Human Rights Watch said.

For example, on May 13, NISS censored an opinion article from the daily al-Sahafa, "The Solution Is Not with the ingaz [ruling party's] Regime," and another in the daily al-Tayyar by a well-known moderate Islamist questioning the claim that Sudan was victorious at Heglig. On April 15, security officials summoned Hassan Ishaq, a journalist who writes for another daily, al-Jareeda, and warned him not to write on the Heglig conflict.

On April 25, security officials summoned Haidar al Mokashfi, a journalist for al-Sahafa to protest an article about a church burning incident by followers of a radical local imam. They banned him from working until he receives permission. As of May 15, he was still waiting.

The subject of Mokashfi's article was one of the most shocking examples of sectarian violence in Sudan in years, and underscored the ethnic and religious hostility that emerged in the wake of the conflict. On April 21, a large group of residents, most of them men, entered an historic church compound in al-Jereif West area of Khartoum and proceeded to burn and loot property while police stood by. According to witnesses, looters chanted, "We will kill the insects, we will kill the slaves."

"Sudan is blacklisting journalists and censoring articles on topics of great importance at this volatile time," Bekele said. "Sudan should immediately stop these tactics and show respect for basic freedoms."

Under Sudanese law national security officials may ban a publication considered a threat to national security. But the tactic of prohibiting individual journalists from continuing to work, with verbal orders, appears to be without an explicit legal basis, Human Rights Watch said.

Security officials also instructed editors not to write about the conflict. On May 5, security officials called Madiha Abdullah, editor of the opposition newspaper al-Midan, and ordered her not to publish articles on specific topics. "They told me over the phone, 'You should not include any articles critical of the performance of the security services, armed forces, the police, and not to criticize the president, and not to talk about the situation of civil liberties and press freedoms,'" she told Human Rights Watch.

The al-Jareeda newspaper editor, Idris al Domah, said his office receives similar calls on a regular basis. Sudanese journalist groups have compiled a list of 29 subjects media have been told they may not write about.

Security officials have also confiscated newspapers in recent weeks. On May 14, al-Midan was confiscated for the sixth time this month. Since the beginning of April, six issues of al-Jareeda have been confiscated and al-Tayyar was confiscated on May 8. Authorities have also apparently resumed pre-print censorship, going to the publication's offices and ordering it to remove articles planned for the next edition, used intermittently in recent years. On May 11, al-Jareeda was so heavily censored that it suspended publication.

Intelligence officials have also cracked down on suspected political opponents. While not directly linked to Heglig, the arrests appeared to be part of a pattern of broader repression in recent weeks.

On April 21, security officials arrested Alawiya Osman Ismail Kibaida, a former health minister of Sennar state, and Ezdhar Juma, a lawyer and a former state minister, without stating a reason. Both women hold positions in Sudan People's Liberation Movement-North, the opposition party that emerged following South's independence in July 2011.

Kibaida is detained in a national security facility, without access to a lawyer or family, and is in poor health, while Juma was placed under house arrest to care for her young children.

On April 22, security officials in Port Sudan, Red Sea state, arrested seven other party members, who remain in detention, according to Sudanese civil society groups.

In similar spates of arrests, authorities have targeted members of SPLM-North and civil society activists from Southern Kordofan and Blue Nile, detaining them since conflict erupted in Southern Kordofan in June 2011. Sudan banned the SPLM-North in September 2011 following the outbreak of conflict in Blue Nile, and arrested and detained scores of members who remain in detention.

In March, 2012, security officials arrested Jalila Khamis Koko, a teacher from Nuba Mountains and member of SPLM-North, at her home in Khartoum. She remains detained in Khartoum without access to a lawyer or family visits. Bushra Gammar Hussein Rahama, founder of a Nuba human rights organization, has been detained since June 2011. He also remains in Kober prison without access to a lawyer or family visits, and suffers from health problems exacerbated by two hunger strikes.

Under Sudanese law the NISS has broad powers to search, seize, arrest, and detain for up to four and a half months without judicial review, in violation of international standards. The security service is known for using ill-treatment and torture against detainees.

“These detentions are shameful,” Bekele said. “Authorities should immediate release or charge these people with a recognizable offense, and allow them access to lawyer, family, and medical visits.”