Kurmuk, Kassala, and the Strategic Containment of Ethiopia

By Bezawit Eshetu

The escalation of the Sudanese Armed Forces' drone campaign to retake Kurmuk in Blue Nile State marks more than a local battlefield adjustment; it signals a potentially destabilizing expansion of the Horn of Africa's security crisis. Port Sudan presents the operation as a defensive measure designed to sever RSF supply routes and dislodge its local partner, the SPLM-N al-Hilu faction, which seized the town in March. Yet the wider diplomatic response suggests that what is at stake is not simply a tactical contest over a border town, but the possibility that a contested intelligence narrative could be converted into a broader regional confrontation.

The fact that Massad Boulos, the U.S. Senior Advisor for Arab and African Affairs, held urgent separate calls with Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty and UAE Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan indicates that Washington understood the issue as a potential escalation point, not a routine episode in Sudan's civil war.

Within a grey-zone warfare framework, the alleged RSF camp in Ethiopia should therefore be treated not as a verified operational fact, but as a strategically useful falsehood. Sudan appears to be weaponizing the claim to externalize its internal military failures, construct a cross-border threat narrative, and pull Ethiopia

into a broader security dilemma that serves Port Sudan's domestic and diplomatic needs. In that sense, the "camp" matters less as evidence of RSF sanctuary than as a geopolitical instrument of blame-shifting, pressure, and controlled escalation.

This logic becomes clearer when the SAF's intensified drone activity along the border is viewed against the backdrop of its own internal weakness. After more than three years of sustained losses against the RSF across western and central Sudan, the army faces a profound legitimacy problem. Attributing battlefield setbacks to an externalized threat tied to Ethiopia serves a critical political function: it displaces blame, preserves the appearance of strategic coherence, and recasts military failure as the product of foreign interference rather than institutional weakness. For a war-weary and politically exhausted public, that narrative is far more usable than an admission of operational collapse.

At the same time, the deliberate proximity of these operations to Ethiopia's sovereign border serves a second purpose: it internationalizes the conflict. By implying the possibility of spillover into a wider East African crisis, Sudan raises the diplomatic cost of inaction and increases pressure on the United States and the United Nations to intervene in ways that could constrain RSF advances on terms more favorable to Port Sudan. The same posture also strengthens Sudan's position in the long-running Al-Fashaga dispute, because it allows the military leadership to project a revisionist posture toward Addis Ababa while retaining leverage along the frontier.

That line of argument aligns closely with Egypt's strategic calculations as Sudan's principal external backer. Cairo's overriding concern is the consolidation of a stronger Ethiopian position that could translate into firmer control over Nile waters through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Because a direct strike on the dam would invite severe international backlash and risk full interstate confrontation, Egypt has a powerful incentive to rely on indirect and deniable instruments instead.

In that sense, the claim of RSF camps near the Ethiopian border provides useful diplomatic cover. By supplying the Sudanese army with long-range drone capabilities and intelligence under the banner of countering border-based paramilitary threats, Cairo can support a heavily armed proxy operating within striking distance of Ethiopia's most sensitive strategic asset.

If a drone strike or artillery attack crosses the border and affects infrastructure linked to the GERD, the immediate blame would fall on Port Sudan under the logic of hot pursuit, while Egypt would preserve plausible deniability even as it continued to pressure Addis Ababa over the Nile. The aim here is not territorial conquest, which is not realistically achievable, but the slower and more systematic exhaustion of the Ethiopian state.

Seen through this lens, eastern Sudan's geography becomes operationally decisive. Al Damazin, Singa, and Gedarif are no longer merely rear-area defenses against the RSF; they form a connected forward line directed at Ethiopia's vulnerabilities. Al Damazin functions as the key air and heavy-fire hub closest to the GERD, and by placing long-range drones there under the cover of border security, Cairo helps create a forward position within reach of Ethiopia's most sensitive infrastructure.

The setup is designed for deniability. If an operation said to target RSF remnants crosses the border and damages GERD-related facilities, Port Sudan absorbs the diplomatic blame under the logic of hot pursuit, while Cairo maintains pressure on Addis Ababa without entering open interstate war. Singa, meanwhile, serves as the logistical hinge between the Blue Nile front and the eastern theater, allowing weapons and

fuel to move efficiently across adjacent border zones in support of both regular forces and irregular networks.

Gedarif anchors the northern edge of this system. Situated beside the contested Al-Fashaga triangle and Ethiopia's unstable Amhara region, it gives the SAF both a military foothold and a political instrument. By maintaining a heavy presence there and justifying it with the unverified claim of clearing RSF border camps, the army gains two advantages at once. First, it forces the ENDF to remain on alert along its western frontier, tying down experienced troops that might otherwise be used to address Ethiopia's internal security problems.

Second, Gedarif becomes a staging area for a covert supply route feeding arms toward Amhara-based Fano militias. With insurgent forces controlling the Metema border gate opposite Gedarif, the corridor has become highly porous. Through it, SAF-tolerated smuggling networks can move weapons into Ethiopia, leaving Addis Ababa to confront a border threat and an internal armed challenge simultaneously.

That posture, however, depends on stability in eastern Sudan, which makes Kassala State a critical vulnerability. Kassala is the geographical hinge linking Eritrea, Sudan, and Ethiopia's northwestern frontier, directly bordering the volatile Humera and Welkait corridors in western Tigray. It is the gateway to Sudan's east, and its politics are shaped by a deep and longstanding distrust of central authority.

The dominant Beja coalition, especially the Hadendowa sub-clans and cross-border nomadic networks such as the Beni-Amer, tends to adopt a posture of survivalist neutrality. Because these groups straddle borders and control the deep desert routes, they view the military authorities in Port Sudan as a center that has historically treated eastern communities as expendable proxies. That distrust helped unravel a key local security arrangement between the army and Kassala's tribal leadership.

According to internal sources, the arrangement broke down further when tribal leaders initially insisted that Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki serve as the formal external guarantor of the deal, hoping Asmara would act as a buffer against Port Sudan. Al burhan naturally refused, recognizing that accepting the condition would effectively elevate Eritrea into an arbiter of Sudan's internal border politics.

However, the fatal blow to local trust occurred when Port Sudan and Asmara bypassed these traditional leaders to strike a separate, bilateral understanding. With the state's approval, the Eastern Cohort, an Eritrea-trained and backed proxy force was deployed into Kassala. Because this deployment circumvented traditional tribal authority and represented a state-sanctioned militarization of their territory, local Beja leaders realized Asmara was prioritizing its strategic arrangement with the SAF over local autonomy. Consequently, they interpreted the arrival of the Eastern Cohort not as a protective measure, but as a direct, coordinated challenge to their regional influence.

Taken together, the episode suggests that the relationship between the Sudanese military and Isaias Afwerki is tactical rather than genuinely aligned. On the surface, the two sides appear cooperative, but in practice they remain locked in mutual suspicion. Isaias has repeatedly warned that Eritrea could intervene militarily if the war threatens to destabilize Kassala, Gedarif, or the Red Sea coast. For Asmara, this creates a security buffer against Sudan's civil war. For Port Sudan, it creates a sovereignty risk, since foreign troops gain leverage over territory the state is supposed to control. The Sudanese command understands that excessive Eritrean influence could eventually reduce Sudan's eastern gateway to a zone of de facto Eritrean control.

That local fracture creates a distinct opening for Ethiopia. Kassala's nomadic tribes are deeply suspicious of both Al-Burhan's military regime, which sees them as pawns, and Isaias Afwerki, who seeks to co-opt them. Addis Ababa is therefore not facing a unified bloc. It can capitalize on this alienation by quietly building relationship and security understandings with local Beja and border-community leaders. Cross-border trade incentives and discreet support for local autonomy could turn these networks into an intelligence screen, making stop the smuggling routes aimed at destabilizing Ethiopia.

Without such Ethiopian engagement, however, Port Sudan and Asmara are positioned to compartmentalize their local rivalries in service of a broader shared objective: the strategic containment of Ethiopia. While the SAF is wary of Eritrean encroachment in Kassala, Al-Burhan's regime is also am implementer of the agendas set by Egypt. Stretched thin by the civil war, the SAF cannot mount a conventional cross-border war in the north. Instead, it effectively outsources that theater. By turning a blind eye, or by actively facilitating access, the SAF could allow Eritrea, and by extension Egypt, to use Kassala and Gedarif as a staging ground.

For Asmara, this permissive environment is highly strategic. Viewing the post-Pretoria settlement in Tigray as a strategic setback, Eritrea uses this SAF-sanctioned corridor to bypass Ethiopia's heavily guarded northern border. Kassala and Gedarif thus function as a dual-use pipeline: moving weapons, intelligence, and material support south toward the Amhara interior through Metema to sustain the Fano insurgency, while also feeding instability directly into western Tigray through the Humera borderlands.

Read together with the active Sudanese front through Kurmuk, this architecture reveals a coordinated, two-pronged containment strategy jointly shaped by Port Sudan and Asmara. Therefore, the SAF is an active participant in the wider pressure system. The drone campaign and military buildup around Kurmuk serve as the conventional southern anchor, tying down ENDF units and heavy artillery near the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Benishangul-Gumuz region. Meanwhile, the SAF-facilitated, Eritrean-managed proxy pipeline through Kassala and Gedarif operates as the asymmetric northern arm.

The intended result is forced overextension. By synchronizing the Kurmuk drone threat in the south with proxy insurgencies in Amhara and Tigray in the north, Port Sudan and Asmara compel Addis Ababa to defend multiple, disconnected fronts at once, fracturing command, logistics, and deployment capacity. That broader strain helps explain Washington's urgency in pursuing diplomacy.