

Conflict over oil in Sudan

Chris Talbot
20 October 1999

Peace talks are now taking place in Nairobi, Kenya over the future of Sudan. The Sudanese government and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) have been fighting a civil war for the past 16 years. The SPLA is demanding self-determination for the south of the country.

The present talks have taken on a more serious character than previous efforts to reach a peace settlement because of the discovery of oil in southern Sudan. The government, which now controls strategic parts of the southern region, began oil exports last month. Both sides have agreed to a cease-fire.

A number of governments are backing the peace talks. Egypt and Libya attempted to broker a settlement last month. The current Nairobi dialogue is being held under the auspices of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which includes Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. The Sudanese government has been able to attract support from European governments, which, according to BBC reports, "no longer hesitate to exchange ministerial visits with Khartoum". Even Britain has restored diplomatic ties with the regime, after it broke them off following the US bombing of a pharmaceutical factory on August 20 last year.

Last month, the Sudanese government earned \$2.2 million from the first sale of oil from the 1,600-kilometre pipeline, which carries oil from the Unity State in the south of Sudan to a special port at Beshair on the Red Sea. Sixty thousand barrels of oil were sold to Shell and shipped to Singapore for refining.

The \$1 billion pipeline was completed in May this year. It was built by a consortium of Chinese, German, Argentinean, British and Malaysian companies. Current production stands at 150,000 barrels daily, but the pipeline has a capacity of 250,000 barrels a day that could be increased to 450,000 barrels a day if more

pumping stations were added. Initial annual income for Sudan from operating the pipeline is estimated to be \$250 million.

The oil is produced by the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company which is jointly owned by Talisman Energy Inc. of Canada (25 percent), the Chinese government (40 percent), the Malaysian state oil company Petronas (30 percent), and Sudan's National Petroleum Company (5 percent). Official figures state that the Unity oilfield has up to 800 million barrels of reserves. Sudan is said to have more than 2 billion barrels of oil reserves in various parts of the country.

That the Sudanese regime has been able to extract oil from the south of Sudan is a serious setback for the United States-backed SPLA. A group allied with the SPLA bombed the pipeline last month, but they have not been able to stop the oil coming on tap. Aid agencies in the south have recently reported that the SPLA is mobilising its fighters and press-ganging recruits ready for a new offensive. They report that the recruits are taken to Uganda for training, where they are kept under armed guard. Uganda has backed the SPLA from the early 1990s and is the route through which the US has supplied it with millions of dollars of military hardware.

The United States was forced to retract claims that the pharmaceutical plant it bombed last year was a chemical weapons plant, producing nerve gas, and was linked to alleged terrorists led by Osama bin Laden. The US government claimed it was unaware that the factory was Sudan's main producer of medicine for both human and animal use. It has belatedly ordered the assets of the owner of the factory to be unfrozen, but has repeatedly refused to make any redress to the Sudanese government and has continued to denounce it.

Typical of the latest round of propaganda against the

Sudanese government is an article written by Susan Rice, assistant US secretary of state for African Affairs, and David Scheffer, US ambassador at large for war crimes issues. The article appeared first in the *International Herald Tribune* and was reproduced in the *East African* newspaper based in Nairobi, Kenya, on September 28. It calls for the rejection of what is termed a "charm campaign" by Sudan—referring to the recent statements by Sudanese Foreign Minister Mustapha Osman Ismail that the regime has moved away from Islamic extremism and was now concerned about democracy and human rights.

It continues: "A quick glimpse within Sudan's borders, however, reveals a world of famine, slavery, torture, religious persecution, massacres, pillage and looting. The Sudanese population and the world community should not be taken in by the new government rhetoric."

Claiming that the Sudanese regime "uses terror against civilians as a weapon of choice", the article implies that it is using chemical or biological warfare. "Recent bombing attacks in two towns resulted in reports of unusual adverse effects on people and animals in the area. While information remains sketchy, these reports are extremely troubling."

The accusation that chemical bombs had been used in July was made by the SPLA and Norwegian aid workers, but has never been verified. Rice and Scheffer's article is a one-sided attack on the Sudanese government. Though they were forced to acknowledge human rights abuses carried out by the SPLA, they claimed these were "on a much smaller scale". The article could be used to mobilise opinion in the event of any future military intervention by America.

Last June, the US House of Representatives passed a resolution by 417 votes to 1 (the first Sudan measure in six years) condemning the Sudan government for "its genocidal war in southern Sudan ... and continued human rights violations". It urged the United Nations to declare that the war plan pursued by the Sudanese regime "constitutes genocide or ethnic cleansing".

Support for military intervention was also proposed by leaders of US-based charities that organise famine relief and support for refugees in Sudan. On September 17, they lobbied Secretary of State Madeleine Albright for "a US commitment to assist in financially supporting a peacekeeping force which could monitor

and enforce a comprehensive cease-fire".

Aid organisations play a considerable role in the international politics surrounding Sudan, given that up to four million people have been internally displaced and that the prolonged war has caused repeated famines. Another group of Canadian aid agencies and churches is furiously lobbying the Canadian government to prevent Talisman Energy continuing to make oil profits in Sudan and giving support to the regime.

It is not clear whether the United States is prepared, at this juncture, to open up a conflict with European and other backers of the Sudan regime. A BBC report suggests that whilst the comments from Rice, and the Congress resolution, would suggest a toughening of American policy, "low-level direct Sudanese US contacts have been more positive".



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