

# US steps up pressure on Sudanese government

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A three-month state of emergency has been declared in Sudan by President Omar al-Bashir. He dissolved parliament, sacked the speaker, Hassan Turabi, and banned the ruling Islamic party, the National Islamic Front (recently renamed the National Congress Party). President Bashir claimed the move was necessary because the country was under external threat and "should be united". He has accused Turabi of becoming a destabilising factor in a country already suffering from civil strife.

The government of the National Islamic Front (NIF) has been in power since 1989, when Bashir, then an army general, led a military coup. Some opposition political parties were banned and Islamic shari'a law was consolidated.

Turabi, leader of the Islamic movement in Sudan, has been Bashir's main political ally since 1989. His party held most of the parliamentary seats and provided the government with its power base.

Over the past few months, serious political differences developed among the country's ruling elite. Bashir and his supporters saw the economic and political advantages gained by Libya through its improved relations with the West. They are also aware of the dangers of increased US involvement in the 16-year-long civil war between the Khartoum government and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) based in the south. Bashir pledged to end the war and has made clear that he seeks a rapprochement with the United States, declaring that he "will diligently pursue the process of dialogue as the sole means for removing all obstacles hampering the improvement of those relations".

Turabi and the National Islamic Front favour a policy of strengthening Islamic law throughout the country, which would undoubtedly fuel the civil war and increase the country's isolation.

The declaration of a state of emergency took place on the eve of a vote on constitutional changes, proposed by Turabi, that would have limited the president's authority. They would have abolished his control over provincial governors, created a new post of prime minister to head the cabinet and granted parliament the power to remove the president with a two-thirds vote.

Bashir has declared that emergency rule and the dissolution of parliament are irrevocable, and that there was "no question of compromise on the fundamental principle, which is that there will be no return to interference by the [National Congress] party in the affairs of state".

The governments of Egypt and Libya have given full backing to the Bashir faction. On December 22, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt flew to Libya for talks with Colonel Gadhafi, and they issued a joint statement in support of Bashir's actions, at the same time opposing American interference in the affairs of Sudan.

Despite Bashir's overtures to the United States, recent changes in US foreign policy indicate a stepping up of American interventions aimed at destabilising the country and removing the government.

On November 29, 1999, President Bill Clinton signed a law allowing the US government to provide direct food aid to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The legislation marks a significant change in US policy and means that food aid can be used directly as a weapon of war. Previous legislation forbade the provision of food aid to warring factions before they demobilised.

A *New York Times* report made the purpose of the legislation clear: "The plan is intended, by its advocates in the State Department and the National Security Council, to strengthen the military operations of the Sudan People's Liberation Army and to isolate the government which Washington has accused of backing international terrorism."

The measure received the enthusiastic support of Susan Rice, US Assistant Secretary of State, and Gayle Smith, Director for Africa at the National Security Council. John Pendergast, a special adviser to Rice, said the food aid would enable the rebels to maintain their positions in the parched territory where they are fighting against government forces. In the *New York Times* he explained how the aid would be used. "This is so forces can eat more easily and re-supply forces in food deficit areas". It would enable the SPLA "to stay in position or expand positions in places where it is difficult to maintain a logistical line".

The Republican Party and the Christian Coalition have been mobilised to support the measure. Senator Sam Brownback (Rep.-Kansas) said the new law would "feed starving people standing for democracy in the Sudan who want nothing more than to live in peace, free from slavery, civilian bombing, government-manufactured famine, and the worst forms of religious persecution".

Whereas it is true that the Sudanese government is an oppressive regime, which locks up its opponents, the SPLA also forcibly suppresses opposition in the areas it controls. A US State Department annual human rights report branded SPLA forces "responsible for extra-judicial killings, beatings, arbitrary detention, forced conscription, slavery and occasional arrests of foreign relief workers without charge". These are the same forces that have been armed and trained with the support of the US, provided mainly through its client state, Uganda, but also through neighbouring Ethiopia.

There are also reports of more direct military aid. A report published November last year by the Washington Office on Africa (a Christian social policy group) speaks of "anecdotal reports of US military assistance to the SPLA, and non-lethal aid finding its way to the SPLA".

Sudan has been condemned by the US as a pariah state since 1991,

when it supported Iraq in the Gulf War. Two years later the Clinton administration placed Sudan on its list of countries that "sponsored international terrorism" and imposed unilateral sanctions. These were extended in 1997; all trade and financial transactions were prohibited and Sudanese assets in the US were frozen. The US also lists Sudan as one of seven countries in the world that tolerate "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom.

After the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, US fighter aircraft destroyed a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum, declaring that it was producing chemical weapons. Washington also claimed that Saudi Arabian exile Osama bin Laden, whom they alleged was behind the embassy bombings, had financial interests in the factory. Both claims were proved to be false, but the demonisation of Sudan continued. The decision to provide food aid to the rebel SPLA forces represents a definite stepping up of America's intervention in the civil war.

While some sections of the American ruling class are anxious to step up the civil war, others think the time has come to enter into dialogue with the Khartoum government. They see the results of the rapprochement between Sudan and France, Britain, Canada and Saudi Arabia, particularly the profits being made from their investment in the developing oil industry in the south.

The area is important for the West, being situated in the Horn of Africa it is strategically placed to control the southeastern entry into the Red Sea. It also controls the upper reaches of the Nile River. From September 1999 Sudan has been exporting oil, carried along the 1,600-kilometre pipeline to the port of Beshair on the Red Sea. Sudan expects to earn around \$250 million annually from its oil exports.

Sudan is a very poor country. Since 1983 it has been embroiled in civil war, in which 2 million civilians have died and 350,000 have taken refuge in neighbouring countries. Four to five million civilians have been driven from their homes and there has been widespread famine in the south, alleviated only by UN food aid.

The United Nations has been operating a food programme for Sudan for 10 years—Operation Lifeline Sudan. Nils Kastberg, director of emergency programmes for UNICEF, warned that the programme could be jeopardised if the US implements the new policy on food aid. He said, "We'll have stronger opposition from Khartoum, and there will be greater risk for everyone involved."

This led *Africa on Line* to comment on December 22, 1999: "Such uncommon public dissent on the part of a high-level official signals that a ferocious debate about the Sudan issue is taking place inside the Clinton administration."

In January 1997 the SPLA launched a huge offensive from Eritrea and captured a large area of the South. Bashir attempted to reach a compromise and in April that year signed a peace accord with five southern leaders promising to hold a referendum on self-determination in three years time. The accord did not include the leadership of the SPLA, the strongest of the opposition forces.

A year later in May 1998, after four years of negotiations, the Khartoum government joined the SPLA in accepting the principle of self-determination for the south, but the issue that Sudan be affirmed as a secular rather than a religious state remains unresolved.

In the past two years the US has been openly involved in the negotiations. In 1999, Clinton appointed former US Congressman Harry Johnston, chairman of the African subcommittee, as special envoy to Sudan. His mandate was to raise the question of human rights abuses by the Khartoum regime and to push for the continuation of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) efforts to

negotiate a peace deal in Sudan. IGAD is made up of states around Sudan—Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. The European Union and the US are also involved in IGAD.

Libya and Egypt have also been actively engaged in trying to broker a peace deal between the Bashir government and the SPLA. It seems likely that US support for the IGAD process is an attempt to control the developments and undermine the efforts of Libya and Egypt. In October 1999, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met the leader of the SPLA, Dr. John Garang. It is almost certain that her instructions were to persuade Garang not to take part in peace negotiations being backed by Egypt and Libya.

Former US President Jimmy Carter has also been active in Sudan, through his Carter Centre Foundation. In December last year he acted as mediator when Uganda and Sudan signed a treaty agreeing to end hostilities between them and stop supporting each other's rebel movements.

Hard-liners in the US State Department were angry at the ex-president's interference in African affairs, particularly as it happened at the same time that American Ambassador to the UN Richard Holbrooke was involved in his own diplomatic negotiations in Central Africa.

There is a fear among all the states surrounding Sudan that, given the conflicts within the ruling elite, if the civil war is not ended quickly there could be a complete collapse of the regime, resulting in the fracturing of the country as has happened in Somalia. Such a collapse could destabilise the whole region.

This fear is shared by some of the opposition forces within Sudan. The northern umbrella opposition group, the National Democratic Alliance, has been meeting in Uganda and agreed to support IGAD-sponsored peace talks. A proposal was made for a new round of peace talks to begin this month in Nairobi.

Hanging over all the frantic negotiations are the intentions of the US, and any attempt they may make to escalate the civil war.

*See Also:*

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