

Sudanese government continues bombing of south

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Despite signing a cease-fire agreement with the southern rebel group the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) on January 19 the National Islamic Front (NIF or National Congress) government of Sudan is continuing to attack civilians in the south of the country.

There is a growing body of evidence showing that the government is intentionally targeting civilians to drive the southern population out of the oil producing regions.

On February 10 two children were killed in the village of Akuem in the province of Bahr al Ghazal (south western Sudan), when a government plane bombed villagers as they gathered to collect food aid that had been dropped from planes. The same day five civilians including a health worker were killed when government forces bombed the village of Nimne.

On February 20 at least 17 civilians were killed in the village of Bieh, which is in Sudan's Western Upper Nile region, about 1,000 km (620 miles) south of the capital, Khartoum. A government helicopter gunship fired rockets and a machinegun into a crowd of up to 4,000 people who had gathered to collect food at a United Nations aid site.

The Christian Aid charity recently issued a report accusing the Khartoum government of consciously pursuing a "scorched earth" policy in the south of the country. But Sudan's special envoy for peace, Ghazi Salah Eddin Atanabi, told reporters that the attacks had been a regrettable "mistake". US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher has announced that Washington is suspending its efforts in peace negotiations intended to end the 19-year civil war until a "full and complete response" was received from the Sudanese government.

In response Atanabi accused the Bush administration of double standards, cynically remarking, "as the US forces in Afghanistan know well, however much care is taken in war, civilians are inevitably the unintended victims of conflict". Another leading representative of the Khartoum government told reporters that Washington was seeking to use the incidents as "a tool of pressure so that the government would make concessions and accept what it had previously rejected".

The cease-fire agreement of January 19, was one of a number of moves made over the past few months towards the NIF regime in Khartoum by the European Union (EU) and the Bush administration aimed at creating greater stability in Sudan.

The agreement, however, is not effective throughout the country and deals only with the area around the Nuba Mountains in south central Sudan. The main oil pipeline in Sudan runs directly through this area. It has been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting since oil production began in 1999. Up to two million people have been displaced from their homes in the last three years.

The Khartoum government refused to stop aerial bombings, stating that this would give an advantage to the southern rebels. (Unlike the SPLM/A, the government has an air force financed by its oil revenues). It did agree to a four-week suspension of bombing civilian targets throughout the south in order to allow humanitarian access.

The proposals advanced by Washington represent a certain shift in policy from that pursued by the Clinton administration. Under Clinton, a series of economic and political measures were implemented that were intended to undermine the Khartoum government and isolate it. These included placing Sudan on a US list of countries that it accused of "sponsoring terrorism", and introducing the Sudan Peace Act, which threw Washington's weight behind the SPLM/A and other opposition forces organised in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). The act also called for capital market sanctions against corporations doing business with the Sudan government.

Washington also set up Operation Lifeline Sudan to deliver aid to the south of the country. According to a STRATFOR.com report, the SPLM/A "relies upon international humanitarian agencies for food and supplies" and the US government has donated £1.5 billion (\$2.13 billion) in aid to the south of the country over the last decade. Covert military support was also provided through Uganda.

All these measures remain in place, but the Bush administration is for the moment holding back on the full implementation of the Sudan Peace Act, pursuing instead a "carrot and stick" policy towards Khartoum in the hope of pressuring the government to adopt an agenda more favourable to US government interests. The US has recently declared its "satisfaction" with the Khartoum government's break from its "terrorist past". Nevertheless, Sudan remains on its list of countries that "sponsor terrorism". It has also kept unilateral sanctions in place, citing concerns over human rights violations

by the NIF regime.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, the Bush administration made moves to develop closer ties with the Khartoum government. According to a report of the International Crisis Group, US Secretary of State Colin Powell contacted the Sudanese foreign minister on September 17, expressing a “desire to enlist Sudan’s help in the fight against terrorism”.

The Sudan government agreed to cooperate with Washington. US intelligence agencies were soon in Khartoum and were reported to be settling in “comfortably”. The Sudanese handed over 30 suspected associates of Osama bin Laden and 200 intelligence files said to detail his activity and that of the Al Qaeda network.

One US official stated that the Khartoum government had “responded more aggressively than almost any other nation to the US call for help in the fight against global terrorism.” Another US official stated that the response from Khartoum meant that Sudan had been “effectively eliminated as one of the biggest bases of operation for bin Laden.” This prompted the Sudanese information minister to tell reporters that he felt there was a “new perspective in Washington. A new policy of engagement.”

Washington abstained on a United Nations Security Council vote which allowed the UN to lift sanctions on Sudan imposed after the alleged involvement of the Khartoum regime in the 1995 assassination attempt on Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak.

These developments coincided with the arrival in Sudan last November of John Danforth—a former Republican senator from Missouri and an Episcopalian priest appointed by President Bush as US special envoy—to negotiate the present cease-fire.

According to a recent International Crisis Group report, Khartoum’s cooperation with Washington offered the NIF the “respectability” it needed in order to attract foreign investment, end its international isolation and allow it to hang onto its new-found oil wealth. It would also allow the NIF to distance itself from its past associations with bin Laden—he resided in Sudan from 1991 to 1996—and would possibly deter the US government from extending its “war on terrorism” to include an attack on Sudan.

Representatives of US oil corporations have become increasingly frustrated since oil production began in Sudan in 1999. They have had to watch from the sidelines as their economic rivals have taken the lead in exploiting Sudan’s estimated 262.1 million barrels of proven oil reserves. China has a 40 percent stake in the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company and the Russian state-owned oil company Slavneft has just signed a \$200 million contract with Khartoum to develop oil and gas exploration. Canada’s Talisman Energy also has a 25 percent interest in the Sudan project and has been heavily criticised by human rights campaigners.

According to *Africa Confidential* magazine, the competition for oil-related contracts in Sudan has become intense and it

“raises questions about commerce driving diplomacy”. This refers to the particular difficulty facing Bush and his administration in how to reconcile the positions of the Christian right, which advocates a more aggressive stance against Khartoum through the proxy army of the SPLM/A, with those of US oil interests that want to see closer ties developed with Khartoum.

European commercial interests have also become heavily involved in Sudan. The German company Siemens announced a \$175.7 million (200 million euros) contract to build the world’s largest diesel power station and in January the Swedish-Swiss company ABB began building power lines between Khartoum and the oil refinery in Jeili. Sudan awarded a \$23 million contract to Marconi Radar Projects Ltd for the implementation of surveillance radar and air traffic control systems to upgrade airports, some of which are used as bases from which to bomb civilians. In February this year the European Union announced that it was resuming aid to the government in Khartoum, which had been suspended since 1990.

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw appointed Alan Goulty as the UK’s special representative to Sudan, stating that his appointment demonstrated “Britain’s determination to play its full part in a coordinated international push for peace in Sudan”. Goulty favours a policy of “constructive engagement” with Khartoum. Talks were also held in Paris between representatives of the French and Sudanese governments. These were described by French officials as expressing the “quality” of relations between the two countries.

Khartoum’s oil wealth has for the moment placed it in a position to attract competing neo-colonial interests. But the NIF regime is wracked by internal divisions and power struggles between those sections of the ruling elite who regard their privileges as being bound up with a more hardline Islamist policy and those that want a more Western-friendly approach. On top of this the SPLM/A may react to the possibility of being sidelined by stepping up its own military campaign.



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