

US behind peace deals in Sudan and Congo

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Two recently brokered peace agreements in Africa, in Sudan and the Congo, are extremely tenuous. Many experts have considered them unlikely to bring the conflicts to an end in the near future. In both cases there has been no cease fire and fighting continues. Nevertheless, taken together with the peace agreement made in Angola earlier this year, it demonstrates a marked change in the involvement of the Western powers in Africa, particularly the United States.

Between them the three countries account for a large part of Africa's oil and mineral wealth. Military and economic pressure from the US was the lever used in pushing through the agreements that will mean closer American relations with Sudan and increasing reliance on the oil rich MPLA regime in Angola. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Africa will play a leading role, and the DRC government of President Joseph Kabila will receive more Western backing. Rwanda, a major recipient of US support under Clinton, has clearly been sidelined and heavily pressured to pull out of the Congo. Given favourable treatment after the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has now been placed under the spotlight for human rights abuses.

The *Wall Street Journal* gives a diplomatic gloss on the increased US involvement, its selective downplaying of human right issues, and willingness to work through proxies: "The West was certainly instrumental in encouraging the parties to come to the table, but took a behind-the-scenes role in negotiations. That was smart. Since the end of the Cold War, Europe and America have seemed to lack the understanding and political will to effect positive change in this region. Such efforts were too easily dismissed by local politicians as mere meddling by supposedly racist former colonial powers."

In Sudan the government has apparently agreed to a deal with the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) that would share control of the country's oil wealth, much of which is in the south where the SPLA is based. The Islamic regime has dropped its insistence on applying Sharia law to the non-Muslim south and has promised that, although the protocol of the agreement gives "unity a priority", they will allow a referendum on secession of the south to take place in six years time.

Concerns raised by Egypt, the US's main ally in the region, that control over the headwaters of the River Nile could pass into hostile forces seem to have been overcome.

After September 11 the Sudanese government gave the US unprecedented collaboration in security issues, using its previous connections with Islamic militants. Desperate for financial backing and heavily in debt, the regime had already initiated a "charm offensive" to gain Western support which had won some response in Europe. It was justifiably frightened at getting the same treatment as the Taliban, being high up on the US list of "axis of evil" regimes.

Given also the interest in the country's oil wealth, the Bush administration appointed a special envoy, former senator John Danforth, to consider mediating in the 19-year-old civil war. The issue divided American ruling circles, with the SPLA strongly supported by right-wing Christian groups. Operation Lifeline Sudan funded by the US, and the biggest aid project in Africa assists the SPLA. Whilst during the Cold War the SPLA was backed by the Soviet Union, in recent years it has been backed by the US against the Islamic regime in Khartoum.

Danforth has been given the go ahead to intervene and US pressure has now apparently extracted concessions from the Sudan regime. Economic sanctions are still in place. Nevertheless, as the International Crisis Group (ICG) points out: "removing its opposition to Paris Club financing, IMF lending and World Bank credits for Sudan would probably be the largest incentive the US could offer Khartoum at an appropriate tactical moment."

Recent reports from aid workers suggest the Sudanese government is continuing its practice of bombing civilians in the southern region, attempting to impose a scorched earth policy around the oil fields. Although the revenue from the oil has given the Khartoum government the military edge over the SPLA, experts state that it must move further south and exploit the larger deposits of oil there if it is to maintain its income.

Sudan may well agree to stop this military expansion after further peace talks this month. Most of Sudan's oil at present goes to China and Malaysia. The Canadian firm Talisman is threatening to pull out as a protest against

human rights abuses. ICG point out that only Western companies possess the technology necessary for rapid expansion of oil production.

The Congo peace talks took a new turn with a deal signed last week between Joseph Kabila, President of the DRC, and Paul Kagame, President of Rwanda. It is supposed to bring about the withdrawal of more than 20,000 Rwandan troops from the Congo within three months. In return the DRC will disarm and repatriate thousands of former Rwandan armed forces (FAR) and Interahamwe militias, many of whom are Hutus said to have taken part in the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi minority in Rwanda.

Fighting continues in the eastern Kivu region of the DRC and the agreement would appear to have little chance of success in the time frame agreed. Whilst Rwandan forces in the Congo and the rebel group they back, the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD), undoubtedly want to deal with threats from Hutu militia, the exploitation of the regions resources has become a priority. As well as gold and diamonds, the region is a source of the rare mineral coltan used in mobile phones. The region is also home to various warring militias, some of which have been backed by the local population which is increasingly angered at their effective colonisation by Rwanda.

Despite the fact that the US has promised a \$5 million reward for information leading to the capture of the eight leading genocide suspects believed to be in the DRC, it seems unlikely that the Hutu militia as a whole will agree to be disarmed and that the DRC will send them back to Rwanda. According to the BBC, out of tens of thousands of FAR soldiers so far only 21 have given themselves up to the UN. They are reputed to have formed the core of Kabila's armed forces.

South Africa, with US backing, is already preparing to send at least 1,500 troops to the DRC to supplement the existing 4,200 UN force. Such a small force, despite superior equipment, is unlikely to have much impact in a country four times the size of France. South African newspapers have expressed concern at troops going up against experienced fighters. Nevertheless South African President Mbeki is strongly backing the deal. South African businessmen are already discussing a range of investment projects in the Congo.

The current agreement follows that made at Sun City, South Africa in April 2002 after weeks of negotiations. Unable to reach an agreement with Rwanda and the RCD, Kabila made a power-sharing arrangement with Jean-Pierre Bemba's Congolese Liberation Movement (MLC). The MLC is backed by Uganda and the arrangement potentially gave the DRC government control over two thirds of the country. Whilst Uganda and Rwanda entered the war in the

Congo together in 1997, their interests have diverged leading to sporadic fighting between their armies and proxy forces.

The US has been central to both Sun City and the current agreement. Kabila is heavily dependent on Angolan support and the Angolan-DRC-Ugandan axis behind the peace initiative is clearly backed by the US. Angola agreed to accept Bemba, provided his connections with businessmen from the former Mobutu period were kept in the background. (UNITA, the rebel force that has now concluded a peace agreement with the Angolan regime was backed by the US via the military dictator Mobutu). In return Uganda insisted that some of the "hardline" personnel around Kabila who are close to Zimbabwe be removed.

Since he took over after the assassination of his father last year, Joseph Kabila has worked closely with his Western backers. Agreeing to accept IMF economic measures, the DRC government has now received loans from the World Bank of \$410 million and \$750 million from the IMF. The IMF is also holding out the promise of relief on the country's \$13 billion debt. Such unusually favourable conditions for an underdeveloped country are a reflection of its importance in terms of mineral wealth.

As well as putting pressure on Rwanda—a country heavily dependent on Western aid—the present peace initiative is likely to undermine Zimbabwe's interests in the DRC. In exchange for the military support he gained from Zimbabwe along with Angola, Kabila gave concessions in diamond mining and logging to the Zimbabwean military. It now seems he has followed Western advice and told Zimbabwe to remove its troops. No doubt South African and US business interests will be keen to step in.

In terms of the humanitarian concern for the millions of African people caught up in the wars, the current round of peace agreements will mean very little. In Sudan the government has repeatedly used famine to drive people out of the oil rich regions. Four million people are internally displaced, with many dependent on outside aid. The DRC is one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of 23 US cents a day. A staggering 2.5 million are estimated to have been killed during the five-year war, the majority of them from starvation or disease rather than the direct result of fighting.



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