

Sudan peace agreement paves way for increased oil production

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The Sudanese government has signed an agreement on wealth sharing with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A), as a prelude to a full peace pact expected by the end of the month.

The agreement envisages a degree of autonomy to the south of Sudan during a six-year interim period in which all revenue will be divided, with half retained by the south and half going to the central government in Khartoum. At the end of the six-year period there is to be a referendum on full independence.

This agreement is intended to bring to an end 20 years of fighting between the Muslim north and Christian/animist south of Sudan, during which some two million people have died—mostly due to starvation.

The main impetus for settling the dispute has been pressure from Europe and particularly the United States, for whom the war has hampered their ability to extract the enormous oil reserves that lie predominantly under the north-south border region.

British imperialism fostered the division of Sudan into a backward Christian south and a more advanced Muslim north, as a means of controlling this vast country.

The US has historically backed the Christian SPLM/A, via Eritrea, Ethiopia and Uganda, against the Muslim central government, whom it considered a harbourer of terrorists. US sanctions still apply to Sudan, largely because Khartoum was a refuge for Osama bin Laden prior to his return to Afghanistan. Sudan is still on the US government's list of states that it claims sponsor terrorism.

Christian fundamentalist elements within the Bush administration still want the US government to back the SPLM/A against the north. However, Bush has come under increasing pressure from oil interests who want to exploit Sudan's oil wealth. US oil companies feel

that they have been hampered by the government's uncompromising stance on rogue states such as Sudan. They feel marginalised by European, Chinese, Russian, Malaysian and Canadian oil companies that are working more closely with the Khartoum regime.

Sudan has an estimated two billion barrels of recoverable oil, and is currently producing around 250,000 barrels per day in an industry worth around \$2 billion per annum. Oil experts expect this to rise to 500,000 or more by 2007/8, and over 800,000 by 2010.

Under the wealth-sharing agreement all oil and non-oil revenue will be shared by Khartoum and the SPLM/A, which will become the de facto government in the south. Each oil-producing state will also receive at least two percent of oil revenue. The agreement allows for a dual banking system, in which the north will operate under Islamic Sharia law and will not charge interest, whilst the south will be a conventional system.

There are two outstanding areas to be resolved before a full peace pact is signed. Firstly, there is the status of three central states of Sudan—the southern Blue Nile, the Nuba mountains and the oil-rich Abyei. The SPLM/A believes that they should be considered as part of the south, but the government disagrees. While all three areas were considered part of the north under colonial borders drawn up in 1956 when Britain handed over administration, they are currently controlled by both the government and the SPLM/A.

Secondly, the two sides have to agree on whether Khartoum should be governed under Sharia law or not, and how many ministerial posts, etc., should go to the SPLM/A, under the new arrangements.

A discordant voice regarding this new arrangement is that of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) in Darfur in the western region of Sudan. Formed in

2001, it claims that the region has been abandoned by Khartoum and wants an end to government discrimination against black Africans in favour of Arab communities. In February last year it took up arms against Khartoum's backing of Arab militias (known as Janjaweed) who were terrorising the area.

The SLM/A wants a similar agreement to that concluded with the SPLM/A, though Khartoum refuses this, largely on the grounds of the self-determination element which it says is unacceptable in the case of Darfur. The US has encouraged the SLM/A suggesting that the southern peace deal is "transferable onto this western problem," but Sudan's Foreign Minister has dismissed this.

Khartoum blames Eritrea for supporting and arming the Darfur rebels and has lodged a complaint with the African Union (AU). Eritrea denies this, but the AU is to investigate.

The International Crisis Group reports that unless rebel groups in other parts of the country are included in the southern negotiations then they may step up their resistance. There are fears also that the signing of the southern deal will free up government soldiers to fight this resistance.

Government aggression against Darfur has increased markedly in the last month. There are numerous reports of Janjaweed militias charging into villages on horses and camels and shooting at will against the civilian population. They steal everything in sight, including livestock, burn villages and terrorise the population with kidnappings and rapes.

In what many see as an attempt by the government to ethnically cleanse the region, the Sudanese Air Force has started bombing the area using attack helicopters and destroying numerous Darfur villages. Two leading SLM/A commanders and 130 rebels were killed last week in a two-day battle to dislodge the SLM/A from Abu Qamra in Darfur.

The United Nations reports that since the start of 2003 at least 7,000 people have been killed in Darfur and approximately 750,000 people have been displaced, with 95,000 fleeing over the border to refugee camps in neighbouring Chad, which has many linguistic and cultural links with western Sudan. Last month alone saw 30,000 cross the border.

The SLM/A signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in September, but peace talks collapsed in

December when the SLM/A demanded that another rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement, was included in negotiations. The SLM/A wants to resume talks, but the government has stepped up hostilities instead.



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