

Sudan: African Union troops sent after weeks of haggling between US and Europe

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The African Union (AU) conference held this week announced that 300 Nigerian and Rwandan troops are to be sent to the Darfur region of Sudan. The troops will guard an eventual 60 AU peace monitors, as well as patrol refugee camps and border areas.

Without seeking to minimise the scale of the outrages being carried out in Darfur, it must be stressed that the AU force does not offer a means of ameliorating the plight of the region's inhabitants. It will function as an instrument of the Western powers to both pacify and secure their control of oil-rich Sudan.

The despatch of the AU force comes after months of horse-trading between Washington, Paris and Berlin over how to respond to the ongoing conflict in Darfur, which has threatened the stability of the entire country.

Even the choice of African countries to provide troops is an expression of the ongoing manoeuvring for advantage between the US and the European powers. Nigeria is a US ally, while Rwanda is dominated by French imperialism. Thus the US and France will be the effective backers of this intervention, as they will be paying directly or indirectly for the troop presence. A French priority in the region is to save its ally, the Chadian President Idriss Déby, who has mediated in the Darfuri conflict and has clan ties with the Darfur rebels.

The decision to send an AU force represents a compromise between the US and the European powers—the latter have been working through the United Nations to advance their interests against those of Washington. It came in the wake of coordinated visits to Darfur by US Secretary of State Colin Powell and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, ostensibly to assess the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Sudan's western province.

The crisis in Darfur is the outcome of a year-long reign of terror by local Arab militias, known as the Janjaweed. They are backed by Sudanese troops, who have forced the region's black African peasant farmers out of their villages and off the land—actions that have increasingly taken the form of ethnic cleansing.

The UN Security Council recently refused to recognise the extent of the crisis, and followed a wait-and-see policy. This was largely under pressure from the US, which, despite its occasional denunciations of the Khartoum regime, is keen to block any advance by its imperialist rivals in the region.

Washington has pursued a twin-pronged policy of working with rebel groups and pressuring the Sudan government in order to safeguard its interests in the region, but it now faces a challenge by Germany and France.

The German government had previously proposed deploying a European Union-backed military force in Sudan, and Annan has also suggested that a UN force might be needed. However, in the week before the UN Security Council meeting in May, Powell made clear to German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer that the US wanted only increased pressure on Khartoum rather than military intervention.

For the UN, and in particular the European powers, a peace-keeping operation in Darfur would allow them to exploit the resources of the country more readily, and would give them an opportunity to raise their

profile and influence on the world stage—having been sidelined during the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

The US ruling class is somewhat divided on the issue—between those who fear allowing their imperialist rivals a military foothold and therefore wish to continue to pressure Khartoum diplomatically, and those wanting to send in troops under US control to protect American interests.

If the humanitarian crisis reaches the point where a military intervention is absolutely necessary, then the West will more openly talk in terms of ethnic cleansing and “genocide.” Internationally, the formal declaration of “genocide” would trigger obligatory action under the UN Convention on Genocide, which legally entails “prevention and punishment” and implies military intervention.

Powell's and Annan's visits, though coordinated, had somewhat opposed agenda. Powell arrived first and toured in a special four-wheel-drive vehicle, which was specially flown in from Washington, for a visit lasting only three hours. He was taken to Abu Shouk camp, which accommodates around 40,000 refugees, and is considered to be a showcase receiving significant aid. It is located a few miles outside El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur state.

Powell spoke with Sudanese officials, urging them to rein in the Janjaweed, and brought with him satellite pictures showing the destruction of whole villages in the region. Khartoum has said that the situation is serious but not dire, and has denied all accusations of collusion in the reign of terror.

Annan arrived the following day and spoke with Powell and Sudanese officials before being taken to Zam Zam camp, 11 miles south of El Fasher, which is also one of the better-equipped camps. Annan had earlier said that what was taking place in Darfur was not ethnic cleansing. At Zam Zam he said, “I hope this time we are going to take such measures that we don't have people in camps for years to come.”

Annan then travelled to a smaller camp, Mechtal, which is further from the city; however, when he got there, the camp was deserted, as the 4,000 inhabitants had been moved overnight to the Abu Shouk camp 12 miles away. Sudanese officials claim that the refugees had been moved for fear that the camp would be flooded. Jan Egeland, UN undersecretary for humanitarian affairs, complained that the “Secretary General wanted to see how internally displaced people live where there are no services. We did not like people evacuated just like that.”

After his visit, Annan raised the possibility of a UN force being sent to the region. But the US is proposing a far more limited resolution to the Security Council, imposing sanctions only against the Janjaweed and not even against Khartoum. After 30 days, the sanctions could be extended to others “responsible for the commission of atrocities in Darfur.”

Sanctions would come into force unless the government fulfills its promise to restrain the militias and allow full access for humanitarian agencies. They include an arms embargo against the militias, a ban on training them, and a travel ban on Janjaweed members named on a list to be compiled by the UN Security Council.

Former governor of Darfur, Ahmed Diraige, told the BBC that the embargoes have no meaning. With regard to the travel ban, he explained, "These are local militias, they have never been outside their territories.... Their movements are internal, they are moving from village to village killing people." Similarly, the arms embargo would be ineffective because "the militias get their arms internally. The arms are in the country, they buy them on the black-market, they buy them from other militias and soldiers. So really, an arms embargo would only really be effective against the government."

The situation in Darfur is an appalling tragedy. The UN now classifies Darfur as "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world." The UN children's fund, UNICEF, estimates that between 700,000 and 800,000 people are faced with malnutrition and sickness, including some 500,000 children. The US Agency for International Development's administrator, Andrew Natsios, notes that the daily death rate in some of the Darfur camps is six times higher than the international standard for declaring an emergency, which qualifies Sudan as a catastrophe.

The World Health Organisation's top emergencies expert, David Nabarro, estimates that with the onset of the rainy season, outbreaks of cholera and dysentery could kill 10,000 this month if a massive relief operation is not set up.

Hundreds of villages have been razed, with around 2.2 million people left without adequate food or medical supplies, and an estimated 30,000 dead. Some 137 makeshift camps have been set up across Darfur, an area the size of France, to accommodate the 900,000 internally displaced people. Other camps have been set up by relief agencies in Chad absorbing the 150,000 who have crossed the border.

Refugees are amassing along the remote and arid border region some 600 kilometres long. Aid agencies and the few camps are overwhelmed. The camps are also unsafe because the Janjaweed have been blocking roads around them, and those who attempt to leave the camps or return to their villages are killed or raped.

No one should believe that the European powers have taken a stand in favour of UN intervention out of a sense of humanitarian concern over what is taking place in Darfur. In reality, all the Western governments have given only a fraction of what is needed in terms of humanitarian aid. Aid agencies say that the amount of aid must triple if major catastrophe is to be avoided. An estimate of 350,000 deaths over the next nine months is considered conservative.

The sole motivation of Germany and France in urging the despatch of a UN military force to Darfur is to seize the initiative away from the US in an ongoing struggle over Sudan's oil wealth.

Up until recently, all the Western powers have been loath to condemn the Khartoum regime's ethnic cleansing for fear of undermining the peace negotiations underway in the south of Sudan. These talks will potentially end two decades of civil war, and allow the region's vast oil reserves to be exploited more fully by Western companies.

A peace agreement was signed on May 26 in Naivasha, Kenya, between the Sudanese government and the southern rebel grouping, the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA). On May 18, the US removed Sudan from its list of countries that are not cooperating in the "war on terror." This was a condition demanded by the National Islamic Front (NIF) for signing up in Naivasha. Sudan expects to also be taken off the list of regimes sponsoring terrorism by next year.

The US has historically backed the Christian/Animist south against the Islamist central government. The SPLA leader John Garang is considered to be the US's man and is slated to become vice president in the new setup. The deal envisages greater autonomy for the south, with a referendum on independence in six years' time. It will also give the southern states half of Sudan's share of the oil revenue.

The deal is fraught with potential future conflicts—not least because it is effectively an agreement between the SPLA and the NIF as the sole

representatives of the south and north, respectively, and does not take into account the various other rebel groups in the south, or the NIF's partners in government in the north. Also, the exact line of the border—and therefore the positioning of the oilfields as well—is still in dispute. More fighting thus seems certain.

The US and the UK, in particular, have been pushing the agreement, to the extent of pressuring Garang to compromise and accept Khartoum's position regarding the imposition of Sh'ariah law in the north. They have also allowed the regime's shadowy security apparatus to remain largely untouched.

Few believe that Washington or London will bother much about monitoring the implementation of the agreement once it is signed and the oil is flowing. They are also ignoring Khartoum's importing of northern Arabs into the disputed border regions, which will weigh the future referendum in its favour.

It is partly in response to the southern peace accord, and in particular the wealth-sharing and autonomy aspects, that the Darfur rebels—the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)—took up arms against Khartoum. The US has even encouraged the SLA by suggesting that the southern peace agreement is "transferable onto this western problem."

Darfur's oil reserves do not compare to those in the south of Sudan, though the former region is rich in minerals. The north of the region is known to contain large deposits of uranium and heavy metals, and the south has copper and oil. This mineral potential is clearly a major factor in Khartoum's refusal to allow any prospect of secession.

Consequently, the military has been ruthless in its dealings with both the SLA and the JEM, and the Khartoum regime has exploited age-old rivalries between nomadic Arab herdsmen and settled African farmers over scarce resources, notably grazing land and water. Militias on horseback ride into the villages with automatic weapons and round up and shoot the men, then rape the women, who are sometimes branded to reinforce the humiliation. Bodies are often dumped into the village wells to poison them. Mosques are desecrated, and anything worth stealing, including livestock and food supplies, is taken.



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