

Sudan: western powers move towards military intervention

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Aid agencies report that the humanitarian situation in Darfur, Western Sudan, is seriously worsening.

The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has begun dropping food supplies from aircraft in view of the difficulties of reaching over one million displaced people, mainly sheltering in camps and without food supplies. The beginning of the rainy season has made some roads impassable and the presence of militias make it dangerous to travel.

WFP's local director explained that, "Dropping food by air is always an expensive last resort, but for many parts of Darfur we simply have no other option at this time of year." Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) reported death rates significantly above the "emergency threshold" with extreme shortages of water, food, shelter and latrines. The latter was causing high levels of diarrhoea among children, a major cause of death. MSF's president said, "Hardly anyone is getting the care civilians should get in a conflict. And there are pockets of real disaster, where people are at grave risk of dying in large numbers."

Despite the posturing by political leaders in the west, it is evident that financial support for aid to the WFP and various charities dealing with the humanitarian disaster has been completely inadequate. WFP report that it has received only half the funding needed for relief operations, only \$US78.5 million out of \$US195 million required for its Darfur emergency work in 2004 and was now having to pay for additional air fuel through till September. MSF state that food deliveries are inadequate and uneven and that despite recently improved deliveries from the WFP, only half of the basic needs for food will be met in July. Their nutritional survey of four refugee camps in May and June found severe malnutrition rates of between 4.1 and 5.5 percent.

For western politicians, especially in the United States and Britain, Darfur has above all provided ammunition to demonise the Sudan regime in order to justify military intervention.

The US Congress has passed a resolution denouncing the atrocities against the black African population by the pro-government militia, the Janjaweed, as "genocide". This was followed by the United Nations Security Council passing a US-drafted resolution giving the Sudanese government 30 days to take action against the Janjaweed or face possible sanctions.

Reliable sources have confirmed killings, rape and

destruction of villages carried out by the Janjaweed with the backing of the Sudan government. Up to a million people have been forced to flee their homes as a result. But there is a deliberately emotive exaggeration of the scale of the attacks on the civilian population. The total number killed over the last year and a half in Darfur—an area the size of France—is approximately 30,000 and, although far larger casualties could result from lack of aid provision to the refugees, the comparison now being made to the killings in 1994 in Rwanda where up to a million were murdered, is completely fraudulent.

Claims of "genocide" and "ethnic cleansing" have been used repeatedly over the last years to justify military intervention in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. As in all these instances, even a cursory examination of the US and Britain's interest in Africa shows that something other than humanitarian concern is also involved in the case of Sudan.

Britain and the US, together with Norway and Italy, are in the process of completing a peace deal between the Sudanese government and rebels from the southern region, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA).

In an attempt to end a 21-year long civil war, in which the US more or less openly supported the SPLA against the Sudan government throughout the 1990s, criticism of the Sudan regime's human rights abuses were largely dropped. The major consideration was to bring some stability to a region that is already pumping out 345,000 barrels of oil per day and has reserves, just in the oilfields currently being exploited, at between 660,000 and 1.2 billion barrels according to the US Energy Information Administration.

When the Sudan government supported militias against the local population, driving out whole villages from the oil-producing regions to prevent attacks being made on the oil pipelines, the US continued with the peace negotiations.

Moreover, as it became clear in 2003 that the SPLA were gaining some concessions with western backing, militia groups in the Darfur region—the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)—stepped up operations against the government.

The Sudanese regime used the divide and rule approach it had successfully utilised in other regions (and followed on from British colonial rule that had imposed the division into

“African” and “Arab” on the complex ethnic variations in the region in the first place).

As the arming and support of the Janjaweed gave rise to large numbers fleeing the region resulting from killings and burning villages, the US and Britain turned a blind eye for over a year so as not to hinder the peace talks. Only when the humanitarian situation became so serious that it hit world headlines in the last month or so has the demand for sanctions and action against the Sudan government become an issue. It should be said also that concentration on the use of military intervention to provide protection for thousands of starving people gave the media a comforting alternative story to the disaster unfolding in Iraq.

The US is now urging the African Union (AU) to send a “protection force” to Darfur, assuming the response from the Sudanese government after 30 days will be deemed inadequate. The AU has so far agreed to some 300 troops from Nigeria and Rwanda but there are now discussions on the numbers being increased to 2,000.

A letter from Christian evangelical organisations to the Bush administration also called for “dramatic expansion of the efforts of the African Union Protection Force by providing its soldiers and monitors with much-needed equipment and resources” and urges active exploration of all available intervention options including sending in troops from western countries. Africa Action and the Congressional Black Caucus have handed a petition to Secretary of State Colin Powell demanding that the US administration use the term “genocide” in relation to Darfur and call for “immediate action to stop the atrocities and secure humanitarian access”.

In Britain, according to an article in the Sunday *Independent* newspaper, up to 5,000 troops of the 12th Mechanised Infantry Brigade have been placed on standby for operations in Sudan. The newspaper quoted a senior British officer on the logistic problems of moving troops to the remote desert region of Darfur.

Supplies would have to be shipped in via Libya explained the officer—relying on the newly found support of Libyan leader Colonel Ghaddafi. It would be a complex operation in which 2,000 of the 5,000 troops would be for transport, engineering and communications, and it would possibly use forward staging posts in Chad.

An alternative plan using an airlift from the Red Sea and the French base at Djibouti would be problematic according to air defence experts as the Sudan government has more than 40 Russian and Chinese interceptors and bombers.

British Conservative opposition spokesman on international development John Bercow said diplomatic efforts were “too little and too late” and urged that British troops should be sent to Sudan “in a matter of days” unless there is an improvement in the country’s humanitarian crisis.

Whether Britain has made an agreement with the French government over the use of bases in Chad is not known. France has already sent 200 of its 1,000 troops based in its former

colony of Chad to the border with Sudan.

The BBC report the French ambassador to Chad, Jean Pierre Bercot, saying that for the time being the troops would remain inside Chad, “securing” the area on the Chadian side of the border. What exactly this would mean, given the border is 1,200 kilometres (745 miles) long was not spelt out. Bercot avoided the question of whether they would defend some 180,000 Sudanese refugees at present encamped in Chad against cross-border attacks by the Janjaweed. French troops would be accompanied by an unstated number of Chadian troops—the French force is supposed to be training them. They would also assist the African Union’s 80 observers currently in Darfur.

On Wednesday August 4, a government-sponsored rally involving tens of thousands people marched on United Nations headquarters in Khartoum to protest the threat of western intervention. Reports indicate that some 100,000 people were involved in the protests. The demonstrators shouted “Annan, Annan, [UN General Secretary Kofi Annan] you coward”, and “We will not be ruled by American’s”.

But behind the scenes, the latest reports indicate the Sudan government is responding to western pressure and beginning to rein in the Janjaweed. It is increasing its armed forces to 12,000 in the region over the next four months after discussion with UN representatives.

A UN mission to Darfur found no evidence that the Sudanese government were forcing people to return to villages under their control as human rights groups are alleging. However, it is also evident that the threat to humanitarian aid deliveries and the security of the population is not just from pro-government militia. Al Jazeera report that SLA and JEM militias have been carrying out daily attacks on villages in South Darfur where the Rizeiqat people are regarded to be of Arab origin. The local state governor claimed they were riding camels and horses, camouflaged as Janjaweed. Also WFP reports give details of two occasions when SLA militia stopped their trucks and looted food.



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