

US pushes for larger UN intervention in western Sudan

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Only days after a closed meeting in February with United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan, US President George Bush called for the number of troops in the Darfur region of western Sudan to be doubled. He said the troops would be “probably under the United Nations,” but called for a greater role to be played by NATO in planning and facilitating the intervention.

His statements indicate that the US administration, after little comment on Darfur for the last year, has now decided to more aggressively pursue its policy on Sudan.

Until recently, US official policy had been to support the African Union (AU) peacekeeping mission in Darfur region (AMIS). In his remarks, Bush said that the AU had failed to provide security. “The effort was noble, but it didn’t achieve the objective,” he said.

There is a deteriorating humanitarian situation in Darfur, with attacks on civilians continuing. According to the UN, some 180,000 people have died from violence, disease or starvation since the present conflict began in February 2003. Some 2 million people have fled their homes and are living in camps, relying on food aid from the UN and NGOs.

Cross-border raids by militias from Darfur into neighbouring Chad are increasing, with crops and villages attacked and cattle and livestock looted. Chad and Sudan are accusing each other of backing anti-government militias, and there is a real risk of trans-border tribal ties internationalising the Darfur conflict, with a potential for open confrontation between the neighbouring countries.

The newfound interest of the Bush administration in western Sudan has nothing to do with humanitarianism, however, but is bound up with the geo-political interests of US imperialism.

There is growing concern about China’s influence in the region. For several years the main recipient of oil from Sudan, China has now increased investment and is developing its political relations with Khartoum.

A recent *Financial Times* article quoted a Sudanese official explaining that China is now important “not only on an economic level but also a political level.” According to

the article, “China has stepped up sales of arms including fighter aircraft. The manufacture in Sudan of Chinese weapons and ammunition complicates the enforcement of a UN embargo on supplies to militias in Darfur. Chinese-designed arms and radios are reported to have been used across the border in Chad—where France keeps a garrison—by rebels alleged to be operating with Sudanese support.”

This is the political backdrop to the Sudan government’s growing boldness in ignoring Western criticism of its involvement in Darfur and Chad and, more fundamentally, its backtracking on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) for Southern Sudan.

The US-brokered agreement between the Sudan government and the southern Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) reached in January 2005 brought to an end the country’s 21-year-old civil war. Especially since last year’s death of long-time SPLM leader John Garang, the CPA deal has become increasingly shaky.

A key part of the deal was to allow Sudan’s oil wealth to be shared with the south and open up possibilities for US and European corporations. Sudan’s oil reserves are estimated at between 660 million and 1.2 billion barrels. According to *Africa Confidential*, the Khartoum regime has blocked oil revenues going to the south and has also refused to disband the government-backed militias that operate in the southern area—key parts of the CPA.

The shift in the US approach to Sudan was evident at the beginning of February, when Washington and London succeeded in getting an agreement in principle that the UN Security Council would transform the existing AMIS peacekeeping force into a UN-controlled mission.

The Security Council envisaged AMIS being absorbed into the existing UN mission (UNMIS), which was established in mid-2004 to enforce the CPA. It was estimated that a UN mission for Darfur would need four years and up to 20,000 soldiers to complete. AMIS currently has around 7,000 peacekeepers.

Bush’s meeting with Kofi Annan appears to have been an attempt to speed up the process. According to Annan, it was

agreed that the UN force would need to be “a much more effective force on the ground”—current rules of engagement for the AU force preclude active policing operations that could lead them into conflict with both Sudanese troops and rebel forces.

In February, US Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton, used the one-month US presidency of the UN Security Council to raise concern over Sudan and press for the UN peacekeeping force to be sent to Darfur in the immediate future. He was opposed by all other Security Council members, including Britain, which advised more diplomacy and waiting for the African Union to make the official request for transition to a UN force. It is expected that the AU will agree to the transition, but the fact that the Sudan government is lobbying hard against it may cause delays.

Bolton also attempted to get the Security Council to agree to sanctions against key individuals for their roles in the continuing military conflict in the region. The UN agreed last year to such sanctions and set up a panel of experts to draw up a list of individuals to be targeted, including Sudan’s interior and defence ministers and national intelligence chief. But China, Russia and Qatar have rejected the panel’s proposals.

NATO was already involved in providing transport for AMIS, but the US is now pushing for its role to be extended. Robert Zoellick, deputy to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, said that “NATO is needed while the UN prepares its force,” since the UN force could take up to a year to get off the ground.

Such a role for NATO is not supported by all the Western powers, however. French diplomats are arguing that the European Union (EU) is better placed than NATO for an African operation and have suggested that a NATO mission would reduce the European Security and Defence Policy’s role and visibility in a vital and sensitive arena.

For months there has been virtually no mention by the US administration of “genocide” taking place in Darfur. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell used the term in 2004, when there was widespread criticism of the Sudanese government. According to international law, if genocide has taken place, the UN must intervene.

In an interview last year on the BBC’s “Panorama” programme, John Danforth, the former US Ambassador to the UN, admitted that Colin Powell’s genocide declaration was made to appease the religious right in the US in the run-up to the presidential election. Domestic considerations aside, the Bush administration also sought to use the genocide tag to threaten and pressure the Khartoum government into signing the CPA agreement.

Subsequently, the hypocritical feigning of concern about

civilian casualties was dropped, and the US administration was content to see Darfur policed by the ineffective African Union’s force. The AU relies on donor states for funding, and the force has been hampered throughout its short existence by a lack of sufficient funds. The EU currently pays two thirds, whilst the US cut its share of AU funding from the Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill.

In April 2005, the US administration distanced itself from Powell’s genocide comments, with Zoellick using the UN’s phrase, “crimes against humanity,” instead. Zoellick also made a point of backing Khartoum’s position regarding the actions of the so-called Janjaweed militias in attacking civilians in Darfur. He said, “There are tribal disputes that may be out of anybody’s control,” contradicting a wealth of evidence that these militias are backed by the Sudanese government.

Behind the scenes, the US administration has also been doing good business with the Sudanese secret service, the Mukhabarat, which has provided the CIA with extensive intelligence on East Africa.

The *Los Angeles Times* reports that the CIA has cooperated with the Mukhabarat since before 9/11 (though the relationship has deepened since then), and that there has been an active CIA station in Khartoum since November 2001. The Mukhabarat has detained suspects and handed them over to the CIA for interrogation, and has also spied on other countries, including Somalia, on behalf of the CIA.

Africa Confidential believes that the US is going beyond intelligence cooperation and wants a vast new embassy in Khartoum—envisaged as a new base for operations in North Africa. This revives the “listening-post” the CIA had previously in Sudan, which was one of its largest.

Now, Washington is once again seeking to step up the pressure on the Sudan government. Bush recently resurrected the use of “genocide” in relation to western Sudan and also proposed \$500 million for Darfur as part of his special military budget request to Congress.

Given the key importance of Sudan, in terms of both its strategic position linking four geopolitical subsystems—the Red Sea, the Maghreb, Central Africa and the Horn—and its oilfields, the US cannot afford to allow China to take advantage of the growing instability in the region.



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