

France backs Chad regime against coup attempt

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The coup attempt against the Chadian regime of President Idriss Déby on April 13 was thwarted by French troops stationed in the country, concerned that power should not be transferred to groupings covertly backed by neighbouring Sudan. In this instance it appears that France was acting with the support of the United States and other Western governments.

Western governments are clearly concerned that the deeply unpopular and weak Chadian regime could fall, giving way to unstable conflict between different warlords and tribal groupings, and possibly be replaced by a government that is not so subservient to their interests. Given that Chad is now an oil producer—its 180,000 barrels a day are not insignificant at current prices—support from China is a key concern. As the *New York Times* pointed out, quoting unnamed diplomatic sources, “A different Chadian government may also sell oil to China, as Sudan does, which would give the Chinese access to oil pipelines straight across the African continent.”

According to the *Economist* magazine, French troops had tracked a rebel column advancing from Sudan towards the Chadian capital Ndjamena and fired warning shots over their heads. France has 1,300 troops stationed in the country and the warning shots, according to a local French army officer, were designed not to engage the rebels but to “articulate” France’s position. Given France’s warning, the Chadian armed forces were able to shoot down rebels on the steps of the parliament building, killing at least a hundred.

The identity of the rebel groups that marched across Chad to the capital is not known, although there are several opposition militias based in the Darfur region of Sudan, some of them receiving backing from the Sudan regime. Chad in turn has been covertly backing the two armed groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and

the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), that are fighting the Sudan government forces and its proxies in Darfur.

With the possibility that the Darfur conflict could escalate into a war between Sudan and Chad, Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi brokered talks between the regimes this February where they made commitments not to back rebel groups against each other. The pledges were apparently quickly broken. After the coup attempt President Déby broke off all diplomatic relations with Khartoum.

Until last year Déby relied on support from the Zaghawa ethnic grouping of which he is a member, and who dominated the armed forces. Zaghawa lands are in both northern Chad and western Sudan and the SLA and JEM are predominantly Zaghawa.

Déby seized power in a coup in 1990 and with French backing has managed to stay in power despite constant threats of rebellions. He held elections in 1996 and 2001 with opposition parties claiming widespread vote-rigging. His support has declined so much that in May 2004 soldiers from his own ethnic group tried to overthrow him. Many members of his large extended family have now publicly broken with him. Prominent among these are Déby’s nephews Tom and Timani Erdimi—the former was his oil advisor, who now lives in Texas. Sections of the army deserted to Sudan last year where there are now a number of opposition militias based in the Darfur region. Despite the mounting opposition, Déby has vowed to remain in office and elections are set for May this year.

Some of the opposition groups, apparently backed by the Sudan regime, are allied to the Janjaweed, the Arab militias that terrorised the population in western Chad and drove them into refugee camps. An attempt to unite these factions with the pro-Western group led by the

Erdimis last December into one opposition movement failed, supposedly because of ethnic differences. Interviewed in the *New York Times*, Tom Erdimi denied the involvement of his group in the latest coup attempt.

Since 2003 Chad has been exporting oil through a 1,070-kilometre pipeline through Cameroon to the coast, a project run by a consortium of oil corporations led by ExxonMobil of the US. Finance for the project came from loans made by the World Bank and the European Investment Bank, with the World Bank countering criticisms from NGOs by getting the Chad regime to promise that oil revenues would be used for poverty alleviation and welfare measures. Chad is one of the most impoverished countries in the world and the Déby ruling clique is notoriously corrupt.

Unsurprisingly, Déby has upset the World Bank by taking money from the poverty alleviation fund to buy arms to defend his government against rebel attacks. He has also used the money to reform his Republican Guard, removing some of the Zaghawa elements.

The bank responded by cutting off loans for current projects in January this year. Déby threatened to stop oil production with the result that the United States has intervened to “mediate” between the bank and the Chad regime, presumably wanting to keep Déby in power.

Meanwhile, Western governments continue to put pressure on the Sudan government with the decision this week by the United Nations Security Council to pass a US-sponsored resolution to impose sanctions on four Sudanese nationals for allegedly carrying out war crimes. The four include a former head of the Sudan air force and a leader of the Janjaweed militia, both accused of widespread atrocities against civilians. The other two are leaders of the SLA and JEM, included to give an “even handed” appearance and to win support of African countries on the UN, many of whom fear that the hypocritical use of human rights violations by the West against the Sudan regime could easily be applied to them. This diplomatic manoeuvre also allowed China and Russia to abstain rather than using their veto.

Commentators have pointed out that one of the main individuals accused by the United Nations Panel for war crimes was notably left off the list, Sudan’s chief of security, Salah Abdullah Gosh. He has recently flown to the United States for talks with the CIA and to London for medical treatment and further talks with

intelligence officials. Sudan’s intelligence has collaborated with the United States in the “war against terror” and Washington for the time being is content to merely threaten the Khartoum regime rather than changing it.

With Western backing the African Union (AU) has given the Sudan government and the SLA and JEM rebels to the end of April to agree to a peace accord to end the fighting in Darfur. The AU currently has a 7,000-strong peacekeeping force in Darfur which has suffered from lack of funding and has had little impact in a region the size of France. Western governments led by the US are proposing the AU force be incorporated into a larger UN force.

The diplomatic pressure on Khartoum and the proposed UN intervention in Darfur is clearly designed to maintain US and Western interests in the Chad-Sudan region. The plight of the population in the Darfur region that attracted media attention two years ago when the US accused Sudan of “genocide” is getting worse. Jan Egeland, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, has warned that relief operations in the region could completely collapse in the next weeks or months in the Darfur-Chad region because of a lack of funds. Only half the funding that was available from Western governments in 2005 was forthcoming in 2006 and there was now less diplomatic support for relief operations, he told reporters. Some 200,000 people were displaced in the last three to four months alone, in addition to the 1.6 million already displaced. More than 3 million people are in need of daily humanitarian assistance, with 210,000 requiring food urgently.



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