

# The new Sarkozy government hosts conference on Darfur

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Representatives of the US, France, the European Union, the Arab League, Russia and China met June 25 in Paris to discuss possible peacekeeping operations in the war-torn Sudanese province of Darfur. The press widely presented it as a means for newly elected French president Nicolas Sarkozy and his foreign minister Bernard Kouchner to demonstrate a more accommodating attitude toward Washington than Sarkozy's predecessor, Jacques Chirac.

Amongst the conference's proposals were the deployment of a 20,000-strong joint UN-African Union (AU) peacekeeping force in Darfur and the use of French troops in neighboring Chad to open "humanitarian corridors" into Darfur. Sarkozy said France would donate 10 million euros to the current 7,000-strong AU force in Darfur. EU officials promised 42 million euros for relief efforts. France may also increase the number of troops it stations in Chad, ostensibly to deliver more humanitarian aid to Darfur refugees there.

The conference had almost entirely a symbolic character. As the French daily *Le Monde* pointed out before the gathering, "the delegations will have only three hours for discussion, and no final press statement is even planned. Pledges of financial aid and of contributions to future peacekeeping forces are hoped for." However, besides the small-scale French and EU donations, no such pledges were forthcoming. AU countries, who would provide a large part of the troops in any future peacekeeping force, were not even invited to attend!

Even if the proposed measures were fully carried out, however, they would be completely incapable of resolving the tragic consequences of the Darfur conflict. On the contrary, the intervention of outside forces in the area would be part of a wider effort to exploit the Sudanese tragedy to advance Western geopolitical ambitions. The oppression and misery in Sudan would continue unabated.

The denunciations of the janjaweed militias armed by Khartoum in Darfur that the US and European press routinely publish obscure a complex situation of spreading violence and militarization in the region. The atrocities carried out by the janjaweed are far from being the only

factor in the carnage in Darfur.

Military forces in Darfur opposing Khartoum—at first led by the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) of Minni Minawi and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) of Khalil Ibrahim—have begun fighting amongst themselves, notably splintering over the issue of whether to respect the May 2006 Abuja peace agreement.

Fighting has continued almost without interruption since April 2003, when a joint SLM-JEM force stormed the airport of North Darfur's capital, el-Fasher. Khartoum then armed local tribes, typically of Arabic nomadic herdsman, and organized them into janjaweed groups to attack areas where the SLM and JEM were thought to have support. The SLM and JEM have reportedly begun forcibly recruiting men from Sudanese refugee camps in Chad; highway robbers and tribal gangs have also claimed many casualties. According to UN statistics, SLM fighters and intertribal fighting are responsible for 20 and 36 percent, respectively, of the total number of displaced since the beginning of 2007.

Fighting has spilled over into neighboring Chad and the Central African Republic (CAR). Both these countries are desperately impoverished and highly indebted, hence dependent on the International Monetary Fund (IMF). IMF insistence on government loan repayments has, in both countries, led to mutinies by sections of the army that the government had declined to pay. France also has troops and aircraft stationed in the two nations.

The situation in the CAR has descended into chaos, with the central government of François Bozizé apparently controlling little outside the capital city of Bangui. In a recent statement Amnesty International declared that "The northern areas [of CAR] have become a free-for-all—a hunting ground for the region's various armed opposition forces, government troops, and even armed bandits." The situation in Chad is also highly unstable; France intervened in April 2006 to help put down a Khartoum-backed coup.

The Darfur conflict is also fueled by increasingly desperate struggle over land. Climbing temperatures and decreasing rainfall have reduced land productivity, impacting the

livelihood of farmers and herdsmen who make up the bulk of the area's population. According to *Jeune Afrique*, Khartoum encourages janjaweed recruits by offering them the right to keep whatever land they can conquer. Desertification (degradation of land in arid areas) also threatens Darfur, as climate change pushes the Sahara south into the region.

In truth, the Paris conference last Monday had little to do with a serious attempt to resolve the Darfur crisis. None of the social problems underlying this tragedy—the crisis of agriculture, IMF-supervised destruction of public finances, the absence of industrial and sanitary infrastructure, and the state of permanent civil warfare—can be resolved by placing a few thousand more troops in afflicted areas, which span hundreds of thousands of square miles. Nor was that the intention of the Paris conference participants.

In part Sarkozy is trying to show that French imperialism's African resources make it a valuable junior partner for Washington. As the conservative French daily *Le Figaro* noted, "After Lebanon, the Iranian nuclear program, and anti-terrorist operations, there is the possibility of unifying our efforts to end a tragedy the US has labeled 'genocide' and France a 'humanitarian catastrophe.'"

*Le Monde* noted contentedly: "A French role in Darfur is considered useful in Washington, as Paris has levers in the region (Chad, CAR) and contacts (Eritrea) that the US lacks." It did not spell out how France's "levers" would help. However, Chad (which backs the JEM), Eritrea (which backs the SLM) and CAR contain all the main bases and local supporters of Darfur's competing anti-Khartoum forces. Implicit in *Le Monde's* comment is the notion that France can organize Darfur's opposition groups into a coherent whole.

At stake are valuable resources in Sudan, notably its considerable oil reserves, which currently generate \$2 billion in revenue, and investments linked to those resources. Most of the purchasing of Sudanese oil at present is done by China, which gets roughly 8 percent of its oil from the East African nation and has invested approximately \$6 billion there. Major US newspapers, perhaps most notably the *New York Times* and its columnist Nicholas Kristof, have repeatedly demanded that China scale back its presence in Sudan for the duration of the Darfur crisis.

This demand became part of the formal policy record when, on May 9, prominent US Democratic Congressman Rep. Tom Lantos sent a letter to Chinese President Hu Jintao. In the letter he applauded China's decision to end incentives for its companies to invest in Sudan and attacked China for selling weapons and giving loans to Khartoum. After threatening that US activists might succeed in branding the 2008 Beijing Olympics the "Genocide

Olympics," he concluded, "unless China does its part to ensure that the government of Sudan accepts the best and most reasonable path to peace, history will judge your government as having bank-rolled a genocide."

Washington's insistence on describing the Khartoum-backed janjaweed as engaged in "genocide" is an attempt to force a UN military intervention, which is obligatory, under the 1948 UN Convention on Genocide, once an act of genocide has been universally recognized.

France's willingness to serve US imperialist interests in the Sudan does not, however, extend to unambiguous support for military action in Sudan. As *Le Figaro* noted, the French government has pointedly labeled Darfur a "humanitarian catastrophe," not genocide. The decision of the public television station *France 24* to grant an extensive interview to Rony Brauman, a French academic and sympathizer of the Darfur rebel groups, who criticized plans for military intervention in Sudan, suggests divisions and anxieties within the French foreign policy establishment.

This temporary alignment between French and US imperialism is not likely to endure. Indeed, much of their common history in Africa has involved direct opposition, notably during the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and in Congo/Zaire's civil war.

The role of French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner is instructive. Having started as a Communist Party member in the 1960s, he moved to the right after the student protests and general strike of 1968. Frustrated with the bureaucracy of the International Red Cross that he experienced as a doctor in Biafra during the 1967-1970 Nigerian Civil War, he founded Doctors without Borders (MSF), an international humanitarian organization.

As head of MSF, he received considerable positive coverage in the French and international press. He re-entered French politics as a member of the Socialist Party, serving in various administrations in the 1980s. He moved rapidly to adapt to the explosion of US militarism, developing concepts of "humanitarian intervention" and even "humanitarian pre-emptive strike."

Now, in his first major act as foreign minister, the former leftist and much-heralded humanitarian has presided over a meeting whose fundamental aim, if one puts aside the hypocritical platitudes, is to facilitate the new colonial "scramble for Africa."



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