

Geopolitical concerns behind United Nations intervention in Darfur

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The United Nations Security Council has unanimously agreed on a resolution to send a joint UN-African Union (AU) force to the Darfur region of Sudan. Proposed as the world's largest peacekeeping force, there will be 20,000 troops that will incorporate the present 7,000 AU force already in Darfur plus 6,000 police. It will be deployed under Chapter 7 of the UN's Charter empowering it to use military force to protect civilians and aid workers. The first troops are due to be sent in October, but full deployment will probably take much longer.

Most of the efforts in pushing through the resolution appear to have come from French President Nicolas Sarkozy and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who have both used the Darfur issue since taking office to boost their humanitarian credentials. It has also enabled them to assure President George Bush of their support. Speaking at the UN after the resolution was passed, Brown personally thanked Bush "for his leadership on Darfur."

There is certainly a worsening humanitarian disaster in Darfur—a recent UN report stated that more than half a million people out of a total of 4.2 million affected were cut off from humanitarian aid. But the driving force behind the proposed intervention is the interest of the United States and the Western powers in taking more control over this strategic region and its oil wealth.

It is intended that most of the troops in the peacekeeping force will be African, but there will be a single UN chain of command giving Western governments control over operations. The current AU force has suffered from lack of funding by the West and has remained small and ineffective because it was not under their direct control.

France has already volunteered to send troops. The conflict in Darfur has spread into neighbouring Chad and the Central African Republic, where France has troops in place already and is supporting unpopular regimes against rebel forces (see "The new Sarkozy government hosts conference on Darfur").

Britain and France, with the agreement of Washington, dropped a demand for "further measures" against the Sudanese government and rebel forces for failing to cooperate. According to diplomats, a more "conciliatory text" was adopted to make sure that China did not veto the resolution in the Security Council and that African countries were kept onside. China

buys most of Sudan's oil exports and supplies it with arms, and has previously opposed US and British proposals directed at the Sudan regime. China has now supported the UN intervention, apparently concerned that the 2008 Beijing Olympics would be targeted by protesters.

Pressure from organisations such as the Save Darfur Coalition—with widespread support in the US—has played a role in getting China to agree to a peacekeeping force. They involve thousands of young people genuinely moved by the plight of the suffering refugees in Darfur. However, the simplistic view put forward by the campaign's organisers that the problem is merely one of the Khartoum regime backing Arab Janjaweed militias against the rest of the population has served to distract attention from the fundamental issue and has been used to legitimise a military intervention by the major powers.

Darfur is just one tragic outcome of the imperialist domination of the African continent. It is also naïve in the extreme to imagine that the Bush administration, responsible for war crimes in Iraq, could be persuaded to carry out humanitarian measures in Sudan.

The Sudanese regime—and countless other oppressive regimes in developing countries that are not at present singled out for US disapproval—thrives under an imperialist system that has seen billions of dollars in debt relief exported to Western banks under International Monetary Fund auspices and huge profits made from mineral extraction by multinational corporations, but with the vast majority of the population forced to live in abject poverty. Whatever anti-Western rhetoric is used for popular consumption, a vital role is played by such brutal governments as that in Khartoum in maintaining the status quo.

Whilst the Bush administration has applied sanctions to the Sudanese regime and publicised the use of the term "genocide" in relation to Darfur, it has combined this pressure with tacit support for the regime, using its intelligence service for a source of information and even covert operations (see "CIA uses Sudanese intelligence in Iraq").

Unlike the previous Clinton administration, which gave Sudan a pariah status, Bush negotiated a peace between the Khartoum regime and the Southern rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), in 2005, the so-called Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), bringing the longest

civil war in Africa to an end. There are currently some 10,000 UN peacekeepers deployed in maintaining this agreement. Chief among the considerations in Washington was that in a power-sharing arrangement the SPLM would be able to take some of Sudan's oil wealth and open up possibilities for Western companies as opposed to Chinese firms.

Given these considerations, the US did not want a UN intervention in Darfur—in fact, Darfur was deliberately kept off the agenda in the CPA negotiations and the Sudanese regime was allowed to pursue its long-standing policy of using local militias to kill and drive out villagers. This did not stop the US moving pious resolutions at the UN on Darfur, knowing that they would be vetoed by China and Russia.

It may be that there has now been a shift in policy, and the balance has shifted towards those sections of the US ruling elite, especially in the Democratic Party, who are demanding a military intervention. Apart from conflicts within the US administration, there are a number of possible reasons for this that relate to Sudan.

Firstly, the conflict in Darfur itself has become increasing complex and violent. The UN peacekeeping intervention has been heralded without any peace agreement in place. In May of last year, under the auspices of the United States and Britain, an agreement was reached between the Sudanese government and one of the Darfur rebel movements, but the two other movements rejected it, leading to its collapse.

Instead of the conflict taking place between these rebels and the government-backed Arab Janjaweed militia, much of the fighting this year has been between rival Arab groups. There are now more than 12 different rebel groups, some of them with links to the Chad government, which is increasingly involved in the conflict. These groups have now been invited to talks in Arusha, Tanzania.

One prominent rebel leader, Abdel Wahed Mohamed el-Nur of the Sudan Liberation Movement, has refused to attend. Another leader, Suleiman Jamous, is prevented from leaving Khartoum by the government. It seems unlikely that any meaningful peace agreement can be reached in the immediate future.

Secondly, the north-south CPA deal is unravelling and it is possible that conflict between Khartoum and the SPLM could recommence. The Sudanese government was supposed to pull its troops out of southern areas in July. According to the International Crisis Group's latest report, this failed to happen in the oil-producing regions. The ICG also notes that the payments from Khartoum to the regional government in the south, supposedly its share of the oil wealth, are steadily decreasing.

Thirdly, the Sudan regime itself is increasingly unstable. With huge disparities of wealth between government circles that benefit from the oil wealth and the rest of the population, it is increasingly losing any base of support. As well as Darfur, there are less-publicised conflicts or potential conflicts in

several other parts of the country, the far North, Eastern Sudan and the Kordofan region.

Whatever the machinations within American ruling circles, the chief concern of the US and Western governments is how to halt the growing Chinese involvement in Sudan as well as much of Africa. Unlike the International Monetary Fund—backed by the United States—China has not placed demands on African governments that they accede to free market policies of “good governance” before being granted loans or access to finance. It has also invested in a range of infrastructure projects and assiduously courted African leaders, avoiding the routine and hypocritical references to human rights issues made by the West.

As one recent book put it: “For western politicians and policymakers, China's growing profile in the African oil business is more than just a commercial threat to western businesses. In particular, Beijing's growing reliance on African oil has put it on a collision course with US political priorities for the continent. A growing chorus of voices in Washington—from congressmen to newspaper commentators—has been complaining about China's willingness to do business in countries the United States is trying to pressure or isolate.” *

The Sudanese government has granted oil concessions throughout Darfur and other parts of the country, eager to extend beyond its present oilfields where the output is now peaking. To put such potential oil wealth under UN supervision and open to exploitation by Western governments rather than China is a key consideration behind the proposed peacekeeping intervention.

* *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa's Oil* by John Ghazvinian, Harcourt, 2007.



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