

Chad regime survives rebel attack on capital

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Rebel troops reached Chad's capital, N'Djamena, on Saturday, February 2, in a rapid movement in pickup trucks armed with heavy machine guns. Once there, the rebels fought it out for two days with government and French troops stationed in N'Djamena, leading to more than 160 deaths and around 1,000 wounded, according to February 7 Red Cross estimates.

By Tuesday, February 5, all reports indicated that the rebels had been expelled from N'Djamena, and the army under Chad's President Idris Déby Itno had retained control of the capital. Some reports suggested that the rebels had accepted "the principle of an immediate cease-fire" after "intense diplomatic pressures" from the international community.

The fighting sent tens of thousands of inhabitants fleeing towards neighbouring Cameroon. Western governments and certain African and Asian states also evacuated their citizens. According to a US spokesman, the US embassy was completely evacuated. France—which has 1,450 troops, including a large contingent stationed at the N'Djamena airport—organised a mass evacuation of its civilian citizens in Chad through the airport.

The rebel offensive was carried out by Chad's three main armed resistance groups—the Union of Democratic Forces (UFDD), led by Mahamat Nouri, the RFC (Rally of Forces for Change) of Timan Erdimi, and the UFDD-Fundamental led by Abdelwahid Aboud Makaye. Until now divided by ethnic differences, these groups formed an alliance last December. They have also reportedly been supported and financed by the government of neighbouring Sudan, in a tit-for-tat conflict with the central government of Chad, which aids Darfur rebel groups.

There was much speculation in the French press that the main goal of this offensive—mounted with the assistance of the Sudan—was to discourage the upcoming deployment of a largely French but

nominally European force, EUFOR, in eastern Chad and the neighbouring Darfur province of Sudan. The Sudanese government, for its part, strictly denied all interference in Chad's internal affairs.

There were also reports that rebels hoped to capitalise on resentment of the unequal distribution of the revenues from Chad's oil exports, which run through a pipeline to the Cameroon coast.

Déby, an ethnic Zaghawa, has also been destabilised by his refusal to use his full military resources to help the Darfur rebels against the Sudanese government in Khartoum. Zaghawas predominate in Chad's army, as well as within the Darfur rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

Déby, who seized power in a coup in 1990, has managed to stay in power largely due to the backing of France. French troops (the Epervier force) have remained in Chad, a former colony, since 1986, when they were sent to act against the Libyan government of Muammar Khadafi, to the north. Déby survived elections in 1996 and 2001—both marred by allegations of massive vote rigging—a 2004 coup attempt, and a 2006 rebellion also launched from eastern Chad. On that occasion, French President Jacques Chirac publicly and openly intervened on Déby's side, ordering French fighter jets to bomb the rebel column and alert government forces to its presence.

The new government of President Nicolas Sarkozy acted in a somewhat more guarded fashion this time. It proposed to evacuate Déby during the worst of the fighting, and issued contradictory statements about its attitude towards Déby. Defence Minister Hervé Morin said on Saturday that the government was "neutral" in the conflict on February 2; the next day, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner claimed, "We are not implicated in this war," then declared in a second statement that Morin's statement about being "neutral"

was incorrect.

Instead, France called an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, pressing for a resolution granting France the right to intervene militarily in Chad. After the resolution passed on Monday, Sarkozy announced that France would “do its duty in Chad.” Plans were announced to begin deploying EUFOR as early as next week.

French forces played an important role in the fighting, however, since French tanks held the N’Djamena airport against rebel assaults and allowed government attack helicopters to land, refuel and rearm there during operations against the rebels. France also reportedly supplied ammunitions provided by Libya for Chad’s Soviet-era T-55 tanks.

Philippe Hugon, an academic and author interviewed on Chad by the centre-left French daily *Le Monde*, called France’s intervention “indirect but decisive.” He said: “Upon their arrival in N’Djamena, there were about 2,000 rebels with rocket launchers, machine guns, and assault rifles. On the other side, the regular army had about 2,000 to 3,000 men, four helicopters, and probably about a dozen tanks.

“The rebels managed to take about half of N’Djamena, but they had to face a counter-offensive with helicopters and heavy weapons, and were forced to withdraw. To take the city entirely, they would have had to provoke defections in the army and take control of fuel and weapons dumps. Once Sudan refused to give them official military support, they could only lose. And above all, they didn’t manage to take the airport, which allowed the government’s helicopters to attack them.”

Part of the reason for French imperialism’s caution in acting to bolster Déby is the widespread recognition that his regime is deeply unpopular. Eight million of Chad’s 10 million inhabitants live on less than US\$1 per day, political opposition figures are routinely arrested — several were detained during the latest fighting in N’Djamena — and the opposition groups are all drawn from the same corrupt Zaghawa elite that has dominated Chad’s postcolonial politics. Many press reports noted that the RFC’s leaders, Timan and Tom Erdimi, are Déby’s nephews and former leaders of Chad’s oil and cotton ministries.

Paris also knows that other European capitals have little enthusiasm for providing forces to act as junior

partners in a French-dominated European coalition force such as EUFOR. In a February 5 comment, “France’s secret colonial policy,” the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: “If Paris saved her protégé [Déby] by military means, she has shown her critics” that Chad “is still under her control.” However, it also noted that a neutral policy by France “risks letting a pro-Sudanese regime install itself in N’Djamena.” It concluded that, for Paris, the worst solution would be one involving it in a “long-term conflict.”

French imperialism is increasingly outclassed by other imperialist powers in its struggle to maintain economic and political control of its former African colonies, as China and the US increase their influence. France fell behind Germany (in 2002) and then China (in 2004) as a source of African imports. China in particular has emerged as a new presence in Africa, seeking contracts especially for oil and raw materials. It recently negotiated a contract with the government of Chad to build an oil refinery in N’Djamena and has already invested US\$6 billion in Sudan, where it obtains 8 percent of its oil imports.

At the same time, the destabilisation of Chad would further undermine French influence and risk exporting the Darfur conflict, already affecting eastern Chad and the Central African Republic, towards Cameroon and Nigeria, the centre of West Africa’s oil industry.



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