

French lead European Union force to Chad/Sudan border

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The European Union mission to Chad and the Central African Republic (EUFOR) is set to begin operations by March 15, with between 400 and 600 troops on the ground. Deployment of the 3,700-strong force could be completed by June, having begun late in January but then delayed by a rebel attack on the Chadian capital N'Djamena early in February.

EUFOR, which is endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, is intended to protect hundreds of thousands of refugees—some 260,000 from Sudan's Darfur region who have crossed into Chad, as well as 180,000 people from Chad and the Central African Republic displaced by internal conflict. In practice, EUFOR will also buttress the United Nations/African Union Mission in Darfur (UNAMID).

France has been instrumental in pushing for EUFOR amongst EU members who are concerned about Chinese encroachment into Africa, most notably in the oil sector. France has also argued for the need to fill a power vacuum in arid East Africa where terrorism could thrive. For this it has received the praise of the US president.

"I thank the government of [President] Nicolas Sarkozy for its responsible work, in rallying EU forces to provide some help" to refugees near the Sudan-Chad border, President Bush told foreign journalists prior to his recent Africa trip.

Paris has agreed to cover the shortfall in the troop and helicopter commitment, after failing to secure sufficient backing from other EU states. This will boost its contingent in EUFOR to 2,100 men, whilst Italy will provide a field hospital and Ireland will command the force under the leadership of General Pat Nash. Concerns have been expressed within the EU about a potentially dangerous confusion of roles between EUFOR and 1,450 French forces already stationed in Chad.

Whilst Chadian President Idriss Déby has welcomed the EUFOR proposal, neighbouring Sudan hoped to block its deployment. Sudan regards the mission as a French-led initiative to prop up Déby and undermine Sudan's ruling National Coalition. Rebel groups, widely regarded as backed

by Khartoum, have also said that they will regard EUFOR as a belligerent party to the conflict, and timed their recent attack on N'Djamena to deter outside intervention by both EUFOR and UNAMID.

French Defence Ministry spokesman Laurent Teisseire reported, "French forces took part in the delivery of ammunition destined for the Chadian forces" from Libya and had also delivered fuel, food and aerial intelligence. France has reconnaissance planes and Mirage jet fighters in Chad, and helped evacuate hundreds of foreign nationals from N'Djamena airport during the recent clashes.

French daily *La Croix* claims that it was told by diplomats and officers that French soldiers had fought alongside Chadian government units at N'Djamena, coordinating an assault on the rebel column at Massaguet on February 1. However, Defence Minister Hervé Morin said that France did not "participate directly in combat" but that its troops "responded every time we felt that the control of the airport might be at risk."

The French weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné* also made claims that French special forces had previously spied on rebel forces on the Sudan border and guided in Mirage strike aircraft. Déby appeared to confirm the press claims when he told journalists that French troops had been in the front line after having met with Morin.

French involvement in propping up the Déby regime has brought into question Sarkozy's post-election goal of breaking with the so-called *Françafrique* interventionism of his predecessors.

"Africa has changed and France's relationships with Africa must also change," Sarkozy had said earlier this year. In an attempt to shift the emphasis towards humanitarian intervention, he claimed that France would "fight for lasting progress in peace, human rights and economic growth, which are indissolubly bound to the Millennium Goals."

Breaking with *Françafrique* "has proved more difficult than people in French political circles would have liked," West African specialist Kaye Whiteman explained. "The African connection has always been what gave France its

status as a middle-ranking power which deserved to have a seat on the UN Security Council.”

Following the attempted coup, Déby began a roundup of political opponents that has drawn criticism from some quarters, including Amnesty International.

According to witnesses, at least half a dozen opposition leaders in Chad disappeared, carried off by armed men in military uniforms with no insignias. These included former Chadian president Lol Mahamat Choua, former minister Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh and opposition party leader Ngarlejy Yorongar.

Interior Minister Ahmat Bachir blamed the rebels for the disappearances. “These people were arrested when their homes were under the control of mercenaries. We only learned of their arrests on the radio,” he said. “It is not known if they were arrested [by the rebels] or if they are hidden somewhere [with the rebels].” The accusations are denied by rebels on the grounds that it does not make sense for them to kidnap anyone who opposes the Déby government.

Following the clashes, Bachir issued a strongly worded attack on perceived Sudanese backing for the rebels, which was for the benefit of an international audience. “Our defence forces captured all of these Islamic mercenaries in the pay of Sudan. You have identity cards... Some are from Islamic groups; some are from Al Qaeda,” he said. “They were sent by [Sudan’s President] Umar Al-Bashir [and] Al Qaeda not only to destabilise Chad but the whole of Africa.”

Chadian Prime Minister Nouradine Delwa Kassiré Coumakoye also claimed that the government would refuse entry to any new Sudanese refugees. “We cannot admit any more,” he exclaimed, and called on the international community to move all 240,000 Sudanese refugees in eastern Chad to another country. “It is because of them that we have the problems we have today,” he said concerning the coup attempt.

Chad is an impoverished, arid nation three times the size of California, with 10 million citizens. There are a variety of ethnic groups with attendant tensions, especially since preferential treatment is given to members of Déby’s Zaghawa tribe. However, ethnicity is not the key cause of the discontent with Déby as Zaghawas and even members of his own family have been involved in the recent rebellions.

Blaise Mouga, a member of the Federation Action for the Republic, whose leader Ngarlejy Yorongar was arrested last week, gave some explanation of recent events. “Despite our oil, our cotton, our rich farmland in the south, look at how poor this country is,” he said. “We want some kind of change. We are not for the rebellion, but we are not for Déby either. The international community might say Déby is the lesser of two evils, but they are not living with him.”

The Agence France Presse news agency reported recently on Chad’s oil sector, which pumps 150,000 to 160,000 barrels a day and has reserves estimated at 1.5 billion barrels of crude. With the recent rise in crude prices on world markets, Chad’s oil earnings now carry considerable weight relative to the size of its economy. Experts believe that the country’s oil potential remains largely untapped, and Chad is likely to draw serious interest from major consumers such as the US and China.

Philippe Hugon, a researcher specializing in African economic affairs, explained, “The oil wealth has been partially siphoned off and wasted on arms spending and on building up the personal fortunes of people close to Idriss Déby.” He added, “The rebels want their share.”

Nicolas Sarkis of *Arab Oil and Gas* magazine concurred, noting, “The opposition accuses the government of having sold off the riches of the country.”

An agreement with the World Bank requires Chadian authorities to allocate 70 percent of the country’s oil earnings to development in exchange for the bank’s financial support for the pipeline between landlocked Chad’s Doba oil field and the port of Kribi in Cameroon. However, Chad’s major creditors complained last year that Déby’s government was not respecting the 70 percent obligation, primarily because of an increase in military spending.

US energy giants ExxonMobil and Chevron, and Malaysia’s Petronas are the key players in the oil sector in Chad, whereas French group Total is not present at all.

“American companies have managed to get into the country, to the displeasure of European and Chinese firms,” said Sarkis. He added that for China, which gets about 30 percent of its oil from neighbouring Sudan, one possible long-term strategy would be for Chad to build an extension of its pipeline to Sudan.



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