

Growing instability in Sudan and Chad

Brian Smith, Chris Talbot
24 June 2008

Over the last week, rebel groups have attacked towns in the east of Chad. According to the BBC, a spokesman for the National Alliance group of rebels claimed they had seized three towns and were preparing to march on the capital N'Djamena, 750 km away, to oust President Idriss Déby.

The Chadian army has now claimed it has defeated the rebels at Am Zoer, northeast of the eastern provincial capital of Abeche. Chadian government reports claim that 161 rebels were killed and 40 vehicles seized. The rebel spokesman said only 27 were killed and it was regrouping its forces for a further assault. If this were true, it would have to take place before the rainy season that lasts from July to October.

Chad accuses the Sudan regime of backing the rebels, though Khartoum denies this and has asked for France to help reduce the tension between the two countries. France has traditionally backed the Chadian regime and has 1,450 troops stationed there, providing logistical support to the army.

France also provides 2,200 of the 3,700 European Union military force, Eufor, that is supposed to provide protection for the 12 camps in eastern Chad housing 250,000 refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan just across the border.

It is not clear if there was French involvement in repelling this latest rebel attack, though in February of this year, French forces provided back-up and air support to repel a rebel attack on the Chadian capital N'Djamena. Relations between Paris and Chadian President Idriss Déby have become strained, with Déby complaining that Eufor forces did not attack the rebels, although their mandate is only to protect the refugee camps.

France has continued to prop up Déby's shaky and corrupt regime, fearing any alternative would be less amenable to the West. Chad currently pumps out 150,000 to 160,000 barrels of oil a day through a pipeline to Cameroon, much of it going to US corporations. Déby has been criticised for spending little of the rising income from oil on reducing poverty, with Chad near the bottom of international development league tables.

Most commentators think the rebel attacks on Chad are supported by Sudan, and that the rebels' bases are situated on the Sudan side of the border. This current incursion is almost certainly tit-for-tat after the attack last month by the Darfur rebel group, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), on Khartoum, in which more than 220 people were killed. The JEM reached the outskirts of Khartoum at Omdurman, the first time that rebels have come so close to the capital in decades of regional violence. Khartoum accused Chad of supporting the JEM's attack, and it is likely that Chad played some role. JEM's supporters, like Déby himself, are mostly from the Zaghawa, an ethnic group that straddles the frontier with Chad, and JEM has become a key partner in Déby's military strategy.

The Sudanese newspaper *Akhir Lahza* also pointed to a Libyan

connection in the JEM attack, a role acknowledged by some of the detained JEM leaders. The paper claims that prominent Libyan officials including relatives of Colonel Muammar Gadhafi funded the purchase of between 300 and 350 Land Cruiser vehicles, of which 127 were used in the attack on Omdurman, and that some of those vehicles arrived in N'Djamena by road from Libya.

It seems likely that there was Western support at some level for the JEM operation, given the French involvement in Chad and given that Libya is also increasingly amenable to Western interests. However, the United States lists the leader of the JEM as a "terrorist."

The US has been leading a propaganda offensive against the Khartoum regime for several years over Darfur, with the Bush administration still claiming that "genocide" has been committed against the population. Western governments are now backing the campaign of the International Criminal Court (ICC) against the Sudanese regime. ICC prosecutor Luis Moreno-Ocampo alleges that there are continuing attacks on the population in Darfur by the Sudanese government and the Janjaweed militias that it supports.

Ocampo is close to completing his investigation of Sudan's Darfur region and issued arrest warrants in April for Ahmad Harun, a government minister, and Ali Mohamed Ali Abdel Rahman (aka Ali Kusheib), a leader of the Janjaweed militia. Ocampo is expected to present a second case to the Court next month concerning "the use of the entire state apparatus for the past five years to attack the civilian population in Darfur."

The Sudanese government has mounted a vigorous defence, with President Omar al-Bashir refusing to hand over the accused and denouncing the ICC as "a first-class terrorist organisation."

It would seem that at least some of the "banditry" in the Darfur region—attacks on aid workers and refugee camps—is still being perpetrated by the Khartoum regime, although commentators have pointed out that the many fractious rebel groups are also contributing to the insecurity.

Atrocities committed by the ruling National Congress Party government pale into insignificance with those carried out by the US in Iraq, and it should be noted that the human rights record of Chad, Libya and other regimes in the region are largely ignored. It is because of Khartoum's close relation with China that it is singled out for criticism, with China obtaining 30 percent of its oil supplies from Sudan. President Hu Jintao recently called on the Sudanese government to take a series of steps toward peace in its Darfur region. This is an attempt to deflect criticism, given the upcoming Olympic games and the condemnation China has received over Tibet.

Despite the widespread and genuine public concern over the suffering of the Darfur population, Western governments have provided minimal humanitarian aid to the region. The UN World Food Programme has recently announced that it is cutting back its air

service that provides much of the aid to dangerous and remote areas because of a funding shortfall. The WFP was forced three months ago to half rations because attacks by “bandits” have made the roads increasingly dangerous.

According to the UN and aid organisations, some 4.3 million people living in the Darfur area, which is the size of France, are affected by the conflict. Only about 40 percent of these are now reachable by aid workers for food, clean water and basic healthcare.

The Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA), signed in Abuja in May 2006, has been a failure. Apart from the Sudanese government, only one part of one rebel faction signed it—the Sudan Liberation Movement-Minawi faction (SLM-Minawi, named after its leader Minni Arkou Minawi)—and yet the US and Britain have given the DPA legitimacy and allowed Khartoum to treat all other factions, including JEM, as the aggressors.

Many of the SLM-Minawi military commanders and troops defected last year and joined the majority SLM’s command (SLM-Unity). SLM-Unity and the JEM are the biggest Darfur rebel groups, and rebel factions occupy much of Darfur.

Western governments claimed that they were setting up a UN/African Union peacekeeping force (UNAMID) in Darfur to replace the 7,000 African Union troops policing the region. The UN Security Council authorised UNAMID last July, but since it became operational on December 31, only 7,600 troops and 1,500 police of the 26,000 promised troops are on the ground, and only one Chinese company of between 120 and 180 engineers and a Bangladesh police unit have arrived to supplement African units. UNAMID lacks the air transport needed to support troops across a vast terrain with limited roads.

UNAMID is being called a “tragic failure” by Darfur campaigners. The UN and other aid agencies can barely function without more military protection. But although the Save Darfur campaign held out great hopes for such a peacekeeping intervention, all such interventions are designed to promote Western geopolitical interests. It is clear that in the case of Sudan, the US and European powers are pursuing their own agendas and have refused to stump up the finance for a UN operation, although they have been able to use the intransigence of the regime and opposition in the UN by China and Russia as an excuse.

There have been sporadic clashes between the north and south of Sudan since the signing of the US-backed Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005, but the clash that broke out in Abyei on May 14 was the worst. Fighting between the northern government’s Sudanese Armed Forces and the southern Sudan People’s Liberation Army left at least 50 people dead and scores injured, and destroyed the entire town of Abyei, with the majority of its population, some 90,000 people, displaced. Previous clashes had been between local militias acting as proxies for the north and south.

In 2005, the southern rebels formed the Government of South Sudan, an autonomous region within Sudan, after the CPA deal that ended 20 years of civil war. The issue of Abyei, which lies on the border between the north and south, was left undetermined in the CPA, but much of the oil pumped out by the northern Sudan government is from the Abyei region. Oil worth US\$1.8 billion is said to have been produced from Abyei since the signing of the CPA, and the south claims they have seen none of the 42 percent of this output that they are supposed to get.

Also, the Khartoum government would like to delay a referendum that is due in 2011 under the CPA that could result in the south

breaking away with full independence. A large part of the oilfields could go to the south, something that the US, with close connections to the southern political leaders, is pushing for.

Following the Abyei clashes, a shaky peace agreement has been reached between the north and south, brokered by the US special envoy to Sudan, Richard Williamson. Joint army units and police made up from both sides have been sent to Abyei town, and thousands of displaced people are to be helped to return home. Commentators expect that fighting could easily break out again—joint units existed before the present clash, but most soldiers defected to their respective sides. The 10,000-strong UN mission, UNMIS, that is supposed to be policing the CPA, has no mandate to intervene in such conflicts and is regarded as ineffective.

According to *Africa Confidential*, Khartoum and Washington have recently held a series of talks aimed at “normalising” relations, following previous high-level contacts between both sides’ security services, which have worked closely with regard to the so-called “war on terror.”

This close relationship is unpopular within certain sections of the US ruling class, including Presidential candidate Barack Obama who called it “a reckless and cynical initiative.” Obama’s foreign policy advisor, former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Susan Rice, is also known for her open criticism of Khartoum and would continue with previous Democratic policy. Under President Clinton, a Sudanese pharmaceutical factory was hit by US cruise missiles for allegedly producing “nerve gas,” the evidence for which was never found.

The Sudanese delegation offered to settle the Abyei question “immediately,” back in February, in exchange for Sudan being removed from Washington’s list of state sponsors of terrorism and the lifting of all economic sanctions. The US for its part is keen for its oil companies to be allowed to re-enter Sudan and compete with Chinese companies.

Talks have so far stalled because of US demands that Sudan allow non-African troops in UNAMID, stop backing the Janjaweed militia, and stop support for Chadian rebel movements. Khartoum replied that it had the sole sovereign right to police its borders and that the US should stop “official interaction” with the Darfur rebel groups. However, the US paper stated that both sides “will continue without diminution their cooperation on counter-terrorism.” There is speculation on how far the US administration will take these negotiations before the November Presidential elections.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact