

US military forces mobilised amid South Sudan crisis

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24 December 2013

The Obama administration has transferred about 150 Marines from Spain to Djibouti's Camp Lemonnier base, home to the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), amid continued fighting between rival political factions and armed groups in oil-rich South Sudan.

The stepped-up Marine deployment to the Horn of Africa follows a letter sent by President Barack Obama to the leaders of the House of Representatives and Senate on Sunday foreshadowing possible "further action to support the security of US citizens, personnel and property, including our embassy, in South Sudan." The previous day, the US military aborted an attempted evacuation of American citizens from central Jonglei State after three aircraft came under fire, with four troops wounded.

The *New York Times* reported that the rapid-response Marine force could be sent into South Sudan from Djibouti with six hours' notice. Forty-five US troops have already been deployed to the country's capital, Juba, to secure the US embassy and assist evacuations.

An AFRICOM statement recalled the attack on the US CIA centre and diplomatic office in Benghazi, Libya in September last year: "By positioning these forces forward, we are able to more quickly respond to crisis in the region, if required. One of the lessons learned from the tragic events in Benghazi was that we needed to be better postured, in order to respond to developing or crisis situations, if needed."

The United Nations is preparing to authorise a wider intervention force. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon reportedly asked the UN Security Council to add 5,500 police and military personnel, as well as attack helicopters and transport planes, to the 7,500-strong UN multinational operation in South Sudan. Three peacekeepers from India were killed last week when armed young people stormed a UN mission in the

eastern town of Akobo.

Unnamed American officials told the *New York Times* that US involvement in a wider UN mission "was currently under review within the Obama administration."

South Sudan remains on the brink of civil war. A long-running power struggle within the ruling Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) appears to intersecting with ethnic and tribal divisions within the impoverished country, triggering a humanitarian crisis. In its latest update, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported on Sunday that five of South Sudan's ten states were affected by the violence, with an estimated 62,000 people displaced. About 42,000 have sought refuge in UN bases.

President Salva Kiir is from the Dinka ethnic group, the country's largest, while Kiir's rival, Riek Machar is from its second biggest ethnic group, the Nuer. Tensions between Kiir and Machar, the former vice president, pre-dated South Sudan's official separation from Sudan in 2011. They escalated this year after Machar declared his intention to win the leadership of the SPLM, ahead of presidential elections due in 2015. Kiir sacked Machar and his cabinet in July, at the same time moving to bolster his control of the military. The president accused Machar of attempting a coup on December 15–16, and ordered the arrest of opposition figures, including former cabinet members.

Machar's forces have claimed control over parts of the country, notably the northern towns of Bor and Bentiu, capital of the crucial oil-producing Unity state.

Washington has backed the government, while urging a negotiated resolution. US special envoy to Sudan and South Sudan Donald Booth yesterday met with President Kiir for what he described as a "frank and open discussion." Kiir reportedly said he was willing to

begin talks with Machar without preconditions. The president also gave Booth access to a group of 11 senior SPLM figures who have been detained.

Machar has denied he is attempting to forcibly seize power, and said he is also open to negotiations, while insisting that the government must first release his arrested allies. Information Minister Michael Makuei dismissed this, telling Reuters: “There is no way we will release anybody who is accused of a coup d’état.”

Fighting is continuing. Just hours before Kiir met yesterday with the US special envoy he addressed the South Sudanese parliament, declaring that the army was “ready to move to Bor.” Kiir said an offensive was postponed only to allow American and other foreign nationals to evacuate the town.

A possible US-led intervention force is being readied in the context of heightened great power rivalries across the region. A 21st century “scramble for Africa” has seen a series of military interventions by the major imperialist powers, most notably in Libya in 2011. The US-led regime change operation there marked the first war organised by AFRICOM, the regional command established four years earlier.

Washington is determined, above all, to prevent Beijing establishing a diplomatically and strategically dominant position in the continent, thereby securing control of its vast natural resources. South Sudan’s very existence is in part a product of the US rivalry with China. Beijing has long been among the closest allies of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, while the US was the key backer of South Sudanese separatism, overseeing the 2005 peace agreement that led to the formal establishment of the country in 2011.

The landlocked state is among the world’s most impoverished with less than one percent of its population reportedly having access to electricity when so-called independence was granted.

It is, however, the third-largest oil exporter in sub-Saharan Africa, after Nigeria and Angola. The state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation remains the country’s major oil producer, and Chinese corporations have invested in telecommunications and transport infrastructure projects.

Beijing is also interested in developing the country’s untapped mineral wealth, including gold, diamonds, uranium and iron ore, this year pledging \$43 million for a geological study mapping these resources. In

September, South Sudan’s mining minister announced the government was willing to “give Chinese companies the opportunity to invest in the Republic of South Sudan in the areas of petroleum and mining industries, and also in other economic circles.”

Rebel leader Machar has publicly called for closer relations with China, which is no doubt an important factor in his inability to win support from the US and other Western powers. “During the liberation we were against them [Beijing] because we thought they were strengthening the war machinery of Khartoum, but after we signed the peace agreement and declared independence the investments of China became very useful,” Machar told the *Irish Times* late last month. “Money has no colour. Let them invest in this country.”

The International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based think tank, last year published a report on China’s relations with South Sudan. It cited an unnamed US official who complained that when the Kiir administration needed help “they still call on us first—but we could exact more pressure when we were in a position to help deliver independence” and now “the China appeal makes it harder for us to apply pressure bilaterally.”

Any US military intervention would be aimed not at relieving the humanitarian crisis but at enhancing the Obama administration’s ability to “apply pressure” across the region.



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