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Sudanese-Chadian Relations

A New Dimension to the Conflict in Darfur?

By Kelly Campbell

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Following more than a decade of close relations, tensions between the governments of Chad and Sudan have risen in recent months.

After initially supporting Khartoum in the Darfur conflict, Chadian President Idriss Déby was compelled by internal political pressure to support anti-Khartoum rebel factions in Darfur. Déby also accuses Khartoum of assisting Chadian rebel groups opposed to his government.

Under the Tripoli Agreement brokered by Libya on February 8, 2006, Chad and Sudan pledged to end support of each other's insurgency movements and restore cooperation.¹ Nevertheless, cross-border violence and allegations of continued support for insurgency movements persist. This has exacerbated the conflict in Darfur and created a new crisis in the region. The anti-Déby forces clashed with government troops in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena, on April 13, raising fears of civil war and prompting the Chadian government to break off diplomatic ties with Sudan.

On March 23, 2006, the Sudan Peace Forum of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) convened to discuss the fragile relationship between Sudan and Chad and the impact this fraying relationship is having on both countries. Nuraddin Abdulmannan of the Sudan Human Rights Organization and Suliman Baldo of the International Crisis Group addressed the forum; [Dorina Bekoe](#) of USIP's [Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention](#) moderated the meeting. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the discussion.

Converging Crises in Chad

According to the speakers, Chad currently faces several overlapping crises, resulting in a weakened regime. One crisis is a direct result of the Darfur conflict. Since fighting began in Darfur, Chadian President Idriss Déby has been torn between loyalty to Khartoum and sentiment within his own country. He has maintained a close relationship with Sudan's Islamist government since Khartoum aided his rise to power in 1990.² In addition, several officials--many of whom belong to the same extended family--have served as bureaucrats in both governments, especially in their security sectors. This has facilitated the flow of information, both formally and informally, between the two governments, strengthening ties between them.

When fighting broke out in Darfur, Déby initially tried to stay out of the conflict. However, his close relationship with the Sudanese government led him to side with Khartoum against the rebels. This alienated much of Chad's northern elite, which belongs to the same Zaghawa ethnic group as many of Darfur's rebel members, especially in the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) and the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA). Déby sent troops to support the Government of Sudan (GOS), but many of his soldiers--out of ethnic solidarity, one speaker at the forum said--provided rebel groups with information and even weapons, leading Khartoum to request the removal of Déby's forces. Déby also attempted to mediate between the SLA and JEM, and to negotiate a peace agreement between the rebel groups and the Sudanese government. However, because Déby's efforts seemed guided by Khartoum, they were not seen as credible and thus yielded no agreement.

In addition to unrest over the Darfur issue, Chad faces internal political and economic crises as well. Déby is in poor health, and Chad lacks a clear mechanism for appointing or electing a successor should he become too ill to rule. Chad's parliament amended the constitution in 2004, clearing the way for Déby to run for a third term in this year's presidential elections, scheduled for May 3. This occurred despite Déby's previous promises to step down after completing his current term, which he referred to as his "last mandate" soon after winning the 2001 election.³ Déby faced political instability before announcing his bid for a third term, and his manipulation of the constitution further alienated him from the Chadian population, especially among the Zaghawa.

According to the speakers, Déby's actions have enhanced citizens' disillusionment about stalled democratic processes

in Chad, and the majority of the population opposes his third presidential bid. The population has grown increasingly frustrated with the Déby government's economic mismanagement, especially its corruption--which, one speaker said, has led to the virtual collapse of social services. The population also resents the small elite in the north controlling most of Chad's oil revenue, which fuels grievances within the country. Dissatisfaction over Déby's actions within Chad and in Darfur have led to large-scale political and military defections to opposition groups. Defectors even include members of elite units like the Republican Guard. The decline in political and military support has weakened Déby's regime internally and regionally.

Chad's Rebels and the Crisis in Darfur

According to the speakers, the biggest threat to Déby comes from the Rally for Democracy and Liberty (RDL), dominated by rebels from the Tama ethnic group. The RDL, which consists of 2,000 fighters (mostly Tama and Arabs) located in Western Darfur, is supported by Khartoum, because the GOS fears the political power of Sudan's Zaghawa. One speaker reported that the RDL has significant training, determination, equipment, and cohesion, and poses a serious military threat to Déby's government. The RDL has loosely aligned itself with Chad's main opposition group, the Platform for Change, Unity, and Democracy (SCUD), which is led by a group of Zaghawa defectors from Chad's inner political circle and six smaller groups, which form an umbrella group called the United Front for Democratic Change (FUCD). The alliances in the FUCD coalition are not sustainable. Indeed, accusing the RDL of being simply a new name for groups Khartoum has used in its Janjaweed militia, groups that are predominantly of Zaghawa origin broke away from FUCD shortly after its foundation and established their own group on April 1, the Rally of Democratic Forces (RaFD).

While the goal uniting these various groups is the overthrow of Déby's regime in Chad, their presence complicates the ongoing conflict in Darfur and endangers the lives of more than 250,000 Darfurian refugees just inside the Chadian border, many of whom live outside of UN-sponsored camps. Presently, the border is unguarded, as Déby has moved most of his armed forces away from the border, leaving the refugees defenseless and exposed to militia attacks. Along with the Janjaweed and other GOS-supported militias, the anti-Déby groups have attacked villages and civilians in both Darfur and the border towns in Chad in pursuit of war spoils.⁴ Furthermore, one speaker said, Déby's growing support for the Zaghawa-based Darfurian rebel groups, particularly the SLA, has complicated the peace talks going on between the rebels and the GOS in Abuja. He elaborated that Chadian support has emboldened the Minni Minawi faction of SLA, encouraging it to forcefully take control of more territory and impede the negotiation progress. The number of ceasefire violations in Darfur has increased dramatically due to tensions between Chad and Sudan, worsening the protection crisis in Darfur.

The border clashes, one speaker noted, are a manifestation of the proxy war being fought by Sudan and Chad. The GOS is continuing its policy of accommodation and confrontation by negotiating in Abuja and Tripoli while pursuing military strategies in Darfur and now Chad, whereas Chadian forces support anti-Khartoum rebel factions. Nevertheless, some degree of cooperation between the two governments still occurs. One speaker noted that in some cases Chadian forces have pursued anti-Déby rebels into Sudan, perhaps with Khartoum's complicity.

Implications of Continued Crises in Chad

The speakers agreed that Chad has entered a troubling political stage. As the scheduled May 3 elections approach, they predicted that there would be increased violence and possibly stronger attempts by rebel groups to force Déby out of power. (Indeed, the events of April 13 would appear to bear out this prediction.) RDL and SCUD, two of the major rebel groups, have publicly declared that they oppose Déby's reelection, and one speaker feared that a major RDL offensive could begin soon. In fact, on March 31, near the Chadian border town of Adre, Chad's senior army commander (and Déby's nephew) died during a fight with RDL and FUCD rebels in which dozens of soldiers from each side were killed.⁵ On April 10, rebel groups--most likely the FUCD--attacked a southern Chadian refugee camp housing around 17,000 Darfurian refugees.⁶ The latest round of fighting has displaced approximately 4,000 Chadian civilians, and the UN estimates that 25,000 to 30,000 civilians have been displaced from eastern Chad since the violence began.⁷ If Déby is forcibly removed from power, civil war becomes a distinct possibility. In addition, if Déby leaves the country for health treatment abroad, the speakers predicted that, a coup d'état would most likely occur in his absence. However, if Déby remains in Chad and "wins" another election, violence could result.

The longer political unrest in Chad continues, the more precarious the situation in Darfur becomes. Because of Sudan and Chad's overlapping history and the mutual influence of the crisis on the two countries, continued instability in Chad will affect Darfur. The speakers feared that a potential for massive killings in Darfur and along the Chadian border currently exists, and warned that the conflict could spiral further out of control.

Recommendations for Addressing the Crises in Chad and Darfur

The speakers suggested that pursuing a national political dialogue in Chad would best serve the country. Because factions in Chad are so divisive and hostile to one another, the speakers did not recommend international backing of one group over the others. Civil society groups within the country are weak but credible and committed to avoiding civil war, and they could facilitate a dialogue process. The main obstacle to such a strategy is Déby himself. One speaker suggested that if Déby is offered a graceful way out of power, such as going into exile, it might prevent a violent power struggle in the country. However, other forum members noted that Déby could potentially face war crimes charges once he is out of office. They emphasized that throughout his career, Déby has shown little inclination to moderation; in addition, Chad has a history of violent political transitions, but virtually no experience in peaceful, civilian transfers of power.

France will also play a major role in the resolution of Chad's crises. The French continue to support Déby, the speakers reported, even as internal opposition to him intensifies.⁸ In order for a national dialogue process to work effectively, the French must agree to support it. One speaker suggested that if France threatens to withdraw its support unless Déby commits to seeking a peaceful political solution, he might be more inclined to cooperate. If pressure from France, neighbors such as Sudan and Libya, the United Nations, the African Union, and other international actors coincide, Déby may decide he has little choice but to cooperate with a national dialogue process. Ultimately, this depends on how much France is willing to pressure its longtime ally. The speakers pointed out that France also has a great deal to lose if chaos or civil war breaks out inside Chad.

If Chad implodes, a permanent solution to Darfur would then prove impossible to attain. However, because the Darfurian and Chadian crises are so interrelated, resolving Chad's political problems would facilitate a resolution to the Darfur conflict. One speaker suggested that "rehatting" the AU force under the auspices of the UN is the best way to reduce violence in Darfur and, ultimately, lead to a political solution. Although Khartoum has objected to this for a variety of reasons--in part because they fear a stronger UN force that will report all ceasefire violations--many forum members agreed that a changeover is necessary to resolve the situation. As it stands, the AU mandate in Darfur has been extended to September, when the changeover is expected to occur. One speaker recommended the immediate deployment of a 3,000 to 5,000-member force to stabilize the situation in Darfur, prevent incursions into Chad, and protect civilians. This force would also help prevent further escalation of the proxy war between Sudan and Chad and, ultimately, to prevent civil war within Chad. With no response from the international community, cross-border fighting between rebel groups will continue. Chances for civil war in Chad would increase, which in turn would lead to the further deterioration of the situation in Darfur.

Notes

1. African Union, "Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Implementation of the Tripoli Agreement of 8 February 2006 Between Chad and The Sudan," (electronic version) 21 March 2006, 1.
2. When Déby's first coup attempt against President Hissane Habre failed in 1989, he and other members of the Zaghawa ethnic group fled to Sudan. Déby reorganized and launched his second, successful coup.
3. Stephen Smith, "Chad's President Déby Interviewed on Recent Elections, Opposition," *Le Monde*, 4 June 2001 (Accessed from Foreign Broadcast Information Service, AFP20010606000121, 4 April 2006). Déby previously won elections in 1996 and 2001 during what one Sudan Peace Forum speaker described as "tainted elections."
4. However, Khartoum continues to deny Chad's accusations that it is sending Janjaweed to support rebel groups like the RDL, insisting that Chad is using the Darfur issue to camouflage its internal problems ["Chad general dies in battle" BBC News Online, 31 March 2006 (accessed from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4864508.stm>, April 11, 2006)].
5. "Chad general dies in battle" BBC News Online, 31 March 2006 (accessed from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4864508.stm>, April 11, 2006).
6. "Chad rebels attack refugee camp," BBC News Online, 11 April 2006 (accessed from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/4898596.stm>, April 11, 2006).
7. "Chad: New clashes in east, government blames Sudan," IRINnews.org, 31 March 2006, (accessed from: <http://www.irinnews.org/print.asp?ReportID=52541>, April 11, 2006).
8. On April 13, rebels engaged Chadian forces in N'Djamena, although Déby said he remained in control; the French have also stationed troops around the city.

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United States Institute of Peace - 1200 17th Street NW - Washington, DC 20036
(202) 457-1700 (phone) - (202) 429-6063 (fax)