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### Emergent Insecurity in Eastern Sudan

By Kelly Campbell  
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The Beja people, who inhabit Eastern Sudan, have consistently been politically, socially, and economically marginalized by successive governments in Khartoum. As a consequence, the Beja have recently joined forces with other disenfranchised groups from eastern and western Sudan, and violence in the region has escalated despite the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the Government of Sudan (GOS) in Khartoum and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A).

On November 9, 2005, the Institute's [Sudan Peace Forum](#) convened to discuss the issues fueling the rebellion, the relevance of the CPA to eastern Sudan, and the possible roles for the United States and the international community. John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group and Mousa Mohamed, a physician from Michigan who has been a member of the Beja Congress since the 1960s, presented the forum with the historical and current political situation in the east and discussed the conflict prevention opportunities available to the international community. Francis Deng of Johns Hopkins University chaired the meeting, and the Director of the Institute's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, [David Smock](#), served as moderator.



Sudan People's Liberation Army Movement/Army Chairman John Garang, right, shakes hands with Sudan's President Hassam Omer El-Bashir at the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement on Jan 9, 2005. (Courtesy [United States Mission to the United Nations](#))

### Issues Fueling the Rebellion

The Beja have traditionally lived as nomadic herders in northeastern Sudan, southern Egypt and northern Eritrea. The Eritrean civil war and the opening of Port Sudan led to an influx of people in the region, resulting in population displacement, increased competition for resources and grazing land and urbanization. In 1964, the Beja formed their own political party, the Beja Congress, to protect their rights as a minority group. While the Congress does represent a relatively unified Beja population, it—like other political parties in Sudan—has been consistently marginalized and undermined by the central government.

Mohamed said it is the country's political structure, which has marginalized and overlooked them, that the Beja and other groups in the east are protesting. The central government's presence in the area is mostly confined to exploiting the area's resources, and the absence of effective political administration means that there has been little development. Without proper education and medical services, the population has endured famine and malnutrition, disease and poverty. Officials from the International Committee of the Red Cross have said that eastern Sudan is one of the most underserved areas in the world and is in need of major humanitarian assistance efforts.<sup>1</sup> This assessment was reinforced during the Institute's September 2005 conflict resolution skills training workshop in Kassala, in eastern Sudan. When asked for an example of a conflict situation he hoped to help solve, one participant summarized the major problems in the east as perceived by its inhabitants:

*The main problem is the control [by] the central government of income generating resources such as lands [and] precious mineral wealth and [marginalizing] local*

*inhabitants and depriving them of their rights to decide about their own governance...The remotest parts of the country have just become colonies adhering to the center, Khartoum, which dominates wealth and power and [allocates] so little to services...Only a few have power in eastern Sudan while the majority are below the poverty line, hungry and struck with epidemics.*

The Beja were also frustrated at their exclusion from the CPA negotiation process, which included only the central government and the SPLM/A. Mohamed said that even after the signing of the CPA ended Sudan's civil war, the Beja continued to feel occupied and dominated by the Arab government. Many of the issues addressed in the CPA at the behest of the south—such as wealth- and power-sharing arrangements and security—are also issues that need to be resolved in the east.

Since the government in Khartoum has not yet addressed these grievances, the Beja have resorted to low-level guerilla warfare and partnerships with similar groups. The Beja previously allied themselves with opposition forces in 1989, when they joined the National Democratic Alliance. In early 2005, the Beja Congress joined with the Free Lions, which represented the Rashaida, another ethnic group in eastern Sudan, to form the Eastern Front.<sup>2</sup> The Eastern Front was later joined by the Justice and Equality Movement,<sup>3</sup> which is active in Darfur and similarly seeks more equitable wealth- and power-sharing arrangements. According to Prendergast, the Beja, like other Sudanese, have internalized an apparent lesson from both the SPLM and Darfur situations—that groups must shoot their way into attention. Such past examples seem to show that only violence will compel Khartoum—and the international community—to act.

### **Preventing Further Violence is Possible**

So far, violence in eastern Sudan has not been widespread or intense. In January 2005, police fired on demonstrators protesting the exclusion of the Beja Congress from the CPA negotiations, killing at least seventeen and wounding dozens more.<sup>4</sup> Demonstrations took place again in February, and government security forces arrested Beja Congress leaders and activists.<sup>5</sup> In June, the Eastern Front clashed with government forces in Tokar, near Port Sudan; although the government blamed Eritrea for the violence.<sup>6</sup> Prendergast noted that these isolated incidents have not devastated, militarized, or polarized the east or led to a breakdown of the rule of law. Nevertheless, he warned that the risk of spoilers is proliferating rapidly, and waiting to address the issues will only encourage the Eastern Front to intensify its military campaign.

Yet, he and Mohamed agreed that there is a danger that the Sudanese government, the United States and the international community will indeed repeat past mistakes and wait until it is too late before trying to act. There is no evidence, thus far, that the National Congress Party, the SPLM or international actors will seize the opening created by the CPA to establish a forum for negotiations—perhaps on the basis of the CPA—to resolve the problems in the east. Prendergast fears that if this does not occur, a protracted war could break out.

Both speakers emphasized that negotiations are in the interest of both the government and the Beja Congress, and that each side has vocalized its preference for mediation over war. The Beja do not want to suffer the effects of war and are militarily disadvantaged. The speakers also asserted that Khartoum cannot manipulate or ignore the east to the degree that it has other regions, since the Eastern Front could potentially cut the central government off from important ports, roads and crops and disrupt the government's main source of revenue by sabotaging the oil pipeline. Moreover, they agreed that a negotiation process with the east would be the easiest faced so far by the government. There would be fewer issues to resolve, and violence has not yet complicated any negotiation process.

Although both sides are predisposed to negotiate, the window of opportunity is closing rapidly. Currently the SPLA, which has been deployed in the east, is beginning to pull out of the area in accordance with the CPA. Prendergast said that while the SPLA/M is still in place, it is uniquely positioned to broker a deal and avert an escalation of violence. Once the SPLA leaves, the resulting security vacuum could easily be exploited, and the chances for negotiations will then decline.

The United Nations, United Kingdom and United States have sent inconsistent messages by promising negotiations but taking no steps to fulfill them and failing to prevent Khartoum from dragging its feet. Thus far, said Prendergast, the Sudanese government instead has relied on countermobilization, using militias as it has in Darfur and continuing its divide-and-conquer tactics. He urged the United States and others to exploit the CPA peace dividend and exercise coercive diplomacy to ensure a comprehensive solution to the dispute.

### **The CPA: Framework for Peace in the East?**

The Beja Congress lobbied, unsuccessfully, to participate in the original CPA negotiations. However, the U.S. government and others believed that once the broader civil war was resolved, the remaining issues in other regions could be addressed separately. Prendergast said this omission disempowered the east. Mohamed argued that if the problems in eastern Sudan and other regions had been included in the CPA when maximum pressure was being applied to Khartoum, then the CPA would have resolved all of Sudan's conflicts, rather than just that between the north and south. Furthermore, they agreed that the CPA allowed Khartoum to make peace with the south while continuing violent policies in Darfur and elsewhere. Both speakers thought the CPA framework could be applied to the Beja. Mohamed maintained the framework of the CPA could address the situation in the east as long as it provides some protection, a degree of autonomy, and substantial democracy. Both speakers agreed that, at the very least, it could serve as a basis for crafting a new settlement.

The CPA provides an appropriate framework, Mohamed emphasized, because there are similarities between the Beja and southern Sudanese. Moreover, with more limited goals, the concerns of the Beja can be more successfully addressed. Both groups have been victimized by the government and are fighting for their welfare, culture and language. Like southerners, the Beja also want issues of wealth- and power-sharing and security to be resolved in a comprehensive, constitutional process. However, instead of secession, the Beja prefer increased regional autonomy within a federal political structure, giving them more representation in the federal government. Moreover, religion and language are not key issues; the Beja are Muslim, and although they are not Arabs, they have adopted the Arabic language as a means of communicating with the government. For all of these reasons, Mohamed argued, and Prendergast concurred, that a negotiation process with eastern Sudan would be much less complicated than it was for the south or is now in Darfur. In addition, the Beja are more unified than groups in other regions. Thus, Mohamed said, if a peace agreement satisfied Beja Congress leaders, others in the area would be unlikely to continue fighting. Alternatively, if the CPA proved ill-suited, the speakers recommended bringing the east into the Abuja discussions on Darfur, since the Beja share many grievances with people from Darfur.

### **Suggestions for the Future**

The speakers agreed that to improve chances for a peaceful negotiation process in eastern Sudan, the United States and others in the international community should reevaluate their approach to implementation of the CPA. Prendergast argued that U.S. counterterrorism objectives in the region dominate its relationship with the Sudanese government at the expense of the CPA. Khartoum, he pointed out, has not followed through on such issues as the resolution of the border dispute in the Abyei region and issues related to intelligence and security. If other groups in the country see Khartoum failing to live up to previous agreements, they are less likely to engage the central government in negotiations toward their own agreements. Consequently, Prendergast encouraged more coercive diplomacy and increased pressure on Khartoum when necessary.

The speakers concluded that a conflict prevention opportunity is available and that the time to engage is now. However, no one is taking the initiative to establish a formal process or forum for negotiations. They emphasized the need for a comprehensive approach, either through the CPA or coupled with the mediation process for Darfur. Both Prendergast and Mohamed stressed that continuing to allow Khartoum to deal with each issue in isolation has not worked thus far and is not the way to move forward in the east. Furthermore, no group within Sudan is capable of applying as much pressure on the government as the United States and other international actors in the area. If there is a chance for peace in eastern Sudan, it will require the involvement of outside parties. Mohamed emphasized the need for the international community to protect the Beja as an ethnic and cultural minority. The longer the

international community waits to do so, the greater the danger of waiting until violence spins out of control and chances for negotiations becoming more remote.

## Notes

1. "Sudan: Beja people's problems exacerbated by rebels," [IRINnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org), 16 November 2005.
2. Richard Cornwell, "Sudan: All Quiet on the Eastern Front?" *African Security Review* v 14, n 3, 2005, 54.
3. See also, "Enemies Everywhere," *The Economist*, 1 October 2005, 4.
4. "Enemies Everywhere," 4.
5. "Arrest and Detention of Beja Congress Leaders," *Sudan Tribune*, 16 November 2005, accessed at [www.sudantribune.com](http://www.sudantribune.com) on 16 November 2005.
6. "Fighting erupts in eastern Sudan," [BBC News](http://www.bbc.com), 21 June 2005, accessed on 16 November 2005 and "Sudan: Rebels say civilians being bombed in the east," [IRINnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org), 27 June 2005, accessed on 16 November 2005.

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