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Central African Republic, Chad, and Sudan: Triangle of Instability?

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Recent rebel activities in Central African Republic (CAR) and Chad have called international attention to political crises within both countries, as well as to the relationships between these countries and Sudan. In CAR, two rebel groups operate in the north. In Chad, various rebel groups continue to challenge President Idriss Deby's authority, particularly in the eastern part of the country. The population flows between Chad and CAR, as well as between each country and Sudan's Darfur region, have intensified the instability within each country. The situation prompted United Nations Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs Jan Egeland to warn last month that the crises in Darfur, Chad, and CAR are "intimately linked" and could lead to a "dangerous regional crisis."¹

To further understand the factors behind the rebellions within CAR and Chad, as well as their relationship to the Darfur conflict, the Institute convened a meeting of its Sudan Peace Forum on December 8, 2006, which featured two U.S. government officials. [Dr. Chester Crocker](#) and [Dr. Francis Deng](#) served as co-chairs of the meeting. This USIPeace Briefing summarizes the discussion.

Rebellion in the Central African Republic

Two rebel groups currently operate in CAR: the *Union des Forces Democratiques pour le Rassemblement* (UFDR) in the northeast, and *l'Armee Populaire pour la Restauration de la Republique et la Democratie* (APRD) in the northwest.² Although conflicts in Darfur and Chad have exacerbated the instability within CAR, the rebellion was ignited by long-standing political, economic, and security concerns stemming from the weakness of the state. President Francois Bozize's government has little authority outside the capital, Bangui, while extreme poverty and a lack of both strong government institutions and economic development have contributed to declining support for the government among CAR citizens. Northerners accuse Bozize of favoring southerners since taking power, of failing to uphold democratic commitments, and of delaying implementation of promised political and economic reforms. The UFDR, for instance, has protested against the "exclusionist" policies of Bozize's government and demanded negotiations on power-sharing arrangements.³ The instability in CAR affects neighboring countries and has prompted outside intervention by several actors, including the sub-regional organization, the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC), France, and South Africa.

CAR and Chad have a history of harboring each other's insurgent groups. For instance, the 2003 CAR rebellion began in Chad, allegedly with the support of Deby. One speaker noted that rebels in

northwestern CAR might be receiving support from rebels in Chad. In northeast CAR, rebels are potentially linked to forces in both Chad and Sudan. In turn, Deby's government has offered support to Bozize in CAR, perhaps in an effort to ensure that Chadian rebel groups cannot attack Chad's army from safe havens in CAR. One speaker concluded that Deby's offer is largely symbolic, since the Chadian army is consumed with fighting rebel groups within Chad; still, support from Chad has helped the Bozize government defend against assaults from the south. As a result of the fighting over the last several years, there are also approximately 50,000 CAR refugees in southern Chad, many of whom fled there during the 2002-2003 rebellion.

While there are ethnic and trade linkages between populations in northeast CAR and Sudan, and the instability in Darfur creates an enabling environment for conflict in CAR, the role of Sudan in CAR rebellion is not clear. According to one speaker, there are some indications that the Government of Sudan (GOS) supports rebel forces in CAR. However, the Bozize government may overemphasize the role of Sudan in an effort to minimize the importance of CAR's internal problems and shift blame for the conflict to an external actor. At a minimum, the speaker asserted, the GOS seems willing to ignore local Sudanese support to CAR rebels, such as the provision of safe havens, weapons, and logistical support. Thus far, reports have not indicated a flow of refugees from CAR to Sudan; however, there are 14,000 Sudanese refugees in CAR, many of whom came from southern Sudan during the civil war.

Troops contributed by France and CEMAC have assisted the CAR military in retaking northern towns captured by the rebels.⁴ The CAR military has relied heavily on France for airlift, intelligence, and logistical support. Although France claimed it would not participate in the fighting, French forces retaliated against rebels who fired on them while they were transporting CAR troops.⁵ One speaker expressed surprise at the level of French engagement in CAR, and some participants wondered what impact the results of the upcoming French election will have on the level of future French involvement.

South Africa has also taken an interest in the CAR conflict, as indicated by the visit of South African Defense Minister Mosiua Lekota to Bangui on December 8. At present, South Africa's motivations for taking action in CAR are vague. Reports suggest that South Africa may provide some military assistance in the future. Additional military and civilian officials from South Africa were to travel to Bangui in mid-December to determine the training needs of CAR's military.⁶

Although recent reports indicate that the CAR government, with significant assistance from France, has retaken rebel-held towns, the consensus is growing that the rebellion will not be easily or quickly quelled. CAR military—which has been accused of committing atrocities during the fighting—seems unable to defeat the rebels at this point, though the rebels do not appear capable of winning a military victory either. Although the rebels have previously expressed an interest in negotiations, the CAR government, France, and even South Africa seem dismissive of such a possibility. Yet according to one speaker, the Bozize government has begun to take other steps to quell the insurgency. In particular, it has engaged civil society to discuss approaches to future power-sharing arrangements. Furthermore, the CAR government seems to believe that a United Nations (UN) force in northern CAR will not only help address the situation in Darfur, but may also lead to peace in CAR. Although a UN force would not instantly solve CAR's internal problems, it might provide a more stable environment in which CAR government can begin addressing larger political and economic issues that are fueling the conflict.

Rebellion in Chad

While the Deby regime survived a rebel offensive in April, just before Chad's presidential elections, it continues to face challenges from several rebel groups, some led by former associates. For example, Deby's nephews Tom and Timan Erdimi, who were formerly in charge of the oil and cotton sectors, lead the *Rassemblement des Forces Democratique* (RAFD); like Deby, they are part of the Zaghawa ethnic group. Other insurgencies include the *Front Uni pour le Changement* (FUC), led by Mahamat Nour, and the *Union des Forces pour la Democratie et le Developpement* (UFDD), led by Mahamat Nouri, the former defense minister.

Although these groups publicly state that they do not work together, at least some of them are in contact with each other, and certain offensive maneuvers to capture towns suggest possible coordination.⁷

According to one speaker, some of the rebel groups are motivated not only by a desire for power, but also by political and economic considerations. In particular, some attribute the rebellion to a contest for scarce resources, including land. This competition is intensified by ethnic and traditional rivalries like the one between the Zaghawa (which include much of Chad's ruling elite) and Arab and non-Zaghawa groups. According to one speaker, some non-Arab Chadians fear an Arab "manifest destiny" ideology, which they say emanates from Sudan and Saudi Arabia and could change the ethnic equilibrium within Chad. As such, one motivation for the Zaghawa rebels is to replace Deby with a stronger ruler, to preserve power for the Zaghawa.

The issue of ethnicity also affects the loyalty of Chad's national army to Deby, which one speaker said is the most critical factor in the rebellion. Although a series of high-level defections from the army have occurred, including from elite units like the Republican Guard, most soldiers have been willing to fight—particularly when Deby has characterized the fighting as a battle between Chad and Sudan. As long as the national army remains loyal, it may continue to provide Deby with a military advantage. However, the army, largely composed of Zaghawa, is unlikely to attack Zaghawa rebels. One speaker suggested that perhaps because of the GOS perception that the Zaghawa in Chad are helping Zaghawa groups in Sudan, the GOS seems to support Chad's rebels. Allegations that Chad is working with the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in Sudan (since many JEM members are also Zaghawa), and the fact that some Janjaweed members are Chadian, has created a confusing combination of Sudanese and Chadian insurgents on both sides of the border, some of whom participate in both conflicts. There are also reports that Chadian rebel groups, with the support of the GOS, are using CAR as a base from which to launch attacks on N'Djamena, Chad's capital.

Yet the extent to which the GOS is involved in Chad's conflict is debatable. One speaker noted that although Deby may try to frame the rebellion as a battle between Chad and Sudan, the current fighting stems from political strains that existed before the Darfur conflict began, and is likely to continue until widespread political reforms are enacted. The fundamental political problem in Chad, one speaker emphasized, is that Deby has lost the mandate of the people. Indeed, many Zaghawa view Deby as weak, and resent his manipulation of the constitution in order to serve a third term. Nevertheless, the situation in Darfur does exacerbate Chad's internal conflict, and vice versa.

France is also involved in Chad, though not to the extent it is in CAR. One speaker noted that France has supplied significant political support to Deby, and that more than 1,000 French troops are stationed in and near N'Djamena. Even though France seems committed to supporting Deby logistically, it has said it will not engage in fighting the rebels directly.

The presence of Sudanese refugees in Chad and Chadian internally displaced persons (IDPs) adds a complex humanitarian component to Chad's conflict. Recent discussions have raised the possibility of moving the Sudanese refugee camps farther into Chad to provide more protection against rebels from both Chad and Sudan. While this may deny rebels one source of recruitment, one speaker noted concerns that such a move will leave the IDPs with less protection and access to food, especially if the evacuation of some non-essential UN staff from eastern Chad due to fighting continues.

Neither Chad's army nor any rebel group seems capable of a military victory in the short-term. Although Deby's advantage over the rebels will certainly grow with the rise of Chad's proceeds from oil exports in 2007, it was not thought that the financial windfall would spell certain victory for Deby. Rather, fighting could continue indefinitely unless a robust international force is deployed to Chad or a change in the military situation allows a clear victory for one side. Moreover, the sub-region is not likely to play a strong role in defusing the tension in Chad. Whereas South Sudan has positively intervened in the negotiations between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army, participants did not anticipate a similar intervention in Chad, as South Sudan is not seen as a counterweight to the Khartoum government.

Instead, one speaker suggested capitalizing on the overtures extended by President Omar Bongo of Gabon to begin mediation efforts.

Implications for Sudan and the International Community

Unlike other neighbors of Sudan, such as Ethiopia and Egypt, which in the past played a constructive role in Sudanese conflicts, the speakers agreed that Chad and CAR are too weak internally to assist in the resolution of the Darfur conflict. Central Africa also lacks the presence of a strong sub-regional organization that can take the lead in resolving crises. Instead, reaching a comprehensive solution in Darfur, Chad, and CAR seems to require an international presence of some kind, and many participants agreed that high-level engagement with Khartoum is necessary in order to establish such a presence.

Acknowledging the present difficulties of deploying a force in Darfur, the United States, other governments, and bodies such as the African Union and UN are considering the deployment of an international force in either Chad or CAR, or possibly both, to address the humanitarian issues stemming from the conflict in Darfur and to monitor the border regions. While Deby and Bozize have accepted the deployment of an international force in principle, one speaker cautioned that refugee camps should not become provision and recruitment centers for the armed combatants and the UN should avoid entanglement in Chad's internal conflict. Both speakers stressed that even if an international force is deployed in the sub-region, that alone would not resolve the political and security crises in Chad and CAR. Still, such a force could provide enough security for longer-term political and economic reform processes to begin.

Notes

1. "Warning ahead of Darfur AU talks," BBC News Online, 29 November 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/6195114.stm>

2. International Council of Voluntary Agencies, "CAR: A tragedy in the Making?" 4-11 November 2006, <http://www.icva.ch/doc00001965.html>.

3. "Central African Republic: Army recaptures last rebel-held town," IRINnews.org, 11 December 2006, http://www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=5668&SelectRegion=Great_Lakes&SelectCountry=CENTRAL_AFRICAN_REPUBLIC.

4. The 380-member CEMAC force, known as the Force multinationale en Centrafrique (FOMUC), includes troops from Gabon, Chad, and Congo-Brazzaville.

5. "French army clash with CAR rebels," BBC News Online, 29 November 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/6191754.stm>.

6. Hans Pienaar, "After inspecting a Central African Republic (CAR) guard of honour at the airport..." Pretoria News, 12 December 2006, accessed via Factiva 12 December 2006.

7. "Rebels 'seize' two Chadian towns," BBC News Online 25 November 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6182662.stm> and "Rebels launch attack in east Chad," Agence France-Press, 1 December 2006, accessed via Reliefweb 13 December 2006, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/LZEG-6W3MSH?OpenDocument&rc=1&cc=tcd>. For a more detailed discussion of some of the rebel groups operating in Chad, and the relationship between Chad and Sudan, please see Kelly Campbell, "Sudanese-Chadian Relations: A New Dimension to the Conflict in Darfur?" USIPeace Briefing, April 2006, http://www.usip.org/pubs/usipeace_briefings/2006/0417_sudan_chad.html.

Of Related Interest

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