

Sudan Gains From Chad Fighting

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Humanitarian crisis in Darfur likely to worsen as Chad rebels continue an onslaught many believe is backed by Khartoum.

As bloody fighting in Chad continues between rebels and the government forces of President Idriss Deby, neighbouring Sudan is likely to emerge as the prime beneficiary of the conflict.

The fighting aggravates the already perilous situation facing thousands of vulnerable Sudanese refugees both in Darfur and over the border in eastern regions of Chad.

The timing of last weekend's attack on the Chadian capital N'Djamena - the latest of several conducted in the past 18 months by the recently unified rebel groups - was no accident.

A well-armed force of some 3,700 soldiers from the European Union called EUFOR was due to descend within weeks, with the blessing of the United Nations. EUFOR was to be deployed along the desolate Sudan border with a mandate, inter alia, to protect the vulnerable Darfuri refugee camps inside Chad.

EUFOR's mission looked similar to that of the peacekeepers of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Darfur, UNAMID, a hybrid force of military units drawn from the African Union and from other United Nations members.

The Chadian rebels, who had found safe haven in Darfur to regroup and rearm, made it clear before their latest offensive that they did not want EUFOR in their country.

EUFOR's presence on the Chad-Sudan border would not only constitute a threat to Sudan's lawless "janjaweed" fighters, it could also thwart the Chadian rebel movements at war with Deby, whose rule has been backed by a permanent French garrison in N'Djamena.

France has wielded considerable power in Chad ever since the country gained independence from its colonial masters.

Several weeks before the assault, Abderaman Koulamallah, spokesman for the rebels' Unified Military Command, accused EUFOR of being a thinly-disguised attempt by the French to prop up Deby once again.

Koulamallah warned EUFOR to stay out.

As the rebel columns raced across the barren landscape of Chad last week, other anti-Deby units simultaneously attacked the lightly-defended positions of the Chadian army in the remote eastern town of Adre, where EUFOR was to be positioned.

To an extent, the tactic may have worked - the deployment of EUFOR has been delayed.

However, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana has insisted that the European Union will proceed with deploying the peacekeeping mission, though no specific time for this has been set given the delay caused by the fighting.

The situation could change again following the February 4 decision by the UN Security Council to authorise the French government to use its resident force of more than 1,000 soldiers to help Deby rebuff his enemies and restore some semblance of peace.

The turmoil, which may have only just begun, is clearly being supported by Sudan, regional experts say.

“There is no question that the Sudan government has been arming and protecting the rebels going into Chad,” said Gerald LeMelle, executive director of Africa Action, a think tank based in Washington. “The al-Bashir government is very afraid of the multi-national force coming in.”

If Chad is destabilised, LeMelle explained, attention will be diverted from the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Darfur, and the international community will become less willing to endanger its peacekeepers either there or in Darfur.

“There is no question that – as Sudan understands well – the more instability they can create, the less inclined the international community is to come in,” said LeMelle.

The Sudan government has admitted responsibility for an attack on a UN supply convoy in Darfur in early January. This effectively shut down the UNAMID operation there while further negotiations on the UN presence took place.

LeMelle argues that such tactics have worked well for Sudan in Darfur, and are now being exported to Chad.

“If they can create more confusion, then EUFOR will do little more than run down there [to Chad] and protect everyone,” he said, adding that more aggressive action than this could be warranted.

There is an ethnic dimension to the conflict with Sudan, as LeMelle explained. President Deby belongs to the Zaghawa people, who live in northeastern Chad and northern Darfur, where they are one of the ethnic groups on the receiving end of janjaweed violence.

“Deby’s people are from Darfur,” said LeMelle. “They’re the people the janjaweed are killing out there.”

Deby has actively supported the various Darfur rebel groups fighting the Sudanese government. Khartoum has responded by assisting those who want to depose Deby.

This has prompted one of the Darfur rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement, JEM, to condemn

Sudan's support for the Chadian rebels. JEM leaders accuse Sudan of attempting to impose a puppet regime in N'Djamena.

"Sudan has always done that. They did that with Deby himself, but now [Sudanese president Omar] al-Bashir wants to get rid of him," Abdullahi Osman El-Tom, JEM's head of training and strategic planning, told IWPR.

El-Tom believes a change of government in Chad would provide a military boost for Khartoum.

"They would be able to track rebel movements from two sides of the border," said El-Tom. "If they have a friendly regime in Chad, they could mobilise the janjaweed from the other side against our forces."

As the rebels amassed for their recent cross-country attack, the Chad government was already accusing Sudan of causing the conflict.

In mid-January, Chad's prime minister Delwa Kassiré Koumakoye said Sudan was "spurred on by an obvious will to reduce populations in the Darfur to nothing, and to destabilise Chad, [which] is granting refuge to the tormented populations [from Darfur]."

Koumakoye also accused Sudan of "recruiting... mercenaries of all nationalities, including Chadians, [whom] he is integrating into the Sudanese army - arming, organising, using, manipulating and mobilising them."

The Sudanese government has denied such claims of interference and support for rebels.

"What's happening in Chad is an internal matter and Sudan has nothing to do with it," Sudan armed forces spokesman Othman Mohammed al-Agbash told the AFP news agency.

It may not be accurate to reduce the Chadian conflict solely to a proxy war against Deby fought on behalf of the Islamic fundamentalist regime in Khartoum.

The leaders of the Chadian rebels include Timane Erdimi, a former member of Deby's ruling clan, and Mahamat Nouri, a former defence minister. Both were high-level officials who defected to the rebels after accusing Deby of a running a ruthless dictatorship that favoured his family and friends.

Deby seized power by force in an oddly similar revolt fought from the east in 1990, and subsequently won elections in 1996, 2001 and 2006.

Sudan has historically been involved in most of Chad's turbulent political history. The difficult relationship between the two states may stem from the colonial-era demarcation of the Chad-Sudan border, according to regional expert Paul-Simon Handy of the Institute for Security Studies, based in South Africa.

In a recent report, Handy explained that eastern Chad and western Sudan are linked by a “complex web of cultural and commercial ties or the political affinities of population groups living on both sides” of the border.

Sudan hosted Chadian rebel groups as far back as the Sixties, and most of the military coups in Chad have been launched from Darfur.

Now Khartoum seems to be reasserting itself. “In engineering political changes in Chad, Sudan affirms its strategic position in the country, which is now contested in the Darfur crisis,” said Handy.

Mark Schroeder, an Africa analyst for the private intelligence firm Strategic Forecasting, with offices in Washington and Texas, believes that Sudan is leveraging influence in Chad.

“It is a proxy conflict, as I see it,” he said, noting that Chad has challenged Sudan’s dominance in the region by supporting Darfur rebel groups such as JEM and Sudan Liberation Army–Unity, among others. “They’ve got a bit of history there,” he said of the two countries.

Schroeder said President Deby could be running a risk by relying on France and the rest of the international community to save him.

Despite Chad’s burgeoning oil revenues, Sudan is the stronger and wealthier country, and can sustain a much longer military effort on various fronts.

“They have relatively deep pockets compared to Chad,” Schroeder said of Sudan, “but if they had a friendly group in power in N’Djamena, they’d have less of a need to interfere in Chad.”

Deby may have his own reasons for resisting an extensive European intervention, Schroeder added, because the presence of a strong international force could expose the darker side of his regime.

If Deby survives this round of fighting, the dark side could reveal itself rather than later.

“I’d expect him to ramp up a particularly brutal counter-insurgency,” said Schroeder said, noting that the effects could easily spill into the refugee camps of eastern Chad and Darfur in western Sudan.

“As a result, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur is going to probably get worse,” he said.

JEM’s El-Tom fears that if a rebel government seized power in N’Djamena, it could then turn on the Darfuri refugees now in Chad.

“They could push them back into Darfur – a forcible emptying of the camps,” he said.

David Buchbinder, a Human Rights Watch expert on Chad, is worried about the effect of the conflict on the humanitarian crisis.

By attacking and destabilising Chad, which has supported the Darfur rebels, Sudan will undermine its strongest enemies at home – with alarming consequences for the civilian population caught up in the Darfur conflict.

“It’s the triumph of the military solution to the Darfur conflict,” said Buchbinder. “I think this is a very bad time for the refugees.”

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