

“CHAD AND DARFUR: A CRISIS IN THE MAKING”

Mario J. Azevedo, Ph.D., M.P.H.
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
mjazeved@email.uncc.edu

1. CONFLICT DRIVERS

The Sudanese Darfur crisis, fully blown since 2003, could not come at a more critical and worse time for Chad and its relations with its eastern neighbor. Notwithstanding the semblance of stability in Chad since 1990, few bright spots make the present regime any different from the previous tumultuous northern-led regimes. The regimes that have controlled Chad since 1979 have been plagued by serious and repeated abuses of human rights, the indiscriminate use of the army, the gendarmerie, and the national guard against civilians, as happened in the south in 1984 and 1994, when hundreds of innocent victims and political dissidents were targeted and killed, resembling massacres that could be called “ethnic cleansing.”

Notwithstanding the imposed democratic reforms since 1993, Chad remains under an autocratic regime, curbing to the maximum the liberties of its citizens. Last year’s Idris Deby’s forced referendum to change the constitution allowing him to run for a third term has created among Chadians a furor whose intensity the Western media does not seem to grasp. Enhanced by the easy accessibility of guns, lawlessness is rampant even in N’Djamena; factions of the army and the president’s inner circles continue to defect; and members of his own family have taken up arms to oust him and prevent him from further entrenching his autocratic rule and corrupt policies in the country. Presently, while Chad has a major dispute with the World Bank, Deby’s MPS is attempting to dismantle the agreement that safeguards the country’s development and the future of generations of Chadians. While 70 percent of the population continues to live in absolute poverty, defined by the World Bank as life under one dollar a day—regardless of the oil revenues—the country is experiencing a daily influx of refugees not only from Sudan, estimated at 220,000, but also from Central African Republic, where the estimated 43,000 people have been running away from lawlessness and the cruel banditry of the “coupeurs de route.”

The Darfur refugee crisis must be seen, first, as the culmination of decades of the seasonal struggle for resources between pastoral nomads and the agricultural sedentary populations, a conflict that has been poorly handled by the Sudanese and the Chadian authorities. This situation has contributed to chaos and violence both in Eastern Chad and Western Sudan, especially in Western Darfur. Lack of government control of the movement of Arab cattle raisers has re-fuelled centuries-standing ethnic, religious, and racial animosities in both countries and has contributed to the rise of the SLA, JEM, and the so-called Janjaweed. In Chad, at least Tombalbaye must be given credit for his establishment of a seasonal corridor for northern cattle owners on their way in search for pasture in the agricultural south during the 1960s and 1970s, which minimized the implantation of the principle “survival of the fittest.”

Second, unfortunately the media has focused on the action of the Janjaweed and their alliance with the Sudanese government but has been unwilling to consider or remains ignorant of the role Deby and his co-ethnic Zagawa alliance has had in fomenting dissent among the Chadian and Sudanese Zagawa (allied with the Fur and the Massalit), in arming them, and in providing them sanctuary in Chad. One ought to remember that it was the Sudanese Zagawa (with French “conspiracy” and US tacit consent) that brought Deby to power in N’Djamena in December 1990.

Third, we need to stress that the refugee crisis has escalated ethnic divisions in Chad and in Sudan, carrying the potential for genocidal and ethnic cleansing in both countries, as the most recent incidents have shown. Indeed, while the African Union, the European Union, and the United Nations have classified the violence and the killings as “ethnic cleansing,” the Bush Administration has gone on record by labeling it “genocide.” The truth of the matter is that genocide and ethnic cleansing are only different sides of the same coin.

2. ROAD SIGNS

As the Janjaweed and the SLA/JEM remain committed to attending the Abuja meetings, the next six months might determine the future of Darfurians and the prevention of further lawlessness, violence, rape, and flagrant abuse of human rights in the region. The political behavior of Al-Bashr and Deby (whose venomous rhetoric has recently heightened to the point of declaring a state of belligerence with Sudan) will be a critical element in the resolution of the crisis. The perception of a stronger African Union presence in the area and massive infusion of refugee international assistance by the UNHCR, the EU, other world organizations, and philanthropists’ generosity into the region can contribute to a sustained cease-fire and a lasting peaceful co-existence among the various ethnic groups in Sudan and Chad.

One other point is worth making at this juncture. The SLA/JEM and the “black” Darfur “insurgents” are not asking for secession from Sudan but for a meaningful autonomy, with resources that are distributed fairly. Thus, a major determinant of the cease-fire and peace building, should there be a peace agreement, will be the attitude of the Arab-dominated Khartoum government in providing a political and economic formula that is not seen as discriminatory in this part of the country. Deby, on his part, will need to stop supporting his Zagawa co-ethnics and remain objective in the process. Interestingly, the southern non-Muslim and non-Zagawa populations of Chad are simply looking on while this co-ethnic and co-religious squabbling goes on, hoping that, as the violence escalates, Northern Chad will become even more fragmented and unable to continue its incompetent and dictatorial governance of the country. In sum, the crisis in Sudan does not help but hurts Chad as it continues to search for a bright democratic future.

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT

On the issue of Darfur and Chad, the United States finds itself in a delicate position. First of all, even the African Union and the UN have resisted calling the situation genocidal, as Colin Powell and George Bush have done. Second, while, on one hand, putting too much

pressure on Sudan might derail the accord concluded recently between the Sudanese government and the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement, in which the US played a major constructive role, it could, on the other hand, jeopardize the fight against global terrorism, to which Bashr has pledged to contribute. Third, the ambiguous attitude of the Russians and the Chinese makes the call for sanctions against Sudan in the Security Council a dubious proposition.

Regarding Chad, US hands are also tied in the attempt to pursue a meaningful policy in the region. Deby is seen as a "reform-minded" leader, who restored and has maintained Chad's political and economic stability during the past 16 years. We need to remember also that the US had supported Habre despite the massacres and the torture of 40,000 Chadians reported after his ouster and stood-by tacitly when Idris Deby overthrew by force his former ally's regime. Indeed, as the Romans used to say, "qui tacet, consentire videtur." The support for Deby has continued notwithstanding the torture chambers against Chadians during the 1980s, which were instituted before his very eyes, as he was Habre's chief-of-staff at the time. The massacre of southerners in 1994 could not have happened without either the express order or knowledge of President Idris Deby. (It will be interesting to find out what Habre, if brought before an International Court of Justice, might have to say about Deby, his former right-hand strong man.)

The other variable of the US policy towards Chad is the Pan-Sahelian Counter Terrorism Initiative, which, involving Chad, has been used by Deby to bolster his army and legitimize his ruthless rule in the face of mounting citizen's opposition. We should not, finally, overlook the flow of oil from Chad operated by ExxonMobil, Chevron Texaco, and Haliburton. So, the US can regain and assert its moral ground by continuing to address the issue forcefully, demonstrating stronger commitment to the presence of the African Union monitors in the region, fully cooperating with the UN, providing greater financial support to the refugees and the almost two million displaced persons in the region, and courting only democratic governance both in Sudan and Chad, lest we face another Joseph Mobutu case. The international community and citizens of the world, on their part, should speak with one voice and, indeed, if the AU presence has become ineffective, as noted by one observer who said that "The AU can be the arms and legs of the mission but it's unable to be the head," the UN ought to step in immediately, taking measures against Sudan, if it refuses to cooperate. The potential for genocide and continued ethnic cleansing, as happened in Kosovo, must be stopped at all cost, and it can be stopped much easier in Sudan than in Yugoslavia or Rwanda. Indeed, the policy expressed as "African solutions to Africa's problems," pursued by the US recently, appears more and more simply unrealistic.