

Darfur: Bush and Blair plan no-fly zone and consider air strikes against Sudan

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Global Research, December 20, 2006
wsws.org 20 December 2006

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The Bush administration is considering imposing a no-fly zone over the Darfur region in western Sudan. It would be backed up by the threat of air strikes, a naval blockade and an extension of the existing sanctions regime.

UK Prime Minister Tony Blair has endorsed the plan. Blair announced his support for "tougher action" on his return from a trip to Washington. A UK official was reported in the *Financial Times* as saying, "The Americans mean business."

The plan seems to be to work with France, which has 1,200 troops in Chad and units of its air force in the Central African Republic. French mirage jets have already carried out air sorties over the last two weeks in the Central African Republic and Chad. A spokesman from the French Ministry of Defence warned of the danger of "Somalisation" of the region. He told the *Independent*, "We want to ensure that the Darfur crisis does not take on a further dimension. The region is crucial if we want to put a peace force in Darfur."

According to local reports, thousands of civilians were forced to flee from the town of Birao in the Central African Republic as a result of a French air strike. If France were to join with the US and UK in imposing a no-fly zone it would mean a joint attack on one of the poorest countries in the world by three major powers.

At present, diplomacy is continuing. Andrew Natsios, the US special envoy to Sudan, reported some progress after a four-day trip to Khartoum during which he met with President Omar al-Bashir. He had a two-hour meeting with Bashir, who has refused to see him on previous visits. According to Natsios the Khartoum regime is now prepared to accept the presence of United Nations technical staff, including military advisors, in Sudan.

This concession to US pressure follows Natsios's public threat that the US would resort to what he called "Plan B." Natsios declined to say what this plan entailed, but the report in the *Financial Times* makes it clear that the US and UK are considering military action. Khartoum's concession falls short of accepting the 13,000 UN troops that the US is demanding should be allowed into Sudan.

The possible move to military action against Sudan follows a period in which the US ruling elite have been deeply divided over the best course of action. The divisions have been no less marked between the US and Europe.

If Bush now seems to be leaning towards military action it is despite warnings from the US military, which is sceptical about its ability to intervene effectively in Sudan.

With an area of 1 million square miles, Sudan is the largest country in Africa. It borders on Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad, Libya and Egypt. The potential for war in Sudan to involve other African countries is immense. Its Red Sea coastline and Arab and Muslim culture in the north give it links to the Middle East.

The possibility of the conflict expanding on a more than regional scale is immense. China, for example, is the largest foreign investor in Sudan. The Chinese National Petroleum Company (CNPC) has invested £8 billion in the Sudan oil industry. According to the *Washington Post*, China owns 40 percent of the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Co., which dominates Sudan's oilfields. Almost half of CNPC's overseas oil and 7 percent of all Chinese oil imports are thought to come from Sudan. Chinese workers are engaged in infrastructural projects, such as the 900-mile pipeline that connects the Heglig oilfield in Kordofan with Port Sudan on the Red Sea. According to the *Daily Telegraph*, 10,000 Chinese nationals worked on this project. A US or British hit on a Chinese merchant ship or Chinese owned plant such as the pipeline could have global implications.

Nor is it certain that any agreement between the US, UK and France would withstand intervention in this strategically important country. Western Sudan was the scene of the Fashoda incident, which almost brought Britain and France to war before World War I.

Bush's threat to attack Sudan flows directly from the US debacle in Iraq. The worse the situation in Iraq has become for the US and its allies, the more confident has the Khartoum regime felt to assert its own interests in the Horn of Africa and beyond. The result is that the Horn of Africa is at the epicentre of a growing regional conflict that is now spreading into Central Africa. It is a conflict that the *New York Times* has described as the next Congo. The epithet is not inappropriate given the region's mix of mineral wealth and complex rivalries. But it was possible for imperialist rivalries over Congo to be contained in both the post-World War II period and in the late nineteenth century. That is far less certain today.

The Sudanese government has stepped up its murderous campaign against the civilian population of Darfur and is spreading the war into Chad and the Central African Republic. This escalation follows the signing of a Darfur peace deal in May.

The Darfur agreement is only one of the many Western-backed deals that has been disrupted by Khartoum's action. Conflict has again broken out in southern Sudan where a peace deal brought an end to the civil war only last year. The need to maintain a deal that offered the prospect of US and European access to the oilfield of the south was one of the reasons that the Bush administration has previously resisted calls to take action over Darfur.

Such was the brutality of the attacks by an unidentified militia in southern Sudan that some observers have suggested that they are the work of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) that has been engaged in an uprising in northern Uganda for the past 20 years. The LRA recently began talks with the Ugandan government. Long backed by Sudan, the LRA may now be active again—this time working against the Khartoum regime's internal enemies.

Meanwhile in Somalia, the Supreme Islamic Courts Council (SICC) has driven out the Transitional Government that was set up under a UN-backed deal in 2004 and which established itself in Somalia at the beginning of this year. Somalia's neighbours Eritrea and Ethiopia are being drawn into the dispute. Ethiopia and Eritrea were at war from 1961 until

2000 with a brief interlude of peace between 1991 and 1998 and that conflict is set to reignite over Somalia. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has declared that his country is at war with the SICC. Eritrea has given its support to the SICC.

The immediate cause of the spread of conflict may be a new assertiveness on the part of the Sudanese government. But the real causes of the instability of the region lie in the policies of US imperialism, both past and present, and the long history of colonial involvement going back to the nineteenth century.

Since the days of the Cold War the US has poured weapons into the area because of its strategic significance. It has supported various nationalist elites in ferocious internecine wars as it tried to exclude the Soviet Union from the area. By the end of the Cold War these national elites controlled rival armed camps with ruined economies. They attempted to maintain their political grip by plunging their countries into a further round of wars and civil wars. Such are the conditions that US policy has created in the Horn of Africa that if Sudan did not assert itself, one of its rivals would make its own bid to become the regional hegemon.

A major humanitarian disaster is already unfolding in Darfur. The Khartoum regime is attempting to depopulate a region the size of France. It has unleashed a scorched earth policy in which villages and crops are destroyed, and civilians raped and mutilated. An estimated 1 million people have been displaced into makeshift camps where they are dependent on aid handouts and 200,000 killed by the government-backed Janjaweed militia.

A Save Darfur campaign has won support from celebrities such as George Clooney, who visited Darfur with fellow actor Don Cheadle and Olympic athletes Tegla Loroupe and Joey Cheek. But it is endorsed by major political figures such as former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright, who was part of the Clinton administration when the US destroyed a pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum with cruise missiles. Albright and other Democrats at the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs are in fact lobbying for a return to that same militarist policy in relation to Sudan.

Former US secretary of state for Africa Susan Rice, a board member of the National Democratic Institute, called for air strikes against Sudan at the beginning of October in a *Washington Post* article. "The United States, preferably with NATO involvement and African political support, would strike Sudanese airfields, aircraft and other military assets," Rice wrote. "It could blockade Port Sudan, through which Sudan's oil exports flow. Then UN troops could deploy—by force if necessary, with US and NATO backing."

The model she cites is the NATO invasion of the Balkans. She wrote: "The real question is this: Will we use force to save Africans in Darfur as we did to save Europeans in Kosovo?" The reality of the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia was that Albanians as well as Serbs were killed, while ethnic tensions were increased. The purpose of the Balkan intervention was not to protect the Albanian minority, but to secure access to the vital oil reserves of the Caspian. Camp Bondsteel, one of the biggest US military bases to be built from scratch since the Vietnam War, now sits in Kosovo close to vital pipelines.

Oil is also a question in Sudan and the surrounding countries. Southern Sudan has large oil reserves. The extent of the oil reserves in the Darfur region is still uncertain, but they may be considerable. Rolls-Royce Marine in Norway is manufacturing \$10 million worth of oil equipment for Sudan. According to two Norwegian organisations—Norwatch and the

Norwegian Council for Africa—this equipment is destined for Darfur. Eric Hagen of Norwatch said, "The equipment probably will be used to connect new oilfields to the gigantic main oil pipeline in Sudan."

Sudan's national oil company began drilling in Darfur last year. According to the *Guardian*, Friedhelm Eronat, a wealthy British-based businessman, has bought the largest single share of oil rights in Darfur through his company Cliveden Sudan. He may be acting alone or on behalf of another company. US companies are currently excluded from Sudan by US sanctions. Eronat gave up his US citizenship and became a UK citizen shortly before the deal was signed.

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