

US talks peace and prepares for war in Sudan

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In the worsening conflict in Sudan between the Khartoum government and the southern states that voted for independence in the January referendum, an estimated 1,500 people have been killed since the referendum and up to 150,000 people have fled their homes. Aid agencies are warning of a humanitarian disaster as the country edges towards a renewal of the two decades long north-south civil war that claimed more than two million lives.

President Barack Obama has called for a ceasefire, presenting himself as an honest broker in a conflict that is largely of US making. The humanitarian disaster threatens to become a pretext for yet another US military adventure in Africa. Washington has intervened in Libya with bombing raids aimed at overthrowing the Gaddafi regime. Now it has Sudan in his sights.

Obama adopted the same high moral tone that he has used in relation to Libya. "There is no military solution," he said on the Voice of America. "The leaders of Sudan and South Sudan must live up to their responsibilities. The government of Sudan must prevent a further escalation of this crisis by ceasing its military actions immediately, including aerial bombardments, forced displacements and campaigns of intimidation."

This is from the president who has sanctioned drone attacks in Afghanistan that have killed civilians, personally ordered assassinations and watched them unfold on closed-circuit television, and is currently assisting the NATO bombing of Tripoli in an effort to kill a head of state. For Obama to speak of peace is entirely hypocritical.

Obama called on Sudanese leaders to seek a peaceful solution and assured them that "the United States will take the steps we have pledged toward normal relations." But there was a sting in the tail. He went on to threaten that "those who flout their international obligations will face more pressure and isolation, and they will be held accountable for their actions."

The implication is that President Omar al-Bashir, who like Muammar Gaddafi has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity, can expect the treatment like that being administered to Gaddafi's regime if he does not follow Obama's bidding.

Khartoum was the target of a US cruise missile attack in 1998 when the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory was destroyed. The Clinton administration claimed that it was a chemical weapons plant linked to al Qaeda. Ample evidence has since emerged that the factory was engaged in purely medical work and did not have any such links.

US claims were a complete fabrication and the destruction of the factory was aimed at intimidating the Sudanese population and depriving them of valuable infrastructure. The

German ambassador to Sudan, Werner Daum, has calculated that the loss of the factory resulted in tens of thousands of deaths from malaria and tuberculosis because of the resultant shortage of life-saving medicines.

In April this year two people were killed when a car was hit by a missile in Port Sudan. The Sudanese authorities said that the missile had been fired from an unidentified aircraft that flew into Sudanese airspace. They suggested that Israel was behind the attack. The Israeli government has made no comment. Only Israel and the US have the type of military technology used in this attack, and it is hard to believe that the Israeli government could have carried it without US knowledge. The victims have not been identified but it was undoubtedly an assassination.

The conflict that is developing in Sudan is the result of a long period of US involvement in the region. Successive US administrations backed the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) under its US-trained leader John Garang. His sudden death in a helicopter crash in no way disrupted the relationship.

The US provided arms for the SPLM's fight against the Khartoum government and has continued to pour weapons into the country following the 2005 US-brokered agreement that ended the civil war. That provided for a referendum on southern secession and the creation of a new state in southern Sudan centred on the capital of Juba. The vote for secession has given Obama a platform within Sudan to launch an assault on the Khartoum regime through a proxy force.

The whole of Sudan is covered by US sanctions that forbid the export of arms to the country. The US is only permitted to export non-military goods to Sudan including the south. But according to WikiLeaks a cargo of tanks, grenade launchers and anti-aircraft guns captured by Somali pirates in 2008 was intended for the SPLM. They had been sold to the SPLM by Kenya, a close US ally in the region. The leaked cables revealed that the US was aware of the shipment.

It is clear from this leak that the US has been preparing the SPLM for a new military conflict while all the public pronouncements coming out of the White House and the State Department have been about peace.

Conflict along the still undefined border was inevitable. The border states of South Kordofan and Abyei are among the few oil-producing areas that could remain in Khartoum's hands after the secession of the south. They were bound to be bitterly contested, but there is evidence that the present conflict was provoked by forces loyal to the SPLM. On May 20, militia units allied to the SPLM ambushed a convoy of UN peacekeepers and northern troops. Diplomatic sources suggest that this was a deliberate attempt to draw Khartoum into a conflict over the border. If so, it worked well, because Khartoum's response was to send tanks into the border town of Abyei and it has now bombed an airfield in South Kordofan.

A separate referendum was supposed to be held in Abyei to decide whether it should join the northern or the southern state. But the vote was postponed after violent clashes between pro-Khartoum and pro-southern groups. Attempts at mediation by other African states have failed and the two sides are becoming increasingly intransigent.

"Abyei is northern Sudanese land," President Omar Hassan al-Bashir insisted. He added that Sudan was not afraid of US threats.

Speaking from the southern capital of Juba SPLM spokesman Philip Aguer told the *Financial Times* “The UN mission has completely failed in Sudan: what is the point of ‘monitoring’ peace when you are ‘monitoring’ people being killed—the UN Security Council must bring a mission that can impose peace, they should do more than lip service.”

The SPLM are in effect demanding UN cover for its own military operations as Alassane Ouattara had in Ivory Coast in his struggle against Laurent Gbagbo.

The SPLM depicts itself as the injured party while at the same time reorganising and re-equipping its army. Atim Garang of the SPLM accused the Khartoum government of wanting war. “We dreamed of good and non-tensed relations between north and south Sudan,” he went on, “and we were arranging for continuation of common interests with the north, namely with regard to our partnership in the field of oil production and marketing, but now we greatly doubt the real intentions of north Sudan.”

Vice-President Riek Machar Teny Dhurgon has visited Washington to ask for more robust support for the SPLM. Having engineered a humanitarian crisis on the border, Washington may well feel that it can now offer more overt military support for the SPLM.

On its part the Khartoum government has turned to its longstanding ally, China. Bashir will visit Beijing in the next weeks. The subject of his talks has not been announced, but China is the main supplier of arms to Sudan.

China has been largely responsible for developing the Sudanese oil industry, 80 percent of which is in the south and will come under southern authority once partition takes place. Most of the paved roads in southern Sudan are in the oil fields and were built by Chinese companies. Potentially, the new government could insist on renegotiating contracts and allowing US companies to have a share of its oil resources. The extent of Chinese investment put at risk by the partition of Sudan is immense. The Chinese National Petroleum Company is thought to have invested some \$20 billion in Sudan, which is the source of 30 percent of China’s oil imports.

Sudan has a strategic significance for China, and the provocative stance that the Obama administration has adopted threatens to lead to the kind of confrontation that Beijing has so far studiously avoided in Africa. A civil war over control of Sudan’s oil has potential global implications. It may prove to have a profoundly destabilizing impact on international relations.

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