
A replay of Iraq beckons in Darfur if we send in troops

Western intervention in Sudan would play into the jihadists' hands, uniting all factions in a war against outsiders

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If there is a world journalism record for being arrested by Sudan's dictatorial government, I probably hold it: I was detained on the first morning of my first visit. Despite many less eventful subsequent visits to Sudan, I remain very wary of the regime.

Nevertheless, Khartoum does have a point about the dangers of western military intervention in Darfur. In February President Bush, during an unscripted question-and-answer session in Florida, suggested an expanded international role in Darfur, with "Nato stewardship" of a UN force there. This statement caught many policy makers off guard.

Nato is already assisting with logistics for the 7,800 African Union peacekeepers in Darfur. Bush is pushing for a large UN force - perhaps 20,000 troops - to replace the AU, arguing that this would end the fighting there. This sounds good but won't work. Putting white, western, Christian troops in Darfur would unite all those fighting each other - in a holy war against outsiders. Defence officials in London and Brussels cautioned Washington by invoking the 1993 debacle in Somalia. But the genie of western-directed forces is out of the bottle.

The 2003 rebellion in Darfur caught Khartoum by surprise, and it acted aggressively to crush the insurgents, who claimed their region had been marginalised. Atrocities have been committed by all sides; banditry and warlordism is widespread. Darfur has been consumed by a brutal conflict, but it is not genocide - the US's stated motive in acting. Khartoum is accused of arming Arab militiamen - the Janjaweed - to wipe out non-Arabs. The war's complex origins are tribal and political, but not racial. Darfur's Arabs are black, indigenous African Muslims - just like Darfur's non-Arabs.

While the conflict is mainly a struggle for grazing lands and water, it is also about national politics: Islamist extremists in Khartoum, disciples of the sidelined firebrand Hassan al-Turabi, have stirred the pot in Darfur. Western intervention would play into the hands of the jihadists. The UN has also pointed to Eritrean, Libyan and Chadian involvement.

There is, however, a framework for peace. Sudan ended Africa's longest war in 2005: the 50-year on-off struggle between Islamic governments in Khartoum and the largely Christian/animist south. Washington, aided by London and Oslo, invested much time and political energy in securing the

peace deal, which will see over 10,000 UN troops being put in the south. This was a rare foreign-policy success for Bush.

While accepting 13,000 UN-directed humanitarian workers in Darfur, Khartoum violently opposes UN military intervention. The new government of national unity - including former warring parties from north and south - is already under considerable internal strain; many in the former ruling Islamic leadership argue that too much has already been given away. They say the "Christian" south was granted too many concessions because of international pressure; now Washington demands even more in the Islamic west of Sudan. The government could implode, taking with it the north-south peace. Sudan has all the potential to become a failed state.

While UN troops have been accepted in the largely non-Muslim south, they would be treated very differently in the fervently Islamic west. They would also attract jihadists from across the Sahel, from Somalia to Mauritania, potentially destabilising the soft underbelly of Europe. Nor it is clear that such a peace operation could be mustered. Nato has strained to find additional troops for Afghanistan, while the UN force in south Sudan is struggling to get up to strength.

This is not a call for inaction. More people are being killed in African wars than in all the rest of the world. While the number of UN troops has nearly quintupled since 1999, the system is under acute strain. And UN operations, especially in Africa, have been mired in sexual and financial scandals. The blue hats would also be much more expensive than an augmented AU operation.

Rightly or wrongly, a UN operation would be perceived regionally as an instrument of America. Washington's reputation, besmirched by false WMD claims and the occupation of Iraq, recovered a little after the north-south peace deal. Now that has dissipated because of Bush's Nato-UN proposal.

African Union credibility is also at stake. It should not be seen to fail in its first real attempt at international peacekeeping. On March 10 the AU decided to extend its cash-strapped force until September at the earliest, before a possible handover to the UN. It's safer to avoid the UN, and to allow Nato to continue to provide increased background logistical and intelligence support. The AU force should double its size; the Arab League has this week promised to help with funding and (acceptably Islamic) troops.

There is no military solution. Neither side can win in Darfur; nor can peacekeepers impose peace where there is none. It will take several months for the AU to be beefed up. This precious time should be used to enforce the AU-brokered Abuja peace talks. Despite some useful US assistance there, the ceasefires in Darfur have been relatively ineffective. What is required is the same sort of international political effort invested in Sudan's north-south peace agreement, signed in January 2005. Meanwhile, western military involvement must be kept to a minimum. Otherwise, a replay of Iraq or Somalia beckons.

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