

## *Rethinking Sudan*

By Dan Connell

A brutal civil war that has raged off and on for nearly half a century in Sudan is putting the Bush administration just where it does not want to be—under domestic political pressure to try to affect the outcome of a seemingly intractable African conflict. Congressional action may force the issue.

Fighting and famine have claimed more than 2 million lives in Sudan during the past two decades, as the civil war there seesawed back and forth with no clear victor. Two recent regional peace initiatives have failed to halt the carnage. Charges that the Arab-Islamist government in Khartoum aids international terrorists and condones slavery in the black African south inflame passions for U.S. action to change the balance of power in the rebels' favor.

Khartoum's critics here say that the government's new oil revenues—estimated at \$500 million this year and expected to double soon—are fueling an escalation of the conflict and worsening the plight of its civilian victims. This has made oil, and the companies that pump it, their prime target.

In June 2000, the House passed the "Sudan Peace Act," which sharply tightens sanctions on the Khartoum government as well as on companies operating in Sudan seeking capital in U.S. financial markets. The Senate ducked the issue, but it won't go away.

The Bush administration, which has voiced deep reservations about the capital markets initiative, is under pressure from an unlikely coalition of conservative evangelical Christian groups and African-American organizations. Both are disturbed over the Sudan government's persecution of the mostly black southerners, some of whom are Christians. Many in this camp want the U.S. to support the rebels directly.

But powerful forces are urging Washington to go in the opposite direction. Oil and gas interests are uncomfortable with any political constraints aimed their way, while key financial interests—including Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan—oppose further politicization of capital markets (already off bounds to companies doing business in Iran and Libya) in these precarious economic times.

America's key regional ally, Egypt, also opposes a U.S. tilt toward the mainly southern rebels, fearing the break-up of Sudan and a threat to Cairo's historical control over the Nile headwaters. To further complicate matters, some southern Sudanese intellectuals argue that support for the rebels can only increase the suffering of the Sudanese people without leading to a victory. Under these circumstances, they insist, the best southerners can hope for is negotiated autonomy—the sooner, the better.

How you position yourself in this multilayered debate turns on what political prism one sees the war through and how one assesses the prospects for a durable peace.

As the political pot was stirred in Washington this spring, the Khartoum regime sharply escalated its aerial bombardment and its ground operations throughout much of the south. This was part of an effort to expand the government's control of territories around the oil fields while shrinking the positions of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), which controls much of the southern third of the country.

However, the SPLA not only defended its positions, it struck back and captured a large government garrison that straddles the only rail link between north and south. Rebel spokespeople also claim they shut down two oil wells in fighting near the Bentiu fields in May, and they threaten to halt production in others. This,

say SPLA leaders, is where the war could be decided.

Meanwhile, though the Bush administration is resisting the push to intervene in capital markets, it pledged \$3 million to help the rebels strengthen their political infrastructure. The funds will, however, not flow directly to the SPLA but will rather go to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which is a broad coalition that brings the SPLA together with more than a dozen other opposition forces from all regions of the country. The aim of the NDA, which has opened new war fronts in the east and north, is the capture of power in Khartoum.

The appearance on the political stage of a multi-ethnic, national opposition raises the question of whether the Sudan civil war is to be approached as a narrowly north-south conflict or as a center-periphery problem that demands broader remedies. It is largely on this issue that two recent peace initiatives foundered: one promoted by Egypt and Libya that rebel leaders said was aimed at reconciliation, not political restructuring; the other, advanced by East African states and embracing a broader agenda, failed to win the necessary support from Khartoum.

Whether the Bush administration grasps the strategic implications of its aid package and is committing itself to a national rather than a regional solution is not clear. Mostly, it has sent mixed signals with respect to U.S. policy in Sudan. The failure to attract a credible peace envoy for

Sudan, after announcing an imminent appointment several months ago, underlines the confusion inside the administration on how to deal with this crisis and how much to invest in solving it.

The conflict in Sudan is considerably more complicated than the simple north-south, Muslim vs. Christian, Arab vs. African duality many of those now lobbying the administration present. Most northern Sudanese are Arabized Africans, not ethnic Arabs. Most southerners practice traditional religions, not Christianity, though missionaries operating there hope to change this. Many Muslims are deeply engaged in armed opposition to the regime, as well. The second largest armed group in the NDA after the SPLA is that of the Beja Congress, based among impoverished Muslims in northeastern Sudan, and there are others from the north in the opposition coalition.

Whether or not to shut companies operating in Sudan out of U.S. capital markets begs the main question that will face the Bush administration if it decisively commits itself to a pro-rebel course. The real issue is whether to support SPLA on its own, or to foster the growth and development of the NDA, with the SPLA at its core.

The former strategy would focus the administration on a north-south solution, with, at best, the potential for the short-term pacification of the country on an ethnic-federal basis similar to that adopted by neighboring Ethiopia in the 1990s and now threatening to unravel there. This

might halt the conflict in Sudan for the short-term, but it would set the stage for an African version of the kind of ethnic factionalism that still plagues the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

The fact that the first direct U.S. aid to the rebels is going to the NDA is a good sign. It should be complemented with limited capacity-building assistance coupled with quiet encouragement to the rebels to promote national forms of economic, social, and political mobilization and deployment within their own movement.

The SPLA rebels also have to integrate their southern operations more fully and organically into the NDA. There is also the need to build the NDA itself and to bring some northern forces and logistical operations into the south, instead of treating each region as a separate operation. This would position the NDA to enter peace talks as a viable national alternative to the regime. Such a strategy would constitute the most promising avenue to a peace that resolves the causes of this conflict. Otherwise, the deadly internal conflicts will resurface, as they repeatedly have over the past four decades.

*Dan Connell <dconnell@aol.com>  
is the author of Rethinking  
Revolution: New Strategies for  
Democracy & Social Justice: The  
Experiences of Eritrea, South  
Africa, Palestine & Nicaragua  
(Red Sea Press, 2001).*

## Who's Who In the Bush Administration

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>