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## Chad: Will a UN Presence on the Darfur Border Protect Civilians?

Facing a standoff with the Sudanese government over ways to stop attacks against civilians in Darfur, the United Nations Security Council sees an opportunity in eastern Chad to project force to Darfur's border in the name of protecting civilians in Chad from additional ethnically motivated attacks.

While such protection is laudable and necessary, the realities of deploying the multidimensional presence proposed by the UN Secretary-General may in fact pose unacceptable risks to civilians—and may arrive too late to protect those most at risk.

Ethnic attacks on non-Arab civilians in Darfur have had dire consequences for eastern Chad. Beyond hosting 230,000 refugees from Darfur, cross-border attacks from Darfur as well as internal ones have driven more than 100,000 non-Arab Chadians from their homes, creating a humanitarian crisis in eastern Chad that mirrors the crisis in Sudan. Concurrently, the Chadian government is consumed with combating rebels protesting presidential abuse of power. These rebels are supported by Sudan in retaliation for Chad's backing of Sudanese rebels, on whom Chad relies for its own security.

With violence and interference on both sides of the volatile border, and in the face of the failure to deploy UN peacekeepers in Darfur, humanitarian and human rights organizations have been calling for a concerted international response to the crisis on the Chadian side of the border. In his February report to the Security Council, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recommended the deployment of a "multidimensional presence" (note the careful avoidance of the term "peacekeeping force") to protect at-risk civilians, police refugee camps and sites where the internally displaced have gathered, and reduce tension along the border. President Déby of Chad, however, has rejected the proposal. Flush with tax revenues from oil extraction and confident after military victories against the rebels, he may not want the interference in internal political affairs that such a

force would involve. Current strategy in New York is focusing on consultations with Chad to accept a border presence, with the United States and many non-governmental organizations on the record supporting a robust force.

There is little question that the need for civilian protection is real and immediate. The initial threat posed by cross-border attacks by Sudanese militia groups has diminished as there are few villages on the border left to attack. In November 2006, however, internal attacks began in the southeast. Tens of thousands of non-Arabs forced to flee their homes accuse their Arab neighbors of conducting attacks similar to those carried out against non-Arabs on the border and in Darfur itself, looting homes and taking over pasture and water sources for their herds. While many villages in the area stand empty, others are still intact and very vulnerable. Future attacks seem inevitable: no police are available to protect these villages, and traditional chiefs no longer have contact with their Arab constituents, diminishing their capacity to mediate.

Deployment of a UN presence in eastern Chad along the border with Darfur, however, may create more problems for civilians than it would solve. Despite language in the proposal focusing on civilian protection, the Security Council seems most interested in breaking the impasse on Darfur by demonstrating to Sudan that the international community can project force to its border. In addition, a UN presence in the area would disrupt cross-border support for both Chadian and Sudanese rebels.

In the face of such provocation, it seems likely that the multidimensional presence would come under attack from

Sudan directly, through Sudan's Chadian proxies, and from Sudanese rebel groups. The force would be deployed explicitly to protect civilians, thus placing civilians directly in the line of fire, either during attacks on peacekeepers or as specific targets to test the resolve of the force, demonstrate its inability to protect civilians, and retaliate for attacks by peacekeepers. For civilians in the southeast, this would internationalize the attacks against them, which are now largely internal.

These risks would be mitigated if a large force with a robust mandate deployed all at once, with a substantial policing component to protect intact non-Arab villages from attack (and Arab villages from retaliation by non-Arabs), as well as refugee camps and internal displacement sites. Identifying enough willing troops, however, will be a major challenge for the UN, especially given the difficult physical and political environment for the mission. Calls for quick action, any action, to bring pressure on Sudan may push the Security Council and the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) to deploy a weak force, which would be vulnerable to attack and unable to protect civilians.

Some proponents of the border force are also calling on the UN to engage openly in facilitating changes to Chad's political system. President Déby recently changed the constitution to allow himself a run for a third term, and rebels cite political marginalization as the primary grievance fueling their fight. UN engagement would presumably reduce risk to civilians by bringing an end to rebel attacks on government-held towns and the fighting generally between government and rebel forces. It could also signal the UN's neutrality to the rebels, mitigating the risk of attacks on peacekeepers and thus the civilians they would protect. But a political process in Chad would not change perceptions of Sudan and Sudanese rebel groups about the threat of a UN force to their interests, and strong Sudanese support to Chadian rebel groups might increase their intransigence, regardless of political engagement by the UN.

The specter of the UN presence meddling in Chadian politics is the main source of President Déby's resistance to its deployment. Further, any mediation related to national political issues risks ignoring the factor currently responsible for the greatest threat to civilians: inter-ethnic conflict between Chadians in the east. While the conflict between the government and the rebels may be resolved through negotiation, particularly using French leverage, the latter issue requires other solutions with more immediate impact than that offered by the long, drawn-out process of deploying an external force.

While motivations vary widely for pushing for the deployment of a peacekeeping force in eastern Chad, its main purpose should be to protect civilians in eastern Chad from

further attack, support humanitarian assistance, and facilitate mediation between ethnic groups, particularly Arab and non-Arab communities in the southeast, in order to stop attacks altogether and pave the way home for the displaced. To realize this ambitious agenda, preparatory steps are required immediately: a clear assessment of risk to communities, refugee camps, and internal displacement sites in the east; training and support of Chadian police forces with rapid deployment to vulnerable communities; and support for traditional leaders to begin local mediation efforts.

These are steps that the UN and others can and must take now to protect civilians, while negotiations continue on the deployment of a formal force. Those involved, however, must remember that Sudan will regard any deployment as a threat, putting civilians, whether from crossfire or direct attacks, in harm's way.

#### **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

- ❑ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) spearhead an immediate risk assessment of attacks on and displacement of civilians in eastern Chad, focusing particularly on areas of ethnic tension between Arab and non-Arab communities in the southeast and Tama and Zaghawa communities around Guéréda.
- ❑ The UN Resident Coordinator work with the government of Chad and potential partners such as the European Union to develop and implement a plan to train, support, and deploy police forces as soon as possible to eastern Chad, based on results of the risk assessment.
- ❑ OCHA use its recently established presence in the southeast to marshal support for traditional leaders in their efforts to stop attacks on civilians, particularly by reaching out to Arab communities.
- ❑ France take the lead in coordinating negotiations on the border force, while considering the possibility of an immediate protective deployment for villages in the southeast.
- ❑ The UN Security Council authorize a robust border force with substantial policing capacity for at least one year, in a framework largely acceptable to both President Déby and Chadian rebel groups, that can reach full force quickly to provide the maximum show of strength possible and respond decisively to attacks on the force itself and on civilians.

*Advocate Rick Neal visited Chad from February 25 to March 4, 2007; Peacekeeping Associate Erin Weir is based in Washington, D.C.*