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No quick-fix in Sudan

Africa

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As the extent of the atrocities in western Sudan becomes apparent, the scramble to find a quick-fix solution begins. The US Congress unanimously voted to call the crisis "genocide". Sanctions are being considered and fact-finding missions undertaken, and Tony Blair has warned that military intervention cannot be ruled out.

Britain's attempts at "constructive engagement" with a fundamentalist government formerly backed by Saddam Hussein and allied to Osama Bin Laden have been replaced by a more robust stance as it becomes apparent that attacks against civilians continue unabated and that Khartoum is deeply complicit.

Last week Gen. Sir Mike Jackson, the UK's chief of the general staff, suggested Britain could deploy 5,000 troops to defend Darfur's bedraggled refugees from further attacks by militias - causing a howl of protest from Khartoum. But military involvement in Africa's largest country is not easy. Logistically, it would need to be on a completely different scale from the UK's recent endeavours in Sierra Leone and Kosovo. Any intervention would need to be swift and robust and with

unanimous international support.

Yet in the post-Iraq climate there is widespread suspicion of Anglo-US motives in another oil-exporting country. Khartoum remains confident of evading international condemnation. Having been voted on to the UN human rights commission post-Abu Ghraib - despite a widely leaked UNHRC report describing a "reign of terror" - it has realized the power of the anti-US backlash and talks of a Western conspiracy against Islam. Blair's backing for the US cruise missile strike on Sudan in 1998 (for alleged chemical weapons production) lends plausibility to these claims, though subsequently British policy concentrated on resolving Sudan's internal problems politically.

Mixed messages were sent to Khartoum, which believed it could do what it liked in northern Sudan in exchange for concessions to end decades of conflict in the south. Mediators encouraged Khartoum's attempts at a military solution for Darfur by insisting they wouldn't allow the insurgents "to bomb their way to the peace talks".

The resultant catastrophe in western Sudan leaves the southern deal on the verge of collapse.

In a chilling repetition of the events in Darfur, militia attacks have created a humanitarian crisis across Upper Nile, and in the far south the Lord's Resistance Army is again massacring civilians. In both cases, Khartoum's army and helicopter gunships are reportedly involved.

A cease-fire in the Nuba mountains, enforced by the internationally supervised Joint Military Commission, gives the impression that a few hundred troops would be sufficient to enforce security. There are numerous reasons why the cease-fire has held in the Nuba mountains, an area previously subject to Darfur-like atrocities, but few involve the JMC. The fighting ended in early 2002 mainly because 40,000 government troops were redeployed to secure the oil fields in south Sudan - in direct violation of the cease-fire - before the monitors arrived.

This will change if the current peace deal is enforced: Khartoum insists Shariah law will be applied across north Sudan, the main reason the Nuba took up arms. A desire to "accentuate the positive" means no one has explained this crucial fact - a worrying concern for

peacekeeping operations predicated on this model.

Khartoum is desperate to avoid a holistic solution to the crisis. An outline deal recently agreed for south Sudan envisages a UN peacekeeping operation but there was no progress on a formal cease-fire before the focus shifted to western Sudan. Last week a pact was signed between the western rebels and insurgents from eastern Sudan. As Khartoum has a military alliance with Ethiopia and blames Eritrea for the Darfur insurgency, there are risks of a resumption of the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

As rains prevent humanitarian access, the death toll has already reached 50,000 and is set to rise dramatically. Seldom has there been a clearer moral case for intervention - yet Britain has never been in a weaker position to act. The one threat Khartoum would take seriously, military force, is scarcely credible. Even were there widespread support for military involvement, tens of thousands of troops could be poured into Darfur before there was any measurable improvement in conditions.

Peter Moszynski is a writer and aid worker with 25 years' experience in Sudan.