

# Sudan's crisis: The politics of 'genocide'

The Rwandan government said Oct. 18 it was prepared to send several hundred more troops to Sudan's western Darfur region as part of the African Union's (AU) contingent of peacekeepers in the country. Although violence has rocked the region for more than 19 months, only since July have major international players - the United States, the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, Britain and a host of nongovernmental organizations - seriously woken up to the estimated 50,000 deaths, mainly of ethnic African civilians, that have resulted from raids against Darfuri villages by pro-government Arab militias, known as Janjaweed. Despite the near-universal condemnation, only one actor - the United States - has gone so far as to call the actions of the Khartoum government and the Janjaweed "genocide," though the EU came close with its "tantamount to genocide" label.

The UN World Food Programme, meanwhile, has said the crisis is humanitarian and certainly deserves attention, but that it is far more contained and manageable than other crises in Africa and elsewhere. The World Health Organization has avoided taking an official stance on Darfur, though one regional director, Hussein Gezairy, said in an interview with Islam Online that the situation does

November presidential elections. Put under the analytical microscope, a broader geopolitical angle emerges. Both are decidedly in the mix. It appears Washington first tried to curry favour with African-American voters by adopting the stance strongly promoted by the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC).

CBC Chairman Elijah E. Cummings met with US Secretary of State Colin Powell on July 23 to present the CBC case for labelling the crisis as "genocide," the most serious charge that can be levelled in humanitarian crises, and usually is seen as a call to action. On Sept. 9, Powell officially called the crisis genocide, and President George W Bush then did the same. When the CBC made its pitch to Powell in July, polls showed African-American voters favoured Democratic challenger Sen. John Kerry almost eight to one over Bush (79 percent to 10 percent).

If the Bush administration did hope to win over African-American voters by coming out so strongly against Khartoum, the ploy failed. Poll numbers released for the first two weeks of October show African-American voters favour Kerry over Bush even more now (85 percent to 5 percent, with 10 percent undecided). Fortunately for the Bush administration, that failure cost little, though the Darfur issue remains important to many within the

Democrats - is convenient on a number of levels.

To begin, not that many voters care about the crisis, and those who do - mainly Christian evangelical groups - most likely support the condemnation of the Khartoum government. Also, despite the international community's reluctance to join Washington's genocide chorus, few seem interested in openly denouncing the US position. In short, almost everyone involved is certain the situation in Darfur is seri-

could have been much tougher, Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir acknowledged. Finally, only Khartoum - which cannot afford to turn its back on the United States, lest Washington actively support the various opposition/rebel movements in the country - appears upset by the unilateral US position.

There is, however, another reason for the US stance. Beyond the here-and-now need for domestic politicking, the Bush administration's position has a much stronger

complicating the situation, negotiations that brought peace between the SPLM/A and the government have since stalled, and opposition political groups such as the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) have openly begun negotiations with traditional Sudanese enemy, Eritrea.

No one has yet come out in direct support of the SLA and JEM, but most opposition and rebel groups have said they are sympathetic to their struggle against the Janjaweed militias. In response, Al-

Bashir blamed the NDA for attempting a coup against his government, accused the SPLM/A of being in league with the JEM and EDF, and accused the JEM and EDF of committing atrocities of their own. By playing the nationalist card, Al-Bashir is attempting to diminish regional support for opposition groups - mainly from Eritrea - and bolster his power base among the Sudanese people.

Despite his efforts, Al-Bashir's government is being pressed on multiple fronts. Eventually, something will have to give. Al-Bashir is enough of a US ally to prevent Washington from actively promoting - or aiding - his overthrow, at least for now. Despite its past support of Al-Qaeda and a sordid human rights track record, Sudan has been relatively reliable in eliminating Al-Qaeda havens on its soil and has made significant - if incomplete - progress in resolving the

Islamist ally of Al-Bashir and now his most vocal critic, knew of bin Laden's presence, but did nothing. Finally, under pressure from Washington, the Sudanese government asked bin Laden to leave in 1996, which led to his entrenchment in Afghanistan.

The bow to US wishes on bin Laden aside, Washington cannot be content that a regime such as Al-Bashir's is leading an important region in the war on terrorism. That said, Washington is unlikely to back an underground coup

attempt - the potential negative impact of failure is far too great. If an internal opposition group such as the NDA appeared set to overthrow the regime, Washington might not hesitate to back the group monetarily and/or logistically. Coincidentally, perhaps, on Oct. 19 more than \$20 million worth of US government contracts were awarded to American firms to operate in Darfur in support of the AU's mission.

Among the firms cited was Dynacorp, which operates a security mission on behalf of the US government in Afghanistan, though the company declined to specify its mission in Darfur. However, placing a group of potentially armed civilian contractors with close ties to the US government in Darfur raises eyebrows, at least. No opposition figure has emerged as a viable alternative to Al-Bashir, making it difficult to assess whether opposition groups are

*Africa* *the F. Post*  
*22/10/04*  
**Among the firms cited was Dynacorp, which operates a security mission on behalf of the US government in Afghanistan, though the company declined to specify its mission in Darfur. However, placing a group of potentially armed civilian contractors with close ties to the US government in Darfur raises eyebrows, at least. No opposition figure has emerged as a viable alternative to Al-Bashir, making it difficult to assess whether opposition groups are close to removing him from power.**

Online that the situation does not amount to ethnic cleansing or genocide. Amnesty International told Stratfor it is abstaining from using the "G" word and will await the findings of an independent UN commission before passing judgment. That commission has been given until January 2005 to submit its report.

In light of these other, more measured responses, the US position on Darfur seems extreme at first glance. On closer examination, however, it points to domestic politicking in the run-up to the

tant to many within the African-American community.

It should be noted that the Bush administration is not alone in attempting to use Darfur for political gain. On Oct. 17, Kerry parroted State Department condemnations of Khartoum, and further said that as president he would take decisive action to stop the genocide. Kerry, in fact, went so far as to accuse Bush of taking "toothless" action on the crisis. When closely examined, the US position on Darfur - whether coming from the Republicans or the

ous, but they disagree on the severity - and, of course, on how to stop the killings.

Furthermore, demonizing Khartoum's actions does not require any follow on action by the United States. Washington can condemn the situation from the comfort of Capitol Hill but has no obligation to step in and provide military assets to halt the crisis. U.S. action in Darfur will be taken only within the context of the United Nations - whose resolution on Darfur

geopolitical significance - laying the moral framework for an eventual overthrow of Al-Bashir. A host of rebel forces are pushing hard against the Al-Bashir regime: The Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA) and Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in the west, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Equatorial Defense Force (EDF) in the south, and various Eritrean-backed rebel groups in the east. Further

progress in resolving the decades-long North-South civil war. However, African leaders, the United States and its allies labelled Sudan a Saddam Hussein supporter and the government remains on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Sudan's support for Al-Qaeda goes back more than a decade. Osama bin Laden lived in Sudan in the early 1990s and reportedly operated militant training camps within the country. Both Al-Bashir and Hassan Al-Turabi, once an

whether opposition groups are close to removing him from power. Over time, however, the various groups, parties and militias could find it in their best interests to unite against the regime - with or without foreign support. In the event of an overthrow attempt, the United States likely would choose a side, and based on the allegations it is levying against Khartoum, it seems less and less likely Washington would be in Al-Bashir's corner.

(Courtesy Kuwait Times)