

Crisis in Chad: implications for the EU

Just when the EUFOR Chad/CAR operation was about to be deployed, a major crisis has erupted in Chad, with several thousand rebels attacking N'Djamena and threatening President Deby's regime. This is a serious challenge for the EU after months of efforts expended gathering relevant troops and equipment. The current instability, which has forced many citizens to flee the capital, could also impact on the security of civilian populations in the Eastern region where EUFOR was expected to be deployed. This makes European troops even more essential to protect refugees and IDPs, but the deployment will need to be backed up by strong political vision to contribute, through reinforced EU diplomatic mediation, to a resolution of the current political and security crisis.

Background

The current crisis in Chad has not taken experts by surprise. It is the culmination of a political war that has been simmering for years between Idriss Deby and those who have felt deceived or disappointed by him for not sharing political power or redistributing national resources, and who have found allies and support in Sudan.

In the last few years, despite warnings from experts and watchdogs, very little has been done to address simultaneously Chad's internal political crisis and its links with the crisis in Darfur, which has on its own concentrated most of the international diplomatic and media attention in the region.

Yet Darfur has been a refuge for opponents of the Chadian political regime since the 1980s,¹ whose presence has created serious tensions with local communities over land and water. The location of the Zaghawa ethnic group and subgroups across the Chad-Sudan border has favoured constant back-and-forth movements.

Under political pressure and led by President Sarkozy and Foreign Affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner, France has been trying to find a way to address the Darfur humanitarian crisis. Since it proved difficult to intervene directly in Darfur because of objections from the Sudanese government, one alternative to protect civilians and to support humanitarian efforts was to act on the margin of Darfur, i.e. in the neighbouring region of Chad where around 240,000 refugees had fled the conflict-prone areas of Darfur.² This plan seems to have been conceived with little consideration to its possible internal implications in Chadian politics and seemed to be based on the assumption that the Eastern humanitarian crisis had nothing to do with what was happening in N'Djamena.

¹ Interview with Roland Marchal, CERI, 30 January 2008.

² UNHCR figures are about 235,000 refugees as of 31 December 2007 in Eastern Chad. This figure does not include IDPs. <http://www.reliefweb.int>

The current crisis

This time, three main rebel groups, temporarily united since last December, have attacked N'Djamena. Their leaders, who used to work for or fight together with Deby in the past, know him well and would vie among themselves for power in the event of Deby being overthrown. Given the fluidity and the shifting nature of alliances amongst armed groups and their leaders in Chad, the sustainability of this alliance and of the current balance of forces is highly unpredictable.

Mahamat Nouri, a Gorane and Deby's former Defence Minister, is the leader of the UFDD (Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement)³. Timan Erdimi (RFC – Rassemblement des Forces pour le Changement), from the Zaghawa Bideyat subclan, is Deby's nephew and former adviser.

Abdelwahid Aboud Makaye (UFDD F – Fondamentale), a dissident from UFDD who set up its 'Arab wing' and who is a former member of the FUC (Front Uni pour le Changement) was already involved in the attack against the capital in April 2006. Approximately 3,000 rebels have fought against almost the same number of more heavily equipped Chadian armed forces.

Fighting between Chadian forces and opposition groups gathered in Sudan had been going on for several months, increasing tensions between the two countries. It was reported that the rebels entered Chad on 29 January despite Chadian air raids into Sudan.⁴ All the rebels' movements have been monitored by the French military forces (as confirmed by French Defence minister Hervé Morin) which have not intervened directly⁵ but were accused by a spokesman for the rebels on 3 February of having deployed troops around the presidential palace to deter an attack.⁶

Why now?

The balance of power between Deby and his divided opponents had remained more or less the same since 2006 until it was announced that an EU military operation would be launched in areas populated by refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in order to ensure the security of civilians and of humanitarian aid workers. The EU operation was perceived by many as an international legitimisation of Deby's grip on power: strong warnings were issued by rebel leaders against the EU troops,⁷ humanitarian agencies were unconvinced of the 'neutrality' of the force and some EU Member States were concerned about an alleged French hidden agenda aimed at continuing Paris's unconditional support to Deby while launching the EU operation, no matter what the state of play was in terms of Chad's internal politics.

³ Crisis Group report, *Vers le retour de la guerre ?*, 1^{er} juin 2006, pp.14-15. Brother in arms of Hissen Habré, Nouri then rallied to Deby after his *coup* in 1990. He was then ambassador to Saudi Arabia until 2006 when he became involved in the rebel movement.

⁴ www.rfi.fr, 'Violents combats entre l'armée et les rebelles', 1 February 2008.

⁵ Hervé Morin stated that a direct military intervention in that case would not fit into the military agreement signed between Chad and France. *La Tribune*, 3 February 2008.

⁶ www.tv5.org, Interview with Oussman Hisssein, 3 February 2008. This information has not been confirmed by France.

⁷ 'Rebels warn of "total war" if EU force is not neutral', www.irinnews.org, 14 September 2007.

For some in the armed groups who want to continue their struggle against Deby, the EU operation was seen as a way of indirectly reinforcing him. For troublemakers in Darfur, the 12 month-long EU mission, possibly leading to a UN deployment, was not welcome as it announced more international control in the area. For Deby himself, who has always opposed any UN peacekeeping mission in Chad, this crisis is going to force the international community to revisit the terms of its engagement and probably to delay it. On the ground, the longer the deployment of EUFOR CHAD/CAR is postponed, the less its impact will be, since very little can be achieved during the rainy season which will begin in June and last until October.

Implications for the EU

In the short term, the deployment of EUFOR CHAD/CAR is being postponed officially because of security risks and logistical constraints, but the current state of play raises serious political issues.

If Deby loses power, the acceptance of the deployment by a new Chadian leadership, some members of which have close ties with violent armed groups in Darfur and Khartoum, will have to be renegotiated. If Deby manages to hang onto power, the security conditions in the intervention area will probably be reviewed in the light of last week's events and some adaptations in the planning of the operation may have to be envisaged.

In any case, continuing the deployment while ignoring what has happened in N'Djamena in the last five days would put EU soldiers in a very awkward position and may well jeopardise not only the whole operation but the image of the EU as a peacekeeping actor in Africa. The deployment should be put on hold until it is clear who controls the leadership in Chad and, in the meantime, contacts should be established and maintained by EU diplomats with all the protagonists of the crisis.

Following France's first diplomatic initiatives to intervene in Eastern Chad, it took the EU a year to negotiate the generation of military forces in order to launch its operation in Chad. This has implied endless meetings to seek a compromise with reluctant Member States and to convince others to participate in the force. The agreement of EU Member States seemed to be based on the idea that EUFOR CHAD/CAR intervention was disconnected from the French military presence and its political support to Deby's regime.

One may wonder whether this assumption has become irrelevant now that Deby's legitimacy is being challenged again from inside. These political uncertainties and contradictions in the diagnosis of the Chadian political crisis have existed since the launching of EUFOR and are now being exposed by the confrontation between Deby and the rebels. No matter how the crisis ends, the EU will have no choice but to consider with whom it is preferable to deal with in Chad. The EU can no longer avoid incorporating an internal Chadian dimension into the definition of the final political objectives underpinning the deployment of EUFOR CHAD/CAR.

This joint analytical exercise is a delicate one, especially for France which seems determined to intervene in order to stabilise the country. In the current context, Paris would benefit from integrating its interests and objectives in Chad into an international or European framework.

What is needed now is not necessarily a review of the current mandate of EUFOR CHAD/CAR, which would most probably take several months, since it will have to be based on a political consensus regarding the position to adopt *vis-à-vis* the Chadian leadership, whoever that turns out to be. EU Member States need to find a common position on this issue and engage in diplomatic mediation to contribute to an acceptable compromise aimed at solving internal Chadian politics and at guaranteeing that political and civic rights are respected. Further EU engagement could then be negotiated in a UN framework. Alleged Sudanese support to the rebels in N'Djamena and on the border with Darfur is a clear signal of a spillover of the Darfur crisis into Chad, and isolated European Members States will probably not be able to address it. What is needed again and more than ever is a co-ordinated response from the international community in the framework of the UN that addresses linkages between the situation in Chad, conflicts in Sudan, state weakness in the Central African Republic⁸ and the factors fuelling the fragility that continues to undermine Eastern Congo and Northern Uganda and which is linked to Sudanese internal conflicts. The EU should then define what contribution it is able to provide to support African peacemakers' genuine efforts, if indeed these exist.

⁸ Crisis Group Report, *Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State*, 13 December 2007.