

# PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN

## BRIEFING

MAY 2000 #2

### Overview

#### **The Ethio-Eritrean War, the NDA and Eastern Sudan**

The eruption of the Ethio-Eritrean war on 12 May and the collapse of Eritrean forces on the western front in the following week had a dramatic impact on the war in eastern Sudan.

But more politically significant is the implication of the Ethiopian offensive for the politics of the NDA. Suddenly the lines of supply and rear bases of the NDA forces in the east vanished. The situation was not helped by a reported armed confrontation between SPLA units (which had been withdrawn from the front a month earlier and were stationed near Haicota in western Eritrea) and advancing Ethiopian army units. Following this, the SPLA withdrew to a location north of Kassala. Redolent of the incidents in 1991, when SPLA forces continued to fight on the side of the defeated Dergue against the victorious EPRDF for two months after the former Ethiopian government had surrendered, this incident has soured SPLA-Ethiopian relations and jeopardised the security of the NDA forces in western Eritrea.

In Asmara, NDA leaders are under severe pressure to take sides in favour of Eritrea. Some have made public statements in favour of Eritrea. To date, Ethiopia has not pressured the NDA to take a line. Confusion on this within the NDA may hamper the prospects of the NDA developing a united front for peace negotiations.

The NDA front in eastern Sudan cannot be expected to last. Already by 20 May there were reports of some NDA units surrendering to the Sudan Government. There are also indications that the Kenyans and the Ugandans have approached the Ethiopian government with offers to facilitate the safe passage of disarmed NDA troops from the trouble area (their primary concern is with the SPLA). At the time of writing (24 May) the situation is extremely volatile and small incidents could have serious consequences.

At the very minimum, the Ethiopian offensive has gravely weakened the voices of those within the NDA who insist on no compromise with the Government and continued armed struggle.

It is important to note that the Sudanese factor has inhibited Arab countries, especially Libya and Egypt, following their natural inclination and supporting Eritrea in the conflict. Their primary concern in the region is with Sudan, and Sudan's neutrality in the Ethio-Eritrean war, have led to a cautious neutrality in the Arab world. This could change if Sudanese become casualties in the war.

## **Bashir's Challenge**

President Bashir survived the critical week after the last showdown with Turabi in early May. But this still unresolved conflict remains his primary threat. His basic plan is to hang on until October when the elections will, he hopes, provide new legitimacy. The ongoing unresolved conflict has partially paralysed the government and prevented it from taking immediate military advantage of the disarray of the NDA on the eastern border.

Bashir may have the executive, at national and regional level, on his side, but it is unclear whether he can actually use this executive to deliver any serious action against Turabi. This is not 1971, when President Nimeiri could use the army to crack down on his Communist former allies, and then seek new coalitions to rebuild his power base. In those days the army was a national institution and an independent power base. The same held for the civil service. Today, neither are independent, and it would be exceptionally difficult for Bashir to use the army and security services against Turabi and his followers. More likely than a violent conflict is the simple paralysis of the system as army officers, party leaders and government officials simply find ways of not carrying out their orders. At all times, the level of efficiency and discipline in the Sudanese executive (military and civilian) when carrying out difficult orders is uncertain. This has allowed many unpopular measures to be quietly subverted by apathy during the last ten years. It may yet save the Islamists from an internal civil war—but at the cost of a government paralysed from top to bottom.

Bashir's hope is that a deal with the NDA under Libyan and Egyptian auspices may save his position. The ascendancy of Ethiopia, and its need to maintain good relations with the Arab world, also strengthen the possibilities for this initiative bearing fruit.

Bashir has formally written to NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani proposing a national dialogue conference. The significance of this is not the proposal, which has been on the table for almost a year under the LEI, but the readiness of Bashir to write directly to the NDA Chairman. The NDA Chairman did not reject the offer.

The leaders of the Sudan Government peace committee (such as Nafie Ali Nafie) appear to be content to allow the IGAD process to die of neglect. Their analysis at the moment appears to be that the SPLA is being overtaken by events; that it is internally more divided than ever and that it is unable to set the peace agenda with the Egyptians and Libyans. The Government is therefore hoping that postponing progress at IGAD will not only kill off the IGAD initiative completely, but also leave the SPLA as a minor player both internally and internationally. This is a miscalculation.

## **Turabi: Down but not Out**

Turabi's failed to strike back after Bashir's action against him early May. Does this reflect weakness or patience? Certainly, the struggle is far from over. Turabi is not afraid of going to prison, or even of instigating some levels of violence to save himself and his cause. This is a fight to the political death, but it has more rounds to go.

The regional dimension to the split will emerge in the longer term as an important factor. A 'Black Book' has been produced and circulated in Khartoum, that claims to reveal the extent of Northern Riverain domination of the Sudanese state and the systematic exclusion of westerners (from Kordofan and Darfur). Most of its focus is the post-1989 period. The statistics it produces are impressive.

The Black Book appears to be the work of westerners within the NIF. It goes so far as to name Daud Bolad as a martyr. Bolad was a Darfurian and a former NIF student leader who

later defected to the SPLA, who led the doomed SPLA incursion into Darfur in 1991, was captured by government forces and then disappeared. (The encounter was personal. The leader of his captors and governor of Darfur at the time, Tayeb Mohamed ‘Sikha’ was Bolad’s former bodyguard and close colleague when Bolad was the Islamist leader of the Khartoum University Students’ Union.)

One factor to be noted is the history of the NIF management of dissension within its ranks. In many regards the NIF is akin to a Leninist vanguard party. But its treatment of dissent is completely different from leftwing movements, which tend to purge dissidents, using violence and defamation. The NIF has never publicly attacked its dissenters and very rarely used violence against them (Bolad is an exception). On the contrary, it usually maintains personal relations and keeps a line of communication open in the hope that it can entice its wayward member back to the fold.

## **SPLM**

May 16 is SPLA Day: the anniversary of the launching of the rebellion. In recent years the celebrations have been modest, but this year the anniversary passed with little comment from the leadership. Dr Garang made a speech in which he praised the successes of the SPLA in the last year. He said, ‘On the military side, we continue to retain and maintain the initiative. Over the last 12 months we have successfully defended all our military gains in all the fronts, in both South and North. We have not lost any territory to the enemy, while we have added substantially to the liberated areas, especially in the Eastern Sudan.’

However, writing for a different audience—this time Cairo’s semi-official newspaper *Al Ahram*’s 17 May edition, Garang chose not to mention the anniversary at all, and nor did he repeat his claims of military victories in the East to an audience that might have been well-informed about the recent loss of Garora. However the SPLA C-in-C felt obliged to rebut allegations of dependence on outsiders: ‘Where accusations about American hegemony are concerned, they are refuted by facts. The SPLM never mortgaged its will to anyone, and it does not say one thing in Cairo and another in Asmara, Washington or Pretoria. The SPLM wants a new Sudan, a just peace and a voluntary unity. It does not make sense that we should have been fighting for nearly two decades to achieve the goals of others.’

The reason for the low-key celebration is undoubtedly that May 2000 marks the 17<sup>th</sup> anniversary, indicating that this war has lasted longer than its predecessor—something the SPLA leadership vowed it would never allow to happen.

Financial pressure on the SPLM is growing. Its former backers, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda and Zimbabwe, are all tied up in their own conflicts. Nigeria’s financial support has visible strings attached, which Garang is reluctant to accept. In early May, Dr John Garang led a large SPLM delegation to Abuja. President Obasanjo tried to arrange a meeting between the SPLM leader and President Bashir; but Dr Garang refused. The delegation was kept waiting in Abuja for more than a week with nothing to do before moving on to Cairo. The delegation returned to Abuja later in May but again left empty-handed.

The SPLM leadership has appealed to the Arab world for understanding. Practically speaking it is concerned with finances.

## **The LEI and IGAD**

The LEI has received support from Nigeria, which is pushing for a rapid move towards a settlement. The Kenyans are reportedly unhappy with the SPLM for canceling the May round

of IGAD talks. It is possible that Ethiopia may soften its customary suspicion of Egypt, in order to open a window to the Arab world.

The SPLM has changed its position on the merger of the LEI and IGAD. Formerly it was insisting that the initiative for merging the talks should come from the mediators themselves (this was asking the impossible). Now it has adopted the view, more widely accepted among the NDA parties, that the NDA Committee for the Comprehensive Political Solution should take the initiative on this. As a result we can expect to see members of this Committee visiting Nairobi with a view to proposing a joint meeting of the NDA Committee, the IGAD Secretariat for Peace in Sudan and a representative of the LEI (which has yet to form a secretariat). The SPLM precondition for supporting that is that the consolidated initiative should adopt the IGAD Declaration of Principles, in line with the NDA resolutions made in Kampala in December 1999.

However, the Chairman's 16 May speech (aimed primarily at a Southern audience) described IGAD as 'Track 1' and coordination with the NDA as 'Track 2' in the peace process.