

# **PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN SUDAN**

## **BRIEFING**

**NOVEMBER 2000**

### **Overview**

The Sudan peace process remains painfully slow and complicated. The last month has seen a dramatic new development—the NDA military raid on Kassala—which has been interpreted in different ways. This briefing is very cautious in attributing greater cohesion to the NDA on account of the raid, and argues that it does not reflect a major change in the balance of power. Meanwhile, Khartoum politics remains deadlocked, with an internal leadership vacuum. Nonetheless, President Bashir is proceeding with an election that is increasingly meaningless. The IGAD peace process has not died, though its chances of achieving progress seem remote.

### **The NDA-Asmara Initiative**

Subsequent to the meeting between President Omer al Bashir and NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani, the NDA-Asmara peace initiative proceeded rapidly. The NDA Leadership Council met in Asmara on 22-24 October. It resolved to proceed with seeking a unified peace forum. It also considered and endorsed an Eritrean outline proposal for a comprehensive peace deal, and requested the Eritrean government to seek a written response from Khartoum to the proposal.

On 2 November a high level delegation from Eritrea visited Khartoum for a three day visit, to present Eritrea's proposal for the facilitation of a comprehensive deal. This proposal included the following components:

1. Formation of a comprehensive transitional government, with the aim of achieving voluntary unity and adopting a new constitution.
2. The transitional government will have Omer al Bashir as President and John Garang as Prime Minister.
3. The transitional government will be guided by principles of diversity, equality of all citizens, human rights and political freedoms.
4. An interim constitution will be put in place, with all parties represented.
5. At the end of the transitional period a referendum on self-determination will be exercised in southern Sudan.
6. Finally, once an agreement is reached on points 1- 5 above the parties shall announce cessation of hostilities.

Asmara proposed that negotiations be conducted with observers from IGAD member states, Libya, Egypt and other countries acceptable to the parties.

The Eritrean visit to Khartoum had mixed results. The Sudan Government formally welcomed the initiative, but in fact appears to have rebuffed it. Apparently, Khartoum did not provide a written response. To add insult to injury, the government launched a large military offensive in eastern Sudan to coincide with the visit, and succeeded in recapturing the town of Hamush Koreb, the largest town held by the NDA.

The NDA Leadership Council meeting also illustrated the lack of preparedness of the NDA for serious negotiations at this point. The NDA has not yet finalised key documents that will be necessary for sustained peace talks, including its position on interim arrangements.

## **The Kassala Raid and its Implications**

The attack on Hamush Koreb was the second occasion in less than five weeks in which the Government had used the occasion of an Eritrean government visit to Khartoum to mount an offensive in the east. This insult appears to have been the spark for the NDA military attack on Kassala, launched on 8 November.

This attack was undoubtedly following a blueprint that had been laid down some months before, and possibly contemplated in August (see September briefing). It was carried out largely by SPLA forces, but also with other contingents including SAF and the Beja, under the command of Pagan Amum, who also serves as Secretary General of the NDA. It appears to have caught the government almost entirely by surprise. The NDA forces overwhelmed the government garrisons in and around Kassala, capturing 13 tanks and large quantities of other equipment, and withdrawing in an orderly fashion after fierce fighting. On their withdrawal, the NDA forces remained in key positions close to the town.

Most observers suspect that the operation was carried out with the consent and involvement of Eritrea.

What are the implications of this attack?

1. *Military.* The NDA forces in Eastern Sudan have demonstrated their military capacity in a very dramatic way. Government claims that the NDA in the east was ‘annihilated’ have been shown to be false. However, the heavy reliance on SPLA troops has also indicated the NDA dependence on SPLA for military action.

The NDA could not have held Kassala against government counter-attack. Its rapid withdrawal was not a defeat: it had actually achieved its military objectives in a remarkably short period of time. Can it repeat the victory? This seems improbable, despite Cdr Pagan’s announcement that the NDA will henceforth be ready to attack northern cities in a similar way. The government will not be off-guard again, and there are few geographical locations in eastern Sudan in which comparable surprise attacks on major targets could be launched.

2. *Eritrea-Sudan relations.* Eritrea had twice been insulted by Khartoum’s offensives while its peace delegations were in town. The NDA counter-attack was a means of saying that Khartoum does not have all the cards, and that the Eritrean role must be taken seriously.

3. *NDA-Asmara peace initiative.* The raid was a high-risk move. It was undertaken when it looked as though the NDA-Asmara initiative had been killed by Khartoum's intransigence. It may revive the initiative, but not immediately. It may kill it off altogether. Certainly, there is no prospect of further government-NDA talks until after the election.
4. *Within Khartoum.* The raid strengthens the hardliners within the government. It also momentarily brings Bashir and Turabi closer together. The attack is a crisis for the credibility of President Bashir, and he has responded with strong rhetoric. But such is the fluidity of Khartoum politics that its outcome cannot easily be predicted either way. However, the idea that Khartoum is close to 'meltdown' or 'implosion' seems improbable.

In the short term, we can expect a crackdown on 'fifth columnists' in Khartoum and eastern Sudan, and the security forces will be directing their attention principally at suspected NDA and SPLA sympathisers, taking their attention away from Turabi's supporters.
5. *Within the NDA.* The raid has momentarily unified the NDA leadership, not least because of the resolve that has been collectively demonstrated. However, the raid has not removed the divisions within the alliance, and may even help to deepen them. The following points should be considered:
  - (i) NDA Chairman Mulana Mohamed Osman al Mirghani was in the UK when the raid took place. He said that it was intended to boost the peace process. But he also stated that such actions were the responsibility of the NDA Leadership Council rather than the NDA Chairman personally.
  - (ii) The northern parties in the NDA tend to this reading. In parallel to the implicit message from Asmara, their interpretation tends to be, 'the Sudan Government must now take us more seriously in the peace negotiations.' These parties are very concerned that they will lose popular support if there is more fighting in the east, especially if there is civilian loss of life.
  - (iii) NDA statements concerning military aspects of the raid have come exclusively from Yassir Arman, SPLM/A spokesman in Asmara. The raid will be interpreted by the SPLM leadership to mean that 'victory is just around the corner' and that the military option should be pursued. Some fear that the SPLA motive behind the Kassala raid was exactly the opposite to the reason stated by al Mirghani, namely that it was to sabotage the peace process.
  - (iv) The SPLA leadership is now better able to fend off internal criticism from Southern nationalists. The raid can be portrayed as a key victory that justifies keeping SPLA forces in northern Sudan, and maintaining the alliance with the northern parties.
  - (v) The NDA inside Khartoum was caught off guard and is deeply ambivalent about the raid. It is keeping a very low profile. The government has started chasing 'fifth columnists', especially Southerners and Nuba. For the NDA inside, the raid poses a big challenge: how can an opposition simultaneously pursue a strategy of armed struggle while also seeking change through civil politics? The government is encouraging Kassala residents to take court cases against the internal NDA leadership, claiming damages for property destroyed and lives lost in the raid.

6. *Among the general populace in Sudan.* The raid is a setback to the wider expectations of the northern Sudanese populace that a settlement can be achieved peacefully. There were high hopes that there would be a return to exclusively civilian politics, and Cdr Pagan's statement about future attacks on northern cities was not well-received by the wider Sudanese public.

The raid also has an important racial dimension that may become very divisive. The government has been clear in placing the blame on the SPLA, and subsequent to the raid, there have been credible reports of serious abuses against Southerners and Nuba (and other black Sudanese) in eastern Sudan. The element of racial sentiment should not be underestimated. The Kassala raid may play in northern Sudanese popular accounts as 'While we [northern] Sudanese want peace, the Southerners and Nuba are bringing war to our land.'

7. *Among the international community.* One reading of the raid is that it is a dramatic demonstration of NDA resolve, unity and capacity, while also indicating the military weakness of the government. This assessment should be treated with great caution. The Kassala raid has strengthened the forces opposed to peace on both sides. It has complicated the task of the international community.

In short, the Kassala raid was a high-risk venture at this stage in the political process. It is possible that it may be the shock that was required to revitalise the potential comprehensive peace process initiated by the NDA and Asmara. It certainly reminded the world that there is a war in eastern Sudan. If there is a tacit consensus between Khartoum and the northern NDA parties that fighting in northern Sudan is unacceptable, then the raid may be quietly forgotten, or its implications minimised. But it is also quite possible that it will merely bring more confusion, division and bloodshed.

## **Khartoum Politics**

With conspicuous lack of popular enthusiasm, Sudan is going to the polls to elect a president and a national assembly. The National Congress Party goes into the election weak and divided. The election is marked by the following problems:

1. Most parties other than the ruling National Congress are boycotting the elections. This includes parties registered under the *tawali* system. This raises the likelihood of a virtual one-party parliament, which will be poor for Bashir's credibility.
2. The NC has requested several parties to reconsider their boycott, and to put forward candidates either on a party ticket or as independents. Negotiations are continuing with three parties: The DUP of Sharif el Hindi, the USDF (formerly headed by Riek Machar), and the Nile Valley Party (Dr Suleiman Abu Saleh).
3. The NC is divided. The recent consultation ended in deadlock on a number of key issues, such as whether the federal system should be more centralised or decentralised, whether state governors should be elected or appointed, and whether there should be term limits for the president. In most cases, the dispute pits the core group of the NC leadership against the membership from the peripheries (South, west and east). These issues have been postponed until after the election.

4. As a result, neither President Bashir nor the NC have an election manifesto, despite promises that it would be drafted and agreed. The NC is putting forward the resolutions of the Preparatory Conference of national dialogue, chaired by Gen Abdel Rahman Suwar al Dahab, as its 'manifesto.' This indicates the depths of confusion within the party.
5. In addition, in some constituencies there are two competing NC candidates standing against one another.

The election has in fact descended into a farce. We must ask, why did the government not postpone the elections, as was requested by most forces inside and outside Sudan? There are two main reasons:

1. The core group in the NC, headed by Ali Osman Mohamed Taha, Nafie Ali Nafie, Ibrahim Shams el Din and el Hadi Abdalla, is determined to seek some legitimacy for themselves and for Omer al Bashir. They see the elections as the best way of achieving this.
2. The core group in the NC is hardline on reconciliation and peace. They would prefer not to have a formal peace settlement at all. Their preferred approach is for the northern opposition to return one by one, while military opposition is crushed. Failing that, they prefer to have their position consolidated by the election, so that key issues such as the presidency and national institutions are not up for negotiation.

The internal struggle within the NC may or may not be resolved by the election. It is possible that if many of those elected to the national assembly are opposed to key government policies, then the national assembly itself may become deadlocked, or a source of internal opposition to the executive. The governmental paralysis may continue.

## **The Return of Sadiq el Mahdi**

The return of Sadiq el Mahdi to Khartoum is expected on 23 November. Sadiq's stated mission is to use the existing small margin of freedom to promote democracy and peace, without ruling out a possible alliance with Bashir (as the de facto government) or Turabi (in the case of Bashir's intransigence).

Sadiq's position is weaker now than six months ago. While few in northern Sudan would dispute his general reading of the situation—namely that peaceful change from within is the means to bring democracy—Sadiq himself has mishandled many potential allies, both inside and outside Sudan. He has not sufficiently counted the importance of the emotions he arouses with some of his more provocative statements, and has not carried key allies in the Umma Party with him. However, there is a serious leadership vacuum in Khartoum, which Sadiq may be able to fill.

## **LEI**

There is no progress on the Libyan-Egyptian Initiative. But the following considerations should be borne in mind before it is written off:

1. The Libyans and Egyptians have formally welcomed the NDA-Asmara initiative.
2. Both the Libyans and Egyptians have condemned the NDA Kassala raid.
3. The Libyan-Egyptian strategy appears to be based on the hope that, with Sadiq el Mahdi returning to Khartoum, other northern leaders will also return. They are likely to be unhappy with the implicit rebuff given to them by Mulana al Mirghani. In mid-November, al Mirghani has travelled to Cairo and the outcome of his visit is awaited.
4. Sadiq el Mahdi has requested the LEI to establish the following: (a) a permanent secretariat, (b) a high-level envoy and (c) a declaration of principles.
5. Hassan al Turabi has expressed his support for the LEI. This may just be tactical move, arising from the fact that the Eritrean delegation did not meet him on their visit to Khartoum.

## **IGAD**

At the point when its demise seemed certain, IGAD has once again remained alive—if only just. The core group meeting of the IGAD Partners Forum in London on 23-24 October reviewed the progress—or lack of it—by the IGAD secretariat for peace in Sudan, since the June meeting in Oslo. Although there was no substantive progress, IGAD was relieved for the time being, because no alternative was on offer. (The option of engagement with and support to the NDA-Asmara initiative was not considered feasible. Asmara had not involved IPF members in its preparations for its initiative, and the IPF is formally tied to IGAD and so could not consider non-IGAD alternatives, at least for now.)

A new twist was added to the long story of IGAD and the NDA in mid-November, when IGAD foreign ministers quietly indicated that they would support the inclusion of the NDA in the IGAD Peace Process if the parties to the conflict did not object. The inclusion of Libya and Egypt was also hinted. Modalities of this are to be worked out at the forthcoming summit of IGAD heads of state, to be held in Khartoum before the end of the month. Provisionally, the plan is to convene an informal seminar to focus on the issues in early January, to be followed by another round of negotiations between the parties.

If Khartoum can be persuaded to accept the inclusion of the NDA, then there is the possibility that IGAD may at last become a forum in which a comprehensive peace can be negotiated. However, this will also require substantial reforms to the secretariat to make it more dynamic, and a clear commitment to the process by the IPF.

## **Conclusion**

The situation in Sudan remains complicated and unpredictable, and in recent weeks there has been no discernible movement towards peace. The Kassala raid has opened new possibilities and dangers: how this plays will depend on whether there can be diplomatic and political pressures on Khartoum to force it to negotiate seriously. The elections seem likely to resolve nothing, except to introduce new complications. Bashir may face continuing internal paralysis in both the executive and in parliament after the elections. Meanwhile, there is a faint hope that IGAD may finally become revitalised.