

Prospects for Chad

Briefing, February 2006

Alex de Waal
February 19, 2006

Overview

1. The crisis in Chad is primarily an internal affair, brought about by the long-term failures of the Idriss Deby government which is inherently unstable. The spillover from Darfur and GoS military designs on Chad are a secondary factor. But the Sudanese-sponsored opposition could be the trigger for either forcible regime change, a 'limited' war in eastern Chad, or a state collapse. Currently the GoS controls the main armed opposition groups and can determine whether or not to start a war.
2. President Deby is enlisting fellow Zaghawa Sudanese SLA and JEM as allies in defense of his regime. For him it is all-or-nothing, using the Darfur war to further other political ends in N'djamena. Minawi is a thug with a tribal agenda. Khalil is also holding Darfur hostage to other political ambitions. They offer problems but no solutions. Meanwhile their linking Chad with Darfur gives Khartoum's military intelligence the pretext for seeking a military solution to the Darfur conflict, fought out in part on Chadian soil.
3. The Zaghawa tribe is entangled in both Chadian and Darfurian politics. This reflects the stratagems of the three leaders mentioned, not the interests or wishes of the majority. Currently there is no Zaghawa leader playing a constructive role in finding peace. Deby's strategy can however be contained.
4. Chadian politics are the politics of power, fear, money and family/tribe without ideological color. The socio-political basis for a functioning quasi-modern state does not exist. There is no tradition of civil politics. Oil exploitation has exacerbated these problems rather than resolving them. Chad needs an internal political settlement. Most Chadians hope for some kind of round-table reconciliation conference leading to a power-sharing government of national unity but expect a forcible regime change.
5. Four measures are proposed:
 - a. Pressure on Khartoum to stop Chadian opposition from launching a war.
 - b. Encouragement of Zaghawa leaders to play constructive roles in the Darfur peace process.
 - c. Robust enforcement of the arms embargo on Darfur and sanctioning of those who are obstructing the peace process.
 - d. First steps towards a round-table political process for Chad.

The Government of Chad

6. President Idriss Deby is sick and may not have long to live. He is facing rebellions that could bring him down almost any day. His main political card is that he currently holds a veto over the Darfur peace process through his military support to Khalil Ibrahim (JEM) and Minni Minawi (SLA-Minawi). For Deby the stakes are political survival. He is playing his cards accordingly and blackmailing the world into supporting him by signaling that Darfur can only be resolved if his own problems are resolved too.
7. Deby's government is inherently unstable, so keeping it in power is at most a short-term solution. Deby has lost the political capital he gained from bringing a measure of peace and stability to Chad since he took power in 1991. Among his own Zaghawa/Bedeyat kinsmen he has lost trust because a series of betrayals and switches. Any appeals he makes to Zaghawa solidarity are treated with extreme skepticism. He has had six cabinets in three years, his ministries are at a standstill, and real power is exercised by the President's office. His Popular Movement for Salvation (MPS) is a patronage machine and not a party. He won fraudulent elections in 2001 and broke his promise not to stand again in 2006. If elections are held they will be a farce.
8. Chad is bankrupt. Just 10% of domestic tax revenue is collected, there is a crisis in oil revenue, and the country is one of the most corrupt in the world. Some economists call Chad a 'pre-developing economy'.
9. The Chadian army has virtually disintegrated. In 2004 Deby faced a mutiny in the army, in part because of a clampdown on army officers who were pocketing the salaries of 'ghost soldiers' who were on the payroll, in part because of Zaghawa discontent over his insistence on remaining in power while sidelining key kinsmen. In late 2005, Deby disbanded his Republican Guard (dominated by Zaghawa) after many defections and is trying to recruit other tribes and also enlist the SLA and JEM to his side.
10. Continued Zaghawa dominance of the Chadian state cannot be sustained. Debate over who might succeed Deby obscures the fact that any Zaghawa replacement would need to embark on a radical redistribution of political power if he were to stand a chance of stabilizing the country.
11. Ideology counts for little in Chad. The 'Africanist' ideology of Chad's first President, Francois Tombalbaye, is dead. The Arab supremacism of the Libyan-backed factions of the 1980s exists only as a remnant. Political Islam has made limited headway chiefly because of Saudi funds supporting schools, clinics and mosques. There is no organized Islamist constituency in the country. (The Sudanese Islamists decided in 1991 to support Deby, a heavy drinker without discernible Islamic credentials, partly because they despaired of creating a real Islamic party in Chad.) There is reportedly a handful of Salafist extremists in the desert north, but they lack the capacity to influence Chadian politics. Deby is unlikely to embrace Islamic extremism as a stratagem.

12. Deby has succeeded in making himself indispensable and removing or sidelining any obvious successors. This may last only a short time, not least because of his health. However, while Deby remains, any strategy for dealing with the Chad crisis must begin with Deby's government as a reality, while also considering other options.

The Zaghawa

13. Since taking power in December 1990, Deby's regime has been dominated by his own clansmen. The Zaghawa (including their close cousins the Bedeyat) straddle the border, one third in Chad and two thirds in Darfur. They are a small minority in both: 3-5% of the population in Chad and 7-8% in Darfur. On both sides of the border they have acquired power, wealth and influence beyond their small numbers, because of their capacity for hard work and strategic action.

14. The Zaghawa are not united. They have no unitary traditional authority and the main branches of Zaghawa are in fact geographical terms that carry little loyalty in and of themselves. More important to Zaghawa are clan structures, which are fragmented. Among the Zaghawa diaspora (including in south and east Darfur) the most important individuals are merchants and moneylenders. In situations of war, the most ruthless commanders become the most powerful. Today, Deby has more enemies than friends among the Zaghawa.

15. Deby is currently encouraging Darfurian Zaghawa to believe that their future is linked to his continuing rule in Chad. He sponsored an alliance of SLA-Minawi, JEM and NMRD. This façade of unity is not persuasive to most Zaghawa. The Zaghawa homeland in north-eastern Chad has not benefited from Deby's rule and remains desperately poor—less developed even than Darfur. Zaghawa traders, farmers and intellectuals have always found Sudan to be more fertile ground than Chad. Deby knows he is not trusted. His strategy is to buy support with weaponry and create a de facto situation of strongmen who are feared and respected. The Zaghawa alliance is fragile and unlikely to last. However, there is no strong Zaghawa leader offering an alternative. Most Zaghawa commanders in the SLA do not want to embrace the GoS or Abdel Wahid (whom they neither trust nor respect), and neither do they want to form separate organizations. Their fear is that the Zaghawa will be fragmented and lose out in any peace deal.

16. In short: there is a Zaghawa-spoiler problem in both Chad and Darfur. Deby and Khalil have political ambitions that cannot be satisfied by a Darfur peace deal. Minawi is a thug whose power comes from his weaponry, his internal security apparatus, his fearsome reputation and the fact that he has been over-indulged internationally. These men have linked Darfur to Chad for their own political reasons. Zaghawa tribal solidarity and interest is against this entanglement, and most Zaghawa leaders recognize this fact. But there no credible alternative Zaghawa leader has been identified who is able to engage constructively with the Darfur peace process. The Zaghawa who are with SLM-Abdel Wahid, the GoS or who are independent are simply not strong enough. Hence the three leading Zaghawa are posing problems and not offering solutions. In these circumstances the only workable strategy is to contain the problem, through a mixture of

political strong-arming and incentives for good behavior, alongside enforcement of the arms embargo and ceasefire.

Chadian Opposition

17. The Chadian armed opposition is organized under the umbrella of the United Front for Democratic Change (known by its French acronym FUC). Its leading group is the Rally for Democracy and Liberty (RDL) headed by Mahamat Nour. FUC includes Chadian Arabs (some of them Janjawiid), the far-northern based Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT) and others. However, the most powerful of the opposition Zaghawa/Bedeyat faction, the Platform for Change, Unity and Democracy (SCUD) has left FUC accusing it of being controlled by Khartoum. There are also armed movements in the south of Chad. The leadership is a mixture of young soldiers (e.g. Yahya Dillo of SCUD, who is 30) and a few veteran exiles.

18. Coordination among these groups is variable. Some merely stay in touch by thuraya, allowing them to synchronize their attacks. Others are controlled by Khartoum security. If a war develops it is likely that more groups will spring up, anticipating that seats at any negotiating table will be allocated on the basis of who has demonstrated a military capacity and controls a piece of territory.

19. Intelligence estimates vary, but FUC probably has about probably about 6,000 armed men, with 2,000 of them trained and recently equipped with weapons, uniforms and vehicles by Sudanese Military Intelligence. This force is probably more formidable than the Chadian army, badly damaged by defections. The Adre battle of December 18, 2005, was probably not a good indication of the rebels' fighting capacity, but was more in the way of FUC/RDL putting down a marker to demonstrate its presence, so that Mahamat Nour could claim leadership. The major arms supplies to FUC/RDL have arrived after the Adre incursion. The way that Chadian wars are fought is in lightning strikes with one or two critical battles. FUC's estimate is that it can defeat Deby in this way and take seize N'djamena in a week-long campaign.

20. All Chadian opposition forces keep their options open. They will deal with anyone who can provide them with power, money and protection. They will not hesitate to switch sides if a better deal is on offer. If Deby emerges as the strongman, they will join him. Much of the recent armed opposition activity is calculated to strengthen negotiating positions for such future deals, either with Deby, his successor, or at any future round-table conference.

21. FUC appears to be closely directed by Sudanese Military Intelligence. The positive aspect to this is that they will not launch an invasion unless authorized to do so. However, Deby is providing every pretext for their incursions. His December 26 announcement that Chad was in a state of war with Sudan allowed Khartoum to dispatch forces to the border. Attacks by SLA-Minawi and NMRD forces across the border are another provocation. There is also a danger that if the GoS abandons its clients, they may start a war on their own.

22. There is a small legal opposition including political parties and civil society organizations, the latter sponsored by foreign donor money and involved in aspects of the Cameroon-Chad oil pipeline. It would be a mistake to separate the civil and armed opposition too sharply. Chad has never known a non-violent change of government and the civil leaders know and talk with the armed opposition, and expect that they will gain a share in power only through alliances with them. If there are competitive elections, it is likely that Chad will see a profusion of tribally-based parties, many of them with their own militia forces. Free and fair elections are unlikely to stabilize Chad unless there is a sound foundation of a working government and a national army.

23. An insurgency in eastern Chad might resemble Darfur superficially. It would generate refugee flows. There would be gross violations of human rights. But the differences are more important. First, there is no racial supremacist agenda at work. Despite the involvement of some Janjawiid elements, Arabs cannot control Chad. Moreover they do not have a major problem of access to land: their areas are large and fertile. Second, while tribal politics are crucial, the FUC alliance involves many different tribes, including Arabs and Zaghawa—groups that are fighting each other in Darfur. Third, the aim of the insurrection is not a fundamental change in the nature of the Chadian state (despite RDL manifesto statements) or ‘liberating’ areas: it is simply a grab for state power.

24. At a later stage, a war in Chad might resemble Darfur to the extent that Chad might again become a failed state with warlords contending for power across the country and a breakdown of any central authority.

Chad and Darfur

25. The politics of Chad and Darfur have always been interlinked. They are now becoming dangerously entangled. This can be contained but it will require rapid and robust political action and military monitoring of the border to enforce the arms embargo.

26. The main entanglement is the Zaghawa interest as articulated by Deby (see above). The January 18 ‘Alliance of Revolutionary Forces of Western Sudan,’ was a Chadian-Zaghawa self-defense pact with the Masalit as a minor player. The Masalit forces of SLA-Abdel Wahid, led by Khamis Abaker, are dependent on Chad for protection and weaponry.

27. A substantial proportion of the western Darfur Janjawiid originated in Chad and many of them still have close ties to Chad. In recent months some of them have been considering a return to power in Chad as part of FUC. Part of the reason for this is that they feel less secure in Darfur with a peace deal in prospect, because their historic claims to land are weak. However, the strength of their motivation for returning should not be exaggerated. Sudan remains more hospitable than Chad. Darfur is (astonishingly) more developed than eastern Chad. The SLM-Abdel Wahid has stated that it has no intention of forcing them out and that there is room in Darfur to accommodate them.

28. Chad remains as co-mediator of the Abuja peace process and co-chair of the Darfur Joint Commission. It is unable to play these roles positively because it is now party to the conflict. This is paralyzing the Joint Commission. In Abuja, JEM and SLM-Minawi have been playing a blocking role, but thus far, Chad itself has not sought to interfere directly to block the peace talks. This possibility cannot be ruled out. Deby may yet try to use his co-chairmanship of the mediation to achieve the same outcome.

29. An incomplete peace settlement in Abuja could further destabilize the Chad-Sudan border. Disaffected or demobilized fighters could seek employment with one or other of the Chadian groups. Groups could become freelance. If Minawi felt shortchanged by such an agreement he might, with Deby's support, seek to destroy it through escalated military action.

Oil and Money

30. Chad derives revenues from its oil exports through a complicated system whereby the funds are deposited in various accounts, supervised by the World Bank and foreign banks. The aim of this system was to ensure that the money would be spent on development and not simply plundered by the government. The system can be criticized for being too tight: for example it does not allow the government to use oil revenues for basic administrative expenditures. It has succeeded in stopping outright plunder of the oil funds, forcing corrupt officials to make their money through mechanisms such as fraudulent road-building contracts.

31. Deby nationalized the 'future fund' of oil revenue in order to stave off fiscal crisis (and doubtless, buy weapons). This gained him some short term relief. In response the World Bank correctly suspended loans to Chad. What Deby did not realize was that this action would also lead Citibank in London to freeze Chad's access to the escrow account for regular oil revenues, a much larger amount. The Chad Government has instructed the oil companies to pay their funds directly to a government account. So far they have refused. The legality of this refusal is uncertain. The impact has been to squeeze Chad financially much tighter than Deby ever anticipated.

France

32. France has a significant military presence in Chad, and also in neighboring CAR. It is providing logistical and intelligence information to the Chadian armed forces. French representation in N'djamena is mainly military rather than diplomatic, and its representatives see Chadian politics primarily through a military lens. France seems committed to supporting Idriss Deby: its diplomats are better advocates for the Deby government than most of Chad's own ambassadors. French logistics and intelligence were critical to Deby's successful defense of Adre in December.

33. Until recently, France has seen no alternative to Deby and feared a collapse of the Chadian state should he go. This probably remains correct in the short term. France is

only now beginning to canvass alternatives. When Deby took power from his predecessor Habre (also supported by the French), the French forces in N'djamena simply withdrew to barracks, watched the takeover, and then emerged to congratulate the new President and offer him diplomatic and security assistance. If the French see a worthy successor they may do the same thing again. There is no sign that France is considering the alternative of a 'sovereign national conference' or political roundtable.

Libya

34. Libya has fears and interests in Chad. Colonel Gaddafi's army was defeated in Chad in 1987 by Hissene Habre's army supported by the U.S. and France. He remembers President Reagan's campaigns against him including the bombing of Tripoli and fears that any western military presence in either Chad or Darfur is a staging post for the U.S. and France to complete their unfinished agenda of regime change.

35. Libya is supporting the MDJT in the north. This is partly to secure a stake in Chad's future and as a bargaining chip. It is partly because the south of Libya consists of military-political fiefdoms controlled by ethnic Goraan, Bideyat and Zaghawa—the same tribes as in northern Chad and northern Darfur—who support their kinsmen across the border.

36. Gaddafi is also trying to play the peacemaker, most recently with summits on the crisis. Libya is notoriously incapable of translating its gestures into sustainable actions. Sudan and Chad know this well and they manage the Libyan leader with public flattery while continuing to pursue their goals. Libya is susceptible to international leverage and the summit declarations provide openings for African action to de-escalate the crisis, which could be supported by the international community, for example the commitment to a 'peace and security force' for securing the Chad-Sudan frontier.

Central African Republic

37. Central African Republic is the much-neglected sideshow to the Chad-Darfur crisis. A proxy war between Libya and France was played out in CAR when General Francois Bozize overthrew President Ange-Felix Patasse in March 2003. Bozize is backed by France but it was Chadian troops (Deby's own Zaghawa Republican Guard) who did the work on their behalf, and who remain in the CAR capital Bangui to this day protecting the President. Libya had supported Patasse and Gaddafi still reportedly wants to bring his man back. For France, CAR is a more significant concern than Chad, due to its military base and proximity to the Congos. Paris's view is that Deby's role in CAR, in and of itself, demands reward.

38. Bozize does not control the hinterland of CAR. It is essentially a criminal state in which money can buy anything. Chadian opposition forces and Darfurian Janjawiid operate there. So does Sudanese military intelligence and a number of smuggling rings, benefiting from the conflicts in neighboring states.

Next Steps

39. Chad is at a precipice but has not gone over. The intricacies of factional and tribal politics should not obscure three simple realities that lend themselves to a strategy of containment which can neutralize key spoilers in the Darfur peace process and should also lay the foundation for addressing the longer-term future of Chad.

40. First, Sudanese Military Intelligence currently has the power either to launch or to prevent a major war in Chad. If Khartoum does not pull the trigger, the situation will remain tense, unstable and confusing, but war can be avoided. Leverage on Khartoum can produce results. However the GoS should not abandon its Chadian proxies to their own devices: this would be a recipe for war.

41. Second, the Zaghawa leadership must become part of solutions in Chad and Darfur and not just troublemakers. Most Zaghawa recognize that their interests are best served by disentangling the Darfurian and Chadian crises. Strong statements by foreign leaders that the Zaghawa need a legitimate political place in Darfur, but they seem to lack credible leaders interested in peace, would be helpful. This should be twinned with tough measures against those (specifically Khalil and Minawi) who have obstructed the peace process and violated the arms embargo.

42. Third, the Chad-Darfur border area should be monitored and steps should be taken to stop cross-border attacks and flows of arms. On the Darfur side, a strengthened AMIS force can do this. An extra force is needed for the Chad side, perhaps deriving its mandate from the Tripoli agreement.

43. Last, Chad's crisis is a chiefly a domestic political problem with domestic solutions. All Chadian parties recognize this. Immediately, the international community must make it clear that violent regime change is unacceptable. In the medium term the solution may be the emergence of a strongman (possibly even the re-emergence of Deby in this role, although this is unlikely). In the longer term there will be a need for a government of national unity, which will require some kind of national conference. This is likely to need some form of external guarantor to be stable. (France or the EU could play this role). A first step would be to engage selected conflict mediation NGOs in making discreet contacts with the Chadian opposition, both civil and armed. Deby's short life expectancy can encourage the opposition that they need not wait too long for their rewards.