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China – Sudan, a complex relationship

By Dorien Braam in Netherlands for CAAGLOP (07/12/2007)

The Darfur crisis in Sudan is the cause of growing concern in international communities. Darfur is a region that consists of the three states North-, South- and West-Darfur. The 3.1 million inhabitants are of Christian-animist African beliefs, as well as Arabian tribes, which have always had an unstable relationship. Whereas the African tribes are agriculturists, the Arabic are nomads and this caused conflicts about resources like water and space to build homes and herd the animals. Besides that, Darfur was a centre for African slave trade for the Arabic world, even until the 20th century.

After independence, a civil war broke out in 1962 between the Islamic north and the non-Islamic south, which only partly got solved in 2002 when a cease-fire was agreed. In 2003, the central government and south-Sudan reached a further agreement about the dividing of oil profits. However, this agreement caused new problems with the rebel groups. They were of the opinion that the Arabs were better off in this deal than the African tribes and started fighting in 2003 against the Arabian government. The government sent its own militias into the battle, named the Janjaweed. In May 2006, it looked like a solution was at hand; the government signed a peace agreement with most of the rebel groups and the Janjaweed would be dissolved. Until now however, there is still no sign of peace; violence continues and there are growing concerns about the specific role China plays in this conflict.

To help protect the citizens and in an effort to solve the problem, the African Union sent 7,000 soldiers to Darfur to keep the peace. They did not succeed, partly because of a lack of funding, and the more resourceful UN sent, in close

has had much with the AU, a region of the Darfur region. China is also to be a part of this UN force; however, the rebels of the Justice and Equality movement (JEM) have recently said they will not allow the Chinese peacekeepers in the region. Two weeks ago, 135 Chinese engineers arrived to pave the way by building roads and bridges for the 26,000 strong UN peace force. Besides the money and people China contributes to the UN, it also just gave 80 million Yuan worth of food and weapons to the Sudanese government. According to the rebels, China is not interested in people's rights, but just in the Sudanese resources and, especially, its oil. JEM also suggests that the oil from Sudan soil, which is sold to China, helps the government with funding the war, and wants China out of the country altogether. They enforced these statements by attacking Chinese oilfield installations, and in October 2007, several workers were kidnapped. Just last May China appointed a representative for African affairs, with its main focus on the Darfur question. While they happily promised to send the money and engineers needed to help the UN force, now already the turning point in relationships to this African country, seems to have been reached.

Not only the JEM, also aid organizations from other donor countries are expressing concerns about the presence of China in Darfur; China is one of the main weapon suppliers to the government of Sudan and supplies the Janjaweed, which is considered to be the main threat to the people in the south of the region. So long as the Janjaweed continue to fight, the rebels will not lay down their arms. The suspicions about the one sided interference of China in Sudan are fed by the fact that the Sudanese government let the United Nations know that it will only allow non-African troops from Pakistan or China.

In China, different views are expressed. According to an article published in China, and a Sudanese news website, China has always kept close ties with the Sudanese government in its search for much-needed natural resources. While somewhat hypocritically blaming the conflict mainly on natural causes, a lack of resources and tribal culture, Chinese policy makers also rightly point to the problem of undefined borders the European colonists left behind. China, not being one of the original colonialist countries, sees itself as the much-needed mediator between the UN and the Sudanese government, pointing out that president Hu Jintao

has had much regard for the Sudanese government and has, on both political and private terms, a good relationship with President Al-Bashir.

Despite these apparent long term relationships, Hu Jintao only visited the African country for the first time last February, not long after the end of the forum on Chinese-African cooperation last year in Beijing. During his talks with Al-Bashir, he stressed once again the Chinese attitude towards its interference in Africa; it will supply resources, but not interfere with the country's government policy of the local governments. This is a threat to the attitude of the UN towards the Sudanese regime; the donors will only supply aid when the government is working towards a long-term solution for the region in which all the parties will be considered. At the same time, China stresses it is taking both sides of the conflict into consideration, and that their African policy is the only correct policy for the future. However, it is clear that for Chinese interests it is important to keep the existing government in place, which the huge investments in good relationships and resource exchange show. The Sudanese government approves of China playing the role of intermediary between Sudan and the UN when difficulties arise about implementing the UN peace keeping plan, as China mainly tries to convince the other UN countries not to insist on pressure and sanctions if the Sudanese government does not cooperate.

It is not only China however, that tries to gain ground in Africa by supplying local governments and militias with arms. The United States is also establishing its position in the rush for the growing oil- and other resource shortages, for instance in Nigeria, where it is the main export partner. While oil prices rise, coinciding with the growth of the emerging new Asian economies, the main players on the international market have to secure future supplies of the energy sources. As the former colonialist countries from Europe and America first finished the oil from their colonies or nearby countries, reserves in these parts of the world are almost depleted. The remaining oil reserves are in the southern hemisphere, including the African continent. Most of the African countries however, do not have a stable government, and as oil is a major income source for these countries, the leaders fight to keep control over the resources. Instead of finding long-term solutions, powers like the US and China try to gain influence by helping the

powers in charge of the countries that have the resources they want.

The questionable position of China in Sudan is an indication of Chinese efforts to assert its influence in the policies of African countries. China seems, not only to the Western world but also to the people in Africa, to be choosing sides in local conflicts, and this will eventually even destabilize countries that initially gained significant positive development by China's aid. If China and the UN do not work closer together, no solution will be found to solve the crisis in African countries. By understanding each others policies and by admitting their sometimes questionable historical position in countries, policy makers can work towards improving the situation for millions of people.

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