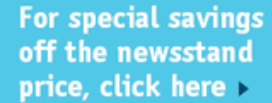


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MIDDLE EAST & AFRICA

Sudan**Peacekeepers into the fray**

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From The Economist print edition

The big UN force now arriving in Darfur will not bring peace at a stroke**[Get article background](#)**

DARFUR can seem eerily quiet from within the neat, well-scrubbed prefabs of the sprawling UN compound being swiftly erected on the outskirts of the region's capital, el-Fasher. Eventually, once it expands over the sand dunes, it is hoped that the base for the UN's African Mission in Darfur (UNAMID) will house the largest peacekeeping force in the world: 20,000 soldiers, and about 6,000 policemen.

Beyond the razor wire, however, it is a very different story. In some areas, the killings and destruction are as bad as ever, but the causes have changed dramatically since the Darfuris first rebelled against the Sudanese government in 2003. The tidy division between the two main rebel groups and the government soldiers with their proxy fighters, the Arab militias known as the *janjaweed*, has dissolved. The violence is now perpetrated by many more groups, with a tangle of motives. As a UN mediator puts it, the situation is "a mess". All this will make UNAMID's task far harder than many first imagined.

For one thing, the new force, which officially took over from African Union (AU) peacekeepers on January 1st, is deploying in the middle of a full-blown war that has spilled from West Darfur across the border into Chad. In February Chadian rebels, supported and armed by Sudan's government, drove out of West Darfur in columns of converted pick-up trucks known as "technicals", to try to topple President Idriss Déby, a former ally turned implacable foe of the Sudanese government. He survived, just, thanks largely to the intervention of his own proxy fighters, a Darfuri rebel group called the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM).

In the past few weeks Sudan's government has taken advantage of the absence of many JEM fighters in Chad to attack their home bases in Darfur, north of el-Geneina, West Darfur's capital (see map). The scorched-earth policy the government applied in its previous counter-insurgency campaign in Darfur has been evident again: attacks on villages by the *janjaweed*, preceded by an aerial bombardment. This has sent thousands more refugees fleeing to camps in Chad.



In this increasingly complex conflict, allegiances stretch across borders and shift from month to month. The rebel groups broke into several factions after a peace agreement signed in 2006 by the Sudan government and the largest rebel group quickly fell apart. They now sometimes fight each other. The Arab militias are less tightly controlled by the Sudanese government, not least because they have not been regularly paid. There has been fighting between them and the government forces, and between rival militias. As the old command structures have broken down, many fighters, on all sides, have become bandits. The hijacked cars of foreign aid workers now turn up in Chad, where a car will sell for about \$10,000.

There must be plenty of them. In 2007, 139 such vehicles were hijacked or stolen from compounds and 77 relief convoys looted; 147 aid workers were temporarily abducted. Since the beginning of the year the UN's World Food Programme alone has had 46 lorries hijacked; 23 of its drivers have been kidnapped. Last October three of its drivers were killed.

The worsening violence has restricted movement to the more remote rural areas, where people need help most. The UN's Children's Fund reports that in North Darfur, a comparatively peaceful part of the region, malnutrition, mortality rates and access to clean water have all worsened again after improving somewhat since the height of fighting in 2004. Another 300,000 or so people were displaced last year throughout Darfur. In ZamZam camp, just outside el-Fasher, almost 9,000 wretched people have arrived in recent months. The camp co-ordinator says some 5,000 have fled renewed fighting in the south; the rest are economic refugees, unable to feed themselves anymore.

The new UN force is unlikely to turn things around. Sudan's government seems determined to press on with its military campaign, especially in the west against the JEM and Chad's President Déby. That will create more refugees and handicap aid efforts in both Darfur and Chad. Columns of a hundred or more technicals and tanks have recently been seen heading west. In el-Geneina, recruits joining the Arab militias to fight in Chad are being offered one-off payments of \$1,000. With lots of oil money to fund their own operations and those of their proxies, the Sudanese forces see no reason to let up yet.

The UN will not be able to deter military activity on such a scale, at any rate not for quite a while. For the present its force is based largely on what it has inherited from the AU, whose soldiers had become thoroughly demoralised under the AU's command. They had not been paid for months and 22 of them were killed last year.

Now please go out on patrol

This means that the first job of the UN's commanders is to cheer up the existing force, which has lost its appetite for anything but the safest of work. Contrary to some reports, the force has plenty of good equipment—but seems reluctant to use it.

The West's aid-giving governments, which are paying for most of the operation, are pinning their faith on a

spine of experienced Western staff officers to make the force more active and effective. At the insistence of Sudan, its composition is still 97% African, but the hope is that the small non-African contingent, which is mostly Asian, can make a big difference.

More men should help too. An Egyptian battalion is expected next, followed by Ethiopian and Senegalese ones. Tanzanians, Ghanaians and Burundians are also expected to join the force. More than 100 Chinese engineers are already operating in Nyala. More military transport aircraft and attack helicopters would be a boon.

In the longer run, success will depend on the peace talks between the rebels and the government. These broke down after an abortive conference in Libya last October. A big obstacle is the splintering of the rebels into a confusion of factions, often for reasons of personal rivalry. One frustrated UN negotiator says that many of the former freedom fighters are now just opportunists—and have managed to make even the Sudanese government look constructive. Still, if the UN troops could provide some security, the rebels might try harder to forge a peace for them to keep.

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