

Invisible, Insecure, and Inaccessible: *The Humanitarian Crisis in Chad*

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The night before I arrived in Abéché to begin my internship with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Chad, a small group of rebels attacked the UNHCR guesthouse where I was planning to stay. Rebels killed one guard, and bound and gagged two other guards while the rebel leader threatened a colleague at gunpoint until he gathered enough money to pay off the intruders. Incidents like this have become common in Abéché, the third largest city in Chad, which serves as the base of humanitarian operations working to protect the refugees streaming across the border from Darfur. Before arriving in the country I assumed that the Darfur refugee situation was the largest crisis in the region, but I soon found out that there are other equally dire problems that need to be addressed.

Off the Map. Chad is a vast, but little-known country in Africa. The majority of its landscape is comprised of the inhospitable Sahara desert, contributing to the underdevelopment of the nation. Less than 3 percent of the land is considered arable and 80 percent of the population survives on less than one dollar a day.^{1,2} Even among other African nations, Chad remains isolated with few economic and political ties to its neighbors. It is not a member of the Economic Commu-

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nity of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Sahara separates Chad from its northern neighbor, Libya. Although relations to the east with Sudan were initially amiable, in 2005, Chad lent support to the Justice and Equality Movement, Khartoum's least popular rebel group operating in Darfur, effectively severing ties with Sudan.³ Even historical ties with its southern neighbor, the Central African Republic, are further strained by an ongoing conflict there. Isolated from its neighbors both politically and geographically, Chad has continued to rely on its former colonial master—France. The French colonial legacy is omnipresent in Chad, as demonstrated by the French Cultural Center in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad, and the myriad of French army bases dotted throughout the country.

The borders of the country, similar to the borders of so many others in Africa, have been arbitrarily delineated by the former colonial rulers. Chad has continuously struggled to unite its diverse ethnic and linguistic groups, including the northern African traders that traverse the Sahara and the sedentary farmers of the nation's southern reaches. Chad's artificial borders, conflict-territory disputes, and consequent ethnic tensions have earned the nation a spot amongst one of the thirteen "most artificial" countries in the world, according to a study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research.⁴

Culture of Violence. Today, Chad faces conflicts along its two longest borders: in the east with the highly publicized Darfur region of Sudan, and in the south with the less notorious Central African Republic.⁵ In eastern Chad, UNHCR has established twelve camps for

approximately 231,000 refugees from Darfur. Southern Chad houses four refugee camps for 44,000 refugees from the Central African Republic. If mentioned at all in the media, violence in Chad is dismissed as a spillover effect from the violence in Darfur. A more complete picture, however, reveals that the country is facing increasing internal violence.

Violence and war have become so pervasive in Chad that its population seems not to recognize it anymore. When I asked one Chadian friend if soccer was the national pastime, he responded with a laugh, "No, it's war. If the International Olympic Committee made it a sport, Chad would win."⁶ Chadians certainly have enough reasons to be fatalistic; one need only look at their leader, President Idriss Déby, to see why.

Déby was born in northeast Chad but received military training in N'Djamena and France. Eager for power, he lent support to warlord Hissène Habré during his rise to control Chad. After Habré deposed the president and took his post in 1982, he appointed Déby to the post of commander-in-chief of the army in gratitude. In 1990, Déby staged a coup and took power from his one time leader. Since then, his presidency has been characterized by brutality, greed, and a complete disregard for the needs of the Chadian people. In 2006, Déby earned Chad the title of the most corrupt nation in the world, a designation primarily given for redirecting revenues from a World Bank-sponsored oil pipeline project and health and education initiatives to buying arms and strengthening the Chadian military instead.⁷ In its Failed States Index, published this past summer, *Foreign Policy* highlighted Déby, along with Presidents

Omar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir of Sudan and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, as three of the world's worst leaders.⁸

Déby is equally unpopular internally. In 2005, Déby changed the constitution to allow himself to run for a third term in office. In response, rebels from eastern Chad, including the United Front for Democratic Change and the Alliance of Revolutionary Forces, attacked the town of Adré on the Sudanese border.⁹ Déby accused the Sudanese government of backing the rebels, an accusation Khartoum vehemently denied. By February 2006, the governments of Chad and Sudan signed the Tripoli Agreement, pledging to restore diplomatic relations and enact a cease-fire along the border. At the same time, rebel groups, many of which had coalesced into either the United Front for Change (FUC) or the Plat-

August 2007 attacks by the FUC and SCUD rebel alliances drove 180,000 Chadians to flee their homes internally. Still, others have fled to find safety in Darfur.

More than Spillover. Despite large rebel activity in the east and even the attempted coup in 2006, the situation in Chad has failed to make the international radar. A friend of mine who worked with a humanitarian relief organization in Darfur described eastern Chad as "Darfur in French." Others consider the conflict a "forgotten crisis." Unrecognized might be a better adjective to describe the problems in Chad, for the international community has barely recognized the trouble in Chad as anything but a consequence of the situation in Darfur.¹¹

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form for Change, Unity, and Democracy (SCUD), refused to recognize the agreement.

Although many of the current rebels fought to put Déby in power in 1990, they fought to overtake the capital before the elections scheduled for May 2006.¹⁰ On 13 April 2006, rebels attacked the capital before being turned back. In May, elections went ahead as scheduled, but with the opposition boycotting the process, Déby easily won reelection to a third term. Rebel activity quieted during the summer rainy season of 2006, but resurged in December of that year. By

Well-meaning celebrities such as George Clooney contribute to the neglect. After he returned from a visit to eastern Chad, he talked about a trip to Darfur, a place in which he never, in actuality, set foot. Such misrepresentation by the media has brought awareness and money to the atrocities of Darfur, not Chad, which also needs more international assistance. Since 2004, campaigns such as Save Darfur, STAND (the Student Anti-Genocide Coalition), and the Genocide Intervention Network, among others, have successfully organized fasts, rallies, and petitions that

bring media and congressional attention to Sudan, but rarely mention its neighbors. While there are numerous UN agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the ground in Sudan, many of my colleagues who worked there feel that the proliferation of NGOs and the influx of money are going to waste in Darfur because true progress cannot be made without a lasting political resolution in Chad.

Excess money and international support are not an issue in Chad. More than three years after the refugee camps were established, most camps in eastern Chad have only four international actors present: the World Food Program (WFP), UNHCR, and representatives of two NGOs for camp management and health, though the particular NGOs vary by camp. The newly formed refugee camps were even more meager because

crises such as this, they are especially acute in Chad where even the most basic needs of the beneficiary population are not being met. Three-year old latrines are full and have not been replaced for a long time now. Aid workers built a water tower, but it has not held any water since its construction. Tents that are intended to last one season of good weather have become completely tattered after three years of use in the harsh, Saharan climate.

Security Crisis. The April 2006 coup attempt was followed by a relative calm throughout the summer and fall. In November of last year, however, the tranquility was broken when a new coalition of rebel groups took over much of eastern Chad. In Abéché, their target was President Déby's family compound. A friend who lives two compounds away

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the other lead agencies of the UN's cluster system were not on the ground to perform their defined duties. UNICEF's office in Abéché focuses mainly on serving the local Chadian schools.¹² With no permanent presence at all except for one field office, their activities for refugees consisted mainly of sending tents and books for the schools.

The UN Office of the Coordination for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) has been operating in Darfur since 2003, yet they arrived in Abéché just this summer with only a small preliminary team.¹³ While budget issues exist in all

from Déby's house showed me the three-inch holes in his ceiling from shells targeted at him. One landed two feet from where he slept, but luckily it did not explode. During the attacks in Guéréda, the chief of the UNHCR field office remained under rebel-controlled house arrest for three days until the UN coordinated an evacuation.

Some humanitarian staff did choose to stay at their posts throughout eastern Chad and attempted to work through "the insecurity" of last winter, but most evacuated by April of this year. For more than four months the refugee camps were

left with little outside help and no security or material relief. Two kilometers outside of Mile Camp, in Eastern Chad, an abandoned tank still stands as an eerie reminder of the past events.

When the humanitarian staff returned to the field offices in April, they were confronted with growing numbers of internally displaced Chadians fleeing attacks from Sudanese and Chadian rebels. The violence and corresponding displacement is worse in southeastern Chad. Chadian rebels have burned every village on the stretch of road between the towns of Goz Beïda and Kou Kou. Charred foundations are the only remnants of the homes that once existed there. The former residents crowded to the outskirts of those two towns in makeshift lean-tos. Unidentified rebels operating under the command of various Chadian rebel groups or others originating across the border in Sudan attack the humanitarian community as well, regularly carjacking vehicles and kidnapping staff. In the first eight months of 2007 alone, over fifty security incidents involved humanitarian personnel in the region.¹⁴ As a result, all land travel now must be done in convoys with armed escorts, prolonging an already difficult process.

Bad Weather. Increasing insecurity is not the only problem confronting the humanitarian efforts in the country. Prior to arriving, I read numerous reports alluding to the difficulties of transportation during the rainy season. I always dismissed their complaints as irrelevant, naively concluding that rain in the desert was primarily beneficial for the desert. I arrived in Chad in mid-June at the start of the rainy season and soon realized how thoroughly mistaken I was.

The rainy season in Chad lasts for about three months. Instead of absorbing the water so it can be used for farming and drinking, the parched land channels the water into *waddis*, or seasonal riverbeds. Nightly downpours erode the landscape and swell the *waddis*, making transportation nearly impossible. A trip of less than fifty kilometers can take an entire day. Daily plans to visit the camps from the field offices were planned according to what *waddis* were crossable that day. Sometimes we misjudged and a member of the convoy would get stuck in the mud. One morning I waited three hours by the side of a *waddi* for the pickup carrying our mandatory armed escort to dry out. By the time we got to the camp we only had three hours to work; leaving by three o'clock in the afternoon was mandatory to ensure that we made it back to the compound safely before dark. Ground transportation during the rainy season is so difficult that the humanitarian staff has come to rely on flights, but even air transportation has its own problems. Wet weather routinely cancels scheduled flights. As I was leaving one field office, our small plane got stuck on the runway. All the passengers had to disembark and wait for the pilots to dig our way clear.

Seasonal rains not only make the existing job difficult, they add additional problems to the humanitarian effort. The night before I arrived at Mile Camp, a *waddi* overflowed and destroyed half of the plant nursery. I watched as workers tried to salvage the tatters of six months of work. Many children also become victims of the rain; each year a significant number of children drown while swimming in the *waddi* as the strong undertows carry them downstream. Others suffer from water-borne diseases that prevail

during the rainy season. In early September, floods blocked aid workers from the refugee camp less than five kilometers away. The number of cholera and malaria cases spiked in the refugee camps and among the clusters of internally-displaced Chadians. Throughout the region strong downpours destroyed the mud and woven stick houses that the displaced had constructed.

No End in Sight. The end of the rainy season means that road conditions will improve, facilitating the movement of not only humanitarian supplies, but also rebel forces. Recent clashes between the government and rebels hint that this winter could bring a security situation worse than last year's evacuations.¹⁵ Although in mid-October the EU gave final approval to deploy up to 3,000 troops to Chad and the Central African Republic, it is apparent that the number is not sufficient to stabilize the region. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner has already stated that the mission will not attempt to secure the border without the support of others.¹⁶

In late October humanitarian efforts throughout Chad were further impeded after Chadian authorities arrested representatives of a French NGO attempting to fly local children for adoption to Europe. While the NGO claims they were told the children were orphans from Darfur, reports have surfaced that they are in fact Chadian children from small villages on the border. Six NGO workers remain in police custody and the children are being cared for in an orphanage while they await reunification with their parents.¹⁷ Since then, distrust of cooperation between Chadians and the humanitarian community has grown. On 14 November anti-French protests erupted

in N'Djamena and several vehicles belonging to foreigners were attacked in the capital, including that of a Canadian colleague.¹⁸ As anti-foreign sentiment in the country grows, it threatens the ability of the humanitarian assistance community to operate in an already volatile environment.

If the international community is truly serious about its efforts to bring international security to the sub-region, nations must back up their forceful words with sufficient action. This begins by putting pressure on member states of the UN, particularly China, which has been reluctant to condemn the governments of Sudan and Chad. It also means that Chad and the Central African Republic must be part of the Darfur peace talks. Without the full participation of all parties, including regional neighbors, any agreement cannot hope to achieve regional stability.

Aside from offering help in the political arena, the international community must provide adequate financial support for the growing crises in Chad and the Central African Republic. Donor countries that are beginning to contribute aid to the displaced must not forget the established refugees by cutting funding to those populations. Additional financial support must be accompanied by sufficient security to allow not only the delivery of humanitarian aid and protection of staff, but also the protection of civilians who have been exposed to the violence. Though more than 3,000 troops from the European Union have been mandated for these purposes, their forces are thinly spread over Chad and the Central African Republic, making their contribution to aid delivery inadequate and minimal. The force's small scale combined with its one-year man-

date cannot effectively manage the destabilized region. In addition, these troops are assigned an unrealistic goal—to secure “favorable conditions for the reconstruction and economic and social develop-

ment” of the sub-region—that ultimately cannot be achieved without additional provisions to the embattled country.¹⁹ Without proper support, the crisis in Chad will continue to deepen.

NOTES

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