

By Jamie Ingram

The UK called a meeting of the UN Security council on 16 November 2010 to address concerns over violence relating to the forthcoming referendum on South Sudanese independence on 6 January 2011. The meeting aimed to demonstrate to the North Sudanese government that the international community is paying close attention to the country and will not permit the situation to regress into violence. This was just the latest visible sign of concern over the situation in Sudan, coming shortly after the visit of a high level UN panel to the country between 10-15 October to closely examine the situation and a statement from US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton condemning the Northern government. Clinton stated that there was only one possible outcome of the referendum, South Sudan's secession, and that any attempts by the North to interfere would be unacceptable.

Sudan's divisions are strikingly evident in both its geography and history. The deserts of the North are in stark contrast to the savannah and jungles of the South, while the populations of these two regions are just as varied. The North is predominantly Arabic speaking and Islamic while the South is populated by English speaking black Africans. After the British gained control in 1899 both regions were ruled from Khartoum in the North. Since gaining independence in 1956 Sudan has been racked by bloody civil wars between the North and South. The first civil war began in 1955 before Sudan even gained independence and ended in 1972; half a million died. The second civil war began in 1983 and lasted until the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005 after over 1.9 million civilians had died. Exploitation of the Nile by the North at the expense of the South was a major cause of the conflagration

The CPA resulted in the promise to hold a referendum for South Sudanese independence in January 2011, but difficulties surround the process and tension is rife. The precise delimitation of South Sudanese territory has proven to be extremely difficult, especially regarding the Abyei region. These boundaries were to be delimited by the Abyei Boundary Commission (ABC) but the findings of their 2005 report were rejected by the Northern Government. Eventually the boundary dispute was referred to the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration which ruled on the delimitation of Abyei's boundaries on 22 July 2009. In addition to the referendum on Southern independence, Abyei is due to hold an election in which its population will vote on whether they wish to be part of South Sudan or remain with the North.

The international community is extremely concerned by the developing situation in Sudan. The allotted date is fast approaching and yet voter registration has only just begun. It will be extremely difficult to complete this registration by January due to the large population involved (approximately 5 million); this is further complicated by the eligibility of Southerners living in the North and in neighbouring countries to vote. Registering those living in the South alone will be

difficult, let alone the diaspora, due to the South's lack of infrastructure. These difficulties will be compounded if fears of the North obstructing the process are realised. Southerners fear that any delay in the vote would lead to its cancellation and so insist that it must go ahead on time regardless of any obstruction.

The greatest worry is that the North will simply refuse to allow the South to secede regardless of the referendum. This would almost certainly plunge the country back into a bloody civil war. Given that memories of the recent bloodshed are still fresh why would the North be willing to risk this? While water played a key role in the explosive nature of the second civil war another natural resource is responsible for many of the tensions surrounding the upcoming referendum; oil. Despite the 2009 Arbitration decision awarding more oilfields to North Sudan than the original ABC delimitation, the majority of Sudan's oil is still located in the South and the North fears losing this valuable source of income.

Most observers believe that the North's fears of losing out on vast amounts of oil revenue are unfounded as the pipelines from the South head to the oil refineries in the North. The North would continue to make a huge profit from the South's oil, and the increased stability that would result from the peaceful completion of the referendum, regardless of the outcome, would only increase profitability. Oil companies are loath to operate in disputed regions regardless of the potential for profit. Regional stability would lead to increased oil production and a number of countries are keen to ensure that this occurs. China's growing appetite for oil, 7.5% per annum, has caused it to look for ever more sources; Kazakhstan, Canada and Iran all supply oil to China and so does Sudan.

China has invested large sums of money into Sudan in return for access to its hydrocarbon resources and is determined to ensure the ongoing security of this source of oil. China is not the only external actor desiring stability in Sudan; the UN expended a lot of effort in securing the 2005 CPA and has continued to play a role in Sudan. The UN is unwilling to see this effort go to waste by allowing the country to descend once again into violence.

Despite the smooth progression of the referendum seemingly benefiting every party, humanitarian agencies are preparing for the worst and getting into position to provide as much aid as possible should violence erupt. Tensions are rife on the ground with mistrust between many from the North and the South remaining high. Any spark could always reignite violence between the two groups.

Another factor to consider is that Governments all over the world are simply loath to lose territory; no matter how much violence could be avoided. Witness Russia with Chechnya and Serbia over Kosovo. Of most relevance to Sudan is Eritrea's realisation of independence from Ethiopia in 1993 after thirty years of conflict. Worryingly independence was not the end of the violence as war erupted between the two states again between 1998 and 2000. Even if Sudan's referendum proceeds smoothly to a vote for secession which is recognised by the North there is no guarantee that hostilities would end there. The new inter-state border would be the longest in Africa with large numbers of both populations on either side. Fears especially abound regarding the fate of the estimated 1.5 million southerners living in the North should the South secede.

With the referendum's fate hanging in the balance, what does the future hold for Sudan? The North is likely to attempt to hamper the progress of the vote in the hope that it can keep turn out below the 60% required for any call for secession to be valid. However, with the eyes of the international community firmly focused on Sudan it must be careful not to interfere too obviously. The referendum is therefore likely to go ahead and return a call for secession. As the date of the vote approaches tensions between the two populations are likely to rise, with some isolated outbursts of violence. The increased presence of UN peacekeepers in the region should keep these incidents to a minimum.

The greatest fears abound over whether the North will allow the South to secede. Sudan's integration into the global economic system makes South Sudanese secession more probable. The amount of foreign investment Sudan has benefited from thanks to its oil reserves, especially from Global powers such as China, ensure that great pressure is being exerted on the Sudanese government to guarantee that the oil flows. Peace is vital for this and the North is unlikely to jeopardise oil production by entering into an ultimately costly civil war.

The referendum in Sudan faces many challenges, but is ultimately likely to proceed on time and lead to South Sudan's secession. It seems probable that the North will allow this to occur due to the attentions of the UN and China and because it stands to profit immensely from stability through oil revenue. It is imperative that a post-referendum framework is put in place to address the immediate issues that will impact on the population. The future will probably see outbreaks of violence in the region and the threat of war will linger for many years but oil should bind the two states together.

About the author

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