



Turmoil in Libya and the Darfur Conflict

The wave of popular uprisings sweeping across the Arab world has not yet reached Sudan. The early, Egyptian manifestation inspired attempts at protests in Khartoum, none of them successful, and energized a reformist movement among Islamists, especially at the universities, focusing on corruption and the dysfunction of institutions.

For the time being, it is another neighbour—Libya, whose south-eastern corner borders northern Darfur—that most concerns Khartoum and that many believe could change the dynamics of the conflict in Darfur, if not the wider Sudan. With much of Libya beyond government control, Khartoum believes the Darfur insurgency is getting a new lease of life as Col. Muammar Gaddafi offers arms to anyone willing to fight alongside him and as the collapse of state authority in Libya, including in parts of the south, creates a new black market in weapons, vehicles, and fuel. Concern in Khartoum is focused on the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the strongest insurgent group and one that Khartoum believes Gaddafi is rearming—for a new attack on the capital, according to rumours in Khartoum—as he seeks support from those he has supported in the past.

JEM denies it has mobilized for Gaddafi, and Western diplomats have found no evidence to support Khartoum's claims.¹ But leaders of the Darfur armed movements, weakened over the past 18 months by unrelenting ground and air attacks, are telling UN officials they have never been as well armed as they are today.

Highlighting government fears, a member of the ruling National Congress Party, West Darfur governor Gaafar Abdul Hakam, for the first time said publicly in March what Khartoum has long asserted privately: that Libya is today the main supporter of the Darfur armed movements. Government officials also believe the Government of South Sudan is firming up support for the Darfur insurgents in response to evidence that Khartoum is backing dissident southern militias in greater Upper Nile.

Today Khartoum is clearly in the anti-Gaddafi camp. Sources in Khartoum say President Omar al Bashir's one-day visit to Qatar on 29 March came at Qatar's request, to discuss ways of supporting the Libyan opposition with Qatari arms transported through Sudan.

Relations between Khartoum and Tripoli have deteriorated sharply since 2008, when JEM fighters crossed hundreds of miles of desert to Khartoum's twin city, Omdurman, in an attempt to take over the capital. Although JEM at the time still enjoyed the patronage of Chad (withdrawn in 2010 after a rapprochement between Khartoum and N'Djaména), Sudanese newspapers quoted government sources as claiming the attack was supported by Gaddafi and financed through Libya's Sahel-Saharan Bank. One alleged that prominent Libyan officials, including relatives of Gaddafi, funded the purchase of between 300 and 350 Land Cruisers, some of which were allegedly used in the attack.

After JEM's chairman, Khalil Ibrahim, was denied entry into Chad in May 2010 and put on a flight back to Tripoli, a victim of the reconciliation between President Bashir and his Chadian counterpart, Idriss Déby, Khartoum petitioned Libya for his expulsion, twice sending the director general of Sudanese security to meet Gaddafi. But Gaddafi refused to relinquish his strongest Darfur card, fiercely opposed the presence of international peacekeepers in Darfur, and determined to capture the Darfur peace talks from Qatar, a country on the opposite side of the bitter intra-Arab divide.



Unable to prise Khalil from Tripoli, Sudanese government officials spread word that Libya had rearmed JEM with a range of weapons, including anti-aircraft guns, and was providing it with two stores, including one near the garrison town of Kufra, where Gaddafi attempted to organize a ‘unity’ meeting of the Darfur insurgents in December 2009. In June 2010 Khartoum closed its border with Libya, even as it acknowledged it was impossible to monitor it.

JEM has always denied receiving significant logistical help from Libya.

With no international presence in southern Libya and little first-hand evidence of events there, it is virtually impossible to distinguish between fact and fiction, truth and propaganda. But several sources point to unusual military activity in the border area since the Arab spring crossed into Libya: the presence of JEM fighters in scores of vehicles at the border early in March (said by government sources to be seeking weapons); a JEM unit that crossed into Darfur from South Sudan on 25 March and arrived in Kufra soon after (shortly before the first Libyan officers in the garrison defected to the opposition); and flights, reportedly from Eritrea, bringing arms into an airstrip near Kufra—departing from Asmara Air Force Base and landing twice on the afternoon of 9 March, according to sources.

Sources close to the Eritrean government say the reports of arms flights originated with foreign diplomats in Asmara wooed by the Sudanese embassy ‘in an attempt to make [President] Bashir look good’ despite the arrest warrant for war crimes issued against him by the International Criminal Court. But UN officials in the region give credence to the reports and are trying to establish whether the shipments were destined for Gaddafi—Eritrea's biggest financial and military patron—or JEM. Eritrea was an early supporter of the Darfur armed movements—supplying them through the Sudan People’s Liberation Army—but assumed a lower profile after brokering the October 2006 Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (EPSA) between Khartoum and the eastern rebels headed by the Beja Congress and Rashaida Free Lions. It did not, however, cut its ties with the Darfur insurgents completely and JEM continues to maintain a battalion in Eritrea.

Speculation that Eritrea was renewing its links with the Darfur armed movements, in expectation perhaps of a renewed North–South Sudanese conflict, circulated early in 2011 after an Eritrean envoy met representatives of the movements (including JEM) in the Ugandan capital, Kampala. There were reports from several sources of renewed activity in JEM camps in Eritrea and even the opening of a new one. Others proposed a different scenario, suggesting that Eritrea, which was rewarded for its role in the EPSA with highly favourable trade deals, was preparing the ground for a new round of bargaining with Khartoum. Supporting this scenario, it was noted that Eritrean foreign minister Osman Saleh travelled to Sudan recently and held a three-hour meeting with President Bashir.

With the region in turmoil and the fate of the Libyan regime still hanging the balance, there are for the moment more questions than answers.

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¹ UN sources say that Libya *has* been recruiting among Chadian opposition groups in Darfur, allegedly through the Libyan consulate. Some have reportedly been paid up to USD 13,000.