

CENTRAL AFRICA From Toby Lanzer in Bangui

Distant borders in the heart of Africa may seem of marginal interest in the affairs of nations. They should not be. As conflicts in Darfur and Chad rumble into the Central African Republic, the stakes are high. International donors are about to meet; they need to engage to halt violence and seed stability throughout the region.



Fragile Frontier

fEW PEOPLE HAVE HEARD OF THE Central African Republic and, despite its name, perhaps fewer still know where it is. Most of the country is wedged between Chad, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, its 4.2 million people having borne the brunt of the country's location and home-grown troubles since independence from France in 1960.

For virtually any outsider, reading an article about an unknown, poor, land-locked country the size of Texas, or a little bigger than France, miles from anywhere and with a population half the size of London's, might seem somewhat unrelated to the world's concerns. But looking a little closer, reading the latest news about Darfur shows that it lies just west of that troubled region. And many of the problems destabilising the country today are directly linked to its closeness to Sudan.

There are different ways in which events in

Sudan influence the Central African Republic. Tensions between Chad and Sudan and conflict in Darfur are but two. The hostility Chad and Sudan feel for each other has a direct impact in and around the capital Bangui. For example, the northeast has been used as a staging ground for armed elements wishing to destabilise Chad. If one were to consider the border between Chad and Sudan a sort of 'Maginot Line' it can be by-passed simply by taking a detour through the Central African Republic's Vakaga region.

In April last year, planes originating in Sudan landed in Vakaga and dropped materiel and armed groups, who then advanced on the Chadian capital N'djamena as part of an attempt to overthrow President Idriss Deby. Understaffed and barely present in the region, Bangui's army could do little but watch. The good relations between the presidents of Chad and the Central African Republic, in stark contrast to the poor state of affairs between Deby and Sudan's Muhammed Al-Bashir, provides ample material

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for speculation as to why Sudan might be behind problems in the Central African Republic.

Late last year, a group of disgruntled supporters of President Francois Bozizé appeared in the northeast. Well trained and equipped, this group known as the Union des forces démocratiques pour le rassemblement (UFDR), took to arms and started occupying towns in the Vakaga and Bamingui-Bangoran provinces. They stated that Bozizé had let them down – not compensated them for having helped him take power in a coup d'état in 2003 – and that his current elected government in Bangui needed a Muslim prime minister.

From the end of October to November last year, the UFDR quickly took both provincial capitals and advanced south, gaining strength with every move. Bangui pointed its finger at Sudan, which was reportedly fuelling the UFDR. The domestic political opposition to Bozizé exploited the situation, further destabilising the regime. France and the European Union-financed Multinational Force in the Central African Republic (FOMUC) stopped the UFDR's advance, supported the government in re-occupying rebel-held towns, and contained their movements to the northeast.

Without such international engagement, the UFDR would have arrived at the gates of Bangui and once there could well have joined forces with the political opposition and overthrown Bozizé. Although the political situation has since stabilised, the incident certainly rattled the Bozizé faithful, who remain suspicious of their northeastern neighbour's intentions.

SAFE HAVEN

On a very concrete level, far from power-scheming and politics in Bangui, the conflict in Darfur has led to serious difficulties for the Central African Republic. Among the various reasons for what is happening in Darfur, the lack of water and the tensions this causes is often cited. West of south Darfur lies a fertile land and in mid-June when Sudanese backed forces attacked the town of Daffaq, its fifteen thousand inhabitants fled. While most of them stayed nearby or moved towards one of the many Darfur sites where aid agencies work, up to a third headed west into this country.

After ten nights on foot - it was too hot and dangerous to walk during the day – and with some 200 kilometres behind them, people crossed the border into the small town of Sam Ouandja. I travelled there a few days later to listen to their stories, and ask some seemingly

straightforward questions including why they had chosen to leave Darfur and Sudan.

People explained that they had walked to the west, towards Sam Ouandja, because the attack on their hometown had come from the east, there was no water to the north, and no paths to the south. If ever there was a good option to flee one's home, the road west offered one. Happily for the arriving refugees, Bangui stated from the outset that all people, no matter their nationality, religion, or political affiliation, were welcome to seek shelter and safe haven.

CONFLICT DIAMONDS?

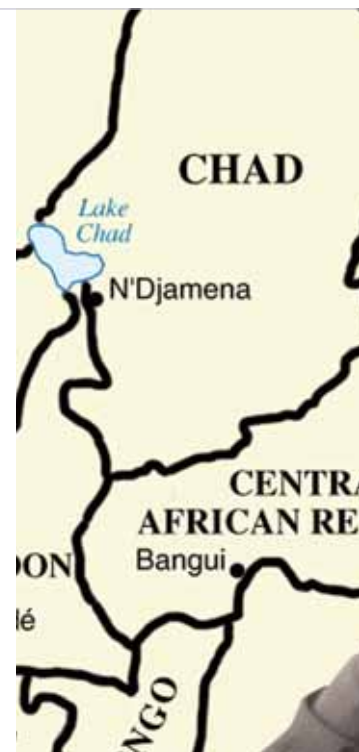
Fingers should not be pointed at Sudan for all of the Central African Republic's troubles in the northeast. And, indeed, one problem that has plagued the country over the years might actually destabilise Sudan. Besides serving as a launch-pad for insurgencies, Bangui has had to cope with its extraordinary potential as a safe-haven, and not only for refugees.

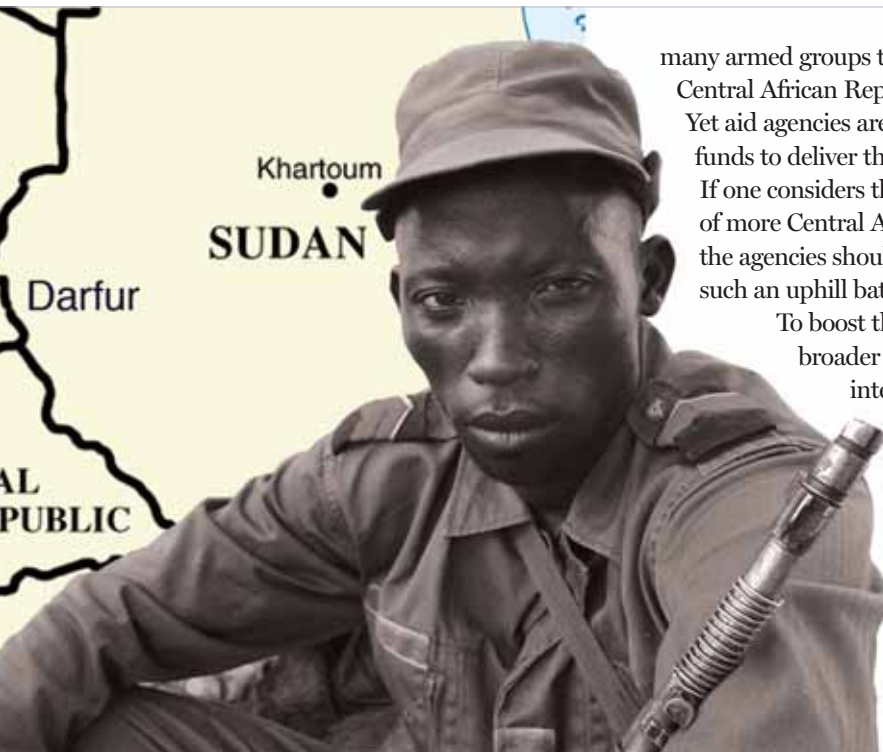
When Jean-Claude Aristide was pushed from power in Haiti in 2004, it was here that he initially came for shelter. For much of the past twelve months, and on that same, rather eerie note, the news that the dissident Lord's Resistance Army from Uganda had established a base was the talk of Bangui. In August, Bozizé had to state the seemingly obvious, 'The Lord's Resistance Army is neither wanted nor welcome in the Central African Republic.'

Various unconfirmed sources had it that the apparently unstoppable Ugandan rebels had arrived in the northeast and allegedly started running a diamond mine. If true, this would be a very bad development. Not only for the most obvious reason: that no country needs any such group on its territory, but also because it would mark the first direct association here between a rebel group and diamonds. Are we about to see the country's mineral wealth – especially in diamonds and gold – attract more troublemakers and, in the process, threaten domestic and regional security? And, if so, what can be done to stop it?

One thing the international community can do is start supporting the government, in place since free and fair elections in May 2005. People have waited for the 'peace dividend' since then, but international donors – with the notable exception of France, the European Union, and some UN agencies – have been very slow to engage. Time is running out.

Since the beginning of last year the government has worked tirelessly to outline





many armed groups that roam the Central African Republic-Chad-Sudan frontier. Yet aid agencies are struggling to raise funds to deliver the most basic help. If one considers the impact on the region of more Central Africans taking to arms, the agencies should not have to fight such an uphill battle.

To boost this work and address broader security issues, the international community needs to establish a multi-dimensional peacekeeping force in the northeastern Central African Republic, and it is heartening to see the Security Council move quickly in that direction. Once approved, troops will be needed and contributing nations

progress made since the elections to donor countries. Key ministers have travelled to capitals in Europe and North America, and in June the prime minister hosted an all-day meeting in Brussels to note some of the challenges ahead and the dangers of ignoring them.

Fourteen Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development members sent delegations, many of whom welcomed the government's initiative and voiced appreciation for its candid remarks about difficult subjects, including insecurity, impunity and corruption. The government hopes that even more donors will arrive at the next meeting this month – the presentation of its poverty reduction strategy paper in which security sector reform features prominently – and that they will be ready to show some political and financial support to help keep the country stable. Two things are needed specifically.

BOLD ACTION

First, countries should take a broader look at what is happening in central Africa and take bold and concerted action to address the regional aspects of the current crises. We all know that violence perpetrated against civilians is wrong and illegal, and throwing the band-aid of humanitarian action at its victims is only the first, if important, step in helping.

Indeed, humanitarian action is our best, immediate shot to keep girls and boys in school, out of harm's way, and further from the reach of recruiters from one of the

would be remiss to ignore the country's plight.

Second, donors should engage financially to alleviate oppressive poverty and thereby help keep the country stable. The main options include investing in the vast economic potential – in particular in diamonds, gold, uranium, or timber – or supporting development plans.

Several international business people have arrived in Bangui this year and are investing heavily in the mineral wealth. Helping the government to overhaul basic infrastructure, boost agriculture, and expand education and health programmes on the one hand, and accelerating economic reform and establishing a solid ability to govern throughout the country on the other are equally critical.

Much has been said on how the world is becoming more and more connected, about how an event in one region has an impact on people across the globe. Yet, it seems that the message has still not really sunk in. To many people, if not most, an unstable Central African Republic-Chad-Darfur nexus in the heart of Africa might seem like another person's problem. That is mistaken.

Beyond the moral imperative to help those in need, which calls on all of us to act, the world should worry about a regional crisis that threatens to spill over to countries across the continent, destroying decades of efforts towards economic and social progress. Not to mention the refugee flows, within and outside Africa, that destabilisation would spur. The situation needs to be seen in that context. And it is a context that requires our action.

