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China and Sudan Cement Economic Ties, Sideline Darfur

By Mohammed Ali Saeed

China and Sudan have cemented their economic partnership during a visit to Khartoum by Chinese President Hu Jintao that focused on trade rather than efforts to resolve the conflict in Darfur.

At their meeting in Khartoum, Hu and Sudanese counterpart Omar al-Beshir agreed on closer economic cooperation, underscoring the Asian giant's no-strings-attached stance on doing business in Africa's largest country.

"We are now officially economic partners," Beshir told reporters before heading into a closed meeting with Hu.

Beshir praised "China's position in regional and international forums of supporting the unity and stability of Sudan."

The international community has been hoping that Beijing would use its economic muscle on Khartoum over the Darfur conflict but Sudanese Foreign Minister Lam Akol said the meeting focused on trade relations.

China has agreed to give Sudan an interest-free loan of 100 million yuan (12.8 million dollars) and a grant of 40 million yuan (5.1 million dollars) for a variety of projects, Finance Minister Al-Zubair Ahmed Hassan told reporters.

The agreements will further boost two-way trade that reached 2.9 billion dollars in the first 11 months of 2006.

China's energy-hungry economy—the fourth largest in the world—is badly in need of resources from Sudan and other African countries.

No other country has more clout on the Khartoum government than China, which takes 60 percent of Sudan's total oil output and has repeatedly used its UN Security Council veto power to block further sanctions on the regime.

The China National Petroleum Corporation has huge stakes in Sudan's oil industry, producing around 500,000 barrels per day. China is also building a dam on the Nile, which is currently Africa's largest hydro-electric project.

After the meeting with Beshir, Hu was scheduled to visit the Khartoum refinery, a joint venture between China and Sudan inaugurated in 2000.

Turning to Darfur, Akol said only that: "The two sides agreed to support the Addis Ababa agreement," referring to the accord calling for a hybrid UN-African Union force in the troubled western Sudanese region.

Khartoum has yet to approve the final phase of the three-stage plan for UN forces to supplement the African contingent in Darfur where at least 200,000 people have been killed and more than two million displaced since fighting broke out four years ago.

Led by Washington, the international community has been pressing Khartoum to accept the deployment of UN peacekeepers in Darfur, where African Union troops have failed to quell the bloodshed.

But Beshir has consistently rejected such a move, accusing the United Nations and Western powers of seeking to invade his country and plunder its resources.

A top presidential aide to Beshir on Thursday accused Washington, which continues to impose sanctions on Sudan, of seeking to overthrow the regime by using rights groups and foreign powers.

Asked about any pressure on Sudan to accept UN troops in Darfur, Akol said there had been none.

"There is no pressure," he told reporters. "We are now in phase one of the agreement and getting ready for phase two as planned."

Hu received a warm welcome Thursday in Liberia, the second leg of his tour of the continent.

He began his tour Tuesday in Cameroon, where he approved grants and loans worth more than 54 million dollars, signing a draft agreement on scrapping Cameroon's debt to China and a series of health and educational accords.

Emphasising its commitment to Africa, China said this week it would write off debts owed by 33 African countries as part of a multi-billion-dollar pledge made last year.

Hu is due in Zambia on Saturday.