

Blair draws up plans to send troops to Sudan

- Army could be used to protect camps
- A million lives at risk from starvation

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Tony Blair has asked Downing Street and Foreign Office officials to draw up plans for possible military intervention in Sudan, where more than a million refugees are at risk from famine and disease.

Despite a heavy commitment of British armed forces in Iraq and other hotspots, the prime minister has had discussions with advisers for on-the-ground involvement of troops.

The prime minister is still hoping that diplomatic and political pressure on the Khartoum government will resolve the crisis without the need for military involvement.

But with conditions in hundreds of camps sharply deteriorating this week with the onset of torrential rain, governments across Europe as well as the US are facing calls for action to prevent a repetition of the Rwanda genocide 10 years ago that claimed a million lives. A government official involved in the discussions said Mr Blair was being given regular updates on the condition of the refugees in the Darfur region.

"The prime minister has asked to look at all options that will save lives and not to rule out the military services," the official said.

Three options for military action have been put forward in Downing Street:

- British servicemen to help with the delivery of aid if the humanitarian agencies can no longer cope. At present, the Belgian air force is helping to fly in aid. Britain is using civilian planes because they are cheaper.
- British logistical support for an African Union force of 60 monitors and 300-strong protection force being deployed in the Sudan. The AU force is short of equipment, including helicopters, vital given the poor state of Darfur's roads.
- British troops to protect refugee camps being harassed by marauding militias. This creation of safe zones would be the most risky of the options and would require the agreement of the Khartoum government, which would be reluctant to give it.

The fact that Mr Blair is prepared to consider military options, even limited ones, so soon after the Iraq war may create controversy, not least among critics who already regard him as too interventionist. It would be his sixth military venture since becoming prime minister in 1997.

Mr Blair, speaking at the Labour party conference in 2001, said he would have a moral duty to intervene in any country to prevent a repetition of Rwanda. Two years earlier, Mr Blair set out in Chicago a doctrine for intervention in humanitarian cases.

Asked about Sudan in the Commons yesterday, Mr Blair did not mention the military option. But he said he "ruled absolutely nothing out".

A ministerial source said pressure was building on Mr Blair and the foreign secretary, Jack Straw.

"For Straw and Blair, Rwanda was a marker for the world," he said. "A reprise of Rwanda chills everyone's blood."

Mr Straw is to fly to Sudan soon to assess the plight of the refugees at first-hand.

The UN security council is shortly to table a resolution that is expected to set out a timetable to put pressure on the Sudanese government to resolve the crisis.

The Darfur refugees, mainly women and children, were forced to flee their homes after attacks by the Janjaweed, a militia armed by the Khartoum government to help combat rebels. The government, which initially slowed access by aid organisations to Darfur, has so far failed to fulfil promises to the UN to disarm the Janjaweed.

The onset of heavy rain in recent weeks has brought chaos to the camps by cutting off roads and aid, destroying shelters and disrupting water supplies, leaving malnourished refugees vulnerable to disease.

There is intense debate between Downing Street and the Foreign Office about the best approach. Some, especially in the Foreign Office, see military involvement as impractical given that Darfur is the size of France, and favour continuing to cajole the government into reining in the Janjaweed and making the camps secure.

Intervention in Sudan would help Mr Blair counter critics who accuse him of intervening only when US or British self-interest is at stake. Britain sent soldiers to Sierra Leone in 2000 in support of a beleaguered UN force: the

other interventions were Kosovo, Afghanistan and twice in Iraq.

In spite of complaints by the Ministry of Defence about the overstretch of military resources, it could provide a few hundred servicemen. A request for thousands would be problematic. Government officials concede that the US is unlikely to put any troops on the ground and there is little support elsewhere in Europe.

At prime minister's question time, the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy, asked Mr Blair: "What scope do you see for further practical steps now ... to assist the millions of Sudanese facing ethnic cleansing and starvation?"

Mr Blair said he was in touch with ministers on the issue every day and had spoken to the UN secretary general, Kofi Annan, twice over the past couple of weeks. He said it was vital to "make sure whatever aid is given gets through to the people who need it most and secondly to keep up pressure on the government of Sudan to make sure they are dealing with the real problems that are giving rise to the violence and ethnic cleansing."