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## **Sudan Balks at Taking Peacekeepers**

By Lydia Polgreen

KHARTOUM, Sudan — On Sept. 12, 2001, President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, whose government had once played host to Osama bin Laden, sent a message to President Bush and the American people.

He called the attack on the World Trade Center “a crime against humanity” and promised to join the fight against terrorism.

Nearly five years later, it is Mr. Bush’s turn to send a message to Mr. Bashir, via the top American diplomat for Africa on Saturday — but they are unlikely to find Sudan to be such a receptive audience.

The Bush administration is pressing Mr. Bashir to accept a United Nations peacekeeping force to salvage the dying peace agreement in Darfur that the United States worked so hard to get. The message will be blunt, Jendayi E. Frazer, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, said in Washington on Friday before heading to Khartoum. Despite Sudanese objections to the peacekeeping force, she said, she expected that a Security Council resolution authorizing it would pass and that the troops would be at least partly in place by Oct. 1.

But Ms. Frazer will arrive in a very different Khartoum than the cowed one that sent the message in 2001. Back then, Sudan’s economy had been battered by sanctions after a decade as a pariah state. Given its jihadist past and suspected ties to terrorism, the threat of military action by the United States still hung heavily, jeopardizing a fledgling oil boom. The very survival of the government, ruled by a tiny elite since it overthrew an elected government in 1989, was at stake.

Today, the Sudanese capital is defiant and transformed, a boom town built on oil money and investments from the Persian Gulf, China and Malaysia, buoyed by a changing geopolitical landscape in which it seems convinced it has little to fear from thumbing its nose at the world’s only superpower. “They seem to be playing on Washington’s weakness and their relative strength,” said J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, whose writings helped shape the Bush administration’s Sudan policy.

“The U.S. is completely pinned down with Iraq and Lebanon and related issues; there is a surge of investment capital coming into Khartoum,” Mr. Morrison said. “It looks to me like they are calculating that time is on their side and they don’t have to compromise. Immediately after 9/11 they came under a serious, credible threat from the U.S., but now I think the equation has changed to where the threats are not there and not credible.”

Rising oil prices mean poor petro-states like Sudan are less dependent on Western-dominated institutions. The rapid growth of China's economy has created alternative markets. The majority of Sudan's crude goes to China, and the Sudanese are betting that those exports are strategic enough to warrant the threat of a Security Council veto of the peacekeeping force by China.

Arab solidarity, bolstered by the role of the United States in Iraq and its support for Israel's incursions in Lebanon, has helped cast Sudan's fight against the United Nations force as one of Arab and Muslim resistance to Western domination. In his increasingly bellicose speeches, Mr. Bashir has compared Sudan to Lebanon and the prospect of a United Nations force to Israel, vowing that Sudan would repulse any attempt by foreign forces to enter Darfur.

The Arab League has pledged to pay for a strengthened African Union peacekeeping force, Sudanese officials said. The current 7,000-member force is almost out of money.

Indeed, Sudan's plan for pacifying Darfur with its own troops working in tandem with the African Union, which was presented to the Security Council last week, was seen by many officials in New York and Washington as yet another negotiating ploy. But any illusions about the seriousness of Sudan's intentions fell away when it declined even to discuss the matter with the Security Council.

Sudan's foreign minister, Lam Akol, said in an interview here that the plan to use troops to pacify Darfur was already in motion. "With this plan, we are implementing the Darfur peace agreement," he said. "We do not need the permission or the input of the United Nations or anyone else."

The indifference to outside pressure suggests that the true audience for Khartoum's protests against the threat of Western dominance is internal. Right now, the government's biggest threat is within the president's own clique, said Eltayeb Hag Ateya, director of the Peace Research Institute at the University of Khartoum. "This has to do with a power struggle in Khartoum, not anything outside," Mr. Ateya said.

Power struggles abound, from the Islamists who think the government has taken the side of the infidels, to the Arab nationalists who think any accommodation with the West is a capitulation of Arab pride, to the internationalists who urge compromise to ensure greater wealth.

Given the proposal put forward by Sudan last week, which calls for 10,500 Sudanese troops to quell the rebellion in Darfur among those who did not sign a peace agreement in May ending the conflict, it seems that the hard-liners currently have Mr. Bashir's ear.

Islamic extremism and rabid Arab nationalism have never fit comfortably with most Sudanese. Here in Khartoum, many men's foreheads bear the telltale bruise of the prayerful, but almost every one of them will shake a woman's hand. On the banks of the Nile, courting couples sit together, chaste yet unsupervised romance blossoming.

Many people here in Khartoum, asked about the United Nations force, said it did not really matter to them. “We want more openness,” said Mazin Aboud, a 27-year-old computer engineer. “We don’t want Sudan to be isolated anymore.”

But if the aftermath of Sept. 11 pushed Sudan to compromise with the United States, end a brutal civil war with the south and cooperate with Washington in fighting terrorism, the current era leaves the United States with few carrots or sticks to end the conflict in Darfur, which Mr. Bush has called genocide.

Mr. Morrison said that with little leverage left, the United States should focus on preventing the total collapse of the vast aid effort in Darfur, a lifeline to millions, and on stopping the blood bath that the impending onslaught by the Sudanese Army would surely cause.

“I don’t mean to pretend there is any fix here,” he said. “What is an option is to face up to a fact that we are in a slide right now and we need to push back and contain the slide to prevent a catastrophe.”

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