

Will Sudan be Re-Colonized?

By Stephen Gowans

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gowans.wordpress.com/

The United States is maneuvering to introduce a UN peacekeeping force into Darfur, as a first step to securing control of the region's vast supply of oil. US control of Darfur's petroleum resources would deliver highly profitable investment opportunities to US firms, and scuttle China's investment in the region, thereby slowing the rise of a strategic competitor whose continued industrial growth depends on secure access to foreign oil. Washington is using highly exaggerated charges of genocide as a justification for a UN intervention it would dominate, while at the same time opposing a workable peacekeeping plan acceptable to the Sudanese government that would see the current African Union mission in Darfur expand.

While Sudan's President Omar Hassan al-Bashir is often presented as obstinately opposing the introduction of peacekeepers into Darfur, Sudan has already accepted an AU force, urges the strengthening of the current AU mission, but opposes its replacement by Western troops. Bashir's fear is that a Western military presence will become permanent, and that Sudan — the first country south of the Sahara to gain independence — will be the first country to be re-colonized.

His fears can't be dismissed.

There is no shortage of turmoil in Darfur for Western trouble-makers to exploit. Conflicts over water and grazing land have raged for decades between sedentary farmers and nomadic tribes. And now there's a new flashpoint: who will reap the benefits of the region's new found oil resources?

In other places, the practice of the United States, Britain, Germany and other Western powers has been to inflame tensions within countries whose resources and cheap labor make them attractive targets for economic take-over, or whose public policies block or impose conditions on foreign investment and trade. The turmoil is often used as a pretext for intervention. While the real reasons for intervention are inextricably bound up with profit-making opportunities, the stated reasons are invariably presented as being related to selfless humanitarianism. This was as true of the Nazis, who said they were intervening militarily in countries across Europe to rescue oppressed German minorities and to save the continent from communism, as it is of the United States today, which, we're expected to believe, can't afford to provide healthcare to all its citizens, but can spend countless billions on wars to deliver democracy and freedom to non-citizens half way across the globe.

Consider Yugoslavia. There the United States and Germany encouraged secessionism, and then used the ensuing conflicts as justification to establish a permanent NATO military presence, followed by the sell-off of the dismembered federation's publicly- and socially-owned assets. While the secessionist conflicts were real, the consequences were often grossly exaggerated to justify intervention on humanitarian grounds. The tens of thousands of bodies NATO spokesmen warned would be found scattered throughout Kosovo after the 1999 78-day NATO terror bombing campaign — like the weapons of mass destruction used to justify another war — were never found. Heaps of bodies thrown to the bottom of the Trepca mines, like Iraq's banned weapons, were inventions.

True to form, Washington declares the conflict in Darfur to be a genocide (another invention), a finding that compels international action, but Washington quietly reveals its true motivations in an executive order to strengthen sanctions on Sudan, which cites "the pervasive role played by the government of Sudan in Sudan's petroleum and petrochemical industries." Washington then declares Sudan's control of Sudanese petroleum resources to be a threat to "U.S. national security and foreign policy interests."

Two realities suggest that it is US foreign policy interests (which is to say, the interests of the banks, corporations and hereditary capitalist families which dominate policy-making in Washington), and not genocide, that shapes US policy on Sudan.

First, while there has unquestionably been a large number of violent deaths in Darfur, there has never been a genocide. This is not to say that Khartoum isn't guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. It may be just as securely ensconced in the club of war criminal countries as the US, Britain and Israel. But on the matter of genocide, the UN Commission on Darfur was quite clear: there has been no genocide in Darfur, notwithstanding Washington's allegations. What there has been is a disproportionate response by Khartoum to attacks by rebel groups on police stations and government buildings, and while that response has targeted entire groups, it has not been aimed at eliminating them.

The response of the public in the West — one based on uncritical acceptance of the genocide alarm raised by a notoriously untruthful Bush administration — speaks volumes about the power of Western governments, the media and ruling class foundations and think-tanks to selectively galvanize support for interventions in some countries, while effacing all recognition of comparable or greater levels of violent conflict and avoidable tragedy elsewhere. The number of violent deaths in Darfur (in the hundreds of thousands) is modest by the standards of other African conflicts. Fighting has claimed four million lives in the Congo since 1998. Were there ever Save Congo marches, as there were Save Darfur marches worldwide last September? Some 600,000 Iraqis are dead as a result of the US and British invasion of Iraq. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees says 3.7 million Iraqis are displaced, the largest refugee crisis since 800,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed from ex-Mandate Palestine by Zionist forces in 1948. There will be no US or British-sponsored Save Iraq or al-Awda campaigns.

Second, Washington has systematically undermined the peacekeeping efforts of the

African Union in Darfur. The AU force was raised by funds provided by the US and EU. Washington and the Europeans had struck a deal with the African Union a decade ago to underwrite interventions in the continent's hot spots by African troops, but their promises have never been completely delivered upon. Midway through 2006, Washington announced funding would be withdrawn for the AU force in Darfur and that a stronger UN force needed to take its place. The AU force, it was lamented, had too few troops to be effective. A stronger UN force was needed. But if so, why had the US and EU not spent the money necessary to maintain an effective AU force in the first place? And why not spend the money that would go to building a larger UN force on strengthening the existing AU force? This would be acceptable to the Sudanese government. It's happy to endorse a bulked-up AU force, but is frightened a UN force, made up of Western troops, will be used to bring about regime change and force Sudan back under a Western colonial heel.

A chess match is now being played out between pro-intervention members of the Security Council (the US and Britain), those opposed (China), and Khartoum, whose approval is required before UN troops can be deployed. From Khartoum's and China's point of view, an outright rejection of a UN mission is undesirable because it could hand Washington and London a pretext to assemble a coalition of the willing to invade Sudan. Both countries, then, have an interest in compromising on a UN peacekeeping mission, so long as it is held in check by significant AU participation. The US and Britain, on the other hand, are angling to give UN authorities as much influence as possible. These considerations can be seen in a tentative June 12 deal which would see the creation of a new peacekeeping force made up mostly of African troops, with an AU commander given operational authority, while overall authority resides with the UN. The AU commander would make decisions on the ground but UN authorities could over-ride his decisions if they disagreed. Considering the US's history of trying to change the Sudanese government, its defining of Sudanese state control of the oil industry as a threat to US foreign policy interests, and its strategic interest in sabotaging China's access to Darfur's oil, it would not be long before the UN found a reason to disagree with the AU commander's decision, and assumed full control of the mission.

There is indeed a very real risk that Sudan could be brought back under Western colonial domination, with a UN peacekeeping force setting the stage. The ideology of humanitarian intervention will, as has always been the case when imperialist powers seek to use force to advance the interests of their economic elites, provide the pretext.