

# The EU and the 'Darfurisation' of eastern Chad

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**The Darfur conflict in western Sudan has captured the attention of the world. In late 2005 fighting broke out across the border from Darfur in eastern Chad and in Central African Republic (CAR). Violence has evolved into a 'regional conflict system' where separate crises have become interconnected and the space in which armed conflict is taking place transcends state boundaries. This analysis of the situation contradicts popular portrayals of the region as a whole having been 'Darfurised' – violence in Darfur spilling over its borders. Experts like Roland Marchal and Jérôme Tubiana have rejected this analysis as simplistic and, ultimately, misleading, for brushing over the internal causes of armed conflict in Chad.**

This article focuses on the response of the European Union (EU) to cross-border insecurity in eastern Chad. EU intervention has been based on four 'pillars': security, development, humanitarian aid, and political engagement. Brussels acknowledged the regional dimension of the crisis, giving its Special Representative a mandate to deal with Sudan, Chad and CAR. The EU also deployed one of the first ever cross-border peacekeeping forces, EUFOR, to both Chad and CAR. Conceptually, EUFOR represents an innovative initiative to address a cross-border problem.

But in practice the EU has struggled to deliver a coherent cross-border peacebuilding response. EUFOR failed to become operational across the Chad-CAR border and its impact on regional conflict dynamics was minimal. Brussels prioritised EUFOR to the detriment of political engagement, while EU peacekeepers were only deployed for one year; and so their contribution to peacebuilding in Chad was limited. The EU also did not respond to local sources of borderland insecurity in eastern Chad, such as relating to law and order, or recognise

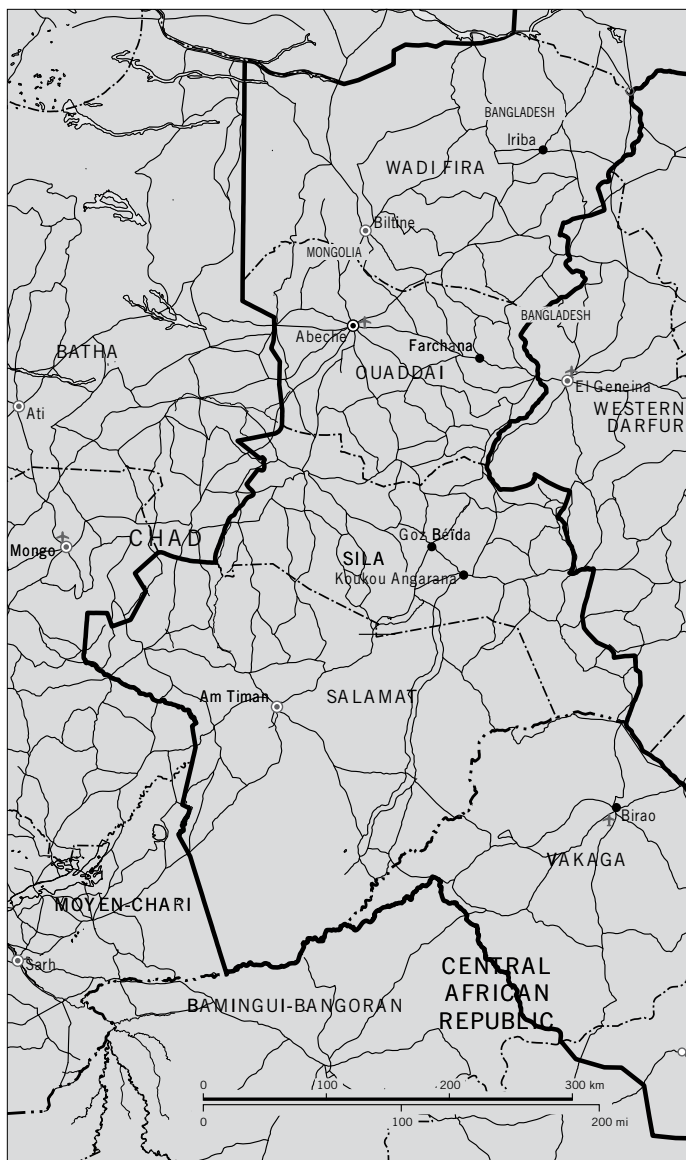
their links with deeper structural problems of governance and political marginalisation. Meanwhile, some EU member states have sold weapons to Chad although it was well known that the Chadian government was arming Darfurian rebels.

## **The formation of a regional conflict system**

The escalation of the conflict in Darfur in 2002-03 put the Chadian President Idriss Déby in an awkward position. On the one hand he was under pressure to support the Darfur rebels, many of whom come from the same ethnic group as Déby, the Zaghawa. On the other hand the Chadian regime had cultivated a longstanding alliance with the Sudanese government of Omer al-Bashir, who expected Déby's help in curtailing the rebellion in Sudan's tumultuous west. Déby initially tried to stay neutral and even acted as a mediator between the government and the rebels in 2004.

However, as pressure increased Déby was forced to safeguard against a coup from within his inner circle of power, consisting largely of fellow Zaghawa, by reneging on his association with Khartoum and siding with the Darfur rebels. At the same time, Khartoum began arming Chadian rebels based in Darfur. Consequently, since late 2005, the Chadian government has channelled money and arms to the Darfur rebels, primarily to the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) led by Khalil Ibrahim, who is also Zaghawa.

Proxy wars ensued as Darfurian rebels began operating from eastern Chad and, vice versa, Chadian rebels established rear bases in western Sudan. This brought the Chadian regime to the brink of collapse. In April 2006 one rebel group, *en route* via the northeast of CAR, launched a raid against the Chadian capital N'Djamena, which the army succeeded in repelling.



**EUFOR Chad/CAR area of operation**

Once again in February 2008, Chadian rebels, still armed by Khartoum, attacked and nearly succeeded in ousting Déby. In fact, it was thanks to French support, JEM's intervention and quarrelling among the rebels that the Chadian army managed to fend off the second major attack on N'Djamena after several days of fighting.

The confrontation between Chad and Sudan also had local repercussions. In 2006 the security situation in south-eastern Chad deteriorated as a result of clashes between the Chadian army and the rebels. At the same time, the area experienced violence that was reminiscent of the conflict in Darfur: villages were attacked by militia groups, some of whom allegedly had connections to *Janjaweed* fighters in Darfur. Growing insecurity led to the internal displacement of 170,000 Chadians who joined the 250,000 Darfurian refugees already in Chad.

The cross-border conflict dynamics that destabilised eastern Chad were triggered by the escalation of the war in Darfur and the subsequent breakdown of the Chad-Sudan alliance.

However, beyond these triggers, the process of conflict regionalisation in the Darfur-Chad-CAR 'triangle' was driven by structural factors, many of which are interconnected across state borders, which peacebuilders should consider if they are interested in the sustainable transformation of conflict.

The most important structural driver is the clientelist nature of state power in the region. Rulers concentrate political power and economic resources in the hands of personal associates, to the exclusion of large segments of society. Hinterlands are governed through opportunistic alliances with local strongmen, which can include armed groups across national borders. Other structural factors include the presence of combatants in search of employment; the abundance of small arms; and the role of cross-border ethnic groups, such as the Zaghawa.

## Enter the European Union

It took some time for the international community to recognise the cross-border dimensions of the Darfur conflict. In December 2006 then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for the first time proposed the deployment of a multidimensional UN peacekeeping mission to Chad and CAR, which included a mandate to facilitate an inclusive political dialogue in both countries. Déby outright rejected this proposal, which he painted as an illegitimate interference in Chad's internal affairs. Libya and Sudan were also opposed to a UN force in eastern Chad. In February 2007 the new UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, proposed a less ambitious plan, but it was also rejected.

The tide turned in May 2007 when Bernard Kouchner became foreign minister of France. Kouchner was eager to 'do something' in Darfur, but his offer to establish humanitarian corridors was dismissed by humanitarian organisations as counter-productive. He then took up the idea of sending European peacekeepers to eastern Chad, who, together with the EU-funded joint UN-African Union peacekeeping mission already stationed in Darfur, would contain the cross-border effects of the conflict. Déby agreed to Kouchner's offer after obtaining a series of compromises: the peacekeeping force would not have a political mandate and it would not operate in areas immediately bordering Sudan.

Kouchner's project was controversial within the EU as a number of member states, most importantly Germany, suspected the mission to be a fig leaf for advancing French interests in Chad. Nevertheless, in September 2007 EU foreign ministers approved the establishment of an EU force in eastern Chad and north-eastern CAR for the duration of one year. The UN Security Council subsequently authorised the deployment of EUFOR, alongside a UN mission, MINURCAT, which was tasked with training Chadian police officers operating within camps for the displaced.

The deployment of peacekeepers explicitly aimed to address some of the cross-border dimensions of armed conflict in the region. EUFOR spanned two countries and UN Security Council resolution 1778 authorising the mission acknowledged that 'the situation in the region of the border between the Sudan, Chad and the Central African Republic constitutes a threat to international peace and security'.

The EU also saw its engagement in Chad and CAR through a regional lens. In September 2008 Javier Solana, the then EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, stated that 'the presence of EUFOR contributes to mitigating regional tensions. This is fundamental since what happens in Chad and CAR is linked to what happens in Darfur, and vice versa'.

EUFOR was operational from March 2008 until March 2009, when it officially handed over to the UN mission MINURCAT II. With 3,700 soldiers, 2,100 of whom were French, EUFOR cost €1 billion and was the largest ever autonomous EU military operation. Operating from four bases in eastern Chad and one in north-eastern CAR, the EU peacekeepers focused on securing areas around camps for the displaced and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

While the security dimension was undoubtedly its centrepiece, as mentioned above the EU's response to cross-border conflict dynamics in Chad included three additional pillars, which, in theory at least, aimed to constitute a broader peacebuilding agenda. First, the EU provided funding for humanitarian aid, aimed at alleviating the effects of the supposed cross-border violence in eastern Chad. The contributions from the European Commission alone, without counting donations from individual EU member states, doubled between 2005-06 and 2007-09 to roughly \$50 million per year.

Second, as part of its development cooperation with Chad, the EU extended its funding for governance projects, such as reforms of the justice and police sectors, decentralisation, and public finance reform. These projects were aimed at addressing some of the structural problems of the Chadian state, which, as mentioned above, are an important driver of armed conflict in the region.

Finally, the EU was engaged at the political level as a means of addressing the underlying causes of armed violence in Chad and in the region. The EU sponsored and, through its head of delegation in Chad, acted as mediator in negotiations between the Chadian government and members of the non-armed political opposition. These talks culminated in the 13 August 2007 agreement, which set out a blueprint for electoral reform

with the aim of strengthening the democratic process in Chad. On the regional level, EU Special Representative Torben Brylle was involved in the diplomatic process to improve relations between Chad and Sudan.

## **What difference did it make?**

What difference did the EU's interventions make on the ground? EUFOR contributed to improving humanitarian access in eastern Chad, fostered by relatively good coordination between EU peacekeepers and humanitarian agencies. Also, no major rebel attack took place during EUFOR's deployment in eastern Chad. However, whether the rebels were actually deterred by EUFOR's presence is difficult to determine.

As for the security situation, eastern Chad in 2008-09 experienced a marked increase in crime and banditry, to which EUFOR could not adequately respond. The mission did not include police units, while those of the accompanying UN mission were only belatedly deployed.

From the outset, EUFOR focused on the protection of civilians around camps for the displaced and refrained from patrolling the tumultuous Chadian-Sudanese border. One reason for this prudence was an incident that occurred early in the mission, in March 2008, when a French EUFOR soldier was shot by the Sudanese army after he mistakenly crossed the border into Darfur. The force also did not have a formal mechanism to deal with Sudanese or Chadian rebel groups, who were operating in the border area. This is confirmed by a UN report of July 2008, which frankly stated that 'EUFOR and MINURCAT are not in a position to directly address the problem of cross-border movement by armed groups'. Thus, EUFOR's impact on cross-border conflict dynamics was minimal.

As far as the EU's interventions to improve governance are concerned, the 13 August agreement provided a useful framework for organising elections. However, according to the International Crisis Group (ICG), the agreement is modest and ambiguous since it did not address paramount governance issues in Chad, such as reforming the security sector. It also excluded actors from civil society as well as Chad's armed opposition. It fell short of the ICG's recommendation of a 'new conflict resolution framework', including different layers of negotiations between the Chadian government, political opposition, rebel groups and neighbouring countries.

The EU's engagement in other areas of governance, such as justice and police, may have had a marginal effect. However, as a whole, despite its leverage, the EU's interventions did not change the way in which the Chadian regime functions.



Polish soldiers, part of the European Force (EUFOR), patrol a village near Iriba, in eastern Chad © PHILIPPE HUGUEN / AFP / Getty images

“ The EU also did not respond to local sources of borderland insecurity in eastern Chad, such as relating to law and order, or recognise their links with deeper structural problems of governance and political marginalisation”

Clientelism and authoritarianism are as much a problem today as they were before EUFOR's deployment, and therefore a primary root cause of armed conflict in Chad and across the region remains intact. That the cross-border conflict dynamics between Chad and Darfur have diminished at the time of writing is not due to international intervention, but to the rapprochement between Déby and al-Bashir since January 2010.

### Challenges for cross-border peacebuilding

The EU's experiences in Chad reveal four challenges for peacebuilding in cross-border conflicts.

- A conceptual challenge to *recognise that many armed conflicts have cross-border dynamics and therefore conventional, state-centric conflict management instruments may not be sufficient*. The EU's conceptual approach to Chad has been remarkably progressive: it recognised a regional dimension to the crisis; it tried to deploy an innovative cross-border peacekeeping force; and it gave its Special Representative a regional mandate. But as discussed above, the EU has come unstuck in implementation.
- *Understanding correctly security threats in borderlands*. Too much focus on cross-border security threats, for example the incursion of foreign rebel groups, can obscure important local sources of insecurity in borderlands, such as lawlessness, banditry and land disputes. European soldiers were useful to deter large-scale attacks, but they were ill-prepared to deal with the more pressing law and order problems in eastern Chad. In this context, a focus on policing and local peacebuilding may have been more effective than a heavy-footprint military mission.
- *Developing a coherent policy approach across all sectors*, even those that are less conventionally associated with peacebuilding. A recent SIPRI report showed that some European countries still sell weapons to Chad, although it is well known that these arms could end up in the hands of armed groups in Darfur, thereby fuelling cross-border conflict. Some observers have also criticised Europeans, and in particular France, for turning a blind eye to the repressive practices of Chadian security forces in the aftermath of the aforementioned February 2008 attack – even as such repression is undoubtedly a cause of armed conflict in Chad.
- *Recognising that peacebuilding is inherently political and requires long-term engagement, especially if the aim is to address the structural drivers of cross-border conflicts*. In Chad the EU focused on humanitarian and military instruments to mitigate the symptoms of cross-border conflict. It did not use its exceptional leverage to promote more fundamental changes at the national political level. Nor did the EU develop a long-term vision of peacebuilding. This would explain why European countries, again focusing on France in particular, have been so passive during post-EUFOR discussions in the UN Security Council about the continuation of MINURCAT II. In the end, Déby's will prevailed and he forced the withdrawal of the UN mission at the end of 2010.

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