

China, in New Role, Presses Sudan on Darfur

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A restaurant in Khartoum, Sudan's capital, is among the signs of China's active commercial and diplomatic role in the country.

KHARTOUM, Sudan — Amid the international outrage over the bloodshed in Darfur, frustration has increasingly turned toward China, Sudan's biggest trading partner and international protector, culminating in Steven Spielberg's decision last week to withdraw as artistic adviser to the Beijing Olympics.

And it may be working.

China has begun shifting its position on Darfur, stepping outside its diplomatic comfort zone to quietly push Sudan to accept the world's largest peacekeeping force, diplomats and analysts say.

It has also acted publicly, sending engineers to help peacekeepers in Darfur and appointing a special envoy to the region who has toured refugee camps and pressed the Sudanese government to change its policies.

Few analysts expect China to walk away from its business ties to Sudan, but its willingness to take up the issue is a rare venture into something China swears it never does — meddle in the internal affairs of its trading partners.

"China in my view has been very cooperative," said Andrew S. Natsios, the former special envoy of President Bush to Sudan. "The level of coordination and cooperation has been improving each month."

For all of China's billion-dollar oil contracts, multimillion-dollar arms shipments and Security Council veto protection of Sudan, the global power with the biggest influence over the country has scarcely a dime invested here, has no ambassador on Sudanese soil and has slapped progressively tougher sanctions on its government: the United States.

While conventional wisdom holds that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have sapped America's prestige and power, especially in Muslim countries, the United States remains the gatekeeper to international respectability in the eyes of the Sudanese government, and its power to influence top officials here — through threats or inducements — remains unmatched, diplomats, Sudanese government officials and analysts say.

"Coming to some sort of agreement with the United States is the Holy Grail of Sudanese politics," said a senior Western diplomat in Khartoum, who was not authorized to speak publicly. "No one has been able to deliver it."

This holds true though Sudan is awash in investments from Asia and the gulf that would, in theory, allow the oil-rich but development-poor country to prosper more broadly than it has despite American opprobrium.

American approval and acceptance would transform Sudan in a way the billions of dollars from China, India, Malaysia, Iran and the gulf have been unable to: by opening the spigots of Western development aid and with it a deal to reduce its nearly \$30 billion in external debt, along with technical assistance to manage the tide of money rushing in.

"We are receiving billions of dollars in foreign investment that we are not even prepared to absorb," said Ali al-Sadig, a senior diplomat and Sudanese government spokesman who worked on the China desk of Sudan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for many years. "We don't have the capacity. We need Western expertise. Sudan wants, above all, a normal relationship with the United States and the West." But the Bush administration seems divided on what to do about Darfur. On one hand, there is heavy pressure from advocacy groups, Congress and others to take a tough line with Sudan, stepping up sanctions and hammering the government over new attacks.

At the same time, because Sudan is a crucial ally of the United States in fighting terrorism, some in the administration argue that it cannot be allowed to become more isolated and further beyond the West's orbit than it already is, diplomats and analysts say.

Sudan's relationship with the West has been troubled ever since Omar al-Bashir seized power in 1989 and embraced militant Islam, playing host to a variety of jihadists, including Osama bin Laden. The relationship hit its lowest in 1998 when the Clinton administration bombed a Khartoum pharmaceutical factory it claimed was producing chemical weapons, though the allegation has never been proved.

After Sept. 11, Sudan reached out to the United States, realizing that it could find itself in the cross hairs of America's military might just as Taliban-controlled Afghanistan and Iraq later did. The two countries have since cooperated on counterterrorism issues, even though Sudan remains on an American list of nations that sponsor terrorism.

Mr. Bush sent John C. Danforth, the former Missouri senator, to help negotiate a deal to end the civil war in southern Sudan that had lasted two decades and claimed two million lives.

Sudan had many reasons for wanting to end the war — its military was exhausted, and a stalemate was helping neither side — but the chance to improve relations with the United States was a big inducement for Sudan's government.

Then "Darfur happened," the diplomat said.

At first, the conflict in Darfur seemed a fly in the ointment, a distraction from the main work of securing peace between the north and south. But five years later, the Darfur crisis is undermining the peace agreement and threatens to tear Sudan apart.

More than 200,000 have died in Darfur, according to international estimates, and 2.5 million have been pushed into camps here and in Chad, sowing chaos in one of the world's poorest regions. Sudan's government says the toll has been greatly exaggerated.

The conflict has also inspired one of the largest protest movements in the United States since the battle to end apartheid in South Africa. China, with its vast commercial interests and sensitivity to criticism around the Olympics, presents a unique leverage point for this movement.

Like Mr. Spielberg, Mia Farrow, an actress and Darfur activist, has said China can do more, specifically by pushing for the full deployment of 27,000 peacekeeping troops in Darfur, supplying some of the helicopters needed for the mission and demanding an end to aerial bombardment of civilian areas.

But some diplomats and analysts argue that offering concessions, not demands — a chance to come off the state sponsor of terrorism list or easing sanctions — may offer the best opportunity to get Sudan's government to strike a deal in Darfur.

There are grave risks to that strategy, not least of which is that Sudan's government has a history of making agreements and not fully putting them in place.

"What this government responds to is pressure," Jerry Fowler, executive director of the Save Darfur Coalition, said of Sudan's leaders.

As a senior Western diplomat in Khartoum put it, the West's stance on Sudan must be "mistrust but verify," a twist on Reagan's posture on the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, the Sudanese government is far from unanimous in its craving for international respectability. The small cadre who have ruled this country since the National Islamic Front seized power in a coup in 1989 have tried a variety of guises — radical Islamism, Arab nationalism and garden variety despotism — in their quest to hang on to power.

The relative moderates who were crucial to negotiating a deal with the south have been largely sidelined, and analysts and diplomats say that hard-liners in the military and elsewhere are increasingly less interested in Western ties.

As for China, analysts warn, there are limits to how far it will go. Olympics or no, China's leadership simply has too much at stake in Sudan.

"Their political fortunes are tied to their ability to deliver a constant stream of economic goods at home," said Christopher Alden, a senior lecturer at the London School of Economics who has studied China-Africa relations. "They can't say, 'O.K., we have sunk billions over the long term in Sudan and we are just going to walk away from it because of Darfur.' It is just not going to happen."

China, along with Iran, Russia and others, is still selling weapons to Sudan. While China says it is abiding by a United Nations embargo on sending weapons directly to Darfur, an analysis of shell casings and vehicles found in Darfur by a panel of United Nations experts found that Chinese weapons were making their way to Darfur.

Fractures among the rebel groups in Darfur and threats from Sudan's neighbors, like Chad, may have more impact on the quest for peace than anything Washington or Beijing does.

Still, John Prendergast, a former Clinton administration official, advocate and writer on Sudan for two decades, said that China and the United States needed to be engaged.

"Unless China and the U.S. are both exerting much more pressure on Sudan, the crisis will continue to spiral out of control," he said in an e-mail message. "China has unique economic leverage, while the U.S. retains leverage based on its ability to confer or withdraw legitimacy."

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