



Central Africa: Looking for Stability in a Chaotic Region

Statement by

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I want to thank Senator Feingold, Senator Sununu, and the subcommittee for holding this important and timely hearing. The central African region where the borders of Chad, Sudan and the Central African Republic intersect is one of the poorest, least stable areas of the world. The region is filled with refugees and displaced people.

The subcommittee is correct to see security and humanitarian challenges there in regional terms. I applaud the three-country focus in Senate Resolution 76, and I appreciate the call by its sponsors, Senators Feingold, Sununu and Levin, for greater U.S. leadership and international involvement in resolving the security, human rights and humanitarian problems in the region.

Refugees International has spent considerable time in these three countries. Over the last year we have made two assessment missions to each country, and two of my colleagues have just returned from Chad and the Central African Republic. Based on our time in the region, I want to make several points, which I will summarize at the outset.

First, insecurity, poverty, political and ethnic tensions, and displacement are all inter-related, yet each country has different problems which must be addressed separately.

Second, the key to resolving the problems is political, not military. Even if the U.S. or other countries were prepared to commit troops—and we are not—or the UN could deploy large peacekeeping forces, troops would be no more than a palliative until the underlying political differences are resolved.

Third, the humanitarian response has been uneven. Huge resources are going to help the people in Darfur, with much less effective responses in the Central African Republic and Chad. Working bilaterally or through the UN, we need to fix this disparity by increasing aid to the C.A.R. and Chad. In fact, a relatively modest humanitarian investment in the Central African Republic now could forestall or avoid a much more costly emergency response later.

Perhaps the fastest way to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the problems in the region is to look at the populations of refugees and displaced people. While doing this, I will also comment on humanitarian responses to the displacement.

In Sudan, a four year civil war in Darfur, characterized by government sponsored militia attacks on civilians, has displaced about 2.2 million people internally and driven 234,000 refugees into Chad. Now, because of increased fighting in Eastern Chad, some Chadians are seeking refuge in Darfur, so the refugees are beginning to move both ways. The internally displaced population in Darfur is sustained by a huge international aid operation that has been so successful that the nutritional condition of camp residents is often better than the population as a whole. Sadly, that successful response is currently in danger. Stepped up violence and harsh government treatment—ranging from harassment to attacks--of aid workers is driving international staff from Darfur and complicating the delivery of food and supplies on which the population depends.

In addition, there are some 14,000 refugees from south Sudan in the Central African Republic. They went there during the 21-year civil war between north and south Sudan. That war, which displaced over 4 million south Sudanese, officially ended two years ago with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, which was brokered by your former colleague, John Danforth. While the focus of this hearing is mainly on the intersection of Darfur, Chad and the Central African Republic, it is important to keep an eye on the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The Khartoum government has violated significant parts of the CPA already, with little or no public objection from the U.S. We need to be resolute and aggressive in pushing for full implementation of that important agreement. For south Sudan to fall back into conflict would be devastating for peace in the region and a diplomatic setback for the U.S.

Chad, not only hosts the 234,000 thousand refugees from Darfur, but also about 60,000 refugees from the Central African Republic. In addition, fighting in eastern Chad—some tribal and some the depredations of militias from Darfur—has recently displaced about 120,000 Chadians. They are, essentially, internal refugees. Although the UN has worked hard to improve humanitarian services and security for the refugees from Darfur, aid for the internally displaced populations in Eastern Chad has been completely inadequate. I would like to submit for the record a recent Refugees International assessment of conditions in Eastern Chad.

In the Central African Republic, the number of people who have fled their homes to avoid fighting between government and rebel forces in the northwest corner of the country has reached 212,000, up more than four-fold in the last year. In addition, as I mentioned earlier, another 60,000 are seeking refuge in Chad. Government forces are responsible for much of the displacement. Just last week, my colleagues visited a village in northwest C.A.R. that had been burned by government troops. I would also like to submit that report for the record.

I congratulate the Subcommittee for focusing on the Central African Republic. The growing humanitarian crisis there has received very little attention. Partially as a result the response of aid agencies has been slow and limited. Much more needs to be done. For example, a \$10 million investment in seeds and tools now, a month or two before the rainy season, would enable displaced farmers to plant crops this season, reducing the risk of future starvation.

The porous borders of the three countries make it easy for refugees to move back and forth. The unmonitored borders also make it easy for militias and bandits to move at will, and they do—killing, stealing, destroying and destabilizing. Late last year, then Secretary General Kofi Annan gave this description to the UN Security Council:

The Darfur conflict has already spilled over into Chad with serious consequences for the country and beyond, while in the Central African Republic, the government asserts that Sudan is backing the rebels in the north-east. At the same time, it is clear that the north-east of the Central African Republic has been used by Chadian rebel groups as a route to bypass the Darfur-Chad border.... The porosity of the borders is attested to by the numerous reports of infiltrations, incursions and cross-border activities by tribal and Janjaweed militias, as well as the regular forces and rebels of each of the three countries, except the Central African Armed Forces.

Obviously, a UN force along the Chad-Darfur border could help protect civilians and stabilize the region—if the force had enough manpower, enough mobility and the proper mandate. According to recent reports, the president of Chad opposes such a force, even though it would help protect his own people as well as refugees in Chad. The UN, working through member states, particularly France, needs to put pressure on Chad to accept a robust UN force that can succeed in helping to protect people in a vast, unruly area.

Even though the key to ending strife and displacement in the region lies in reaching political settlements in each of the three countries, the border area needs to be secure. Senate Resolution 76 addresses the security force issue. Let me just list several other things the U.S. should do, by country.

Sudan. There are three urgent challenges:

- Getting the government and the rebel groups in Darfur to begin comprehensive, good-faith negotiations toward a political settlement that will stop what President Bush and the Congress correctly have called genocide.
- Maintaining the humanitarian operation—now the world’s largest—in Darfur with sufficient resources and security.
- Bolstering and supplementing the current African Union force in Sudan so that it can provide greater protection to civilians – particularly the women who risk rape every time they venture out of the camps for the displaced.

Currently, the U.S. policy toward Sudan is failing. Sudanese and government backed forces continue to attack civilians and humanitarian workers with impunity in Darfur, and, some fear, may be preparing to do so in south Sudan again as well. For several years, U.S. efforts to change Sudanese behavior have been all talk and no action. That may be changing with the imposition of stiffer financial sanctions on Khartoum. Until it is clear to Sudan that it will pay a painful price for its state-sponsored death and displacement, the war will continue unabated.

Chad. An end to the war in Darfur would enable refugees to return home and reduce current cross-border attacks, alleviating some of the pressure on Chad. But inter-tribal attacks in eastern Chad--and the fighting between rebel groups and the government would likely continue. So far the government has refused to begin good faith negotiations with rebel groups, some of whom are supported by Sudan. Until the sides can address their grievances, peace and stability will be illusive. France, which maintains troops in Chad and provides crucial support to the government, may be able to exert more pressure on all sides to start negotiations.

The second major issue in Chad today is the dearth of humanitarian services in the eastern area, where internal displacement is growing rapidly. In a report to the UN Security Council last month, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon admitted that “direct assistance to internally displaced persons has thus far been insufficient.” He praised the government for doing more to help internally displaced people in the area, but it’s clear that the UN needs to boost its presence and its programs in the region.

Central African Republic. Despite growing displacement in the north-west region, where government and rebel forces are fighting, there is not yet a humanitarian emergency. But conditions could turn dramatically worse if the fighting continues and the UN doesn’t begin to respond more effectively to growing humanitarian problems. As I mentioned earlier, quick support packages to farmers now could help fend off a future emergency.

Actions, including the burning of houses, by government troops are responsible for much of the displacement, so there has to be more pressure on the government from donors to end such human rights abuses.

There also has to be greater international involvement in the peace process. Some of the issues are economic, and it's possible that these could be resolved in the context of comprehensive negotiations.

Progress toward peace in the central African triangle of instability has not been and will not be easy, but the key to progress is increased engagement by the UN and by countries, like the U.S., France India and China, with an interest in stability in the region.

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