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SUDAN: SAVING PEACE IN THE EAST

Africa Report N°102 – 5 January 2006

International Crisis Group
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The low-intensity conflict between the government and the Eastern Front risks becoming a major new war with disastrous humanitarian consequences if the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) proceeds with its scheduled withdrawal from eastern Sudan this month. Competition to fill the security vacuum could spark urban unrest, reprisals and worse. Yet, there is also a peace opportunity. As a partner in the new Government of National Unity and with troops in the East, the SPLM is in a position to broker a deal. Like Darfur and the South, the East suffers from marginalisation and underdevelopment: legitimate claims for more power and wealth sharing in a federal arrangement should be addressed within the framework of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) the government and SPLM signed in 2005. But the SPLM needs to push for a provisional ceasefire and use its influence in Khartoum to get serious negotiations. International partners, under UN leadership, should facilitate the process.

The CPA has brought no peace dividend to either eastern Sudan or the Darfur region of western Sudan. It dealt with the political and economic marginalisation of the South but ignored the similar structural imbalance in the rest of the country. The ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the international community are now bearing the consequences of excluding other participants from the long negotiations that were conducted at Naivasha in Kenya. After hundreds of thousands of deaths and the displacement of millions in Darfur, the international community is trying to salvage a peace in negotiations conducted under African Union sponsorship at Abuja. At the same time, however, it may be in the process of repeating its mistake by largely ignoring another powder keg.

Under the terms of the CPA, the SPLM is obliged to withdraw from eastern Sudan by 9 January 2006, though fortuitously it is months behind schedule. Its former partner, the Eastern Front, will seek to take over but the NCP is unlikely to permit it to exercise uncontested control. Its efforts to recover territory along the Eritrean border will be all the more dangerous because Eritrea and Ethiopia are on the verge of renewing hostilities. Asmara wants to ensure at least Sudanese neutrality and could be willing to trade away its support for the Eastern Front. If fighting does break out again between the two large neighbours, eastern Sudan, whose humanitarian situation is in some ways worse than Darfur's, would face a disastrous flood of refugees.

Credible negotiations are needed immediately to address the simmering conflict in eastern Sudan but these are being delayed because the Government of National Unity, with its SPLM contingent, and the international community are concentrating almost exclusively on Darfur. The urgent requirement is to put an end to the piecemeal approach to peacemaking. The East needs to be incorporated into a national process that builds on the CPA and includes Darfur. One forum may not be practical to resolve Sudan's regional wars but a common framework is needed to give continuity and consistency to disparate negotiations which have been strung out over the last four years.

The CPA provides the conceptual and substantive framework to solve Sudan's regional wars, in the East as well as Darfur. It is based on the premise that the South's long marginalisation by the centre (Khartoum) and its underdevelopment led to the civil war that lasted 21 years. To rectify those underlying causes, the NCP and the SPLM agreed to power sharing commensurate with the South's population as well as significant wealth sharing between the central government and the government of South Sudan. Since Khartoum and the Eastern Front alike say they recognise that the same underlying causes have contributed to conflict in the East (as well as Darfur and elsewhere in the North), the same elements of a solution should be applied.

If this is to happen, the SPLM will need to use its leverage as a member of the Government of National Unity and play a robust role. Though this means diverting some time and energy from its major preoccupations in the South, its new responsibilities in Khartoum make it uniquely competent to advance the policy. It has fought side by side with the people in the East and knows the similarities of their situation with that of the South. Moreover, it has a duty to ensure that its withdrawal from eastern Sudan does not create a security vacuum that could invite

escalation. It must insist on having strong and senior representation on the government delegation and then press for an early start to credible negotiations with the Eastern Front.

To prevent war in the East, the international community needs to work with the key regional actors, particularly Eritrea, to underwrite comprehensive negotiations between the Government of National Unity and the Eastern Front that can produce a sustainable peace based on the CPA framework. Western governments should make it clear that they also want to take a major part in those negotiations, not unlike what they did with the CPA and what they are now attempting with Darfur at Abuja.

Thus far, the UN, the U.S., the European Union and its member states (including the UK, which has taken an interest), have all failed to apply themselves sufficiently to generate a serious peace process for the East. A Libyan mediation initiative collapsed in late December 2005. If Sudan's vicious cycle of violence is not to spread again, a major effort is needed now to construct a forum for credible negotiations that can defuse the situation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Avert Conflict in the East:

1. Sudan's Government of National Unity should be prepared to send a high-level delegation, with joint National Congress Party (NCP) and Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) participation, before the end of January 2006 to begin internationally-backed and facilitated negotiations with the Eastern Front on a solution to the conflict in and problems of eastern Sudan.
2. To give negotiations a chance to succeed, the Government of National Unity and the Eastern Front should:
   (a) accept a provisional cessation of hostilities as soon as possible to prevent the withdrawal of the SPLM from leading to violent confrontation for control of Hameshkoreb and other opposition-held areas;
   (b) agree that, until a comprehensive ceasefire can be reached, the SPLM should maintain a small force in the region to serve as a buffer and prevent hostilities over Hameshkoreb; and
   (c) work out a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire as part of the security arrangements to be discussed during the broader negotiations.

To Create a Credible Negotiation Process:

3. An eastern Sudan negotiating forum should be established that includes:
   (a) a special envoy, appointed by the UN Secretary-General and accepted by the parties, who serves as the lead mediator and liaises with the UN Mission in Sudan;
   (b) a secretariat, provided by the UN or another capable body, to give the mediation technical capacity; and
   (c) international observers from the U.S., UK, Canada, Italy, Norway and the European Union, and regional observers from Eritrea, Libya and the African Union.
4. The CPA should be accepted as the framework for negotiations, in particular its formulae for power and wealth sharing between the central government and a region.
5. The NCP and the SPLM, as the two key partners in the Government of National Unity, must develop a consensus on handling the conflict in eastern Sudan, including accepting participation within the Eastern Front delegation of representatives of the Beja Congress and Rashaida Free Lions from Khartoum and government-controlled areas of the East.
6. A plan of action is needed for the negotiations, including consensus that:
   (a) the talks should open and a provisional ceasefire should be in place in January 2006, or at least prior to the completion of the SPLM withdrawal; and
   (b) the substantive agenda will cover power sharing, wealth sharing and security, including control over Hameshkoreb and other opposition-held areas.
7. The international observers should be present at the negotiations to facilitate the peace talks and should provide guarantees to ensure its implementation.
8. Other relevant Sudanese parties should participate as observers, such as tribal and religious leaders, civil society representatives including women, and other stakeholders from the East.
9. Consideration should be given to the creation of Joint Integrated Units for the East which, like those provided for in the CPA, would include government troops (the Sudan Armed Forces) and the SPLM's military wing (the SPLA) but also the Eastern Front, and would be deployed after conclusion of a peace

agreement between the Government of National Unity and the Eastern Front.

10. Issues of development in the East should be dealt with through a post-conflict needs assessment with the involvement of interested donors, particularly the governments that have taken part in the negotiation process as observers.

To Address the Humanitarian Crisis in the East:

11. Significant donor attention and resources should be directed urgently to reversing a situation in which crude mortality rates and malnutrition levels are significantly higher even than in Darfur.

Nairobi/Brussels, 5 January 2006

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WORKING TO PREVENT CONFLICT WORLDWIDE

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SUDAN: SAVING PEACE IN THE EAST

I. INTRODUCTION

The people of eastern Sudan have struggled with successive governments in Khartoum for greater political autonomy and wealth sharing since independence. For decades, the contest was non-violent, led by the Beja Congress, a political organisation founded in 1958 to represent the region's major tribal group. In 1995, however, in response to repression, imposed Islamic fundamentalism and land expropriation, the Beja Congress took up arms to force the government to address the grievances or be overthrown. That same year it joined the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), the umbrella organisation of opposition political parties and groups,[1] and began military activities in the East in coordination with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/SPLA, henceforth SPLM), the major, southern Sudan-based insurgency. At times the fighting was heavy, but the government managed to contain most of it to the area bordering Eritrea.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed by the ruling National Congress Party (NCP) and the SPLM on 9 January 2005 addresses the latter's presence in eastern Sudan by stipulating the withdrawal of its military forces by 9 January 2006, but it does not provide a mechanism for transferring authority of the opposition-controlled areas to the government of Sudan or for dealing with the presence of other armed groups, such as the Beja Congress. Nor does it address the grievances of the people of eastern Sudan, who are arguably the country's most politically marginalised, with a worse humanitarian situation than parts of Darfur.[2]

The NCP and Eastern Front (as the Beja Congress has been known since it merged with a smaller insurgency, the Rashaida Free Lions, in February 2005) are locked in a fierce political contest. The Eastern Front seeks concessions from the government similar to those made to the SPLM for the South. The NCP is attempting to maintain its dominance by undercutting support for the Eastern Front through patronage, divide-and-rule policies, and creation of tribal militias. The government raised the stakes of this competition when it brutally crushed a peaceful Beja Congress demonstration in January 2005 in Port Sudan.[3] This radicalised and mobilised youthful city dwellers and persuaded some to trek to the "liberated areas" to join the Eastern Front's growing army. If serious negotiations are not begun, a violent confrontation looms over control of Hameshkoreb, which could spark unrest in other eastern cities.

This report, Crisis Group's first devoted to eastern Sudan, provides background; analyses the changing political dynamics since the signing of the CPA, the evolving political and military strategies, and the likelihood of large-scale conflict; and evaluates the responses of international actors. It concludes with recommendations for averting new conflict in eastern Sudan and linking negotiations to the country's broader peace process.

[1] Formed in 1989, the NDA reached the peak of its influence in the mid-1990s when it included the Democratic Unionist Party, the Umma Party, the SPLM/SPLA, the Union of Sudan African Parties (USAP), the Communist Party of Sudan (CPS), the General Council of the Trade Unions Federations, the Legitimate Command of the Sudanese Armed Forces, the Beja Congress, the Sudan Alliance Forces, the Federal Democratic Alliance, the Free Lions Association, the Arab Baath Socialist Party, Independent National Figures, Representatives of the Liberated Areas, and the Sudanese National Party. See http://www.nda sudan.org/ for the organisation's founding charter.

[2] Humanitarian indicators in Darfur have improved over the past year (see fns. 185 and 186), not least because of an impressive response by some 14,000 aid workers. However, the situation remains dire and has actually worsened over the past few months as ceasefire violations by the warring parties, Janjaweed militia attacks and banditry have increased insecurity, resulting in reduced access for those workers and threatening to reverse the hard-won gains.

[3] See Section II B 3 below.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE CONFLICT

A. GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHY AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

Eastern Sudan[4] covers 336,480 square kilometres, slightly more than Poland. It is a strategic region that includes Port Sudan – the country's economic lifeline, through which most of its foreign trade passes; its oil export pipeline; many irrigated and semi-mechanised agricultural schemes; and a long border with Eritrea, with whom Sudan has had rocky relations for the past twelve years. Due in part to the region's economic and strategic significance, as well as the military activities since the mid-1990s, the government has a heavy security presence involving – according to a government source – three times as many forces as in Darfur.[5]

The population of the three states – Red Sea, Kassala and Gedaref – is approximately four million,[6] a substantial part of which is the Beja nation,[7] a confederation of indigenous non-Arab tribes whose ancestors have inhabited the semi-arid areas between the Nile River and the Red Sea for more than 4,000 years. The Handendowa is the largest Beja tribe (and one of the largest tribes in Sudan, after the Dinka of the South and the Fur of Darfur), with an estimated population of 600,000. The three other largest Beja tribes are the Amar'ar, primarily in Red Sea State, the Beni Amer, [8] divided between Sudan and Eritrea, and the Bishariyyn, divided between Sudan and Egypt.[9] Almost all Beja tribes speak TuBedawiye (of the Cushitic linguistic group), except the Beni Amer, whose mother tongue is Tigre (a Semitic language).

The East is also populated by several Arab tribes. The Shukriyya, farmers and pastoralists who were granted land by the king of Sinnar during the Funj kingdom (1504-1821), are the largest in present-day Gedaref. Northern riverain Arabs, such as the Shaiqiyya and Ja'aliyin, comprise part of the top economic and administrative class in the East. They started migrating there during the Turkish-Egyptian rule, from 1821, when, benefiting from their privileged connections with both the colonial and post-colonial state, greater access to capital and higher education, they succeeded in commercial agriculture and business. The Rashaida, Bedouin nomads who emigrated from Saudi Arabia after 1869, live on the outskirts of Kassala town and along the Eritrean border. Economic migrants from western Sudan and as far as West Africa have also been drawn to the region. By one estimate descendants of West African migrants from the Hausa, Zabarma and Bargo tribes comprise between 30 to 40 per cent of the population of Gedaref.[10] Darfurians, Nuba and southern Sudanese are numerous in Port Sudan and Kassala.

The economy is primarily based on large-scale agriculture and the port.[11] Both are significant sources of state revenue and make the East one of the country's richer regions.[12] Although these economic activities profit the few who own the farms and port companies and provide a steady income for employees, they provide little benefit to the nomads and small-scale farmers in the rural areas. Thus, Red Sea State is among the wealthiest in Sudan but also has one of the highest levels of poverty: per capita income of $93 in 2004, according to a household survey.[13]

[4] Eastern Sudan is generally considered to cover the three states of Red Sea, Kassala and Gedaref. However, this definition is itself a point of contention between the government and the Eastern Front. The government considers the East to be just Kassala and Red Sea State; the Eastern Front includes Gedaref. Historically the three states have been grouped as one region.

[5] "Enemies everywhere", *The Economist*, 29 September 2005; Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, April 2005.

[6] The 1993 census registered 3,067,000; in 2001 the World Bank estimated 3,746,000. See World Bank, "Sudan Stabilisation and Reconstruction Country Economic Memorandum", vol. 2, statistical appendices, 2001.

[7] The Beja population is estimated at up to 2.2 million.

[8] From an anthropological perspective, many consider the Beni Amer distinct from Beja, with a different language (Tigre rather than TuBedawiye) and social structure (caste system rather than segmentary). See Sara Pantuliano, "Changing Livelihoods: Urban Adaptation of the Beja Pastoralists of Halaib Province (NE Sudan) and NGO Planning Approaches", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Leeds, Department of Politics, April 2000. Over time, however, the Beni Amer, who came to Sudan from Eritrea, have been incorporated into the Beja nation, in part perhaps as an attempt by the Beja Congress to broaden its base.

[9] There are a number of smaller tribes with varying degrees of similarity to the mainstream Beja and to one another, such as the Kamalab, the Sigolab, the Irtiga, the Shailab, the Ashraf, the Kimilab, the Hassanab, the Halanga and the Memran.

[10] Adlan Al-Hardallu and Somaya E. El Tayeb, *Inter-Communal Conflict in Sudan. Causes, Resolution Mechanisms and Transformation: A Case Study of the Eastern Region* (Ahfad University, 2005), p. 33.

[11] Agricultural schemes have a long history in eastern Sudan: the Tokar delta has been planted with cotton since the 1860s, while the British established the Gash scheme in 1924 and the Ghadambaliya scheme in Gedaref in 1945. Based on their traditional land use rights, the Hadendowa claim to own 70 per cent of the Gash delta.

[12] Based on revenue generation in 1999, Red Sea, Gedaref, and Kassala are the third, fourth and eighth richest respectively of the sixteen northern Sudan states. See World Bank, "Sudan Stabilisation and Reconstruction", op. cit., pp. 71-74.

[13] "A Livelihood Vulnerability and Nutritional Assessment of Rural Kassala and Red Sea State", World Food Programme, May 2005, p. 25.

For the rural majority, survival is based on subsistence farming and livestock trade, a livelihood threatened over the past 50 years and especially the last two decades by drought and famine.[14] During the 1983-1985 drought, the Beja are estimated to have lost 80 per cent of their animals; the Amar'ar sub-group shifted entirely from camel-rearing to breeding smaller animals and working in Port Sudan.[15] The ecological shocks have had profound effects; a World Food Programme (WFP) assessment concludes:

> The rural populations in both the [Red Sea State] and Kassala are experiencing a severe erosion of their traditional livelihood systems. Ecological, political and economic factors have combined to create both a recurrent food security crisis and situation of chronic structural poverty for many of the rural households. Recurrent droughts have decimated pasture and livestock herds, significantly reducing the sustainability of pastoral livelihoods.[16]

Surveys suggest malnutrition levels and crude mortality rates in the East are significantly higher than conflict-ridden Darfur.[17] Endemic diseases, such as tuberculosis, have also exacerbated poor living conditions,[18] while mechanisation of the port has cost many jobs.

Nevertheless, the East, like other mostly rural parts of the country, has received only paltry government investments for education, health and other services. The highly centralised nature of government in Sudan gives federal authorities a near monopoly on revenue collection and control over both how much money is distributed to the states and how it is used.[19] Mostly it is doled out as patronage to regime supporters, such as tribal chiefs, government employees, and security officials.[20] Not surprisingly, economic decentralisation is a key Beja Congress demand, as articulated by Dr Amna Dirar, its secretary general: "In east Sudan, you have the poorest of the poor. Yet our region is rich, we have ports, gold, oil, pipelines, and fertile land. We want justice and our share in the power and wealth of Sudan".[21]

B. POLITICAL HISTORY

The post-independence history of the East, like other Sudanese peripheral areas such as Darfur, Nuba and the South, has been defined by regional groups challenging the centralisation of political and economic power, resisting the onslaught of Arabisation and Islamic fundamentalism, and mobilising to preserve local identities and livelihoods. This struggle has been particularly acute for the Beja, who believe their identity and actual existence are threatened by these pressures as well as drastic ecological change. The CPA has ended hostilities in the East between the government and the SPLM, but by excluding the Beja Congress, the Rashaida Free Lions, and other marginalised groups there, it has failed to resolve the conflict in the region.

1. The Beja Congress and the struggle for regionalism

The Beja Congress was formed in the late 1950s by a group of educated Beja who were not content to allow the Khatmiyya[22] and its parallel political party, the Nationalist Unionist Party (NUP), which later became the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), to dominate politics in the East. The Beja were also concerned about state-led projects such as the Gash agricultural scheme and the Gebeit gold mines that led to what they perceived as expropriation of their land.[23] The Beja Congress called for an even distribution of resources and devolution of power for all regions in Sudan through a federal government. In 1965, it registered as a political party and won ten seats in the national parliament, campaigning on a regional platform.[24] This

[14] There have been three main periods of drought and famine during this time: 1983-1985, 1988-1990, and 1993-1995.
[15] Abdel Salaam Sidahmed, "Beja", in Peter Verney (ed.), *Sudan: Conflict and Minorities* (Minority Rights Group, 1995), available at http://www.sudanupdate.org.
[16] World Food Programme, op. cit., p. 48.
[17] "A Multisector Assessment of Communities in the NDA-Area of Sudan", September 2005, conducted by MercyCorps, International Rescue Committee, and Samaritan's Purse. See also fns. 185 and 186 below.
[18] For a comprehensive overview of the humanitarian situation and underdevelopment in eastern Sudan and how it can be better addressed to contribute to sustainable peace, see Sara Pantuliano, "Comprehensive Peace? Causes and Consequences of Underdevelopment and Instability in Eastern Sudan", NGO Paper, September 2005.
[19] According to the World Bank, "almost all revenue, about 98 per cent, was collected by the federal government". World Bank, "Sudan Stabilisation and Reconstruction", op. cit., p. 78.
[20] Crisis Group interviews, Sudan, 2005.
[21] "Sudan's eastern rebels in first talks with govt. next month", *Sudan Tribune*, 23 October 2005.
[22] The Khatmiyya, a Sufi order first introduced into Sudan under Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani in the early nineteenth century, gained power and prominence in central and eastern Sudan from close association with the Turkish-Egyptian rulers. It suffered setbacks under the Ansar-led *Mahdiyya*, when many Beja, especially Hadendowa, shifted allegiance to the Mahdi and his successors to gain relief from heavy taxes. British support for the Mirghanis allowed the Khatmiyya to recover its position.
[23] Mohamed Z. Yakan, *Almanac of African Peoples and Nations* (New Brunswick, 1999), pp. 231-232.
[24] The Beja benefited from a boycott of the election by the Khatmiyya-based People's Democratic Party. John Morton,

success was short-lived: in the 1968 elections it secured only three seats.

In pursuing a regional agenda, the Beja found natural allies in Darfur, Nuba and to some extent even the separatist South. A rural bloc including the Beja Congress pushed regionalisation as a means for resolving the war in the South and to address their own grievances. Their proposals were taken seriously by a twelve-man committee, commissioned by the 1965 Round Table Conference,[25] to investigate potential political and constitutional solutions to the southern conflict. It proposed devolving more power to the regional level[26] but its suggestions were not heeded by the mainstream political parties, the Umma and DUP, which were dominated by Northern riverain elites.

After he came to power in a coup d'état in May 1969, General Jaafar Nimeiri banned all parties except his Sudan Socialist Union (SSU). In 1980, a regional system of government was introduced in a belated attempt to woo the sectarian parties and their local supporters. Nimeiri's regional policies gave the Beja opportunities at the provincial and regional level – at one point they controlled nine of eleven ministerial positions in the regional government.[27] But the appointees were labelled "sons of Nimeiri": "The appointments came from above to men committed to working within the one-party system and did not represent power being devolved to the people of the Province, or a recognition of the special needs of the Beja".[28]

With Nimeiri's overthrow in 1985, multi-party politics returned. The Beja Congress competed in the 1986 elections but gained only one seat. The beginning of this third democratic period coincided with the great famine that devastated much of the Horn of Africa, including eastern Sudan, and had profound effects on the Beja and their pastoral livelihoods:

> The most conspicuous changes were the increased urbanisation of the Beja, the numerical rise of non-Beja groups in the region (particularly in Port Sudan and other urban centres), the intensification of the Ethiopian/Eritrean civil war and the resulting influx of refugees in eastern Sudan, and the arrival of some of the drought-stricken groups from western Sudan. These radical demographic changes have had a severe impact on the Beja. With their herds mostly lost, the Beja have to compete with these successive waves of "foreigners" and "intruders" for jobs (in towns and on farming schemes) and services. Gone are the days when the extremely proud Beja could contemptuously turn his back on the town to face the endless and comforting desert.[29]

The hard-pressed Beja turned to the Beja Congress not only to lobby for self-rule and development resources but also to help preserve Beja identity and "their place in their own land".[30]

2. The NIF: Inviting armed struggle, and getting it

The National Islamic Front (NIF) seized power in Khartoum in 1989. To consolidate its control, the regime jailed or killed political opponents, confiscated land and property without compensation, and launched an intensive Islamisation program.[31] It sought to exploit the East's economic potential and establish control over the Beja through Islam and tribal administration, which led to a series of incendiary policies.

First, the NIF replaced Mohamed Osman Karrar, Beja governor of the Eastern Region under the democratically elected government of Sadiq al-Mahdi, with a riverain Arab army officer. In April 1990, Karrar was extrajudicially executed along with 27 officers and more than 200 regulars of the Sudan Armed Forces – more than three quarters reportedly from Beja tribes – for involvement in an alleged plot to shut down Khartoum airport and take over the government.[32] These executions outraged the Beja, who felt specially targeted.[33]

Secondly, the government and friendly investors began to expropriate fertile land. In June 1990, large tracts

"Ethnicity and Politics in Red Sea Province, Sudan", *African Affairs*, vol. 88, no. 350 (January 1989), p. 67.

[25] That conference between northerners and southerners sought to find a political solution to the war that broke out in the South in 1955, a year before independence.

[26] Francis Mading Deng, "Negotiating a Hidden Agenda: Sudan's Conflict of Identities", in I. William Zartman (ed.), *Elusive Peace: Negotiating an End to Civil Wars* (Washington, DC, 1995), pp. 87-88.

[27] Morton, op. cit., p. 68.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Abdel Salaam Sidahmed, op. cit.

[30] Ibid.

[31] For a systematic investigation of repression during the first six years of NIF government, see "Behind the Red Line: Political Repression in Sudan", Human Rights Watch, Washington DC, 1996.

[32] For a critique of the sham military trials of those accused of the April 1990 coup, see "SHRO-Cairo Calls for the Trial of Omer Bashir and Perpetrators of the Sudanese Army's Massacre in April (Ramadan) 1990", press release, Sudan Human Rights Organisation-Cairo Branch, 13 December 2001, available at http://www.shro-cairo.org/pressreleases/dec13-01.htm. On the coup attempt, see Mohamed Osman, "Loyalist troops reportedly thwart coup attempt in Sudan", Associated Press, 23 April 1990.

[33] "Eritrea/Sudan: Tempers Fraying Again", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 3 December 1994.

were seized around Kassala that belonged to the family of DUP leader Mohamed Osman al-Mirghani.[34] Osama bin Laden "'bought up' nearly two thirds of the irrigated lands in the Gash Delta"[35] – the heart of Handedowa territory and to which the tribe attaches much symbolic importance – for mechanised farming.

Thirdly, "alarmed by the Beja's pride in their ancient culture and tradition, which is considered incompatible with the regime's emphasis on an Arab-Islamic identity",[36] the NIF coerced young easterners to join the Popular Defence Forces (PDF, *Defa Shabi*), which was established to instil both combat skills and the movement's Islamic ideology. As tensions worsened with Eritrea in the mid-1990s, the government intensified PDF recruitment and training, opening up hundreds of camps in the state of Gedaref alone.[37]

Fourthly, the NIF's drive to centralise power and wealth in the hands of its ruling clique (predominantly riverain Arabs) exacerbated the Beja's sense of political and economic marginalisation. The regime's authoritarianism, including banning all political organisations, such as the Beja Congress, made it nearly impossible to express grievances through normal political channels. Taunting by regime leaders, such as President Bashir's declaration at a meeting with Beja Congress representatives in Port Sudan in 1991 that if the Beja wanted concessions they would have to fight for them,[38] further pushed the population toward radical strategies.

Forcible recruitment into the PDF, conscription into the army and expropriation of traditional land were the issues that became rallying calls for the Beja to join other marginalised and excluded groups and take up arms. The Beja Congress, which had mostly been operating underground since 1989, began preparing for war in 1994 and operating along the Eritrean border under the leadership of Mohamed Tahir Abubakr.[39] Recruitment efforts were greatly helped by the outcry following the detention and ill treatment of Islamic leaders in Hameshkoreb, who resisted government attempts to use the large, traditional Koranic schools the area is renowned for to propagate the NIF's version of militant political Islam.

According to Beja Congress literature, the organisation made the formal decision to declare armed struggle against the government on 10 April 1995 in Kassala.[40] Two months later it attended the NDA meeting in Asmara, Eritrea, at which participants agreed to try to overthrow the Bashir regime, institute a decentralised government, separate religion and state, and hold a referendum on self-determination for the South. Despite the prominence of DUP Chairman Mirghani, who was also the NDA chairman and claimed to represent the Beja, membership in the umbrella organisation gave the Beja Congress opportunity to push for greater autonomy for the East.

Rising tensions in the East in the mid-1990s should also be understood in the context of worsening bilateral relations between Sudan and newly independent Eritrea. Successive Khartoum governments, including the NIF, supported the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in their war for self-determination against Ethiopia. As Ethiopia allowed the SPLM bases on its territory, Sudan gave the EPLF and an estimated 500,000 Eritrean refugees protection in eastern Sudan. Upon Eritrea's independence in 1993, the NIF backed the new government in Asmara led by Issaias Afeworki. Relations began to sour, however, after Asmara accused Khartoum of training Islamic extremists, in particular the Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement, which made military incursions into Eritrea in 1994. Afeworki also claimed the NIF government was "forcibly conscripting [Eritrean refugees] into its People's Militia to serve its strategy".[41] In response, Asmara began to train Beja dissidents who had helped the EPLF when it was based in Sudan and had since moved into Eritrea. By late 1994, the border was closed.

The Beja Congress began its military activities in 1996 with attacks on PDF camps in April and destruction of several bridges on the Kassala-Khartoum highway in July.[42] A mutiny of Beja army officers in August in Port Sudan was quashed by the government, leading to the execution of at least eleven. In October 1996, the Beja Congress and Sudanese Allied Forces (SAF)[43] joined with

[34] "Sudan Mirghani family land confiscated", BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 22 June 1990.
[35] "Eritrea/Sudan: Tempers Fraying Again", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 3 December 1994.
[36] Abdel Salaam Sidahmed, op. cit.
[37] Mohamed Ali Saeed, "Sudan steps up 'popular defence' force training", Agence France-Presse, 3 February 1995.
[38] See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°14, *Sudan's Other Wars*, 23 June 2003.
[39] "The Asmara Conference", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 1 July 1995.
[40] "Beja Congress: History, Regulation, Principles, Goals", Beja Congress Foreign Relations Department, Asmara, undated.
[41] "Eritrea and Sudan: Rien Ne Va Plus", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 8 January 1994.
[42] A.M. Lesch, *The Sudan: Contested National Identities* (Bloomington, 1998), p. 204.
[43] The Sudan Alliance Forces (SAF) was founded in December 1994; its ranks were filled with soldiers who defected or were removed from the army and police after the NIF came to power. Activists from the trade unions, professional associations, women's and students' groups were also prominent in its founding constituencies. The SAF at first participated in operations in the East but over time tended to operate independently of the SPLM in Southern Blue Nile.

the SPLM and the smaller armed wings of the Umma and DUP parties to coordinate military activities in the East under the NDA banner. Although several efforts to shut down Port Sudan failed, "by mid-1997 the NDA controlled a 114-square kilometre area with 29 towns and villages along the Red Sea coast, with 92,000 residents, plus 86 towns and villages in [Hameshkoreb] with 360,000 residents".[44] This success caused several local notables to join the NDA, including Sheikh Suleiman Ali Betay, the leader of a clan that the government had rewarded in 1994 with an autonomous province around Hameshkoreb.

At the time, Beja Congress sources estimated their fighters to be 2,000 out of a total 8,000 to 9,000 NDA forces in the East.[45] Most Beja were trained by the Eritreans and the SPLA starting in 1995, while the Beja themselves claim to have been instrumental in training Fur militias in the mid-1990s and in bringing troops from Darfur to the eastern front in mid-2003.

The new NDA front in eastern Sudan directly threatened the strategic transportation and communication links between Port Sudan and Khartoum at a critical moment for the government, which had just begun to export oil. However, their 1998-2000 border war caused Ethiopia and Eritrea to compete aggressively for Sudanese support or at least neutrality. Eritrea cut back its logistical support to the rebels. The defection of former Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi and his Umma Party from the NDA and his return to Khartoum in March 2000 also weakened the new front.[46] Fighting in the East peaked in 2000, mostly with NDA surprise attacks on isolated army and police posts and sabotage operations and the government's retaliatory or pre-emptive strikes. The Beja Congress attacked the oil pipeline in January and in May.[47] NDA forces recaptured Hameshkoreb in March but lost it again in November. SPLM and Beja Congress forces, under the command of the SPLM's Pagan Amun Okiech, responded with a large offensive on Kassala but controlled the town for only several days.

Overall, however, the government was able to contain the violence along the border, preventing major economic damage to the pipeline, port, or mechanised farms and an advance through Kassala to Khartoum. In addition to the impressive military strength it mobilised, it exploited several factors. First, it played the religion card, arguing that Beja fighting from Eritrea with the SPLM were enemies of Islam. However, its burning of mosques in the East and aerial bombardment of Hameshkoreb and the Koranic schools handed the rebels propaganda victories. Secondly, it tried to strengthen relations with Beja tribal leaders.[48] In October 1994, President Bashir brought many of them to Khartoum, where they obtained some government concessions in return for offering their "unwavering support".[49]

The government also tried to take advantage of the Hadendowa's dominance in the Beja Congress and their historically tense relationship with the Beni Amer to win over the latter. Increased training opportunities and public sector jobs throughout the 1990s favoured the Beni Amer, who had traditionally enjoyed better access to education in their tribal territories under Italian and then Ethiopian-Eritrean administration than the Beja living under British or Sudanese administration.

3. The CPA: What peace dividend?

A new round of IGAD-facilitated peace talks[50] between the SPLM and NCP[51] began in June 2002 in Machakos, Kenya. After the parties signed the Machakos Protocol on 20 July,[52] fighting erupted as each tried to gain leverage for the next stage, the substantive negotiations on power-sharing, wealth-sharing and security arrangements. In late

[44] Lesch, op. cit., p. 204. The present population of Hameshkoreb and the opposition-controlled areas combined is estimated at 70,000 by non-governmental organisations working in the region.

[45] Crisis Group interviews, May-June 2004. This estimate was probably inflated.

[46] Dan Connell, "Sudan: Recasting U.S. Policy", *Foreign Policy in Focus*, vol. 5, no. 40, November 2000, updated August 2001, available at http://www.fpif.org/briefs/vol5/v5n40sudan.html.

[47] "Sudan resumes pumping crude oil after repairing damage to bombed pipeline", Sudan News Agency (SUNA), 25 January 2000.

[48] The 1994 decree on federal administration that divided eastern Sudan into three states and reestablished the Council of Native Administration throughout the country, crowned the NIF endeavour to bring "all the influential tribes into the local and state governing processes, providing them with a stake in the system". Not unlike what happened in other parts of the North, most importantly Darfur, the process compounded the resentment among some tribal elites. Lesch, op. cit., p. 127.

[49] "Eritrea/Sudan: Tempers Fraying Again", *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 3 December 1994.

[50] IGAD stands for the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the regional body for the Horn of Africa which became the forum and facilitator for Sudan's peace talks in 1994.

[51] The NIF split in 2000 into two factions, the ruling National Congress Party, and the Popular Congress of the former chief ideologue Dr Hassan al-Turabi.

[52] The Machakos Protocol was a framework agreement, whose provisions exempted the South from Sharia (Islamic law) and established a six-year interim period during which the SPLM and government would share wealth and political power and at the end of which the South would have the right to conduct a self-determination referendum. The Protocol was dependent upon conclusion of the CPA, however, which was signed only in January 2005.

August the SPLM captured the key government garrison of Torit, prompting a freeze that almost led to the complete collapse of talks when the government began a massive counter-offensive, eventually retaking the town in early October. New fighting then broke out in the East as the SPLM-led NDA launched what SPLM leader John Garang declared "the most important [offensive] on this front for several years",[53] in part to offset the demoralising loss of Torit. This operation, which the Sudanese military claimed received "massive Eritrean support in form of troops and weapons",[54] recaptured Hameshkoreb (the government alleged that the Koranic schools were destroyed) and targeted Kassala. As the security situation deteriorated, the IGAD mediators pressed the parties to sign a cessation of hostilities agreement for the whole of Sudan, including the East, which they did on 15 October, with effect from 17 October.[55] Though the ceasefire covered only the SPLM and the government, the former claimed it was "in a position to guarantee that the NDA will stop fighting when it receives orders from the SPLA[M]".[56] The NDA, including the Beja Congress, initially agreed to respect the ceasefire in anticipation that it would be included in the peace talks and its issues addressed during the negotiations.[57]

As the talks in Kenya proceeded, opposition groups and foreign observers called for them to be more inclusive and to acknowledge that the war in the South was part of a larger structural problem that affected the entire country: the concentration of power and wealth at the centre, at the expense of the regions.[58] In February 2003, the NDA petitioned the Kenyan government to allow representatives from the umbrella organisation to join the IGAD talks. A few months later, five eastern members of Sudan's parliament sent a memorandum to President Bashir demanding that representatives from their region be included.

When it became apparent to the Beja Congress, however, that the IGAD talks would exclude the East, it initiated new military action in October 2003.[59] Further attempts, with some apparent support from Garang, were made throughout the summer of 2004 to bring at least NDA Chairman Mirghani into the high-level talks, now in Naivasha, between First Vice President Taha and Garang himself. The government resisted this as well as the more formal inclusion of either the Beja Congress or the NDA, and little international pressure was applied to change its position.

Instead the NCP sought to engage the opposition alliance, especially the DUP, in a forum without the SPLM. It foresaw that the IGAD negotiations were setting the stage for Sudan's political division between North and South and wanted to strengthen and legitimise its position in the North – goals that would be advanced if it could convince the DUP to accept marginal positions in the interim government and the Beja Congress to lay down arms. It pursued two tracks: one was negotiations with the NDA in Jedda and Cairo; the other involved trying to persuade exiled Beja Congress members to return to Sudan.

The NCP had some success drawing Beja Congress leaders back to Khartoum. In December 2003, with promises of development aid for their people and material enticements for themselves, it convinced Secretary General Omer Mohamed Tahir to return from Asmara and Dr Mohamed Sharif, the Beja representative in London, to return from there to sign a deal on behalf of the movement. It quickly proved worthless, however, as Tahir had lost the support of Beja in Eritrea and the NDA areas. Poorly supplied by the Sudanese government and with limited grassroots support he left Kassala and re-defected in February 2004. Sharif subsequently returned to London as a Beja Congress representative in the diaspora.

Further attempts to reach out to the Beja were made during NDA meetings in Jeddah and Cairo, where NCP and security officials approached members of the Beja Congress about going home. With renewed promises to address Eastern grievances, the NCP was able to convince Osman Bawanein, a former member of the Beja Congress who had lived in Asmara and Cairo, to go to Khartoum in September 2004 to establish the Beja Congress for Reform and Development. The NCP sought to use the new party to supplant the original Beja Congress

[53] "Opposition claims major advance in eastern Sudan", Agence France-Presse, 3 October 2002.
[54] "Army spokesman says fierce fighting going on with Eritrean-backed rebels", Sudan TV, reported in BBC Worldwide Monitoring, 6 October 2002. Eritrea denied any involvement in the offensive and called for a commission of inquiry to corroborate its claim. "Eritrea denies involvement in rebel fighting in Sudan", Agence France-Presse, 5 October 2002.
[55] For more on this period, and the threat posed to the negotiations by the escalating fighting stemming from the Torit attacks and the NDA offensive in the East, see Crisis Group Africa Report N°51, *Sudan's Best Chance For Peace: How Not To Lose It*, 17 September 2002.
[56] SPLM spokesman Samson Kwaje, quoted in "Sudan govt., rebels try to end disagreement over terms of truce", Agence France-Presse, 15 October 2002.
[57] Crisis Group interviews, Asmara, 2005.
[58] Crisis Group has argued this consistently since the beginning of the IGAD talks. See Crisis Group Briefing, *Sudan's Other Wars*, op. cit., p. 17.
[59] Omer Mohamed Tahir, then-chairman of the Beja Congress, stated that NDA forces reactivated the front "in response to the government's rigidity and its rejection of the inclusion of other political forces in the peace negotiations particularly its negligence of the problems of Eastern Sudan and its persistent exclusion of forces that control the region from the peace process". Crisis Group Africa Report N°73, *Sudan: Towards an Incomplete Peace*, 11 December 2003, p. 18.

movement by giving it resources and free access throughout eastern Sudan. The initiative failed because Bawanein lacks a significant following, though he has tried to keep himself relevant by travelling to Tripoli to discuss the East's problems with the Libyan government. The Asmara-based Eastern Front has rejected his efforts to join its negotiating team as representative of an independent Beja party.

With Khartoum enticing Beja leaders back to Sudan, the Beja Congress sought to prove that it was alive and well by forging an alliance with Darfur rebels in January 2004 and reasserting its commitment to armed struggle. Ali al-Safi of the Beja Congress in Asmara declared:

> It was quiet [in the East], because people were expecting to be included in the Naivasha [Kenya peace] talks. But from now it will not be quiet. One can expect an escalation of fighting in the East, because the government is seeking a partial solution [to Sudan's problems] with the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army.[60]

Meanwhile, the series of talks the NCP and NDA initiated in Jedda in 2003 culminated in a framework agreement signed by Taha and Mirghani.[61] The SPLM was apparently unaware of those talks until they ended, and other NDA elements, including the Beja Congress, wondered openly whether Mirghani had signed on behalf of the umbrella organisation or merely his own DUP party.[62] However, he persuaded the NDA of the utility of a separate negotiating track with the government to settle terms for the North, since the IGAD talks were concentrating on the SPLM and the South. Subsequent negotiating rounds in Cairo in 2004-2005 ended in an agreement on general principles in January 2005, including terms of NDA representation in government and issues related to the "nationalisation" of the CPA.

The talks, however, have in many respects been disappointing for the NDA. There was internal disagreement over the terms the NCP offered for participation in the new Government of National Unity; only the DUP and several smaller parties openly endorsed the CPA and agreed to participate in the new structures in June 2005 and were included at the last minute in the National Constitutional Review Commission.[63]

At an October 2004 NDA internal meeting in Cairo, a disagreement with the DUP caused the Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions temporarily to withdraw from the team that was to negotiate with the NCP.[64] They presented a joint paper to the DUP-dominated NDA committee on the East demanding a regional solution for the East similar to that the CPA was about to grant the South. They called, among other things, for 70 per cent of the wealth generated in the East to stay there, which the DUP considered excessive.[65] They also wanted the NDA to declare the Beja Congress and Free Lions as its official representatives for negotiations on eastern Sudan, to which the DUP objected on the grounds that this would ignore its own historical strength in the region. "All of the representatives [from the East in Sudan's parliament] have come from the DUP not the Beja Congress. How do you grant yourselves the right to represent the East?", a DUP official asked, slightly exaggerating the party's political dominance.[66]

Feeling sidelined, the Beja Congress and Free Lions left Cairo and continued to seek a separate forum in which to talk with the government. "The Beja and Rashaida should negotiate separately. We would not get anything through the NDA. The DUP doesn't want anything for the East. We know and they know the DUP has not encouraged education in the East", a Beja Congress official said.[67] The walkout from the Cairo talks was the culmination of generations of tension between the Beja Congress and the DUP over political control and representation in the East.[68] Nevertheless, in February 2005, the Beja Congress and Rashaida nominally re-entered the NDA, accepting the previous month's NDA-NCP agreement in exchange for the NDA's blessing of their call for a separate forum for the East.

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[60] Ali al-Safi, member of the Central Committee of the Beja Congress, quoted in "Western and eastern rebels forge alliance", IRIN, 16 January 2004.

[61] "Sudan government signs peace accord with northern opposition leader", Agence France-Presse, 4 December 2003.

[62] Crisis Group interviews with SPLM and Beja Congress officials, December 2003-January 2004.

[63] See Crisis Group Africa Report N°96, *The Khartoum-SPLM Agreement: Sudan's Uncertain Peace*, 25 July 2005. In mid-November 2005, the NDA leadership council agreed to participate in all legislative institutions and to authorise its component parties to participate in the executive positions if they so wished. This was meant as a compromise between the majority of DUP representatives, who favoured participation in the executive, and other DUP members, as well as the Communist Party, who were opposed. However, it may lead to the NDA's break-up. Crisis Group interviews, November 2005.

[64] The first disagreement took place at the NDA Leadership Council in July 2004. The Beja Congress and Free Lions withdrew from the Cairo talks in October 2004; see "Two eastern Sudan armed movements withdraw from Cairo talks; al-Mirghani confirms talks proceeding", *Asharq Alawsat*, 24 October 2004 (in Arabic).

[65] Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, 20 February 2005. See "Eastern factions call opposition leaders to urgent meeting in Asmara to iron out differences, criticise al-Mirghani", *Asharq Alawsat*, 3 November 2004 (in Arabic).

[66] Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, February 2005.

[67] Crisis Group interview, Nairobi, February 2005.

[68] See Section III below.

On 26 January 2005 a group believed to be from the Beja Congress organised a peaceful demonstration in Port Sudan and presented a list of demands to the governor of the Red Sea State, including that the government recognise the Beja Congress based in Asmara as the legitimate representative of the Beja people, negotiate with it directly on power and wealth sharing and provide jobs in the Port and throughout the East for the Beja.[69] The demonstrators demanded an answer within 72 hours, and on 29 January, a crowd gathered in Deim al Arab and other Beja neighbourhoods and started to march towards the governor's office. Before they could get far, the police intervened, sparking violent clashes.[70] Government special forces then used extreme force, firing indiscriminately into Beja homes or at anyone wearing traditional Beja dress.[71] "Security forces had to protect the port and oil reservoirs", said Abdel Rahim Mohamed Hussein, the interior minister, attempting to justify the deaths of over twenty people and the wounding of hundreds.[72] Protests were held in Kassala and other cities in the East, and the government detained more than 150 members of the Beja Congress throughout the region, including Abdallah Musa, the secretary general in the Red Sea State.

The use of indiscriminate force against the demonstrators and civilians in Port Sudan and the subsequent imprisonment and torture of Beja Congress leaders have contributed greatly to the radicalisation of young people in eastern Sudan. Moreover, they reinforced many easterners' view that peaceful political mobilisation and dialogue with the government are futile, even after the CPA. A Beja opposition leader said: "If you use the gun, they will fire upon you. If you give them a letter, they will fire upon you. It is better to use the gun".[73]

During the ceremony for the opening of the Beja Congress office in Port Sudan in September 2005, almost all speakers evoked the memory of those who were killed in January and promised revenge. One leader said: "We will kill you as you killed us. We will take revenge against whomever took part in the massacre". Another added: "First time we take you a piece a paper and you kill us. We are warning you: Next time, we will kill you before you kill us". Khartoum's failure to publish the results of a government inquiry into the massacre or hold anyone accountable has added fuel to the fire. A young Beja student signalled the danger of further escalation when he exclaimed, "our blood is boiling. We are even willing to become suicide bombers".[74]

[69] Crisis Group interviews, Nairobi and Asmara, February 2005. See also "Demonstrators in eastern Sudan demand wealth and power shares in peace agreement", *Asharq Alawsat*, 28 January 2005 (in Arabic).
[70] "Police kill protesters in Port Sudan", *Al-Jazeera*, 29 January 2005.
[71] "Sudan: Those Responsible for Indiscriminate Port Sudan Killings Must be Brought to Justice", Amnesty International, press release, 31 January 2005.
[72] Opheera McDoom, "At least 18 dead after Sudanese forces quell protest", Reuters, 31 January 2005.
[73] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, April 2005.
[74] Crisis Group interviews, Port Sudan, 2005.

III. POLITICAL DYNAMICS

The establishment in August 2005 of a Government of National Unity, with the NCP holding half the positions, the SPLM a quarter, and other opposition forces the remainder, has changed little in the way Khartoum deals with problems in the East. The NCP continues to exercise the same level of control over the security structures of the state through its hold on the defence and interior ministries, the national intelligence agency, and the PDF. Its insistence on controlling both the finance and energy ministries despite prior agreement that the SPLM would have one of these demonstrated its determination to cede little dominance in the economic sector, a stand that almost unravelled the CPA.

In short, the NCP is trying hard to maintain the status quo ante under a facade of national unity. It seeks to placate local people by pumping money through the party and state governments and leaning on tribal leaders, who are licensed to create militias to monitor dissident behaviour. It actively seeks to divide opposition movements on every possible fault line, by buying off leaders, creating parallel movements and playing groups off against each other. It bombards citizens with propaganda blaming problems on foreign governments. Central government officials fronting for the NCP frequently visit the East promising development aid, while Khartoum extracts as much revenue as possible. Finally, the government, while keeping its instruments of repression ready, seeks to localise grievances and redirect them so that Khartoum is no longer the target.[75]

The opposition, with scarce resources, weak coercive capacity, and poor media access, tries to outdo the NCP at mobilisation by raising political consciousness and relying on anti-marginalisation and anti-discrimination ideology. It also recruits radicalised youth for the rebellion who are disenchanted with the region's traditional leaders.[76] While it wants to generate a broad insurgency, it often finds that appeals to narrow tribal interests produce the greatest response. It also seeks support from neighbouring countries and their people, other insurgencies, and governments and international organisations farther afield. Success hinges upon putting maximum pressure on Khartoum through military means, but also, and as importantly, through the international community. It has an incentive to provoke the security services, even at civilian expense.

These dynamics repeat what happened in Darfur and the South, though on a different scale and with less overt violence. Two recent developments, however, have raised the stakes. The CPA laid out a clear framework for peace in Sudan and raised political consciousness and expectations. Regional leaders and their supporters will not accept anything less than power and wealth sharing commensurate with their population. Meanwhile, the Port Sudan violence and the government's refusal to hold anyone accountable has enraged people throughout eastern Sudan and driven many young people into Eastern Front training camps.[77]

The net effect is to bring the government and Eastern Front to the edge of violent confrontation. Fewer sections of society in eastern Sudan are sitting on the sidelines, passively supporting the government and its local intermediaries, than in the mid-1990s. A more politically conscious population is increasingly demanding its rights and siding with the Eastern Front.[78] A local government official in the East stated:

> [Before] rural people were not part of this conflict. They felt they did not have a part in it. Today that is changing. The Eastern Front is moving among people and brainstorming, recruiting youngsters voluntarily instead of taking them by force.[79]

The greatest danger is the potential for an armed confrontation between the government and Eastern Front over control of Hameshkoreb and the opposition areas after the SPLM withdraws its troops. If not discussed and settled in formal negotiations soon, this could be the flashpoint that produces all-out war. However, the government still underestimates the level of discontent and overestimates its political control. "We have complete control over the religious and tribal leaders in eastern Sudan. We are not concerned about this so-called Eastern Front", an NCP official claimed confidently.[80] This is a

[75] The government perfected this strategy in the South and in Darfur. In the latter, it transformed a threatening civil war, initiated by one of the most successful insurgencies in post-independence Sudan, into a full-fledged tribal conflict, not only between the rebels and the Janjaweed militias, but also between the rebels themselves.

[76] In Darfur, rebellion by the youth against the traditional authorities was crucial for initiation of the insurgency. See Crisis Group Africa Report N°76, *Darfur Rising: Sudan's New Crisis*, 25 March 2004, p. 19.

[77] A Beja leader stated, "the issue will explode again, unless the government holds accountable those [responsible] for violence in Port Sudan. Compensation is not sufficient". Crisis Group interview, eastern Sudan, September 2005.

[78] For example, Nazir Tirik of the Hadendowa was confronted by Beja citizens during a meeting in Kassala in September 2005 and forced to apologise after publicly espousing the government line that the conflict was an external problem, orchestrated by Eritrea and *kuffar* (impious persons) abroad. There have been other occasions when Beja have challenged their traditional leaders not to support the NCP blindly. Crisis Group interviews, eastern Sudan and Khartoum, September-October 2005.

[79] Crisis Group interview, eastern Sudan, September 2005.

[80] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, October 2005.

dangerous misreading not unlike that which contributed to the government's failure to contain the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) in Darfur.

A. NATIONAL CONGRESS PARTY AND THE SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT

Compared with Darfur and the South, which are thousands of kilometres from Khartoum, the East is closer to the centre and more strategically important. With a substantial component of Khartoum bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, it is much more open to the influence of the Nile Valley, as well as the riverine areas of northern Sudan. The presence of many first and even second-generation immigrants from central Sudan also makes a narrow regional or ethnic agenda more difficult.

The government cannot afford a protracted conflict in the region on a scale comparable to the South or Darfur, since that would immediately affect the supply of food and raw materials to the capital and could seriously damage its stability. It has not forgotten that the ability of Osman Digna's army to cut off Khartoum from the port of Suakin was crucial to the success of the nineteenth century Mahdi uprising and the downfall of the British General Gordon. It can and does tolerate a certain amount of low-level instability and armed conflict in the region, which so far has not seriously challenged the prevailing patterns of economic exploitation but justifies a heavy security presence, the use of exceptional executive powers under the state of emergency and the deepening of unequal patron-client ties between the central state and Beja tribal and religious leaders.

When the National Islamic Front (NIF), the precursor of the NCP, came to power in 1989, it sought to unite the country, end the fractious sectarian politics of the democratic period, improve the economy and reach out to the marginalised periphery. Islam was seen as one means by which the new regime could appeal to rural societies, including in the East. As a member of the Revolutionary Command Council, the body that governed Sudan in those first years, said, "we recognised the Beja are very religious tribes. Thus, we came with a religious face to get their support".[81] However, the harsh Islamist ideology soon provoked resistance by some Beja, who felt it did not match their more moderate Sufism.

To keep power in the middle of an economic crisis and civil war in the South, the NIF soon resorted to the same tactics of ethnic division used by its predecessor, the Sadiq al-Mahdi government. In the East, it considered the Beni Amer, often better educated and wealthier than other Beja, could be used to undercut the traditional political power of the Hadendowa, and it sought their support in the 1986 parliamentary elections.[82] The Beni Amer, who were well-connected to their kin in Eritrea, were also useful for exerting pressure on President Issaias.

The NIF likewise sought to strengthen its ties with other Beja tribes and exploit the tribal system to maximise its control. With the replacement of Mohamed Al-Amin Mohamed Tirik, Nazir of the Hadendowa, who was openly critical of the government, by his son, Sayed Tirik, in the mid-1990s, it found a more amenable ally.[83] Employing the tribal and religious leaders and taking advantage of the Beja's poverty, the government developed the extensive patronage network in the East through which it continues to try to co-opt leaders and weaken and split the Beja Congress.[84]

Since the Port Sudan massacre in January 2005, the government has been spending a lot of money in the East. In February, it dispatched a committee, led by the former minister for roads and bridges and now governor of Red Sea State, Mohamed Tahir Aila, to promise development aid. At an April meeting in Kassala attended by most of the tribal, religious and political leaders and sponsored by

[81] Crisis Group interview. Khartoum, October 2005.

[82] Morton, op. cit.

[83] Nazirs are the highest officials of individual Beja tribes, such as the Hadendowa, Beni Amer, Bishariyyn and Amar'ar. During colonialism, the British gave them judicial, administrative and tax collection powers, though the region has no social traditions of paramount leadership. See Pantuliano, "Changing Livelihoods", op. cit., pp. 45-46. The authority of the Nazirs persisted even after Nimeiri abolished the Native Administration in 1971. The NIF re-instituted the Native Administration in 1994 in an attempt to use the traditional leaders to garner political support in the rural areas. The politicisation of the tribal leaders, however, has weakened their authority and led to conflict between them and younger, educated generations which are turning to more modern political institutions such as the Eastern Front to challenge the government.

[84] To maintain its economic leverage over the Beja, the NIF carefully managed the regional economy to undermine a nascent local bourgeoisie, particularly by granting tax exemptions on an ad-hoc political basis; financing agricultural activities through the newly-created Islamic banks, which inevitably favoured riverain investors, privatisation of the economic schemes to the advantage of capital-owners from the Gulf, including Osama Bin Laden; and creating parastatals in the import-export sector. Development funding was channelled through Islamic-oriented NGOs, which are entitled to trade customs-free across the borders and engage in parallel economic activities. See the analysis of the Islamist economy in eastern Sudan in E. Ahmad, "Political Dynamics and the Search for Legitimacy at the Local Level: The Case of Kassala State", in C. Miller (ed.), *Land, Ethnicity and Political Legitimacy in Eastern Sudan* (Lawrenceville, Red Sea Press, 2002).

the National Congress Party, Minister of Finance al-Zubeir Ahmed al-Hassan pledged $88 million over three years.[85] Officials acknowledge that such offers are an attempt to appease the Beja in the aftermath of the Port Sudan violence.[86]

The government has also attempted to strengthen its networks of loyalists and extend their penetration of Beja society. Upon the transition to the Government of National Unity in August 2005, the NCP appointed Aila (a Hadendowa) and Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid (a Beni Amer) as governors of Red Sea State and Kassala, respectively. It counts on them to serve as government spokesmen and to recruit Beja to join the ruling party.[87] Hamid underlined the importance of the NCP in his speech upon returning to Kassala as governor in September: "The size of this crowd means you are not accepting me as governor, but accepting the program of the National Congress Party. We are going to make the people in Kassala believe in the National Congress. You have to believe in us because we know what is best for you and will protect you".[88] He sought to blame outsiders for the conflict in the East and weaken support for the Eastern Front, declaring: "The war comes from the outside, it does not come from the inside. When you believe in God, you get so many enemies fighting against you".[89]

The NCP has also sought to undermine the Eastern Front by exploiting the ambiguities of the Beja political agenda, which still vacillates between an ethnic and a regional concept. Government agents have spread rumours about Beja chauvinism and stirred fear among the non-Beja in the East that the Beja Congress would not negotiate on their behalf. They have also played upon fears of Nile Valley entrepreneurs for the security of their investments in the event of a peace agreement between the government and the Eastern Front. Pro-government newspapers, particularly *Alwan*, assist in distorting the Beja platform by publishing protocols alleged to represent the position of the Beja Congress such as the suggestions that only Beja should have the right to vote in elections in the East during any interim period; only Beja would be able to own land; and non-Beja should leave. The Beja denounce these as fabrications but have not adequately addressed the concerns of the other communities.[90]

Differences between Tigre-speaking Beja and TuBedawiye-speaking Beja are another target of NCP manipulation. Government agents and media intimate to the former that the Beja Congress is solely a TuBedawiye-speaking organisation that will not represent their interests. Some sources suggest that the governor met in Gedaref in early 2005 with the state's Tigre speakers to urge them to present their demands separately from the Beja-TuBedawiye.[91]

The NCP is also resorting to potentially more violent tactics. There are persistent reports of efforts to encourage tribal leaders to recruit militiamen in exchange for money and weapons, in order to create a rural force that can monitor the Eastern Front's activities and serve as a first line of resistance.[92] Most of these attempts to form Janjaweed-like groups have not yet succeeded, probably because despite their communal divisions, the eastern tribes have an acute sense of their social and economic inter-dependence as part of the Beja nation. Such tribal militias as exist are weak, with members showing up once a month only to collect pay.[93] The policy, and the rumours it engenders, have nevertheless contributed to the spread of weapons and fear among civilian populations.

Possibly realising the limits of a divide-and-rule policy in the East, the NCP has attempted to promote consensus among the elites through political activities. An important first step was the meeting of the Eastern Forum (*minbar al-sharig*) in May 2005 in Kassala. Attended by key NCP members, senior political leaders and tribal chiefs, it advised the government to negotiate with the rebels.

However, the olive branch ostensibly extended by the NCP is widely viewed with mistrust. The new Kassala governor, Hamid, was not the Hadendowa chosen by the local NCP consultative council (*shura*), but a Beni Amer who was imposed on the Kassala party branch for the sake of tribal balance. In Red Sea State, there was reportedly no consultative council to sound out local

[85] Opheera McDoom, "Sudan govt. promises aid to restive eastern region", Reuters, 25 May 2005.
[86] Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, May 2005.
[87] Reportedly Governor Aila has initiated a vocational training program in Red Sea State for which he has recruited many Beja. The wealthy and influential non-Beja populations in Port Sudan are said to be not happy with Aila's tilt toward the Beja. There was genuine enthusiasm, especially among the Beni Amer, over the return of Ibrahim Mahmoud Hamid as Governor of Kassala (he had been governor before between 1998-2001). Yet, many see him as merely a tool of the ruling party and more concerned with carrying out its wishes than improving the plight of the Beja. Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum and eastern Sudan, September and October 2005.
[88] Crisis Group interview, Kassala, September 2005.
[89] Crisis Group interview, Kassala, September 2005.
[90] At its founding conference in opposition-held areas in March 2005, the Eastern Front attempted to broaden its support base to include the Shukriyya and other non-Beja tribes in the East.
[91] Crisis Group interviews, Asmara, February 2005.
[92] See Nima Elbagir, "Fearing rebels, Sudan arms tribes in East – source", Reuters, 7 October 2004; Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, and Eastern Sudan, March-November 2005. In Hameshkoreb, Crisis Group also spoke with several defectors from militias who have joined the Eastern Front.
[93] Crisis Group interview, eastern Sudan, September 2005.

notables. The appointment of two former ministers has been read by some observers as mainly an effort to open up senior positions in Khartoum that can be filled by the SPLM, at the expense of the East, which now has only one representative in the cabinet.[94]

Whatever political game the NCP is playing in the East, militarisation of the region persists. Security is tight in the major cities. Military intelligence reportedly remains influential in government decision-making and closely monitors movements throughout the territory,[95] keeping a wary eye in particular on anything related to Eritrea.[96] Foreigners and non-governmental humanitarian organisations find it as difficult to obtain permission to work and travel in the East as in Darfur.

The key question is what the government and its security establishment plan to do when the SPLA withdraws from Hameshkoreb and other areas held by the rebels. The Eastern Front is working to fill the security vacuum with its own forces but it is unlikely the government will cede it independent control over this area. Instead, it is putting pressure on the UN peacekeeping force (UNMIS) to go there. UNMIS has so far refused on the grounds that its mandate is limited to monitoring the SPLM withdrawal.[97] While force would only be used to reclaim the territory if "worst comes to worst", as an NCP member put it,[98] it is clearly not ruled out. The government has little respect for the Eastern Front forces there and feels emboldened by a recent thaw in relations with Eritrea. The security mentality that drove Khartoum to try to crush the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) in Darfur rather than negotiate with the young insurgency in early 2003 may also incline it to try to wipe out the Eastern Front.

Judging by its policies in Darfur, the South, and the Nuba Mountains and Southern Blue Nile, the government would prefer to use local proxy forces to reclaim the area in order to achieve its strategic objectives under the cover of tribal conflict. It has been supporting tribal militias controlled by the Beja Nazirs but these are too weak to do much without heavy army assistance. In fact, many militia members have defected to the Eastern Front or melted into the countryside. Moreover, the Nazirs are reluctant to attack fellow Beja. The government has also been supporting the army of Sheikh Suliman Ali Betay,[99] which is larger (some estimate 1,000 to 2,000 armed men on camels)[100] and more formidable than the militias. The Hameshkoreb area belongs to his tribe, the Demelab, and he would like his force to replace the SPLM and the Eastern Front in the area. But Sheikh Suliman also refuses to fight other Beja and recognises that an effort to impose a military solution would only hurt the civilian population.

Recent statements by National Assembly representatives from eastern Sudan of the NCP have called for the SPLM to complete the withdrawal of its forces by 9 January 2006 and for military control and civil leadership to be handed over to government forces and the sheikhs respectively.[101] Any attempt to impose such a unilateral solution, however, would surely be resisted by the Eastern Front.

Renewed fighting between Ethiopia and Eritrea could provide the spark for military activities in the East. Tension between those countries, which fought a brutal border war between 1998 and 2000, has been rising alarmingly,[102] and the UN is doing contingency planning for the possible arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees in Sudan. Some fear that any influx of refugees and instability along the border could prompt Khartoum to send troops to seal the border. It might also use this as a pretext for re-establishing authority over Hameshkoreb and other rebel areas near the Eritrean border. This would put the Eastern Front under severe pressure at a time when its key ally, Eritrea, would likely not be in a position to help it. If anything, Eritrea might attempt to negotiate for Sudan's neutrality or even support, using abandonment of the Eastern Front and other groups it harbours in Asmara as a bargaining chip. The surprise visit of a senior Eritrean official to Khartoum in October 2005 may have been meant to prepare the way for such a contingency.[103] As a

[94] Dr Hamid Mohamed Ibrahim, a Beja, was appointed Minister of General Education by the DUP in November 2005.

[95] Crisis Group interview with UNMIS staff, Khartoum, August 2005.

[96] Crisis Group interview with NCP official, Khartoum, August 2005.

[97] Crisis Group interview with UNMIS, Khartoum, November 2005. The UN chose to deploy to Kassala rather than Hameshkoreb, perhaps because Sheikh Suliman Betay (see fn. 99 below) objected to its presence in the town.

[98] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, October 2005.

[99] Sheikh Suliman Ali Betay is a religious leader and son of Sheikh Ali Betay, who founded Hameshkoreb and the Koranic schools in 1951. He came to Khartoum in 2001 after being accused of attempting a coup against the leadership of the Beja Congress. He is an important figure in the Hameshkoreb region, and there is ample evidence that the government has helped him raise and train his own military force, with the implicit agreement that it would help the army flush Beja Congress troops out of Hameshkoreb once the SPLM has withdrawn.

[100] Crisis Group interview with UNMIS, Khartoum, August 2005.

[101] "Demand of the Withdrawal of SPLM Forces from Hameshkoreb", 18 December 2005 at http://www.sharisiasi.com/details.php?rsnType=1&id=99

[102] See Crisis Group Africa Report N°101, *Ethiopia and Eritrea: Preventing War*, 22 December 2005 .

[103] Abdallah Jaber, head of external and organisational relations for the Popular Front for Democracy and Justice (Eritrea's ruling party) and responsible for the Sudan portfolio, became the highest-ranking Eritrean official to visit Sudan in years when

Sudan ruling party official put it, "If we have [President] Issaias, to hell with the Eastern Front. They are doomed".[104]

The exchange of official visits between Khartoum and Asmara culminated with an agreement on 7 December to normalise bilateral relations and resume air and road links. The SPLM played a key role in this rapprochement, to the obvious satisfaction of the NCP.[105]

B. THE EASTERN FRONT

1. The Beja Congress

The Beja Congress is one of the oldest political parties in Sudan, though its influence has waxed and waned in the nearly half-century since its founding. It lost ground while outlawed during Nimeiri's single party rule, and throughout the post-independence period it has competed bitterly, and not always successfully, against the DUP for primacy in the East. Ever since 1995, when it opened an office in Asmara as part of the NDA and began military activities along the border, it has suffered from internal divisions between hardliners in Eritrea and those who have tried to work inside Sudan from within the ruling system.

The recent resurgence is partly due to the CPA and the shift in Sudan's political dynamics toward regional groupings. The Eastern Front alliance with the Rashaida Free Lions has broadened its base and energised the movement. In 2002 it resumed overt political activities inside Sudan for the first time since 1989. The political wing inside Sudan is led by Dr Amna Dirar, a Beni Amer lecturer at the Al-Ahfad University of Omdurman and daughter of one of the Beja Congress founders, Mahmoud Al Khidir Mohammed.[106] This Khartoum group and those in Asmara often seemed to be on different pages, with little coordination between them. Events in the past year, however, have forced them to come closer together. Withdrawal from the Cairo talks and exclusion from the CPA negotiation obliged the movement to craft a new political strategy that could no longer depend upon alliances with the traditional parties and the SPLM to extract concessions from the central government. The Beja Congress had to become more self-reliant and dependent on its ability to strengthen its internal structure and institutions and broaden its representation in the East.

In December 2004, the movement held a consultative meeting in "the liberated areas" along the border at which it decided to place greater emphasis on political mobilisation within Sudan in order to be better prepared for the interim period and to exploit whatever political space the CPA might create. Since then it has made a concerted effort to "put our house in order [that is] strengthen ourselves internally and externally and unify the Beja people".[107]

The Beja Congress and the Rashaida Free Lions met in March 2005 in those same "liberated areas" to strengthen the Eastern Front alliance they had announced a month earlier. They produced a single organisational structure and a unified political platform,[108] and said they were ready to negotiate if the government was serious but would continue to prepare for war.[109] The conference, which was attended by Eritrean government officials, the SPLM, the SLA, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), the DUP and the Umma Party, also demonstrated progress in bridging the divide between the Asmara and Khartoum wings. Even though the Sudanese government prevented Dr Amna and others inside the country from attending, Amna was elected deputy chairman. Delegates from other marginalised groups joined the Eastern Front at the conference: Nubians resettled in the East in the 1960s after Egypt built the Aswan High Dam; an association of residents of the state of Gedaref; and a women's group.

Enhanced political mobilisation since then has included rallies in Gedaref, Gash in Kassala State, and Port Sudan, and the opening of offices throughout the region. The official opening of the Port Sudan office in September was attended by thousands. Through these activities, the movement is striving to raise people's awareness about their rights under the CPA during the interim period and to encourage support in approaching negotiations and elections. Often Beja officials call in from Eritrea and their speeches are broadcast to the crowd.[110]

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he went to Khartoum in October 2005 to discuss bilateral relations. He denied that his trip related to the increasing tension with Ethiopia. See "Eritrea says rapprochement with Sudan not linked to Ethiopia border row", http://www.sudantribune.com/article.php3?id _article=12266.

[104] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, November 2005.

[105] Following visits by Presidential Advisor Ghazzi Salah al-Din and First Vice President Salva Kiir, Foreign Minister Lam Akol visited Asmara on 6 and 7 December 2005 and signed a joint communiqué with his Eritrean counterpart.

[106] The former chairman, Captain Ahmed Mohamed Mokhtar, an Amar'ar seaman living in Port Sudan, was discredited after allegedly working with government security to provide *diya* (blood money) to families of victims of the Port Sudan violence. This was viewed as an attempt to buy-off Beja and moderate calls for an investigation. Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, November 2005.

[107] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, November 2005.

[108] "Final Declaration of the Eastern Front conference held in the liberated territories", 29 March 2005, available at www.sudaneseonline.com, in Arabic.

[109] "Eastern Sudan rebels prepare for war with show of force", Agence France-Presse, 2 April 2005.

[110] Crisis Group interviews, eastern Sudan, 2005.

From its beginnings, the Beja Congress advocated greater devolution of political and economic power to Sudan's regions within a federal framework. As a member of the NDA, it has continued to call for greater autonomy for the East, despite the disapproval of Mirghani, the umbrella organisation's chairman. After being excluded from the CPA negotiations in Kenya and sidelined in Cairo, it began, alongside the Rashaida Free Lions, to articulate publicly a comprehensive political platform and negotiating position for the newly created Eastern Front.[111]

The founding declaration of the Eastern Front (February 2005) charged that self-preservation was driving the ruling NCP to try to settle regional conflicts through piecemeal peace processes that left the root causes of the national crisis unaddressed. Consequently, it argued, only the restructuring of the Sudanese state on a new and just basis would usher in lasting peace and stability throughout the country. Its strategic goals, the Eastern Front said, were a negotiated settlement and voluntary Sudanese unity.[112] It hailed the CPA and called for it to serve as the model for resolving the conflicts in Darfur and the East. And it demanded that any negotiation between the government and Eastern representatives should be endorsed by regional and international actors.[113]

The Front insisted that genuine federal rule and guarantees of fair power and wealth sharing at the local and national levels were prerequisites for a lasting solution.[114] Subsequently Dr Amna, as vice chairman of the Eastern Front, defined what the movement meant by power-sharing: "the political system should be based on proportionate representation as determined by population size, which for the East would mean not less than 18 per cent of power in all the executive, legislative, judicial, security, and cultural branches of the central government".[115]

The Front calls for Sudan to have a federal government formed to reflect the weight of six regions – South, North, Central, West, East and Khartoum – which in turn would have regional, state and local governments. It also wants a presidential council consisting of the governors of the six regions, with a rotational presidency; a Government of National Unity during the interim period; and an interim constitution drafted by a constitutional conference at which all six regions of the country and its political forces and civil society organisations would be fairly represented.[116]

On wealth sharing, the Front demands agreements at the national and regional levels to determine the percentages of resource allocations, such as minerals and revenues from ports, and says these should take into account the level of development in each region. Its push to claim control over 70 per cent of the wealth generated in eastern Sudan remains a major bone of contention with the DUP, which considers the percentage unrealistic and challenges the Eastern Front's claims to be the sole legitimate representative of the East. Beja Congress and Eastern Front declarations raise a host of economic grievances requiring redress in the context of a negotiated settlement of the conflict, chief among which is the review of all land appropriation in the East by foreign and non-eastern Sudan investors.

Accountability figures prominently among the alliance's priorities. Its founding declaration demands "an independent and just investigation of the Port Sudan massacre and bringing to justice the perpetrators of this crime".[117] At national level peace talks, the Front will insist upon "fair trial in accordance with the provisions of international human rights law of perpetrators of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and human rights violations".[118]

All Eastern Front policy statements strongly denounce the lack of recognition by Sudan's ruling elites of the country's cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity. The founding declaration cites acculturation as a leading factor in the marginalisation of the region, on the same level as "repression, political marginalisation, social injustice, and economic deprivation".[119] Dr Amna argues that democracy is most suited to accommodate Sudan's diversity and ensure equality of its citizens. Denouncing the failure of traditional parties to reflect that diversity, she appeals for proportional suffrage.[120]

Agreement on the political, economic, and cultural issues outlined above, the Eastern Front says, must be reached before it will consent to security and military arrangements.[121] The March 2005 conference also insisted that the right to self-determination be included in the declaration of principles for any new talks with the government.[122] However, this does not seem – at

[111] "Important Joint Declaration from the Leadership of Beja Congress and Sudanese Free Lions - Liberated Areas of Eastern Sudan, 12-16 February 2005", in Arabic, copy of the original with Crisis Group.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Dr Amna Dirar, "Participating in Power as Seen by Red Sea Citizen", paper presented at the Dialogue Workshop on "Development in the Red Sea State – Challenges and Perspectives", Port Sudan, 13-14 August 2005, in Arabic.
[116] See "Important Joint Declaration", op. cit.
[117] "Final Declaration of the Eastern Front conference held in the liberated territories", 29 March 2005, available at www.sudaneseonline.com, in Arabic.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Dr Amna Dirar, op. cit.
[121] "Important Joint Declaration", op. cit.
[122] Dr Amna Dirar, op. cit.

least not yet – to be a core demand, unlike in the South during the IGAD negotiations. A challenge to national unity can probably still be averted via a fair political solution for the East if genuine negotiations begin soon. If the conflict is allowed to drag on and the central government continues to ignore the region's complaints, however, the call for self-determination is likely to become much stronger, as happened in the South after years of government neglect.[123]

The political platform of the Beja Congress and Eastern Front reflects a conscious effort to use the CPA framework as a reference. However, the CPA has created a fait accompli at least regarding the apportionment of national and regional power. Once the NCP's 52 per cent and the SPLM's 28 per cent have been distributed, only 20 per cent is left for the NDA, the Darfur movements, the Eastern Front, and the other regional and national forces. Negotiations to end the conflicts in the East and Darfur will have to overcome the same hurdle of achieving real power-sharing for the two vast regions from a relatively small piece of the national pie.

If its demands are not met during political negotiations, the Beja Congress claims it will continue its armed struggle as part of the Eastern Front. In October 2003, it reactivated its military activities after being excluded from the CPA negotiations and conducted a number of hit-and-run attacks. As the Eastern Front, it made headlines in May 2005 when it captured three NCP state legislators who had attended an NCP-sponsored conference on the eastern crisis in Kassala.[124] Then in late June, it attacked military garrisons south of the town of Tokar in Red Sea State, claiming to capture seventeen soldiers and a senior officer.[125] Both attacks were allegedly carried out in alliance with troops from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a Darfur insurgent group based in Asmara. They were small but high profile operations (the Eastern Front exaggerated the Tokar attack and the subsequent government bombing, which were then further exaggerated by the media) and aimed to remind the government it was still active in the East despite the NDA's acceptance of a place on the National Constitutional Review Commission.

Overall, however, the government has the military upper-hand in the East. Its heavy security presence along the border, around Hameshkoreb, and in the cities of Kassala and Port Sudan makes it difficult for the Eastern Front to carry out more than hit-and-run attacks. Demography also works against the insurgents. Famine and the decline of rural livelihoods have fostered a strong urbanising trend for 50 years.[126] The remaining rural population lives in small and isolated settlements, so the Beja rebels have had to try to mobilise the urban poor, a group that is bombarded with propaganda and courted by the NCP. Even some of the urban middle class elite has been absorbed into the NCP as members of legislative and government administrative bodies, including those who spent time in Eritrea. To an extent, such involvement has dampened enthusiasm for armed struggle.[127] Instead, these groups have been battling politically for Beja rights within the system and trying to act as liaisons between the government and the Beja Congress wing in Asmara. As a Beja official in the state government said, "We can't all go outside. Some have to stay and work inside to protect the Beja".[128]

It is common to hear government officials express their conviction that the NCP maintains complete political control in the region, and the Eastern Front is not a major problem.[129] These officials fail to appreciate the changes that have occurred in eastern society since the regime came to power. A non-Beja Sudanese expert on the East explains: "The government thinks the Beja are part of Mirghani and part of the DUP. Yet, there is a fundamental change within [eastern Sudan]. There are very young leaders emerging who have their own ideas and own understanding [of the political solution]. The DUP and Mirghani cannot speak on behalf of the Beja, and [it would be a mistake] for the government to think that the

[123] This point was underscored by Abdallah Musa, an official of the Eastern Front based in Port Sudan, in a press conference on 25 December 2005 in Khartoum. *Al-Sahafa*, 26 December 2005 (in Arabic).

[124] "Sudanese rebels kidnap three politicians in East", Reuters, 25 May 2005. See also "Sudan: kidnapping of 3 deputies of Red Sea State parliament; eastern and Darfur armed groups claim responsibility", *Asharq Alawsat*, 26 May 2005 (in Arabic).

[125] "New front flares up in eastern Sudan", Agence France-Presse, 21 June 2005. The incident received considerable coverage in the Arab media, see: "In response to Cairo Accord, eastern Sudan fighters take control of government positions", *Asharq Alawsat*, 21 June 2005 (in Arabic); "Sudanese army declares repulse of opposition offensive in East", *al-Hayat*, 22 June (in Arabic); "Beja and Darfur fighters claim inflicting casualties on government in East", *al-Khaleej*, 19 June 2005 (in Arabic).

[126] For example, in Red Sea State the urban population expanded by 138 per cent between 1973 and 1990, while the rural population declined by 18 per cent. Hassan Abd el Ati, "Beyond the Locality: Urban Centres, Agricultural Schemes, the State, and NGOs", in Leif Manger (ed.), *Survival on Meagre Resources: Hadendowa Pastoralism in the Red Sea Hills* (Nordic Africa Institute, 1996), p. 104.

[127] The violence in Port Sudan has fuelled more radical rhetoric among urban populations, however.

[128] Crisis Group interview, Eastern Sudan, 2005.

[129] The NCP is not monolithic, however. Some officials recognise that traditional patronage politics is not sufficient to appease the Eastern Front and solve the crisis in the East. They acknowledge negotiations will be necessary to address the grievances. Crisis Group correspondence, November 2005.

agreement between Mirghani and the government would appease the Beja".[130] The government may also be discounting the significance of the many young people who have been trekking to opposition-controlled areas to join the Eastern Front for military training.

Overall, the greatest risk of a larger conflict stems less from the rebels' hit-and-run attacks[131] than from the difficulties that are foreseeable when the SPLM pulls out of the border areas. Under the terms of the security agreement it reached with the government on 25 September 2003 and which forms part of the CPA, it must leave eastern Sudan by 9 January 2006. To date, it has withdrawn up to 1,500 troops from the East and is in the process of redeploying them to Khartoum, though 500 members of this force have not yet left Kassala. The SPLM still has more than 5,000 troops in the East (though no longer on the frontlines), and lags far behind its timetable for withdrawal due to logistical constraints, including lack of airlift capacity.[132] It hopes to withdraw half its remaining force by March 2006, but believes that it may not be possible to complete full withdrawal before October 2006.[133]

The Eastern Front is actively seeking to fill the administrative and military void the SPLM will leave behind. It has put in place over a number of years institutions to govern and control the opposition areas, including a civil administration that runs the schools and oversees humanitarian operations. It also has redeployed a significant number of its troops around Hameshkoreb and along the frontlines in anticipation that the government may launch some type of operation once the SPLM is gone. Recently, it publicly reiterated its resolve to maintain control of Hameshkoreb after the SPLM withdraws: "It is our town and our forces will not pull out and surrender it to the government. The SPLM are obliged to withdraw because they have an agreement with the government but we do not have such an agreement and therefore we are not obliged to pull out".[134]

The SPLM's withdrawal will present a security dilemma to both the government and the Eastern Front. The Eastern Front will feel vulnerable and can be expected to continue to build up its military strength. The government is likely to perceive this as a threat and bring in additional troops.[135] With both sides building up, any incident could quickly escalate. While the Eastern Front has only a few thousand fighters and little military hardware, it should be able to survive an attack, at least if Eritrea keeps the border open and provides sanctuary and support.[136] Any attack on Hameshkoreb would also have repercussions in the cities, where radicalised youth might take to the streets seeking to damage government installations. Government security would attempt to prevent any unrest in strategically sensitive areas such as Port Sudan and would likely use overwhelming and indiscriminate force, leading to many deaths and arrests. This is an all too plausible scenario for the start of a protracted and brutal conflict in the East.

2. The Rashaida Free Lions (*al-usud al-hurra*)

The political agenda of the Rashaida is more elusive than that of the Beja Congress. One of Sudan's most traditional tribes, the Rashaida are pure nomadic pastoralists, who move large distances across Kassala but with no defined territory. Originally from Saudi Arabia, multiple family connections link them to the Gulf, from where they receive relief and financial assistance. They are believed to be considerably wealthier than the Beja. When famine decimated Beja livestock and drove people to the cities in the mid-1980s, the Rashaida sold or smuggled much of their livestock to the Gulf.

The armed wing, the Free Lions Movement, was founded in November 1999 under the chairmanship of Mabrouk Mubarak Salim, a graduate of Damascus University and a DUP parliamentarian during the last democratic government. Rashaida political grievances, like the Beja's, revolve around the depletion of natural resources and destruction of nomadic migration routes by the expansion of mechanised farming and claims of heavy taxation without government investment in their areas.[137] The government aggravated the Rashaida during the Gulf War (1991) by restricting the unofficial imports of four-wheel-drive vehicles from that area of the sort commonly used by the Rashaida, on the grounds that the tribe had sent men to Saudi Arabia to fight against the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, and the vehicles would be used for smuggling. The Free Lions claim that the Rashaida were harshly

[130] Crisis Group interview, Eastern Sudan, September 2005.
[131] To inflict significant damage on the pipeline, oil refineries, or other valuable infrastructure, although these are heavily guarded, would not require a large force. According to one political analyst well-attuned to the East, the Eastern Front is contemplating "more proactive strategies to destabilise the region if the negotiations don't proceed as hoped". Crisis Group correspondence, November 2005.
[132] Crisis Group interview with senior SPLA commander, 30 December 2005.
[133] The SPLM points out that the SAF also remains far behind its timetable for withdrawal from southern Sudan. Crisis Group interviews, 27 and 30 December 2005.
[134] Abdallah Musa, deputy secretary general of Eastern Front, quoted in "East Sudan rebels vow to control Hameshkoreb instead of SPLA", Agence France-Presse, 27 December 2005.
[135] Reportedly, the Sudanese military has not made new deployments near Hameshkoreb, though it maintains a large camp nearby. Crisis Group interviews, November 2005.
[136] As noted above, Eritrea's reliability in such a contingency is uncertain.
[137] Crisis Group interview, Eritrea, 2005.

penalised for their opposition to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. As many as 600 Land Cruisers are said to have been seized by the government at the time and not returned. Throughout the 1990s the regime and the Rashaida battled over smuggling, with the government often resorting to extreme measures, including extrajudicial killings. The Rashaida also resist compulsory military service.

Because the Rashaida migrated to Sudan so recently (between 1869 and 1882), they do not own tribal land. They did sign in 1933, however, an agreement by which they recognised Hadendowa ownership of land and water and obtained in return access subject to certain restrictions. The agreement also provided that if the Rashaida wished to cultivate the land, they would have to pay the individual or sub-tribe owner.[138] It was renewed and modified in 1950 to give the Rashaida greater flexibility with respect to pastureland.[139] These arrangements governed tribal interaction satisfactorily for decades.

In the early 1980s, however, the Rashaida started agitating to have their own nazir independent of the Beja, which would have implied recognition of land rights. In 1989, Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi briefly granted the Rashaida a nazirate but revoked it after objections by the Beja Nazirs.[140] A conference scheduled for 30 June 1989 to resolve the issue never occurred because of the NIF coup. Under a 1994 compromise, the NIF government granted the Rashaida a nazirate without land – an "administration" (*idara*) – but with equal status. The Beja were dissatisfied, and the issue remains one that the government may seek to exploit to disrupt the Eastern Front.

The Free Lions, who are proud of their Arab "purity", seem to have both hawks and doves. It is not clear to what extent this division reflects old differences between the three major clans: the Baratikh, the Zineimat and the Marasaa.[141] However, Mabrouk's control over the movement's political orientation is questionable. His wing has tended towards the Beja Congress but seems to resent its domination by the Hadendowa and may regard the Beja as too distinct, ethnically and culturally, to build a common agenda with.[142] On the other side, Hadendowa resentment of Rashaida control of the border trade, which the Free Lions are seen as protecting for the exclusive benefit of the tribe, is a long-time factor in inter-communal relations.[143]

Since Kuwait has strong family links to the Rashaida, and apparently out of appreciation of their solidarity during the 1991 Iraqi invasion, it attempted to mediate between them and the Sudanese government soon after the Eastern Front was announced. The Rashaida said Khartoum's aim was to divide the new movement by encouraging the return of their leaders to the East, where they were promised some local government positions and freedom to associate politically if they agreed to dismantle the Free Lions. "There is no initiative, only some contacts and good intentions from our brothers in Kuwait", the Free Lions said.[144] However, the persistence of two Kuwaiti parliamentarians of Rashaida origin to facilitate an agreement finally paid off as detailed below.

3. Formation of the Eastern Front

The conclusion of the CPA and the finalisation of the Cairo talks between the NDA and the government, both of which sidelined the Beja Congress and the Rashaida, strengthened their determination to cooperate more closely with each other and led to the March 2005 decision to combine their forces. The partnership and the name change are clearly intended to broaden their appeal and undercut government propaganda that the Beja Congress is concerned only with the Beja, who are just more than half the population.

So far, however, the merger has had little practical effect. The Beja certainly remain the predominant element of the Eastern Front's military wing. There appears to have been no true integration of Beja and Rashaida forces, and very few Rashaida fighters are in opposition-controlled areas. Some Beja Congress officials inside Sudan even claim the Eastern Front does not exist and stress strengthening the Congress first.[145] It is also questionable how much support the Eastern Front has from other tribes. Beja Congress sources repeatedly say dialogue is underway to mobilise the Lahawayn and particularly the Shukriyya in Gedaref State, two of Sudan's poorest pastoralist tribes.[146]

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[138] Khalid Ali al-Amin, "Eastern Sudan Indigenous Conflict Prevention", *African Security Review*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2004).
[139] Ibid.
[140] Pantuliano, "Comprehensive Peace?", op. cit., p. 15,
[141] Ahmad, "Political Dynamics", op. cit.
[142] Crisis Group interview, SPLM member, Khartoum, April 2005.
[143] Ahmad, "Political Dynamics", op. cit.
[144] "Media release from the Free Lions movement in the UK", 2 December 2005, posted on 7 December 2005 at www.sudaneseonline.com/anews2005/dec7-98961.shtml (in Arabic).
[145] Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, August 2005.
[146] Crisis Group interviews, May 2004-June 2005. The creation of a new Shukriyya-based party, Nahda (meaning emergence or rising), was reportedly announced at the last Eastern Front conference, in Hamashkoreb in March 2005, probably to capitalise on grievances at the increased number of Ethiopian settlements in the state, to which the government is considered to turn a blind eye. Others suggest that some

All indications, however, are that even this is still in its infancy.

The new partnership suffered a blow in late December 2005 when the Kuwaiti parliamentarians helped facilitate an agreement between the Free Lions and the NCP. Secret talks were conducted in Tripoli on 24-25 December between the Free Lions, led by Mabrouk, and the NCP, led by Kamal Abeid, the secretary for external relations.[147] Reportedly, there was agreement that the Land Cruisers confiscated by the Sudanese government in the early 1990s would be returned, in exchange for which members of the Free Lions would lay down their weapons.[148] Coming three weeks before talks were to start between the Eastern Front and the government under Libyan auspices, the agreement appeared to be an NCP effort to weaken the alliance of its enemies and avoid making real concessions on power sharing and wealth sharing.

The Free Lions denied the agreement undermined the Eastern Front or jeopardised January 2006 talks in Tripoli and claimed it merely resolved an isolated bilateral issue by providing "restitution" to aggrieved Rashaida. Furthermore, they said, "issues of power and wealth were not discussed".[149] This explanation, however, has done little to mute criticism of a deal that has placed tremendous strain on the Eastern Front and exposed its frailty. Beja Congress leaders were caught off-guard by the secret negotiations, which they learned of only when they saw Mabrouk in Tripoli on Libyan television. Though some in the Beja Congress will now be tempted to shun their Rashaida counterparts, the people of the East will likely only obtain real concessions from Khartoum if they are united when they deal with it in a credible negotiating forum.

4. SPLM

Links between the Beja Congress and Southern political forces go back to the mid-1960s, and a common demand for a federal system of government was made at the New Forces' Congress in 1968-1969. However, the main Southern insurgency at that time, the Anya-nya, pursued a strictly "separatist and racially exclusive policy"[150] preventing any direct military cooperation and limiting the political partnership. From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, the SPLM was able to extend its war only to the Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile and, to some extent, Darfur.[151]

The situation began to change with formation of the NDA, to which most traditional actors in the East, the DUP and Beja Congress, as well as the SPLM, were parties. To increase military effectiveness in the East, SPLM Chairman Garang created a New Sudan Brigade and unified the NDA military command under his direct leadership in 1996. The southern experience in guerrilla warfare has been a key factor in the NDA's military operations, and SPLM disengagement from the East, supposed to be completed by 9 January 2006, is a challenge not only for the Eastern Front's military survival, but also for the New Sudan political agenda's survival there.

Beja concerns about SPLM intentions have grown since Garang's death in July 2005.[152] Across the North, the death of the man who symbolised the hopes of many for peace and equitable development in a united Sudan has been read as almost a fatal blow to the idea that the country can hold together. Alliance with the SPLM becomes increasingly opportunistic, as suspicions grow that it lacks the political will, and in the short term also the capacity, to assist the marginalised North's struggle for equal rights and opportunities. The Beja feel the SPLM is especially indebted to them for the sacrifice they made in the war in the East. "The SPLA would never have achieved the CPA unless the Beja had died. When they fought in the East, is when the SPLA put real pressure on the government. They owe us a lot. We don't want their money or power, just their moral support", declared a group of Beja Congress members.[153]

Reservations about the SPLM tend to be most acute in the East, where the movement has always lacked a true constituency. While leaders such as Yusif Kuwa in the Nuba Mountains and Malik Agar in Blue Nile managed to a large extent to sell the New Sudan agenda to their people, and Daoud Bolad's 1992 insurgency in Darfur showed the SPLM potential in western Sudan, the East

Nuba living in eastern Sudan are working to deepen the links with the Nuba of southern Kordofan in order to build an anti-government alliance. Crisis Group interview, June 2005.

[147] "Ruling party, eastern Sudan rebel group sign agreement", Libyan Jamahiriya Broadcasting Corporation (LJBC), 27 December 2005 at http://www.sudantribune.com/article.php3?id_article=13245.

[148] "Libyan mediation between Khartoum and the Free Lions devastates the Eastern Front", *Al-Hayat*, 29 December 2005 (in Arabic), at: http://www.daralhayat.com.

[149] Ibid.

[150] D.H.Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Bloomington, 2003), p. 138.

[151] Though the Beja Congress publicly declared support for the SPLM in the mid-1980s, the two movements did not coordinate political activities until a decade later. "Eastern organisation expresses support for SPLA-SPLM", Radio SPLA, 26 March 1985, from BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 29 March 1985.

[152] See Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°30, *Garang's Death: Implications for Peace in Sudan*, 9 August 2005.

[153] Crisis Group interview, eastern Sudan, 2005.

has never been well represented in the movement's leadership. The Beja Congress, while coordinating with the SPLA, has maintained its autonomy.[154] The Beja attitude has been consistently pragmatic, supporting any national political force from which some benefit could be expected, including the SPLM. However, the radicalisation of political discourse, especially among youth in the East, may favour the SPLM. Its offices in Kassala and Port Sudan have registered several thousand new members over the last six months, drawn from all the resident communities – most importantly the Beja.

The local SPLM leadership has on occasion appeared to be overwhelmed by the task. A relatively high-profile clash between two SPLM factions in Kassala in early June 2005, when each tried to take control of the office, seems to have resulted from jockeying within the movement's leadership over responsibility for political mobilisation in the North but possibly also from the unease of the local Southern community about the increasing numbers of Northerners who were joining.

The future of the alliance with the DUP is also a factor in SPLM calculations. While the political and personal understanding between Garang and DUP Chairman al-Mirghani was exemplary, continuation of the alliance through the 2009 general elections is problematic. The SPLM is expected to campaign among the urban poor, often migrants from the countryside, while the DUP tends to represent the interests of the Nile Valley's merchants and landowners, whom many Beja blame for their disadvantages.

One way for the SPLM to reassure Easterners and others in the North that it is not abandoning plans to be a national party is to take the lead in political talks on the East. As a government partner, it could be instrumental in ensuring that a stable and just settlement is reached with the Eastern Front. An important contribution to this would be to leave a small force in Hameshkoreb after withdrawal of the remainder of its forces from the East, which could serve as a buffer between the government army and Eastern Front until a comprehensive agreement is reached. The delay that has already resulted in the scheduled withdrawal offers a possibility to do this and so prevent development of a security vacuum. It should also consider proposing early in negotiations – as a practical measure that could head off confrontation and help coordinate demilitarisation – establishment of a Joint/Integrated Unit (J/IU), like those provided for in the CPA's security provisions, but including the Eastern Front.[155]

Overall, however, the SPLM gives no indication of pushing forward negotiations between the Government of National Unity and the Eastern Front. Instead, Foreign Minister Lam Akol seems content to question the unity of the rebels and downplay the significance of political negotiations.[156]

5. Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)

The DUP's political dominance in the East for much of the post-independence period has benefited from the sectarian affiliation of most Beja to the Khatmiyya religious sect and the patronage ties linking them to the Mirghani family. The DUP is the political platform of the Khatmiyya, and the Mirghani family traditionally provides the leadership of both the religious sect and the political party. After the NIF came to power, however, the DUP was weakened by the banning of parties and the curtailment of Mirghani economic activities, though it has tried to resurrect itself within the NDA, which Mirghani chairs.

The DUP has never concealed its unease at the presence of the Beja Congress as an autonomous force within the NDA, one admitted only upon Eritrean insistence in 1995 and which as late as March 1997 Mirghani kept out of the leadership council. Only the SPLM's growing influence in the alliance paved the way for these difficulties to be overcome temporarily. The difficulties reemerged again, however, soon after the SPLM signed the CPA, testifying to its diminishing role in holding the NDA together. It is unclear how much support the DUP still has in the East. In the aftermath of the CPA, senior party officials have stated their intention to participate in local and, if possible, state government institutions, with a view to restoring rural influence and making urban inroads.[157] This strategy is likely to succeed in parts of the Nile Valley, Blue Nile and Gedaref, and may attract some Rashaida support given DUP ties with the Gulf, but results in the destitute suburbs of Kassala and Port Sudan, where most Beja live, may be mixed at best.

It is common to hear young, educated Beja criticise the DUP more than the NCP for their people's marginalisation. "The Mirghani family does not want the Beja to go to

[154] Beja elites have been wary of throwing their weight fully behind the movement; there have been grassroots complaints about plundering of natural resources, particularly timber, to sustain the war in the South. Crisis Group interview, London, July 2004.

[155] The security arrangements agreement of 25 September 2003, part of the CPA, is ambiguous about the deployment of a J/IU in the East, merely stating that further talks between the army and the SPLM are to take place during the interim period.

[156] "Sudan unsure of Eastern rebels unity – FM", Agence France-Presse, 7 December 2005.

[157] Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, August-September 2005.

school because the people would then be educated and would no longer follow the Mirghanis", declared one.[158] An incident that has become known through the East and particularly outraged Beja reportedly occurred at an NDA meeting in 2004 in Asmara. Mirghani was speaking on the East when a Beja representative tried to introduce a Beja Congress paper. Irritated at the interruption, Mirghani slammed his fist on the table and shouted: "Shut up! I am the master of the East". The DUP's patronising attitude has caused many to turn their back on the Khatmiyya and the party.

The DUP is evidently attempting to revive its support among the Beja by selecting two for significant positions (minister of general education and deputy governor of Red Sea State) in the DUP's team in the Government of National Unity. Furthermore, Party Chairman Mirghani has publicly stated his intention to help solve the problem in the East, including by participating in the negotiations, despite objections from the Eastern Front.

6. JEM and other national political forces

Contacts between Darfur and Eastern Sudan to forge a common platform based on a federal system were started as early as 1964 and seemed to gather some momentum in the early 1990s, when senior Fur exile Ibrahim Ahmed Diraige and Zaghawa anthropologist Sharif Harir launched the Sudan Federal Democratic Alliance (SFDA), a party that campaigned for regionalisation as the only guarantee of national unity. The SFDA is officially part of the NDA, but has attracted support only from intellectuals and lip service from other groups, notably the SPLM.

Darfur's connections to eastern Sudan since the outbreak of its civil war in February 2003 may have been less significant than sometimes suggested. Both insurgencies – SLA and, to a lesser extent, JEM – started infiltrating the combat area as early as mid-2003. Both Darfur movements, as well as SPLM and Eritrean officials, attended the March 2005 conference that created the Eastern Front. However, debilitating internal squabbles seem to have seriously hampered the SLM in the East. The smaller JEM has been more active, with a view to boosting its claim to be a national movement.

On 15 July 2004, JEM announced an agreement for military and political cooperation with the Rashaida Free Lions.[159] Beja sources have claimed the armed wing of the Beja Congress also signed but it has refused to confirm.[160] At the subsequent NDA summit, the agreement soured the already poor relations between DUP and the Beja/Rashaida. Indeed, DUP urged that the Beja Congress and the Free Lions be expelled for making a deal with a movement outside the NDA and suspected of Islamist connections.

In November 2004, Free Lions' Chairman Mabrouk claimed to have been involved in a coup attempt in Khartoum two months earlier and hailed coordination with JEM.[161] Subsequently, joint JEM-Eastern Front patrols seem to have been responsible for the kidnapping of three Red Sea State parliamentarians in May 2005 as well as the attack on police south of Tokar in June. Eastern Front sources often suggest that JEM's true contribution to the latter operation was fanciful press statements which for some time caused the international community to believe a local skirmish was on the verge of becoming a major armed conflict.

JEM is too small a military movement in Darfur itself – a few hundred fighters – to be able to alter the military balance in the East, despite claims that it has recently intensified recruitment in the refugee camps in Eritrea, particularly at Sawa, north of Tessenay, an area known for Rashaida-controlled smuggling.[162] Eastern Front cooperation with JEM does not seem to imply any commitment to the latter's ambitious agenda for changing Sudan's political landscape. However, the Eastern Front may take pragmatic advantage of JEM's easy access to Sudanese and international print media and its active European diaspora to boost the profile of its issues.[163] Some observers fear that JEM, if excluded from negotiations on the East, may carry out another high profile attack there to provoke the government and derail negotiations.[164] This is a risk – it would not require a large force to cause a major disruption – so it is important that the government not take the bait and avoids overreaction.

None of the other northern Sudanese political forces seem to be important players in the East. The Umma party did win some seats there in the 1986 democratic elections, through alliances with local notables, but Mohamed Al-Amin Tirik, the Hadendowa Nazir, lost in those elections on an Umma ticket to a DUP candidate.

[158] Crisis Group Interviews, Khartoum and Port Sudan, 2005.
[159] See "Agreement between the Free Lions Movement and the Sudan Justice and Equality Movement", 15 July 2004, at http://www.sudantribune.com/article.php3?id_article=4077.
[160] Crisis Group interview, July 2004.
[161] "Sudanese rebel group claims involvement in alleged coup plot", *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, 29 November 2004, reprinted in English at www.sudantribune.com.
[162] Crisis Group interview, Abuja, October 2005.
[163] During the September-October 2005 round of Darfur peace talks in Abuja, Beja and Rashaida representatives were part of JEM's delegation and met with a wide range of international partners and observers. Crisis Group interviews with observers, October 2005.
[164] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, October 2005.

Its current difficulties even in traditional Darfur and Kordofan strongholds suggest it has a difficult recovery ahead. The Popular Congress is hampered by the traditionally limited appeal of its strictly Islamist agenda in the East and by Beja resentment of past massive conscription into the PDF. The Sudan Communist Party, the left-wing alternative in the urban centres, may find its room to manoeuvre constrained by the SPLM. If the elections planned for 2009 are free and fair, the key democratic battle in the East is likely to be between the parties of the Eastern Front and the DUP.

IV. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

Despite the patent risk of renewed conflict and the narrowing window for a negotiated settlement, engagement by regional and other international actors in the political process has been limited, inconsistent and sometimes counter-productive. Half-hearted attempts have inflated Easterners' expectations and left them disheartened. The past year has seen contradictory initiatives. The UK, working through a small British non-governmental organisation, Concordis International, sought to find a political solution, though its efforts were undercut in April when the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative (SRSG) Jan Pronk unilaterally offered during a trip to Asmara that UNMIS facilitate the talks.[165] However, UNMIS subsequently sent inconsistent messages and was rejected by the Eastern Front in favour of a Libyan-led mediation initiative.[166]

The Libyans offered to host negotiations between the government and Eastern Front in Tripoli, originally to begin in mid-December 2005, then, because of a delay, on 17 January 2006. After they facilitated the agreement between the NCP and Free Lions, however, the Beja Congress representatives in the Eastern Front have now rejected Libya as a mediator: "Given the obvious role of Libya in the Khartoum scheme to undermine the unity of the Eastern Front, the Front declares that it no longer has any binding commitment with the Libyan mediator, which has revealed its lack of credibility from the onset".[167]

Overall, international engagement with the Eastern issue is prisoner of the piecemeal approach to peace-making in the Sudan that was pursued throughout the CPA negotiations. Just as insufficient attention was paid to Darfur throughout 2003-2004 lest it complicate conclusion of the government/SPLM agreement, serious attention to the East is being delayed to allow the Darfur peace talks in Abuja to progress. Yet, the Eastern conflict results from the same pattern of dispossession

[165] Concordis International describes itself as "a small British organisation that works with individuals and groups in conflict situations to build relationships across conflict boundaries". www.Concordis-International.org. It was formerly known as Relationships Foundation International and has worked in a number of African countries, including South Africa and Rwanda.

[166] Although the Eastern Front's leadership advised the UN that it accepted the Libyan initiative, some members of the movement made it known during the capacity training in Asmara that they would prefer UN mediation. Crisis Group correspondence, November 2005.

[167] "Explanatory Statement from the Eastern Front", 27 December 2005, in Arabic, www.sudaneseonline.com.

and neglect of the periphery by the centre that has fuelled armed resistance in other parts of the country. The international community needs to rethink its approach to regional peacemaking in the Sudan and develop a more comprehensive national strategy.[168]

A. ERITREA

Eritrea has a large Beja community of its own and has been a natural economic partner of eastern Sudan, particularly Kassala State, since colonial times. These links were at times exploited in the political game between the colonial powers: Britain in the Sudan, Italy in Eritrea.[169]

The protracted independence struggle of the EPLF against the Ethiopian government benefited the Sudanese Beja indirectly, as the rebels, generously supported by the Eritrean diaspora, provided the region with services Khartoum had ceased to supply.[170] The NIF policy of destabilising its neighbours in the early 1990s encouraged the militarisation of Beja dissidents, with Eritrean support. As noted above, Eritrea insisted that the NDA admit the Beja Congress in 1995, against DUP resistance. Since then the Eritrean regime has been a close ally of the Beja Congress and subsequently the Eastern Front. Some Beja, however, claim Eritrea has too much control over the Congress. One formerly based in Asmara said: "Eritreans controlled everything, according to their needs, not the needs of the Beja".[171] Another from Asmara asserted: "The Eritreans are trying to use us".[172]

The war with Ethiopia in 1998-2000 rendered the positions of the Sudanese opposition in Eritrea more precarious but did not deal a fatal blow to the Eastern insurgency. By the same token, the current renewed tensions between Asmara and Addis Ababa pose an increased challenge to the Eastern Front, as well as to the SLA and JEM in Darfur. Khartoum's new national unity government, and particularly Foreign Minister Lam Akol (SPLM), have attempted to take steps towards normalisation of relations with Asmara, resulting in a visit by an Eritrean delegation visit to Khartoum in October 2005 and the return visit by First Vice President Salva Kiir (SPLM) to Asmara in early December. This policy should be reinforced and accompanied by serious negotiations with the Eastern Front.

Eritrea accepted the Libyan initiative on eastern Sudan, as it earlier accepted high-profile Libyan efforts to broker a meeting between President Afeworki and President Bashir on the margins of the "six-way" Tripoli summit on Darfur in May 2005. In late October, Asmara sent senior officials to meet with President Moamer Kadhafi and the Eastern Front. While it agreed to Libya as lead negotiator, the Eastern Front demanded that Eritrea remain involved as co-mediator.[173] Cooperation with Eritrea will be necessary in any alternative to the Libyan initiative, especially for shaping a sustainable security settlement in the border areas, but it remains to be seen whether any country with leverage over Eritrea will be willing to expend it on Eastern Sudan rather than on the pressing issue of the Ethiopian-Eritrean border dispute.

B. LIBYA

Libyan involvement is more ambiguous than that of Eritrea. In May 2005, the SLM and JEM invited the Beja and the Rashaida to attend all-Darfur consultations in Libya with President Gaddafi. In August, Gaddafi sent an envoy to Khartoum and Asmara, and in October an Eastern Front delegation travelled to Tripoli. While Libya has been constructive in the Darfur peace process by attempting to facilitate emergence of a common rebel platform and subsequent unification of the insurgency,[174] the unity of purpose of the Eastern Front and the social fabric in the East are perhaps strong enough to make grassroots reconciliation initiatives less relevant.

In the absence of any immediate threat to its own security, such as could be postulated in the Darfur case, and, seemingly, in the absence of vital economic interests, Libya's main motivation in the East is most likely preventing further involvement by the wider international community in Sudan. It is doubtful whether it has the expertise, or more importantly the political will, to address the conflict within a framework compatible with the CPA. Moreover, Tripoli lacks solid relationships with other important international players, such as the U.S. and UK,

[168] Crisis Group will analyse this concept in more detail in subsequent reporting.

[169] Prominent members of the Mirghani family living in Asmara were well-known supporters of Italian fascism prior to World War Two. When the Italians bombed Omdurman in 1940, they shelled the residences of the Mahdi but not those of the Mirghanis. See Gabriel Warburg, *Islam, Sectarianism and Politics in the Sudan since the Mahdiyya* (London, 2003), p. 108.

[170] Johnson, op. cit., p. 138.

[171] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, April 2005.

[172] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, April 2005.

[173] Part of the reason why the Eastern Front has been cool to possible UN mediation is that UNMIS did not appear prepared to give Eritrea a prominent role in the peace talks. Crisis Group interview with a member of the Eastern Front, November 2005.

[174] Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°32, *Unifying Darfur's Rebels: A Prerequisite for Peace*, 6 October 2005.

which makes coordination of negotiations difficult.[175] Indeed, a long history of difficult relations makes many Western countries reluctant to accept a central role for Libya in a sensitive diplomatic endeavour.

As noted, Libya lost the trust of the Eastern Front, particularly the Beja Congress members, after it brokered the December 2005 private deal between the Free Lions and the NCP. While Tripoli may still seek to assert itself in any negotiations, it will be a marginal player at best.

C. EGYPT

Egypt hosted several rounds of talks between the Sudanese government and the NDA, leading to the signature of the Cairo agreement on 18 June 2005. Its interests include maintaining influence over the traditional sectarian parties (Umma and DUP), and reducing the strength of radical Islamism in its neighbour. Although its intelligence service was involved with the talks, it does not appear that Egypt took a proactive role as a mediator. For example, it did nothing to bring in the SLA, although it is an NDA member; nor has it attempted to improve relations between the DUP and the Eastern Front or try to have the latter's issues dealt with seriously.[176] It also seems not to have advanced any clear position during the Taha-Garang-Mirghani summit in early June that paved the way for the agreement. Its primary concern is to contain disputes among the Sudanese actors, lest they disrupt a status quo that is broadly favourable to Egypt. This is compatible with low-level instability in the peripheral parts of northern Sudan.

D. UN

The UN has done less than anticipated both politically and on the humanitarian side, its actions marked by a visible lack of strategy, unsatisfactory internal planning, overall inconsistency and what is seen as a patronising attitude towards the Eastern Front. SRSG Pronk met Eastern Front representatives in Asmara in April 2005 and reportedly promised to explore ways for the UN to mediate the regional conflict. At the same time, the Eastern Front, likely under pressure from JEM, asked to be included in the Abuja peace talks on Darfur.[177] The Khartoum government agreed to UNMIS involvement with the East as a way of preventing the Abuja talks from becoming a forum for tackling the issues of limited representation and access to national wealth across northern Sudan.

However, the UNMIS commitment has been slow to take concrete form and has not produced clear results – apparently because of protracted internal debate as to whether the Mission has the capacity or mandate to shoulder responsibility for the process. The confusion surrounding UNMIS's role in negotiations was expressed by Beja students in September 2005: "We do expect negotiations organised by the UN. But newspapers say the UN is withdrawing. We think this is just government propaganda [against UNMIS], but don't know".[178] There is now internal agreement that UNMIS, in accordance with its limited "good offices" mandate from the Security Council, would only help bridge the gaps between the government and Eastern Front and organise "talks about talks" with a view to finding a suitable mediator and venue. However, as no other state seemed ready to take on the mediation role, the result of the vacillation was the Eastern Front's acceptance of Libya's offer.

The Eastern Front seems never to have fully trusted the UN to play a pivotal role and has been slow in its responses to UNMIS. It has a methodical approach to talks with the government, based on analysis of the precedents with the South and Darfur. This is evidenced by its insistence on building up its capacity prior to negotiations, its position that it will not agree to a ceasefire until the end of the talks, and its efforts in recent months to collect as much information as possible on the East and Sudan as a whole.[179] UNMIS agreed to coordinate the efforts of donors (U.S., UK, South Africa, Canada, Norway) and to give technical aid to the Concordis International capacity-building workshop in Asmara. It seems to have withheld the promised support for the workshop, however, since being informed by the Eastern Front of its preference for Libyan-Eritrean mediation.[180] These false starts have undermined the perception of the UN as a reliable partner.

Nonetheless, the UN is best positioned to mediate between the government and Eastern Front.[181] The AU is

[175] This was evident in late November 2005, when key international partners had little information on whether the Libyan mediation would occur, let alone when talks would start, how they would be structured, or what the central issues would be.

[176] Crisis Group interviews, NDA, SLM and Beja Congress officials, Khartoum, Asmara and Nairobi, December 2004-June 2005.

[177] Crisis Group interviews with Eastern Front representatives, Asmara, May 2005.

[178] Crisis Group interview, Port Sudan, 2005.

[179] A library is reportedly being gathered in the offices of the Eastern Front in Asmara. Crisis Group interview, August 2005.

[180] Crisis Group interview with UNMIS staff, November 2005.

[181] The lead mediator should be appointed by the Secretary-General and separate from UNMIS. He or she would be tasked with liaising with UNMIS and key international partners to facilitate negotiations and broker a ceasefire.

too consumed in Darfur to play a role; IGAD is crippled by the Ethiopian-Eritrean dispute and Eritrea's deep involvement in the eastern problem; and the failure of the Libyan initiative showed that the regional actors are not sufficiently disinterested to play a leading role. The UN, fully supported by international partners, is the best hope for facilitating substantive talks between the two parties and ensuring a new war does not break out. It should learn from its previous missteps and realise that any mediator it appoints[182] would have to be independent of UNMIS so he or she could devote full attention to the Eastern Sudan negotiations. One reason the Eastern Front rejected SRSG Pronk's initiative was his preoccupation with a full plate of other pressing issues, including Darfur, the South, and the implementation of the CPA.

The UN has taken some recent steps to improve humanitarian assistance, the difficulties of which have been ascribed to inadequate donor commitment and background work. Until mid-2004, no high-level UN assessment mission had visited the area in many years.[183] The information available to UN agencies, mainly the result of the work of humanitarian NGOs, was conspicuously more limited than what was gathered on the South and Darfur. No framework yet exists for delivering relief across the frontline. While the knowledge base has expanded in the last year and a half, and UNMIS is now fully established in Kassala to monitor the SPLM withdrawal,[184] humanitarian access remains a concern in a time of increased restrictions on movement of aid workers.

In fact, the humanitarian situation is critical throughout the East, in both government and opposition areas. The crude mortality rate in Red Sea State and the opposition-controlled border region is almost double that of Darfur.[185] The improving if still dire humanitarian situation in Darfur is due to an impressive response by almost 14,000 humanitarian workers[186] but only a tiny fraction of that number work in the East.

Although the Beja Congress/Eastern Front is preparing to shoulder the burden of administering the former NDA-held areas on the SPLM's departure, most of the 70,000 people in the arid area are dependent upon food and health aid from two NGOs, Samaritan's Purse and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).[187] "People are aware they are better off since the area has been liberated because non-governmental organisations have come", explained the commissioner of Hameshkoreb.[188] Should they be forced to withdraw as a result of a conflict between Khartoum and the Eastern Front or a new Ethiopia-Eritrea war, the consequences on food security and health would be severe. Many in the "liberated areas" might starve or be forced to relocate.

In government-controlled areas, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Programme still feed more than 110,000 Eritrean refugees and 25,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). Renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea would undoubtedly cause more refugees from Eritrea to try to cross the border through heavily mined areas of northern Sudan. Estimates of possible refugee arrivals in Kassala and Gedaref are as high as 300,000.[189] A government/ Eastern Front confrontation over Hameshkoreb would likely drive several tens of thousands of Sudanese refugees into Eritrea or Ethiopia. If both scenarios were to be combined, hundreds of thousands of Sudanese and Eritreans could try and move further inland into northern Sudan.[190]

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[182] Mohamed Sahnoun, the Secretary-General's special adviser on Africa, was mentioned earlier as a possible mediator on the eastern Sudan issue and might be given consideration again.

[183] The first mission gave the impulse to preparation of the report by the international organisation, Technical Assistance to NGOs (TANGO), "Vulnerability and Nutritional Assessment of Rural Kassala and Red Sea State", Final Report, May 2005, conducted in cooperation between the UN Development Program (UNDP), the WFP, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and UNHCR.

[184] UNMIS has completed deployment of 263 Nepalese monitors to Kassala. Crisis Group interview, UNMIS staff, October 2005.

[185] Global acute malnutrition (GAM) rates are near 20 per cent in the East and around 12 per cent in Darfur. Data for Darfur is from the office of the Deputy SRSG for Sudan and the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator; "Darfur Humanitarian Profile No. 19", Khartoum, UN, October 2005. Data for the East is from "A Multisector Assessment of Communities in the NDA-Area of Sudan", September 2005, conducted by MercyCorps, International Rescue Committee and Samaritan's Purse.

[186] In the past year GAM rates have declined in Darfur from 21.8 per cent to 11.9 per cent; crude mortality rates have improved from 0.72 deaths per 10,000 people per day to 0.48. However, the humanitarian situation remains extremely precarious and dependent on the degree to which humanitarian workers have access to the vulnerable populations. An escalation of fighting since September 2005 threatens this access in parts of Darfur.

[187] The 70,000 figure is derived from Samaritan's Purse, which distributes food in the opposition-controlled areas.

[188] Crisis Group interview, Hameshkoreb, 2005.

[189] Reportedly, increasing numbers of refugees have recently begun to enter eastern Sudan from Ethiopia and Eritrea even though a fragile peace still holds. "Number of Ethiopian/ Eritrean refugees entering Sudan rises", *Sudan Tribune*, 11 December 2005.

[190] From a presentation to donors by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Crisis Group interview with donor representative, November 2005. There have been recent reports of Sudanese militia incursions from

Sudanese refugees on the Eritrean side, a mere 100 km south of Hameshkoreb, are possibly worse off, as they have barely any access to water, and they are too close to the border to get UNHCR services.[191] Despite the rhetoric of solidarity with the war-affected populations of eastern Sudan, the opposition-controlled areas are used by Asmara and the SPLM for the extraction of resources, especially timber, which worsens the precarious ecological balance. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is trying to establish a framework for humanitarian access covering both government and opposition areas but the Eastern Front's reaction has been negative, due to fears of exploitation by Khartoum. The Eastern Front is likely to stiffen its position as its own status in Hameshkoreb becomes more precarious with the SPLM withdrawal.

UN agencies as well as the World Bank should seriously plan for helping to develop sustainable livelihoods in the rural areas under government control, but even this would require a degree of consultation with the local stakeholders and the donors that is hampered by the unresolved conflict.[192]

E. U.S.

Washington has historically viewed its support to the East through the lens of its overall political engagement with the SPLM and the NDA, with the aim of containing the ruling party's Islamist policies. Like elsewhere in Sudan, its position on the East seems to be driven partly by the concept of using aid to pressure the Khartoum regime, though the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has been at the forefront of funding humanitarian work in the opposition-controlled area of Hameshkoreb.

Nevertheless, there are signs that the U.S. is increasingly concerned about the East in its own right. During his recent visit to Sudan, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick said the Eastern Front was making "reasonable demands", and it was time for Khartoum to resolve the problems in the East in the framework of the CPA.[193] The U.S., – whose primary interests in Sudan remain securing the success of the CPA, helping to resolve the Darfur humanitarian and political crisis, and maintaining intelligence sharing with the NCP component of the government –, may be constrained by the limited attention First Vice President Salva Kiir from the SPLM is devoting to non-South issues and by the current low profile of Vice President Taha. USAID's financing constraints are possibly an obstacle for any larger-scale humanitarian involvement in the East, at least in the short term, though the State Department is trying to encourage the Gulf countries to help, stressing the symbolic importance of Hameshkoreb to Gulf Arabs.[194]

Yet, it is not clear whether the U.S. is prepared to give high-level support to government/Eastern Front negotiations. Citing poor relations with Asmara as evidence of its limitations, it is willing to let the UK try to lead.[195] Zoellick in Khartoum dismissed the practicality of a single forum to solve all Sudan's regional conflicts but did recognise that a common framework is necessary to secure political agreements in Darfur and the East. The CPA already offers a good framework, and the U.S. should work to see to it that especially its principles of power sharing based on population and significant wealth sharing form the basis for negotiations on Darfur and the East.

F. EU AND MEMBER STATES

European donors' attention to eastern Sudan has increased over the last few years through stepped-up engagement in particular by the EU, member states UK, Italy and the Netherlands, and non-member Norway. Among EU member states, the UK was the first to support the search for a negotiated settlement. Since late 2004, the British have tried to get a deal in the East brokered by the non-governmental organisation Concordis International which shuttled between Khartoum and Asmara in the hope of jumpstarting joint consultations. An early result was a workshop in Nairobi, 14-17 February 2005, which pulled together most of the (limited) international expertise available but was frustrated by the low level of government and rebel representation. The issues at the root of the conflict were clearly identified: regional marginalisation, access to land and natural resources, education and employment, justice and human security, and relationships with neighbouring countries. However, the recommendations left unclear what role the NDA

Gedaref state into Eritrean territory, reportedly supported by Eritrean refugees opposed to the present Government.

[191] Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, Asmara and Hameshkoreb, 2005.

[192] OCHA Khartoum is currently engaged in an emergency planning exercise in case a major humanitarian crisis erupts as a result of renewed hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea or a Sudanese government attack on Hameshkoreb. Crisis Group interview, November 2005. This exercise, though useful, downplays the humanitarian needs already existing in government-controlled rural areas.

[193] Robert Zoellick, speech at University of Khartoum, 9 November 2005.

[194] The U.S. has warned Khartoum that the Beja Congress is recruiting in the suburbs of Port Sudan, near to the pipeline, and that the Government of National Unity should "solve the East peacefully or risk losing oil revenue". Crisis Group interviews with U.S. officials, November 2005.

[195] Crisis Group interview, 28 November 2005.

should have, if any, in the political process. Some of the recommendations, notably establishment of a Commission for the Development of Eastern Sudan, appear to have been taken up by Khartoum at the May 2005 Kassala conference organised under NCP auspices.

Subsequent mediation attempts by Concordis failed to get off the ground, though the organisation was responsible for the capacity-building workshop offered to the Eastern Front in Asmara in November 2005. Similar to the U.S., it was unclear what role the UK and other EU member states would have played if the Libyan initiative had taken off. The prevailing British attitude appears to be one of seeking "a quick, quiet, and cheap" settlement in the East rather than following the more elaborate CPA or Darfur models.[196] It is not likely, however, that real power or wealth sharing can be negotiated for the East unless key Western partners invest significant time, money and political credit in the endeavour.

G. AFRICAN UNION AND IGAD

The two organisations responsible for negotiating peace in other parts of Sudan have been noticeably absent from efforts to address the conflict in the East. IGAD, which facilitated negotiation of the CPA, has been silent. Its original mandate in Sudan, in its 1994 Declaration of Principles for resolution of the conflict, was limited to the problem of the South. The NCP was adamant about maintaining this limitation during the Naivasha negotiations, demanding that all discussions over the three areas of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains (Southern Kordofan) and Southern Blue Nile – which are in northern Sudan but were part of the SPLM's insurgency – take place under the auspices of the Kenyan government, separate from the IGAD talks on the South. IGAD is also poorly placed to deal with the East, because one if its member states, Eritrea, is involved, and there is a risk of renewed conflict between it and Ethiopia.

The AU, which is leading both the political negotiations for Darfur in Abuja and the international monitoring mission there, is overstretched and has barely expressed interest in eastern Sudan.[197] It turned down the Eastern Front's request to be included in the Abuja talks. The AU's lack of involvement in the East is likely due to its intense focus on Darfur. It was not heavily involved in the IGAD process, despite its observer status, and has not sought to play a major role in the implementation of the CPA.

H. TOWARDS AN INTERNATIONAL WORKPLAN

The past year demonstrated that half-hearted initiatives are not sufficient to achieve a comprehensive peace in eastern Sudan. At the start of 2006 the question remains how, when and where negotiations will take place. The Sudanese government wants as little and the Eastern Front as much international presence as possible, and the issue of a venue has, not coincidentally been a stumbling block. The Eastern Front would refuse locations likely acceptable to the government, such as Jedda or Dubai.[198] Its preference, Asmara, is a non-starter for Khartoum. Kenya may be a suitable for both parties, having successfully hosted both the IGAD peace talks and subsequent rounds of South-South dialogue. In addition to the venue, a roadmap for the talks should be discussed, with the first stage probably being negotiation of a provisional ceasefire to defuse tensions over control of Hameshkoreb, and subsequently discussion of power and wealth sharing, security arrangements and implementation modalities.

It is unclear how the international community would deal with the participation of the SLA and JEM, both of which, but particularly JEM, want to be present. One scenario – unified Darfur and Eastern talks – would be attractive in that it would provide a single forum in which to discuss marginalisation in northern Sudan but involvement of the Darfur insurgents is questionable from the point of view of their real motivations and commitment to the East. The Eastern Front refused to take part in the government/NDA talks in Cairo but it sent observers, and the NDA may ask for the same treatment. While it makes sense to link regional processes, a common forum may not be viable in the short time available to establish negotiations on the East. Nonetheless, a common framework for both processes should at least be established, based on the CPA's model for relations between the central government and a region. The mainstream DUP joined the Government of National Unity in November 2005 with three ministers, including a Beja, so it should be included in Khartoum's delegation.

The collapse of the Libyan initiative before talks even began has introduced a further element of confusion into a scenario already dominated by ambiguity and lack of commitment. Some diplomats in Khartoum were critical of the decision by the Eastern Front to reject UN mediation in the first place in favour of the Libyans as it

[196] Crisis Group interview, Khartoum, 2005.

[197] The AU did release a statement of "concern" after the Eastern Front attacked near Tokar in late June 2005 but this has been the extent of its engagement. "Fighting in east Sudan is cause for concern-AU", Agence France-Presse, 2 July 2005.

[198] Eastern Front leaders recall Brigadier Abdelaziz Khalid, ex-head of the Sudan Alliance Forces, was arrested in the Emirates on an Interpol warrant and extradited to Sudan in November 2004 and seem to fear they might be vulnerable to similar action.

would have placed negotiations under the auspices of Tripoli, which arguably lacked the technical prowess or specialised knowledge to structure talks on the basis of the CPA.[199] Moreover, as evidenced by the Free Lions-NCP agreement, the Libyans were probably looking for a quick, more informal and less comprehensive settlement between Khartoum and the Eastern Front and also between Khartoum and Asmara. It is widely assumed Eritrea leaned on the Eastern Front to accept the Libyan initiative but UNMIS also shares responsibility for not having engaged the Eastern Front more seriously after Pronk's initial offer. Indeed, after UNMIS failed to deliver, it is difficult to blame the insurgents for seeking an alternative mediator.

After the premature termination of the Libyan initiative, the warring parties and the international community are back at square one with time running out to prevent a conflagration in the East. The international partners will need to engage in the issue themselves, rather than passing off responsibility to neighbouring but more partisan countries or overburdened non-governmental organisations.

A first imperative is the opening of an eastern Sudan negotiating forum led by a full-time special envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General who is acceptable to the parties. Such a special envoy should serve as the lead mediator, liaise closely with UNMIS and coordinate with international and regional observers, especially the U.S., UK, Canada, Italy, Norway, EU, AU, Eritrea and Libya. Even before the forum establishes a plan and timetable for substantive negotiations, the special envoy could request UNMIS to broker a provisional ceasefire agreement between the NCP and the Eastern Front, with a stipulation for the SPLM to maintain a small force in Hameshkoreb and the other opposition-controlled areas to provide a buffer between the two warring parties so that its full withdrawal does not trigger a major confrontation. The substantive negotiations, based on the CPA framework, would then begin as soon as possible in Kenya or another suitable regional country.[200]

[199] Crisis Group interviews, Khartoum, November 2005.

[200] Every effort should be made at least to begin formal negotiations in January 2006.

V. CONCLUSION

There is a dangerous potential for a sharp escalation of the conflict in eastern Sudan early in 2006. A confrontation between the government and Eastern Front over the Hameshkoreb area could spark urban unrest, a massive government crackdown and perhaps the beginning of a larger conflict. Yet, there is also an opportunity for peace. As long as it still has forces in Hameshkoreb and as a partner in the new Government of National Unity, the SPLM sits in a unique position to help broker a deal on this front. It can use its presence in the East to avert conflict between the government and the Eastern Front over control of the territory and can use its position in government to push forward negotiations.

Moreover, the framework for a larger and sustainable peace process exists: the CPA. The East, like Darfur and the South, has been historically marginalised and underdeveloped. It has a legitimate claim on greater power and wealth sharing in a new federal arrangement. It also needs aid and investment to spur development and reverse abysmal humanitarian conditions. The modalities of an agreement need to be hammered out in a credible negotiating forum with international backing and involvement.

Both warring parties are in favour of negotiations. Though their different expectations, demands, and end-goals have contributed to delay peace talks, they have explicitly stated their desire to negotiate a settlement of the conflict. Conditions on the ground make a deal less complicated than in Darfur. Fighting has been low-level guerrilla warfare and has not completely devastated, polarised and militarised society. The rule of law has not broken down completely. The Eastern Front has greater internal coherence than the SLA in Darfur. The government or the Eastern Front has support from much of the population so that if they commit to a peace agreement, implementation should be relatively straightforward. Consequently, the risk of spoilers – those who have been excluded from the negotiating process and thus view it as illegitimate – is lower than in Darfur or the South. Of course, certain safeguards need to be put in place and post-agreement conferences would be required to ensure buy-in from all segments of Eastern society. Overall, however, the conditions in the East are conducive to a sustainable peace agreement.

The question is whether this opportunity will be seized by the Government of National Unity and its international partners. With the potential for renewed violence between Ethiopia and Eritrea, circumstances are shifting in Khartoum's favour. Asmara is making overtures, and the Eastern Front is losing its leverage. The international

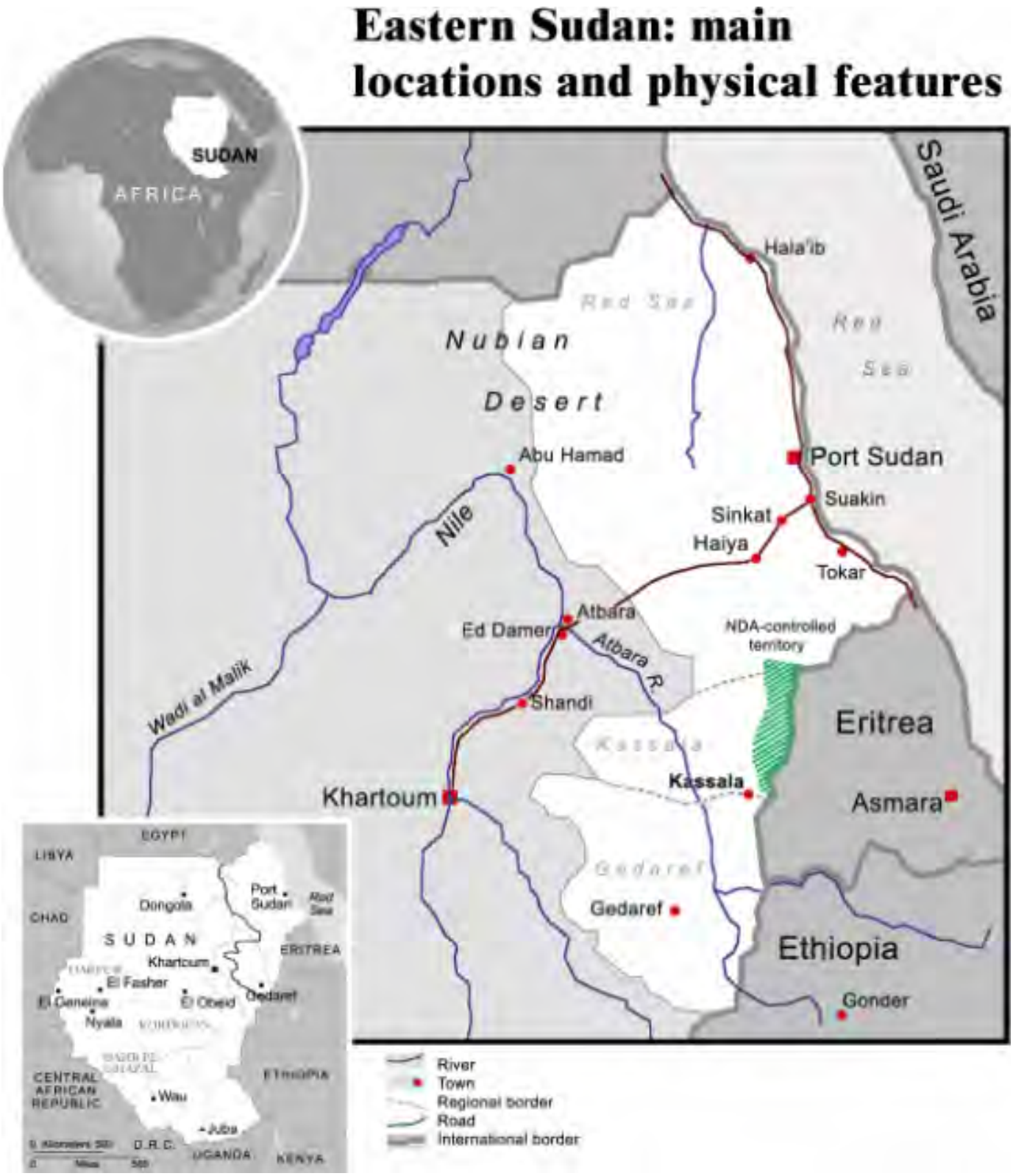
partners are preoccupied with Abuja and more concerned with preventing a war between

Ethiopia and Eritrea than investing their energies in forging a just peace in eastern Sudan. The collapse of the Libyan initiative and the absence of an alternative leaves the adversaries on the threshold of new conflict with no forum in which to negotiate. If Sudan's vicious cycle of violence is not to consume the East, a major effort is needed now to construct credible negotiations based on the CPA framework.

Nairobi/Brussels, 5 January 2006

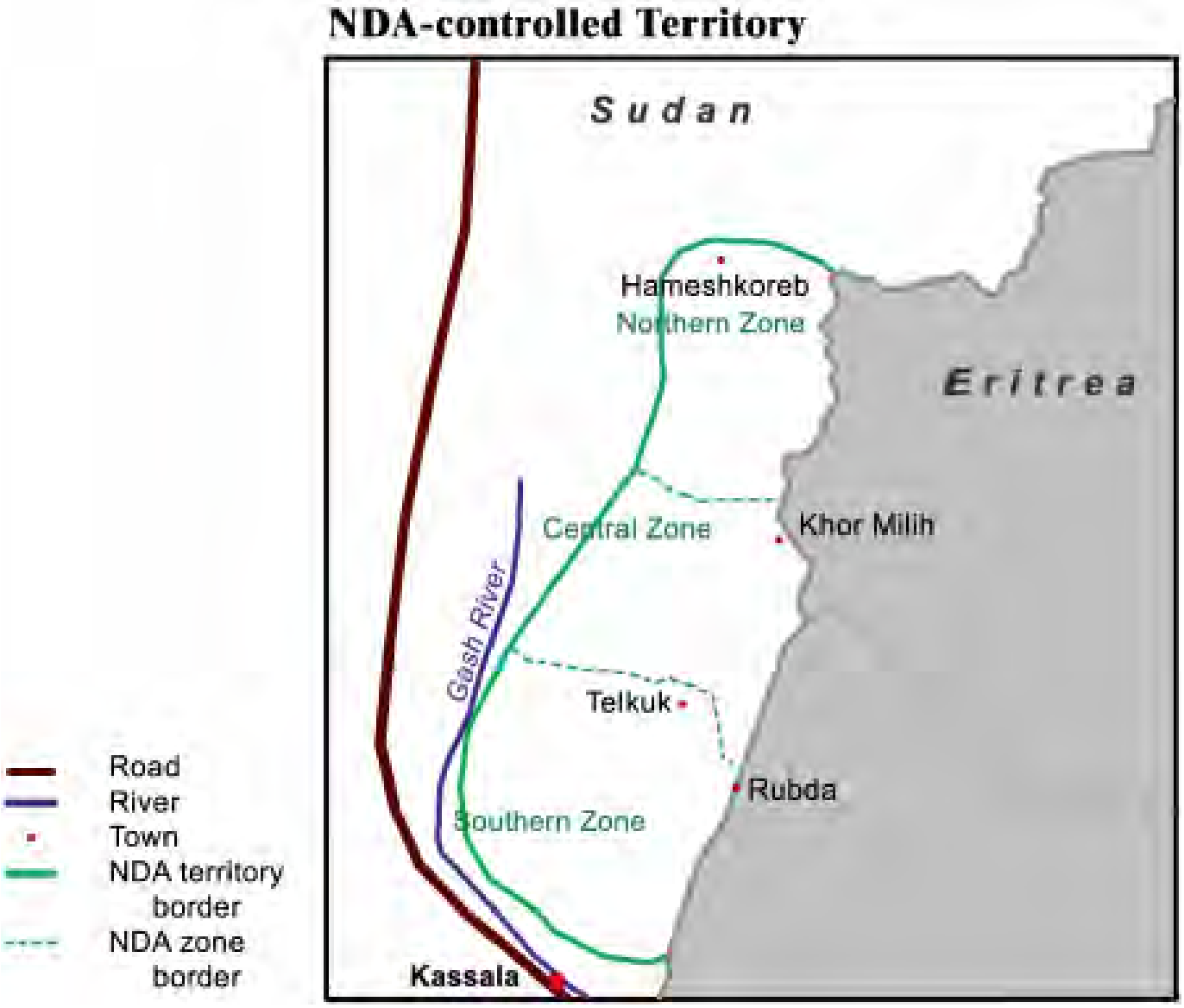
APPENDIX A

MAP OF EASTERN SUDAN



APPENDIX B

MAP OF NDA-CONTROLLED TERRITORY



APPENDIX C

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made available simultaneously on the website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

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January 2006

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