

Why a free Southern Sudan is Bad News for Darfur Foreign Policy Maggie Fick 24 November 2010

For

all intents and purposes, it looked like an act of war. Just over two months before Southern Sudan votes whether to secede, on Nov. 12, the central government in Khartoum flew two Antonov aircraft over the contested north-south border and began an aerial bombardment campaign. The bombs landed in disputed territory occupied by the Southern army, marking the first overt provocation since the 2005 Sudanese peace agreement. With an unidentified number of Southern Sudanese soldiers killed, this looked like the start of a new phase of the decades-old conflict between north and south -- a looming war that many in the international community dread.

Just a day after the attack, however, both north and south seemed willing to write off the attack as an accident, an unexpectedly hopeful sign. Unfortunately, though, the bombing has more to do with the fact that Sudan's north is once again taking the fight to Darfuri rebels, the latest chapter in one of the ugliest and most lopsided conflicts the world has seen (...)

(...) The bombardment of Sudan's militarized borderlands certainly looked like a show of force by Khartoum, a sign to the south of what might await should it incur the north's wrath. This is something Southern diplomats surely won't forget in the negotiations that are bound to follow the referendum (...)

(...) Meanwhile, the message from the United States is that getting to January's referendum is the only thing that matters. Sen. John Kerry's recent visit to Khartoum underlined this point. He offered to take the government off the state sponsors of terrorism list on the sole condition that north Sudan cooperate with the referendum vote, instead of making it conditional on cooperation in Darfur as it has been in the past.

So it's perhaps no surprise that the real impact of the airstrikes has less to do with north and south and far more to do with the other Sudanese conflict (...)

(...) When it comes to Darfur, Khartoum has less reason to behave than it does vis-à-vis the south. Kerry's message has the effect of essentially decoupling north-south issues from Darfur in U.S. diplomatic brokering with the central government. That's good news for Khartoum, and terrible news for the people of Darfur. Although Human Rights Watch reports that "Sudanese government forces have carried out a series of attacks on civilians since August 2010" in central Sudan, including past airstrikes, U.S. President Barack Obama's administration is giving a subtle green light for Khartoum to wage war in Darfur as long as it allows the Southern referendum to occur.

Unfortunately, it makes sense that Khartoum would escalate in one region while settling with another. Indeed, this has been its strategy for decades. Successive regimes in Khartoum have

managed to function and even thrive by exploiting Sudan's vast peripheral regions, using proxy groups like the Arab janjaweed to fight their war against the south (...)

(...) In the short term, we can expect more provocations, veiled threats, and tense moments like last the Nov. 12 bombardment, perhaps with less peaceful conclusions. In the long term, if Khartoum continues to exploit the world's distraction during the referendum to continue its quiet war in Darfur, there could be some ugly consequences come January -- not just for Darfur, but for the whole country.

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