



Humanitarian concerns and a harsh, undeveloped environment are amongst the greatest challenges for the EUFOR Mission.



Into Africa's Dead Heart

SIGNAL REPORTS FROM CHAD ON THE CHALLENGES FACING THE EUFOR MISSION.

BY Aoife Kavanagh

Jabal refugee camp stands in a dusty valley circled by low-lying hills on the outskirts of the oasis town of Goz Beida in Eastern Chad. Here, 110kms from the Darfur border, 15,000 refugees have taken shelter from the chaos created by a confusing web of warring factions. The sun beats down relentlessly and hoards of locusts gather every evening, a fluttering reminder of the desert conditions that prevail here. Banditry and lawlessness persist in the east of the country and the various splinter groups and rebel movements at play here are a baffling list of acronyms for any newcomer.

This volatile corner of sub-Saharan Africa is now home to around 400 Irish troops. A cold, hard look at this region, incorporating Darfur and Eastern Chad as well as the chaotic Central African Republic, reveals one of the most troubled and war-torn parts of the African continent. This is before you stop to consider the challenges posed by the heat, the desert-like conditions and the sheer scale of EUFOR's area of operations. Already this year, the region has been rocked by two rebel attacks; the first in February when Chadian rebels advanced towards the capital N'djamena, and the second in May with a bold assault by Darfurian rebels on the Sudanese capital Khartoum. Relations between Chad and Sudan have deteriorated as a result. While EUFOR's mandate does not reach into Darfur, events across that porous border will have a direct impact on the European deployment. While Darfur first hit the headlines as an unfolding humanitarian crisis in 2003, it is a conflict born of age-old disputes over land and grazing between nomadic Arabs and black 'African' farmers. Increasing desertification and drought caused tensions to heighten between the two groups in the 1980's.

In 2003 Darfurian rebels, frustrated by years of neglect by the Khartoum government, launched an attack on a military base in the town of El Geneina in West Darfur. The government's response was brutal and swift and the real spark to the flame which provoked the crisis in Darfur. As well as carrying out air attacks on countless villages across the

region, the Sudanese government enlisted the services of nomadic Arabs, providing them with arms to use against their fellow countrymen. These loose Arab groupings have now become known as the 'Janjaweed' or 'Devils on Horseback'. The subsequent deaths of up to 300,000 people and the displacement of millions more in the region are by now well documented.

While there is agreement in principle that 26,000 UN troops will be deployed to the Darfur/Chad region, there are few people in Khartoum or at United Nations Headquarters in New York willing to stake their reputations on a full deployment, even by the end of next year. At best, the current force of around 10,000 troops is engaging in damage limitation. Darfur is huge and the job of protecting an estimated 2.5 million internally displaced people would be difficult for a fully deployed force, not to mention one less than half the strength of that. The recent attack by Darfur rebels from the Justice and Equality Movement, or JEM, has further complicated the picture. JEM is widely believed to be funded by the Chadian government of President Idriss Deby and, while it was unlikely JEM was ever going to succeed in its stated aim of overthrowing the central government, the attack has further damaged any prospect of peace talks between the rebels and the government. In fact, it may simply have played into the hands of the government who, following the United Nations condemnation of the JEM attack, will probably feel justified in continuing its bombing campaign in Darfur. Humanitarian organisations on both sides of the Chad/Sudan border are on alert for



Left: President of Chad, Idriss Déby

further influxes of innocent civilians caught in the crossfire.

The scale of the refugee and internally displaced crisis in Eastern Chad may pale in comparison to that of Darfur, but the security situation there is no less fluid and the EUFOR mission presents a real challenge both to the operation commander of the mission, Lieutenant General Pat Nash, and to the troops on the ground.

According to one analyst, Alex de Waal, author of 'Darfur, A Short History of a Long War', this is simply a very dangerous mission. "Everybody in Chad sees this as a pro-Deby force, propping up a government that is deeply unpopular", he said, referring to Chadian President Idriss Deby. Certainly, a quick survey of the villages surrounding the remote town of Guereda in Eastern Chad reveals a population that is largely in the dark about why European peacekeepers are in the country. The few villagers who did have an opinion about the EU peacekeeping force believed they were there 'to help the French'. France, of course, has a long and complicated colonial history in Chad and maintains a strong military presence in the country. Certainly, as far as the local population goes, concerns about this force not being seen as completely neutral in the complex web of Chadian politics appear well founded.

De Waal's concerns about the wisdom of this EU deployment go further. He believes that the Chadian president would have no qualms about using the presence of

European troops to his advantage. "President Deby.....is quite capable of staging incidents that would drag them (the troops) in," he says, adding, however, that the main rebel groups in Chad would "want to avoid any run-ins" with the EU forces. The rebel groups in Chad are certainly aware of the military superiority of EUFOR. As one military source based in the region said. "This deployment is very well organised and logistically sustained. I believe the rebel groups are in for a shock". Irish troops got a quick lesson in the volatility of the region in February, as they were literally en route to Dublin airport to begin their deployment. The troops returned to their barracks as news emerged of a rebel assault on N'djamena. The rebels were swiftly pushed back, mostly due to the intervention of French troops, along with help from JEM rebels.

That attack was a clear example of the ongoing conflict between the governments of Chad and Sudan who are fond of settling their differences by sponsoring rebel groups in each other's territories. Finally, in May, diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed when the same Darfur rebel group, JEM, launched its own attack on Khartoum. Sudan immediately pointed the finger of blame at Chadian President Idriss Deby and promised to avenge the rebel attack. In May, I witnessed the build-up of Chadian army troops in the key town of Abeche in Eastern Chad, as the government prepared for a possible repeat of the rebel assault of February. This is the environment EUFOR troops are now operating in and it's one where the security situation changes almost on a weekly basis.

Despite all this criss-crossing of rebel activity, the biggest threat to the security of EUFOR and Irish troops comes from banditry. For several years now UN and non-governmental organisations have been the victims of car-jackings and so called 'road-cutters' in Eastern Chad. Countless numbers of vehicles have been stolen and in one of the most recent attacks



the Country Director of the UK-based 'Save The Children' aid agency was shot dead by bandits during an attack on an aid convoy.

Humanitarian organisations operating in Eastern Chad have welcomed the deployment of 4,300 troops to the region. At the very least they believe it keeps the focus on the ongoing political and military instability there. However they echo concerns that a mission comprised predominantly of French troops won't necessarily be perceived as a neutral one. "This remains a very volatile and uncertain environment," said Ros O'Sullivan of the Irish aid agency Concern, who has worked in this region, on-and-off, for the past two years. Concern's focus in this area is the 180,000 Chadians who have sought the safety of humanitarian camps because of rebel and militia activity in the area. "The deployment of an EU force certainly contributes to an air of stabilisation in the region, and should make it easier for us to do our work", he said. However aid agencies appreciate that, while the troop deployment will help secure humanitarian corridors, its priority is the protection of the civilian population. He added that, despite the arrival of European troops, it is

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unlikely Concern would be removing the strict nightly security curfew it imposes on its staff who work in the area anytime soon.

What would help the EU force, of course, is an effective peacekeeping deployment on the other side of the border in Sudan. But the European deployment is a shining example of good military planning compared to what is happening in Darfur, where political and military interests are clashing wildly. The time frame for the deployment of a massive UN force there is almost as fluid as the region's security situation. As schedules change and timetables are re-written, rebel groups continue to splinter and bicker and challenge each other for territorial control. There is, not surprisingly a complete lack of trust between the rebel factions and the Sudanese government. And in the middle of all of this are millions of innocent Darfurians, who pray for security and dream of returning home some day.

Military analysts say that the first stage of preparations for troop deployment to



**Top: Irish advance troops prepare to leave Chad.
Below: French Mirage jets in Chad,
not part of EUFOR forces.
Right: A Chadian family near an IDP camp.**



Darfur have been so poor that the entire mission is being compromised. Negotiations between the United Nations and the African Union (the Sudanese government has said it will only accept African troops as part of the UN mission to Darfur) set out a three-phase approach to the deployment. A crucial element was the role of 'military enablers' to prepare the ground for the arrival of the bulk of the 26,000-strong force.

But preparations have fallen well short of expectations. Critically, there is still a huge amount of horse-trading going on over equipment and infrastructure and the mission is a long way off being fully equipped. In an area as vast as Darfur, helicopters with lift and attack capacity are vital, particularly if troops are to react to isolated outbreaks of violence. However, few first world countries are willing to commit that kind of equipment to the mission. Ironically, the demands of the EU force deploying to Chad have had a knock-on effect on the Darfur operation.

While the intense focus on the humanitarian situation in Darfur has forced politicians, finally, to act, their desire to see a speedy 'resolution' to the conflict is impacting on military preparations. At its current pace, though, observers say they cannot see the UN operation in Darfur being fully functional before the end of 2009, or perhaps even beyond that. There are, of course, plenty of risks attached to rushing the job. "To do nothing is not an option", said the same military source, "But reinforcing failure by putting a force on the ground, re-hatting them with blue berets and little else ignores the effect this will have on the armed groups". The fear is that rebels and government sponsored militias in Darfur will see no real difference between the strength and firepower of the new UN-mandated mission and the under-resourced African Union force that has failed so miserably to have an impact on the security situation in Darfur. Not to mention the impact it might have across the border in Chad.

To truly 'lock down' the Chad/Sudan border, both the EU force and the UN operation should have deployed simultaneously. The fact that this didn't happen makes the job of EU - and of course of Irish troops - that little bit more difficult. The success or failure of peace initiatives both in Sudan and in Chad will have a huge bearing on the intensity and the nature of

the mission facing EU and UN troops over the next twelve months. Unfortunately, and this applies particularly to Darfur, the track record of all the various players involved would suggest that hopes for lasting peace in this region are at best fifty-fifty. The biggest concern for international troops in the months to come will be what kind of peace, if any, there will be to enforce.

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Refugees clamour for food and displaced children on the move in Chad.