Chad

Roots of the Crisis

Chad, a vast landlocked nation rich in oil and uranium, has faced severe and violent internal turmoil since it gained independence from France in 1960. In Chad, politics and armed conflict are synonymous. The country's post-colonial history has been marked by a long series of coups, and the country has not seen a peaceful transition of power since independence. The Chadian people live at the mercy of their leaders, without freedom to decide how their country is governed. Today, the conflict in Darfur and Chad's internal political crisis keep the country locked in a continuing cycle of conflict that poses significant risks to the stability of the wider region.

North-South tensions

Like many of its neighbors across the Sahel belt—which stretches from the arid Maghreb region of North Africa into tropical Central and West Africa—Chad has historically been divided between an Arab-influenced north and a black "African" south. During the French colonial period, Chad's southern region was the breadbasket of the region, producing cotton and agricultural goods. Southerners won the favor of the French, and political control of the country at independence.

Immediately following independence in 1960, French-appointed President Francois Tombalbaye faced threats from political rivals and quickly established an autocratic government. A Christian from southern Chad, Tombalbaye alienated Muslim northerners, who launched a violent opposition against the government. Tombalbaye retaliated by declaring a state of emergency and then dissolving the National Assembly in response to rioting by the opposition. In 1966, the northern revolt, led by the Chadian National Liberation Front, began a full-fledged war against the Tombalbaye regime. In the early 1970s, French troops intervened to quell the northern revolt, but in 1975, Tombalbaye was deposed in a coup and replaced by another southern Christian, Felix Malloum.

Before President Tombalbaye was deposed, the leader of Libya, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, crossed the Libya-Chad border and occupied a swath of uranium-rich land called the Aouzou strip. This incident not only marked the beginning of Libya's ongoing role in Chad, but also underscored Colonel Gaddafi's desire for Arab-domination in the Sahel region.

Human rights abuses under Habré

Chad's largely nomadic northern population suffered continued grievances under President Malloum. In 1979, Muslim northerner Goukouni Oueddei forced President Mallou out of power with support from Libya. However another northerner and a former prime minster,

Hissène Habre, led an "Army of the North" against Oueddei's government and fought Libyan troops sent by Colonel Gaddafi. In 1982, Habré's troops took the capital of N'Djamena, and President Habré began his repressive rule of Chad.

Habré was a brutal dictator who many called an "African Pinochet." His regime allegedly carried out widespread torture and is responsible for as many as 40,000 politically-motivated killings. Cold war interests and escalating tensions between Libya and Chad in the 1980s led the U.S. to back Habré. This angered France, who maintained a strong interest in its former colonies. After Habré's government was toppled in 1990, he fled to Senegal, where he has lived in exile for the past eighteen years. He currently awaits trial for torture and crimes against humanity in an African Union court in Dakar, but his trial has been delayed by budget problems and political wrangling.

President Déby and the Chad-Sudan proxy war

Idriss Déby Itno, the current president of Chad, is from the Zaghawa ethnic group, a semi-nomadic minority group whose population straddles the Chad-Sudan border. Déby's links to the Zaghawa have played a significant role in both his rise to power and the current crisis in the Chad-Sudan border region. In the late 1980s, Déby, one of Habré's former military commanders, crossed the porous eastern Chadian border to Darfur, where he was greeted warmly by Sudanese Islamists and his Zaghawa kinsmen, both of whom had an interest in toppling Habré's western-friendly regime. The Sudanese government armed and trained Déby and his men in Darfur. In late 1990, Deby made a trek across the Chadian desert in a convoy of 300 battle-ready Toyota pickups, and took the capital from President Habré.

This cross-border collaboration fomented a volatile and violent relationship between Chad and Sudan, which has been a frequent subtext of the crisis in Darfur. The roots of the current proxy war can be traced to 2003, when the Sudanese government realized that members of Déby's Zaghawa clan were arming Sudanese Zaghawa rebels in Darfur. Fearing that Chad's involvement would strengthen Darfur's growing armed opposition, the Sudanese government began support-ing rebel factions seeking regime change in Chad. Halfhearted international efforts to respond to the disputes between Chad and Sudan have been largely ineffectual. The most recent attempt at negotiations, the March 2008 Dakar Agreement, was violated in a matter of weeks.

President Déby is Chad's longest-serving leader, and he has effectively maintained his hold on power despite numerous attempts by armed groups to topple him. In the past three years, there have been three coup attempts on the capital, and in early 2008, rebels nearly made it to Déby's doorstep before being pushed back with the assistance of French forces, stationed in Chad as part of a permanent force called Operation Epervier. During each coup attempt, thousands of Chadians were forced to flee to neighboring Cameroon and Nigeria.

Following the tradition of his predecessor Habré, Déby's tenure has been characterized by a willingness to brutally crack down on political opponents, and to silence any challengers. After the failure of a World Bank oil pipeline project that included stipulations that some portion of oil revenues be spent on public services, Déby appears intent to continue efforts to protect himself and his cronies by buying weapons rather than increasing living standards for Chad's citizens.

The internal political crisis

The chronic instability plaguing Chad is frequently—and inaccurately—characterized principally as "spill-over" from the Darfur conflict. While there is no doubt that the Chad-Sudan proxy war has put Chad's instability in sharper focus, the most recent rebellion inside Chad is the latest chapter in a decades-long internal power struggle. Despite its claims that all of the country's problems emanate from Khartoum, the Chadian government is among the world's most corrupt and predatory, and its citizens are among the most poor and disenfranchised.

The Chadian National Army is rife with child soldiers, mainly boys who were forcibly recruited during the army's efforts to put down rebels backed by Sudan. Despite UN-sponsored child demobilization efforts, child soldiers remain on the front lines, and the army is accused of committing abuses against civilian populations accused of supporting the rebels.

Rampant banditry and violence in eastern Chad poses a threat to some 500,000 displaced persons, refugees, and conflict-affected civilians. The international community has attempted to manage the Chad-Sudan proxy war and contain the insecurity through a variety of means, the most visible of which was the 2007 deployment of a 3,300 strong European Union force (known as EUFOR) and a United Nations Mission in the Central African Republic and Chad (known by its French acronym MINURCAT). However, diplomatic efforts to resolve the political crisis in Chad remain weak, and attempts to address the issues of rule of law and government have been stymied by the Déby regime.

The future of Chad is unpredictable, and the end of every rainy season brings the possibility of yet another coup attempt on the capital. The country remains unstable and faces persistent threats from within and outside of its borders. If Chad's political system continues to be controlled through the barrel of a gun, the east will continue to be a theater for proxy conflict with Sudan and a haven for bandits, and the Chadian people will continue to suffer.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.

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