

Egypt restores diplomatic ties with Sudan in bid for peace

by Linda de Hoyos

The government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak decided to fully restore diplomatic relations with Sudan, its key neighbor to the south, after a meeting between President Mubarak and Sudan President Omar al-Bashir in Cairo on Dec. 23. It is the first visit of the Sudanese head of state to Egypt since 1993. The decision to restore relations is part of an initiative by Egypt to bring about a peace that will end the 16-year-long war in southern Sudan, and to bring about a reconciliation between the Sudan government and the armed opposition in northern Sudan.

The joint communiqué released by the countries on Dec. 23 specifically cited their commitment to “concerted national, regional, and international efforts for the realization of a comprehensive political solution that will be based on the unity of Sudan and the safety of its territories”—a rejection of the secessionist efforts of John Garang and the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) in southern Sudan. Egypt has long stated its position that any secession from Sudan is a threat to its national security.

The two countries further committed themselves to the “implementation of a number of giant strategic projects that would achieve food security for the two brotherly countries and the surplus in their production [that] would contribute in the Arab and African food security.” This is a crucial point, because Egypt is forced by lack of water to import most of its foodgrains. The projects concern the usage of the waters of the Nile that would ensure food security for both countries. The Jonglei Canal, for example, which spans the breadth of the Sud swamp in southern Sudan, would amplify the Nile waters by 15%.

The two Presidents also committed themselves to the gradual lifting of restrictions on the movement of goods and people “in a way that would lead to the creation of a common market.” The communiqué further “underlined” the backing of the two countries to “efforts exerted for the realization of peace in the Middle East,” and expressed their concern about conflicts in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes.

Constitutional crisis in Sudan

The restoration of ties between Egypt and Sudan comes 11 days after President Bashir took emergency action in Su-

dan to end what he called a “dual leadership” in Sudan between his Presidency and the Speaker of the National Assembly, Dr. Hassan al-Turabi. Turabi, considered the intellectual godfather of the Islamist movement that came to power in Sudan in 1989, is also the secretary general of the ruling party, formerly the National Salvation Front, and now called the National Congress, of which Bashir is chairman. The President on Dec. 12 dissolved the National Assembly, and proclaimed emergency rule, which he said would last three months.

Since then, there have been successful efforts to bring about a reconciliation between the government and the National Congress factions that follow Turabi, in order to avoid the constitutional confrontation from turning into violence on the streets between the two groups.

Speculation has been rife in the Western press that the reduction of the powers of Dr. Turabi would result in a de-emphasis in Sudan on the Islamist movement that has backed the National Salvation Front. Diplomatic sources indicate that this may be a trend in Sudan over the coming period, a view further indicated by statements in Cairo by President Bashir that national unity, not the unity of Islam in the *ummah*, as Dr. Turabi has called for, must be Sudan’s first priority. According to the Egyptian paper *al-Gomhuria*, President Bashir asked, in speaking with the press, “How can a country that cannot realize its national unity and security of its territories go beyond its borders in search of [Islamic] unity of nations?”

In the meantime, Egypt, Libya, the Arab League, the United Arab Emirates, and others, have come forward to strongly back President Bashir. Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa said that Egypt supported Bashir’s measures inside Sudan because a “challenge to the authority of the Sudanese Presidency” had brought Sudan to the “brink of major confrontations.” Speaking to the press on Dec. 16, Foreign Minister Moussa had issued Egypt’s full backing to President Bashir: “Egypt will never allow Sudan to sink. We consider what has happened,” referring to Bashir’s emergency measures, “to be nationalist measures, policies, and efforts to save Sudan, which we wholly support.” Later, after the meeting between Presidents Bashir and Mubarak, Foreign

Minister Moussa was even more forthright: "Sudan has one leader and that is General Bashir," he told reporters.

In the week before he met with President Bashir in Cairo, President Mubarak toured the Persian Gulf states of Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to build support for Bashir in the Arab world.

President Bashir's position was further bolstered by a "mini-summit" held in Tripoli, Libya, on Dec. 22, called by Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi, which brought together President Laurent Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, and Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, along with President Bashir. Sudan is at odds currently with both Uganda and Eritrea.

Reporting on the day-long conference, President Qaddafi stated, "We all at this mini-summit are determined to support our brother President Omar al-Bashir. Even those who have had disagreements with him took the initiative to telephone him before arriving in Tripoli to express their support, because he protects the unity of Sudan and saves Sudan. We want to get the Sudanese, south and north, to abandon arms, shake hands, and build a new Sudan," he said. The week before, Egyptian President Mubarak had visited Tripoli, meeting with President Qaddafi, with whom he is coordinating peace efforts for the entire region, especially Sudan.

On Dec. 8, only days before the constitutional crisis came to a head in Sudan, President Bashir had met with Ugandan President Museveni in Nairobi, Kenya, in a summit mediated at their invitation by former American President Jimmy Carter. Presidents Bashir and Museveni had signed an agreement to withdraw support from any rebels against their neighbors, which in the case of Uganda would mean the expulsion of Garang's SPLA from Uganda. While the agreement is very difficult to implement, given U.S. State Department pressure on Uganda to provide assistance and safe haven to Garang, the summit opened up a channel of communications between the two governments.

Another notch down for London

The Egyptian decision to return its ambassador to Khartoum, Sudan's capital, is another nail in the coffin of the regional coalition that had been patched together in the mid-1990s by London with the aid of U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Susan Rice, to carry out a war to bring down the Sudan government. Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Uganda were the key military players against Sudan in support of Garang's SPLA. Egypt was pulled into the operation in July 1995 with the assassination attempt on President Mubarak in Ethiopia, which was blamed on the Sudan government, a charge that led to United Nations sanctions against Sudan. Egypt broke relations with Sudan, and Cairo became one of the bases for the National Democratic Alliance, the coalition of armed opposition to Sudan cobbled together by Baroness Caroline Cox, Deputy Speaker of the British House

of Lords and a leader of the so-called Christian Solidarity International.

Despite the support of this Western-backed regional coalition, Garang et al. made no substantial military progress against Sudan. However, the continuation of the war brought death to hundreds of thousands through famine and lack of cultivation, and caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands more. Further, continuation of the war has brought about a process of social and political disintegration of the south, which threatens to turn southern Sudan into a land of lawless warlords, similar to Somalia. This condition constitutes a direct threat to Sudan's neighbors, including Egypt, whose very survival is dependent on the waters of the Nile. After the 1997-98 offensive against the Sudan government failed again, Egypt in 1999 has taken actions to bring about reconciliation among all of Sudan's warring parties. This was marked in July by the return to Sudan of former Sudanese President Jaafar Numeiry, who had been in exile in Egypt since his overthrow in 1985 in a military coup.

Egypt's initiatives have brought Cairo into collision with Washington. Secretary of State Albright used her tour of Africa and her meeting with Garang in Nairobi in late October, to rev up a new crusade to "bring down the Khartoum government," as her premier puppet, Garang, stated his intentions in a summit of the Sudanese opposition in Kampala, Uganda, on Dec. 9. While Egypt, in concert with Libya, has been working to bring the Sudan government into serious and comprehensive talks with the opposition National Democratic Alliance, Albright publicly rejected the Egyptian initiative during her October trip, stating that the U.S.-funded Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD), based in Kenya, is the only venue for negotiations. This was followed by the State Department securing President Clinton's signature on a bill on Nov. 29 that would authorize the United States to directly supply the SPLA with "food" using U.S. transport planes, a plan designed to instigate direct military confrontation with Sudan.

Since the territorial unity of Sudan is an issue of vital national security for Egypt, Albright's categorical rejection of Egypt's initiative caused grave concern in Cairo. Egypt has proceeded with its peace initiative, and is now publicly working to mediate between the Sudan government and all the opposing armed parties, including Garang.

In regards to Washington, Egyptian Foreign Minister Moussa has said that "the U.S. position on the Sudan is developing." He described recent communications with Washington as "positive," and said that he had been assured that the United States is not working toward the partition of Sudan, and that Washington is "beginning to understand" the Egyptian-Libyan initiative for peace in the region.

It may also be hoped that saner heads in Washington would understand the obvious: Egypt's success in bringing about peace in Sudan would aid the United States' efforts in bringing about a comprehensive peace for the Middle East.