

CHAD: In the line of fire

While the world's eyes focus at the troubled Darfur region, the violent conflict in its nearest neighbour, Chad, remains virtually invisible to the West. YASMINE FATHY writes.

A country that is sandwiched between two of the world's most violent conflicts is destined to be in trouble. With the Darfur battle raging on its Eastern border and the violence of the Central African Republic (CAR) spilling into its southern region, the people of Chad often find themselves trapped in the line of fire.

These two conflicts are not the only problems. For years, ongoing confrontations between government forces and rebels attempting to overthrow Chad's current President Idriss Deby have left many Chadians either dead or displaced.

Last February rebel troops reached Chad's capital N'Djamena, where fighting led to 160 dead and 1,000 wounded. This was followed by another attack on government troops in April. For the people of Chad, this was just another day of the usual violence.

"Chad has suffered from internal problems, and the people have lost families, some have emigrated, some were orphaned," says Saleh, (last names have not been used to protect interviewees' identity) a Chadian who has been living in Sudan for three years.

The leading party President, Idris Deby from the Zaghawa tribe, has been ruling the country with an iron fist since he seized power in 1990. While many political parties are active, Deby's Patriotic Salvation Movement dominates the political sphere.

For years, disgruntled rebels from other ethnic groups, and even some from his own, have attempted to overthrow him. Coup attempt after coup attempt have been executed, but he still remains in power. With Chad's history, though, rebels are not likely to give up any time soon.

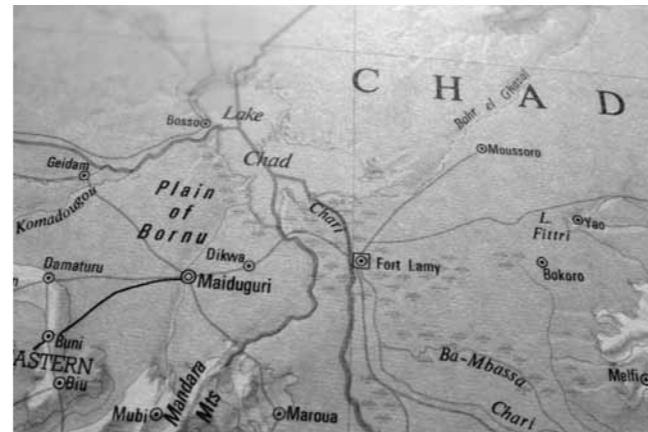
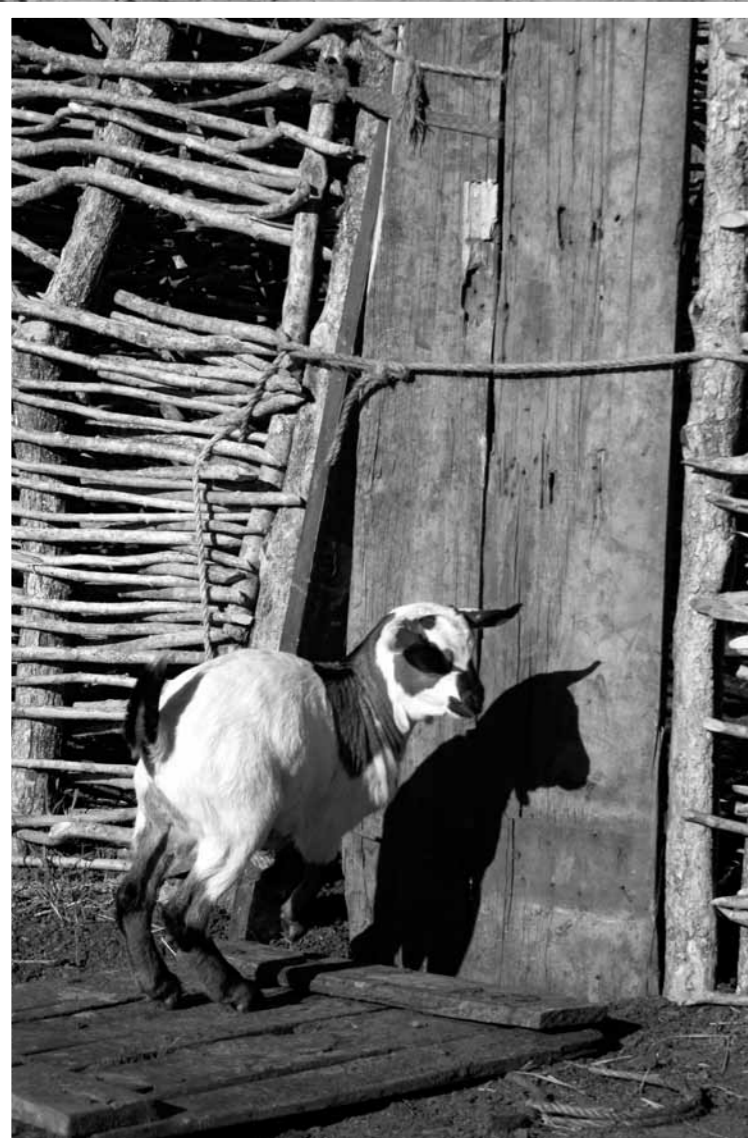
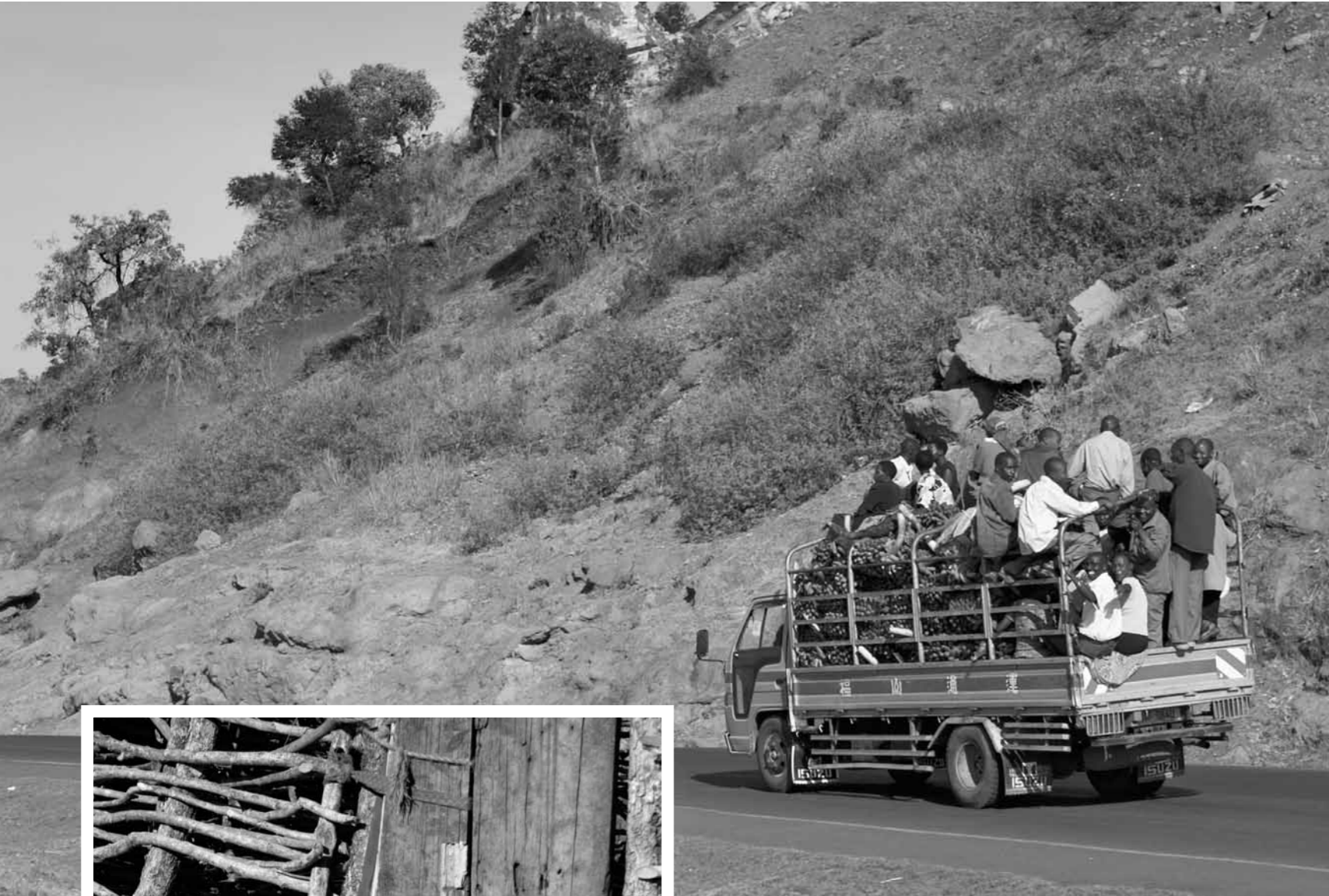
"The leading group controls everything. They are destroying the country, making agreements with other countries which are not understood by the nation,"

The Republic of Chad is a landlocked country in Central Africa, which is bordered by Libya to the north, Sudan to the east, the CAR to the south, and Cameroon and Nigeria to the southwest. The country is named after Lake Chad, which is the largest wetland in Africa. It is the fifth largest country in Africa but has only 10 million inhabitants. There are more than 200 ethnic and linguistic groups living in Chad, with French and Arabic being the two main languages. People practice different faiths such as Islam, Christianity and Animism. Chad's environment is so harsh that it is often dubbed the 'Dead Heart of Africa,' because it is far from the sea, and has a desert climate.

The 2007/2008 Human Development Index ranked Chad at 170 out of 177 countries. Chad's population has an average life expectancy of 50.4 years and almost one third of the population is not expected to live past the age of 40. Chad has a literacy rate of 25.7 per cent and only \$1,427 GDP per capita. According to the 2004 Human Poverty Index, it was ranked 108th among the 108 developing countries for which the index was calculated.

In 1920, France conquered the country and made it part of French Equatorial Africa. After 40 years of brutal French rule, Chad gained its independence in 1960 under the leadership of François Tombalbaye, a member of the Sara ethnic group which dominated the South. If the Chadian people hoped for some stability, they didn't get it.

Discontent with Tombalbaye's policies



in the Muslim North led to Chad's first civil war, which lasted from 1979-1982. Tombalbaye was finally overthrown by Hissene Habre from the Gorane ethnic group. This conflict would set the pattern for years to come. Rebels from one ethnic group, unhappy with the ruling group, have staged coup attempts and waged wars in order to gain power.

The Habre era would not prove to be any better for the long-suffering Chadians. By the end of his eight-year presidency Habre had ordered tens of thousands of Chadians either to death or to be tortured before he was overthrown by President Deby. Habre is currently awaiting trial on international criminal charges.

After serving for two terms, President Deby successfully held a referendum that allowed him to eliminate the two-term constitutional limit. He ran for presidency again in 2006, which angered the opposition.

While most of Chad's population relies on subsistence farming and raising livestock, in 2003 an attempt at oil exploitation began with the completion of a pipeline to Cameroon, financed by the World Bank. However, President Deby used a state of emergency decree to suspend Chad's obligation to devote 80 per cent of its oil revenue to poverty reduction measures, instead redirecting it to military use. A new memorandum was signed in July 2006, in which the government of Chad committed to using 70 per cent of oil revenue on development.

"Chad was supposed to be different. The oil money was supposed to help the poor, but we're not seeing that," said Massalbaye Tenebaye, president of Chad's Human Rights Commission in 2006.

The conflict with Sudan

Sudan and Chad share many of the same ethnic groups. A borderline was drawn by the Europeans in the 19th century, but this is still meaningless to many of the inhabitants of both countries.

"Historically [people] have moved

across that border for thousands of years," explains Noah Bassil, a member of the African Studies Association of Australia and the Pacific.

The irrelevance of the border, and the fact that the people share the same ethnic makeup, has meant disaster for both countries. "The conflict among one or another kin group, means the ethnic kin on the other side of the border are drawn into it," explains Bassil.

There's no doubt the Darfur crisis gets the most media attention. Since 2003, the whole world has been watching on television the conflict between government backed Janjaweed militias and the African tribes of Darfur. But while many people see the current Chad crisis as an extension of the Darfurian conflict, it is actually the other way around.

"Historically it was the outbreak of the civil war in Chad in the mid 1960s that over time precipitated and fed into division in Darfur," says Bassil.

President Deby initially supported the Sudanese government and refused to help his fellow Zaghawas (fighting against the Janjaweed on the other side of the border in Darfur), leading to a 2004 coup attempt initiated by the Zaghawa members of the Deby's government.

In 2005, members of Deby's snubbed Zaghawas regrouped in Darfur under Le Socle pour le Changement, l'Unité et la Démocratie (Platform for Change, Unity and Democracy, SCUD). Then another rebel group called the Rally for Democracy and Freedom, (RDL) and eight other Chadian anti-government rebel groups formed the Single Front for Democratic Change in Chad, (FUCD), under the leadership of Mahamat Nour Abdelkerim. FUCD was supported by the Sudanese government and Janjaweed militias, in retaliation for the support Deby's Zaghawas had initially provided to Sudanese rebel groups.

In December the Chadian RDL attacked the border town of Adre, but was successfully repelled by Chadian troops. The Chad government accused the Sudanese government of backing

the RDL assault, and declared a "state of belligerence" with Sudan.

In retaliation, and in order to protect its border, the Chad government made alliances with Darfurian rebel groups. Despite this, Sudan and Chad signed the Tripoli agreement in February 2006, which was brokered by Libya's leader Muammar al-Qaddafi. Under the terms of the agreement the two nations vowed to stop arming each other's opposition. "So we have here an almost complete tapestry of interconnected and inter-related interests, motives and conflicts. To extract them and try and understand them separately is impossible," Bassil says.

Just one month later, in March 2006, SCUD, made-up of President Deby's relatives, tried to assassinate him by shooting at his aircraft. In mid-April, a FUCD convoy reached the capital of Chad, N'Djamena, to accuse President Deby of backing the FUCD attack. The result: 291 people died in the fighting.

According to a human rights report serious fighting between elements of the FUCD took place in October 2007. "The fighting was said to have been precipitated by the unwillingness of the FUCD elements to disarm and integrate into the army, as provided for in the peace agreement. FUCD leader Abdelkerim urged these FUCD elements to accept integration into the army," the report says.

"There are many political problems which cause the current situation," says Fathy, a member of FUCD. "We don't have ethnic, tribal, or religious problems, what we have is a political problem. That is why if President Deby wanted to open dialogue with the Chad opposition, we would welcome this very much, but he refuses this completely," Fathy insists. "If the Deby's Zaghawas were to be defeated by the Sudanese government, the risk is that his own government might fall as well, so he has a great deal of interest, of strong motives to arm the Zaghawa to continue the fight," says Bassil. "And vice versa, groups in Chad are used as proxies for the Sudanese government interest in the region as well."

Humanitarian devastation

In the meantime the people of Chad are trapped in the middle. The conflict is mostly playing out on the troubled 600 km stretch between Chad and Sudan where the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) operates 12 refugee camps.

According to a spokesperson of the Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), Chad now plays host to 240,000 refugees from Darfur, 50,000 from the CAR, in addition to the 180,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs). This is too much for a country that is already struggling.

For the people of Chad, however, the conflict is more real than ever. With every attack, they are forced to leave their homes again and again. In one incident in 2006, MSF reported that the camp of Koloye, in the troubled Eastern border was attacked, looted, and emptied of its inhabitants. The 5,000 displaced Chadians who were living in the Koleye camp went missing along with 37 MSF staff members.

The armed opposition however denies any responsibility for the attacks.

"The attacks that are happening among the refugees are not from the opposition. This is from the Deby presidency," says Fathy *. "It wants instability inside the camps, to cause internal problems with Chadian tribes. Then they blame it on the opposition."

Often the attacks are so brutal that the Chadians are forced to seek refuge in the most unlikely place – Darfur.

The infamous Janjaweed do not limit their atrocities to Darfur either. From as early as 2003, aid organisations have been reporting military incursions by the Janjaweed in Chad. Human Rights Watch reported seven military incursions in Chad that included looting, killing and stealing cattle from the already hungry Chadians. Such bloody attacks are systematically administered and continued to the present day. "We urge authorities in Chad and Sudan to reinforce security in border regions to prevent further attacks and

displacement, and call for more international engagement in dealing with the very serious issue of spreading instability and insecurity," UNHCR spokesman Ron Redmond said in 2006.

Life in the refugee camps is hard, even without the Janjaweed attacks. In Herz's report, he describes the camp as "an almost endless collection of tents that have taken on a uniform brownish colour from the sand of the desert, becoming virtually indistinguishable from the identical brown of the ground, all merging into a vast brown mass. The individual tents are usually set up in a kind of allotment that also includes an open fireplace for preparing food, storage space for firewood, and sometimes a resting place for a goat which is surrounded by a makeshift fence, made of twigs, weeds, or various collected building materials."

With overcrowding, limited resources, and lack of funds, the Chadians who have achieved at least some security in the camps are still struggling to survive. In mid 2003, MSF reported the first signs of malnutrition in the camps in the town of Gore in the South of Chad. At the time, 30 percent of children below the age of five were "at risk from acute malnutrition."

Refugees also need to battle daily for basic needs such as food, water, and access to primary health services.

In 2006, the World Health Organisation (WHO) reported problems including acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and malaria as well as injuries as a result of fighting between rebels and government soldiers. The insufficient supply of clean water and poor sanitary conditions have also resulted in Hepatitis E outbreaks in Darfur, and refugee camps in Chad.

Then there is hunger. The World Food Programme (WFP) appealed for US\$87 million this year in food aid to cover the needs of the refugees in Eastern Chad. The WFP faces the challenge of getting three months' supply of food to the camps before the rainy season makes it impossible to reach them.

During the rainy season, the main road from N'Djamena is closed to most traffic, leaving air transport as the only

practical means of moving humanitarian staff and vital medical supplies.

"We need food now," said WFP Chad Country Director Stefano Porretti. "The rain is only a matter of two or three months away, it is absolutely imperative that we move food to the places where it will be needed later this year."

At the beginning of the Darfurian drama, the local population of Chad opened their arms to welcome the influx of refugees. However, with many Chadians becoming internally displaced after fleeing their villages, it was a different story.

When their villages were attacked and their livestock and other possessions seized, the Chadians were left with nothing.

In fact, the Internally Displaced People (IDP) are often worse off than the refugees.

"Sometimes the situation of Chadian IDP and Chadian residents is more worrying because they don't receive assistance, especially [the] residents," an MSF spokesperson said.

Even worse, aid agencies are often targeted by rebels, making it very difficult for them to help the people.

In January 2007, an attempted ambush forced MSF to stop medical support for two months. In June, two cars of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were targets of a violent ambush on the road to Adé. These were not the first attacks, and they were not the last either.

While the refugees in the South of Chad do not have to face constant attacks by rebels, nevertheless the situation is dire, according to Catherine Swysen, vice president of the California based Chad Relief Foundation, that focuses on refugees in the South of the country.

Swysen, who spent two weeks in Chad in March, says that they are the forgotten refugees that do not get any media exposure.

"If nothing is done soon, the world will have to deal with another mass humanitarian crisis in Africa." ■