

Africa Report by Mary Lalevée

Sudan moves into the Libyan orbit

Famine is threatening a million people, while the IMF cuts off credits and the civil war continues.

Five days of talks in Ethiopia between representatives of several of Sudan's main political parties and leaders of the rebel Sudan Peoples' Liberation Army ended in failure on March 25. The talks had been aimed at persuading the SPLA leader, John Garang, to agree to a ceasefire in the civil war which has placed a large part of the south of the country out of control of government forces.

Since the military coup which overthrew President Gafaar Numayri just one year ago, on April 6, 1985, the country has been caught increasingly in a squeeze between the International Monetary Fund, on the one side, and the Soviet-backed Libyans and Ethiopians, on the other.

Reports have reached the West that 1 million people in the south of the country are currently threatened with famine, as aid workers are denied access to drought-stricken areas by the SPLA. However, Garang refused to agree to any end to the fighting, probably on the orders of his backers, the Ethiopian regime. Garang is reported to be a virtual prisoner under house arrest by the government of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Reports from the southern capital, Juba, say that the SPLA is tightening its grip on the south. Juba is still held by government forces, but conditions there are worsening: A report in the London *Observer* on March 23 said that the city has been without electricity for 10 days and without water for over a week.

The civil war in the south is only one of Sudan's problems: In Febru-

ary, the International Monetary Fund declared Sudan to be in default, and suspended any new loans or credits. Sudan owes SDR 605 million to the IMF, and had been unable to stick to its repayment schedule. As other creditors had insisted on Sudan coming to an agreement with the IMF prior to further loans being given, this means that a de facto economic boycott of Sudan has begun.

Sudan's total external debt has reached \$9 billion, more than 12 times the value of the country's exports, and is expected to reach \$12 billion in 1986-87. The country is supposed to repay \$800 million per year, of which \$350 million is just interest payments, a sum totaling more than Sudan's entire exports. Some political forces in the country are actively campaigning for the cancellation of the debt, or at least a three-year moratorium. Others, however, are prepared to submit to IMF pressure, and this group seems to have scored a point on Feb. 24, when the prices of sugar and gasoline were increased by 20%, and a new tax was introduced to be deducted directly from salaries.

The Sudanese government has turned to Libya for aid: financial and military. A Sudanese delegation visited Tripoli in early February, led by Prime Minister Gazouli Dafa'a Allal, and the Defense Minister Osman Abdullah Mohammed. A military cooperation agreement was signed, but while no details were given of the contents, the kind of cooperation envisaged became clear with reports that Libyan planes had attacked SPLA po-

sitions in southern Sudan, near the town of Rumbek, recently captured by the SPLA. Two TU-22 fighter planes are reported to have flown 25 sorties over the town and dropped 50 bombs.

Libyan aid of another kind is being given to many leading Sudanese political figures: Sudan's transitional military council has announced that elections are to begin in April for a 301-member assembly, which will draft a new constitution and choose a government. (Elections in 37 southern constituencies have been postponed because of fighting). A pilgrimage of Sudanese leaders to Tripoli, Libya has been taking place, in search of financial backing.

Sadiq el Mahdi, leader of the Umma Party, is widely reported to have received substantial financial support from Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, and is seen as the most likely winner in the upcoming elections. El Mahdi is the great-grandson of Mohammed Ahmed el Mahid, who defeated the British and Turkish invaders in 1885, and became the first ruler of the united Sudan.

The Umma Party has been traditionally supported by the Ansar tribe in western Sudan, but has won more widespread backing with its opposition to the fanatical Muslim Brotherhood, which is financed by Iran. Sadiq el Mahdi has two main backers: Libya, as mentioned; but more discreet support comes from Great Britain. He studied at Oxford University, and is reported to have long cultivated ties with Britain, a somewhat ironic alliance given his ancestors' fight against British colonialism.

Without a change in the attitude of Western governments and creditors, to provide financial aid to the ailing Sudanese economy, the Libyan role in the country is certain to increase, whatever the outcome of the upcoming elections.