

EU Prepares for Hard-core Chad Mission

Brooks Tigner *

The EU has set in motion plans to send a peacekeeping force to Chad along its troubled border with Sudan, prompting international aid and humanitarian groups to call for clear rules of engagement that focus on civilian protection and human rights and the effective implementation of a ban on using children as soldiers in the region's various conflicts. "EU soldiers must have the right to fire if they are under attack or if civilians are attacked as well," Alain Deletroz, vice president for policy in Europe at the International Crisis Group, recently told reporters in Brussels. "The rules of engagement must be clear and robust. It would be pointless without it."

As expected during their 23–24 July meeting in Brussels, foreign ministers from the bloc's twenty-seven member states gave the green light to the EU Military Staff (EUMS) to begin defining a crisis management concept. The concept will be premised on the deployment of several thousand European troops and police officers to Chad and possibly the northern region of the Central African Republic (CAR). EU military planners aim to finalize the concept in the coming weeks, an EU diplomat told ISN Security Watch on 23 July after the ministers' decision.

The mission's purpose would be to protect civilian populations in Chad and contain the chaos in adjacent Sudan and its war-torn western province of Darfur, where strife has displaced hundreds of thousands of people in the last four years. Many Darfurians now live in refugee camps in dire conditions just across the borders in Chad and northern CAR. Their numbers are swollen by displaced Chadians fleeing a conflict between rebel groups and the central government of President Idriss Deby. The EU soldiers would also protect UN and humanitarian personnel working in the region.

The size of the EU's mission is still uncertain, but initial indications have been that it could involve as many as 3,000 troops, though a smaller number is more likely, said the EU diplomat. "The numbers are somewhat up the air at this point, but one shouldn't forget that Artemis was run with considerably less than 3,000 soldiers," said the diplomat, referring to the EU's short-term peacekeeping mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Artemis' three-month deployment of 1,400 troops in June 2003 to Bunia in eastern DRC was the EU's first autonomous mission to deploy outside Europe and a test case of its ability to run a hard-core security mission.

While Artemis also had to deal with instability in Bunia, it was focused on a small area and a relatively restricted conflict scenario. By contrast, the peacekeeping challenge in Chad is more complex and dangerous, according to aid officials familiar with the setting and conditions of the region. Nearly a quarter of a million refugees from

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Darfur are huddled in a dozen camps along Chad's border with Sudan, according to aid officials. Given that another 170,000 are internally displaced within Darfur, the refugee numbers could easily grow.

The refugees "are under siege from all sides," one aid official in Brussels said. "There is inter-communal and inter-ethnic violence, banditry, threats from militia groups in Chad who oppose the central government and, of course, raids by the Janjaweed across the border in Sudan. It's a desperate situation." The Janjaweed are fearsome Muslim militia, tacitly backed by Sudan's government, who have relentlessly attacked Darfur's non-Muslim tribes and villages. Until recently, Khartoum staunchly refused to allow any foreign troops in Darfur, save for poorly equipped Africa Union (AU) peacekeepers, though plans are now underway for a so-called hybrid force of UN and EU troops to work alongside the AU. The EU's mission in Chad would complement the UN's presence in Sudan and would hand over to it after a year or so. The EU official said the Chad mission would be split into two components: a police element to protect and maintain order within the refugee camps and a military one with responsibility to secure the area around the camps and beyond.

The decision to deploy to the region is long overdue in view of the grave human rights violations not only in Sudan but also in Chad, where rebel groups are fighting Deby's government. "Both sides of the civil war in Chad have recruited children. We're talking about children aged fifteen or younger with guns thrust into their arms. This is a crime against humanity and must end immediately," said Lotte Leicht, EU director at Human Rights Watch. "Deby's government has signed up to human rights declarations but it doesn't cooperate much [with human rights groups and the international community] to fight this problem. While we don't have evidence that it has recruited children in recent months, there's no evidence that it is demobilizing any child soldiers, either."

Getting Deby to comply with such demands could pose a delicate challenge for the EU peacekeeping force due to its expected large French element. As much as half the force could be French, with the balance drawn from other EU countries. As the former colonial power, France has long had close ties to Chad (Tchad in French), and has stationed troops in the country. One humanitarian aid expert said the mission should firmly come under the EU's flag, and stressed that the EU should turn down any French offer to use one of its deployable headquarters as the force's main operational or planning headquarters. "If France is perceived as partial in any way, as taking sides with the Chadian government [in its conflict with the rebel opposition], then the EU will get into a horrible situation. The mandate must be clear, strong and focused on civilian protection," said the expert.

Given the region's harsh environment, high security risks, and huge geographic scale—Chad and Darfur together equal nearly one-third the size of the continental United States—Leicht said the EU force will need a strong UN Chapter 7 mandate based on robust self-defense. "The huge operating area means the mission will need rapid reaction capabilities and the right kind of equipment to protect itself," she said. An EU military planner refused to divulge what kinds of equipment or weapons the Military Staff would choose, but said "all kit options are being reviewed as we talk."

When asked by ISN Security Europe if the EU planned to invoke its so-called Berlin Plus arrangement with NATO, the EU diplomat said “no, there are no plans to do that.” Agreed between NATO and the EU in 2003, Berlin Plus allows the latter to borrow allied assets or capabilities such as airlift or detachable and deployable command chains for its own use. However, the option has never been exercised.

The EU’s Military Staff is expected to finalize a crisis management concept for Chad before the end of September 2007. Based on the mission’s goal and rules of engagement, the concept will recommend the level of troops and equipment needed to carry out the mission. EU foreign ministers will review the document in October, followed by consultations with UN and Chadian authorities. Deployment could take place by early November, though this could easily slip to the following month, said the EU diplomat.