

Africa Report by Douglas DeGroot

Return to civil war?

Libya and Ethiopia, with Soviet backing, are making big trouble for the strategic nation of Sudan.

Sudan President Gaafar Numeiry emerged from his talks with President Ronald Reagan in Washington, D.C. on Nov. 21 to charge that Libya and Ethiopia, both Soviet-backed, were acting to destabilize his government. Sudan's strategic importance far outweighs its small population of only 20 million. It is the African continent's largest nation in area, sharing borders with eight other states, most importantly with Egypt, with whom its interests are closely linked. It is basically for this reason that Sudan receives more U.S. aid than any other African country (\$220 million this year) with the exception of Egypt.

Now Numeiry, under whose leadership the country was brought together in 1972 after a 17-year-long civil war, is under siege.

- The late November kidnapping of seven French technicians and two Pakistani employees on the French-run project dredging the Jonglei canal represented a declaration of war against Numeiry. The president accused both Libya and Ethiopia of arming the rebels, who, he said, belonged to the People's Liberation Army of Sudan.

- The day before Numeiry met with Reagan, Sudanese officials charged that 1,000 Ethiopian troops had moved to the border with Sudan, backed by Cuban and Soviet advisors. Ethiopia denied the charges.

- The concentration of refugees in southern Sudan is providing the cannon fodder for operations against the central government. There are currently 400,000 Ethiopian refugees in

Sudan, and Sudanese dissidents have also crossed the border into Ethiopia. "It's a classic arrangement," as one State Department officer put it. "You have a series of refugee camps . . . and those refugee camps can provide considerable manpower for military training." Libyans are training Sudanese dissidents in Ethiopia.

- In Ethiopia itself, at least 100,000 Ethiopians are threatened with death by starvation over the next four to six weeks, unless the country receives emergency food and water-management aid. The famine increases the likelihood that the Soviets and the mystical Coptic Church and military currents running the Ethiopian regime will launch foreign adventures to divert attention away from the collapse of the country.

"The civil war between the North and South in Sudan has already started," report African diplomatic sources. One of the demands of the rebels who kidnapped foreign technicians last week was the dismantling of the Sharia all-Islamic law recently introduced by Numeiry. Roughly 6 million Sudanese who live in the south are non-Muslims, who bitterly remember the attempts to Islamicize Sudan during the last civil war.

In the north, meanwhile, the opposition against Numeiry, himself a northerner, has demanded a more orthodox Muslim regime, based on the Shāria, which is a literal application of Koranic law. In an attempt to coopt this northern opposition, which is critical of Numeiry's alliance with the Reagan administration, Numeiry in

September suddenly declared that the Sharia would become the law of the land. My African sources report that not even Numeiry's closest associates knew he was going to make this unwise move.

To a large extent, the pressure for Sharia comes from the Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist semi-secret cult with strong financial backing from London and Switzerland. Operating mainly from Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brotherhood has provided funds to the desperate Numeiry government, and has acquired considerable blackmail capability in the process. The pro-Khomeini Saudi Prince Muhammad al-Faisal, for example, has acquired extensive agricultural and commercial interests in Sudan, establishing the Islamic Development Company and the Al Faisal Bank. The money thus funneled into Muslim Brotherhood-run business operations gives the Brotherhood, only a minority group on the national scene, enormous political and financial clout.

Numeiry's attempts to propitiate the fundamentalists have reportedly worried the Egyptian government, for whom Sudan is the front line for stability. Egyptian papers with articles against Sharia are being kept out of Sudan.

But the chief factor determining Numeiry's weakness in the face of the political crisis is the disaster the Sudan economy has become after Arab financial backers in the mid-1970s pulled out of a plan to turn the backward southern area of the country into a highly developed agricultural production center. In 1978, the International Monetary Fund forced Numeiry to cancel all development projects and concentrate on producing cotton as a cash crop. Now, the production of this primary foreign exchange earner has dropped from \$220 million worth to less than \$50 million.