

U.S. walks tightrope on Sudan and Uganda

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AFRICA

U.S. Walks Tightrope in Sudan and Uganda

On Oct. 19 the Obama administration announced its new Sudan policy, and from Oct. 16 to Oct. 25 the U.S. Army conducted military exercises in the Kitgum region of northern Uganda with forces from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda and Burundi to develop joint responses to humanitarian emergencies. The two developments are surely related. What happens in Sudan will have important effects on its neighboring countries, all of which have experienced grave humanitarian crises in recent years.

The peace in Uganda is fragile, but for now the Lord's Resistance Army has ceased terrorizing people in northern Uganda, and many of the 1.8 million people displaced by its ruthless campaigns are returning home. The conflict in southern Sudan has long been intertwined with the crisis in northern Uganda. The south Sudan crisis is distinct from but related to the grave challenge raised by genocide in Sudan's Darfur region, though it has been even more destructive. The conflict, which has killed two million people and displaced over four million

more, came to an end in 2005 under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

A key provision in the peace agreement is a referendum scheduled for 2011, by which the south will decide whether to remain part of Sudan or seek independence. Those in the south have long been treated as second-class Sudanese by the north. It is highly likely they will opt for separation from Khartoum in 2011. But few in south Sudan believe Khartoum will permit independence, since that would carry away most Sudanese oil reserves along with the north's self-image as the ruler. The referendum could very well bring war back to south Sudan, making resolution of the crisis in Darfur even more difficult and threatening the fragile peace in

northern Uganda.

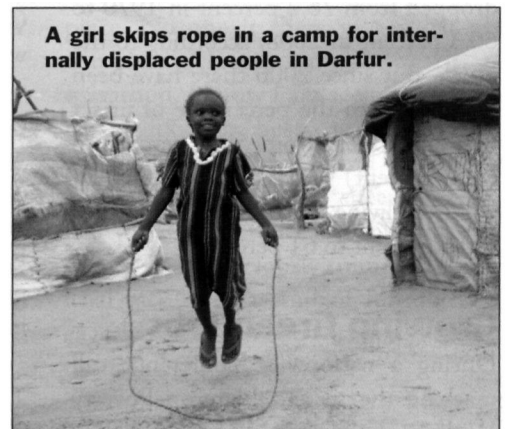
If war does return, the term “humanitarian crisis” could be too mild to describe the consequences. The Sudan People’s Liberation Movement that governs southern Sudan today is no longer a rebel movement operating from the bush. It is much better armed than it was in the war halted in 2005. Renewed conflict could do even more harm than the massive destruction engendered by the previous conflict.

The new U.S. policy promises to play a vigorous role in pressing Khartoum and the south to move peacefully to the 2011 referendum, abide by its outcome and peacefully conduct the elections scheduled for April 2010. It also seeks to re-engage

European and African nations in the peace process and to press China to use its oil links with Khartoum in a more constructive way. Preventing a new war in the south is rightly a high priority and also a condition for the resolution of the Darfur crisis.

The new U.S. policy threatens serious consequences if Sudanese officials impede the peace agreement in the south or interfere with the ending of the Darfur conflict. It also holds out the promise of positive benefits to Sudan if real progress toward these goals is achieved. Sudan’s President Omar al-Bashir, however, has manipulated the international community to his own ends in the past and is quite capa-

ble of doing so again. The real test of the Obama administration will be whether it will pursue its goals with the



A girl skips rope in a camp for internally displaced people in Darfur.

creativity and commitment needed to reach them. The well-being of the Sudanese people, along with that of

many Ugandans and others in the region, hangs in the balance.

DAVID HOLLENBACH, S.J., of Boston College, now teaching in Kenya, recently visited some of the works of the Jesuit Refugee Service in northern Uganda and southern Sudan.
