

Gulf war already spread to Africa

by Linda de Hoyos

Even before the first U.S. cruise missile had hit Iraqi soil on Jan. 17, the Middle East war crisis had precipitated major crises for countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as the United States, Israel, and Libya—among other powers—took steps to maximize their force-presence on the continent.

In northeast Africa, the pressure centers around the government of Sudan under President al-Bashir, whose Revolutionary Council denounced the presence of the U.S.-dominated “Multinational Force” in the Gulf as an attempt to destroy Islam and grab the region’s resources. The Sudan central government faces both internal and external pressures. Under U.S. pressure, the *New York Times* reported Jan. 17, the “United Nations has delayed a major food relief operation in the Sudan because of that country’s decision to side with Iraq in the Persian Gulf crisis.” A top U.N. official had been scheduled to go to Sudan to arrange shipping 1.2 million tons of food to the country, where, say relief agencies, millions face starvation this year. “But,” the *New York Times* reported, “after consultations with U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Herman Cohen, the U.N. decided to postpone the mission.”

Before this, the U.S. government had publicly upbraided the Al-Bashir government for its alleged blocking of food aid to southern Sudan, where drought and civil war have brought famine. The civil strife in Sudan ostensibly breaks along religious lines—the Muslim north versus the largely Christian and animist south, but this division has long been exploited by the imperial powers, beginning with the British.

Now, Israel is meddling in the longstanding conflict: In November, John Garang, leader of the National Salvation Front, visited Israel, where he met with Foreign Minister David Levy and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, indicating Israeli backup for the Sudan insurgency.

Simultaneously, Israel and the United States opened negotiations with the Ethiopian government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which was formerly under the tutelage of the U.S.S.R. Leading the U.S. forays into Addis Ababa, under the rubric of negotiating a peace between the Mengistu government and the Eritrean separatist guerrillas, was Paul Henze, former CIA station chief in Turkey and a controller of the Kurdish separatists.

Henze’s “peace negotiations” came to nought, but in December, a formal deal was arranged between Israel and Ethiopia whereby Addis Ababa would permit the airlift of 1,500

Falasha Jews to Israel, and, in exchange, according to the Cairo *Mena*, Israel will be giving “backing to confront military escalation against the government by Eritrean forces.” In December, the government launched a counteroffensive against the Eritrean front, using arms supplied by Israel. Mengistu’s counteroffensive has also pushed thousands more Eritrean refugees into Sudan.

Somalia in flames

There are also suspicions that such Israeli “backing” to Ethiopia may have extended to the Somalian rebels who have laid a bloody siege to the government of Siad Barre. Simultaneous with the Ethiopian assault on Eritrea, the Somalian insurgents, led by the United Somali Congress (USC), stormed the capital city of Mogadishu. Somalian rebel forces have based their military operations from Ethiopia. Siad Barre has ruled Somalia for 20 years, mostly with the backing of the United States. But in 1989, the U.S. suddenly cut all aid to Somalia, citing human rights violations. In addition, it was believed in Washington, Somalia’s strategic importance declined as the U.S.S.R. decreased its own ties to Ethiopia.

For the last month, the USC has attempted to gain control of the capital, amid reports that Barre was holed up in a bunker, or had fled to Libya. According to Arab sources, Barre had also been offered asylum by Iraq. From London, the executive committee of the USC has refused all efforts by the Italian government to mediate a ceasefire, as insurgents ransack the capital. According to the Italian ambassador, the Roman Catholic cathedral has been ransacked and destroyed, and all embassies save the Italian, have been vacated and pillaged. “The city is being attacked and sacked as in the days of the barbarians,” Ambassador Mario Sica was quoted by Agence France Presse as saying.

On the western side of Sudan, the Chadian government of Hissan Habre was successfully overthrown in December. According to the new Chad Planning Minister Kittir, the rebel takeover of the capital city of N’Djamena was made possible by the failure of the French to supply Habre with intelligence on rebel military activity, as it had done during other rebel offensives. Kittir announced that Chad will renew relations with Libya, to its immediate north. In addition, at the end of December, Sudan President Al-Bashir visited the new government in N’Djamena, on his way back from a state visit to Nigeria. The Chad press wrote that the visit “marks a new era in relations between Chad and Sudan. Not long ago [under the Habre government], these relations were at their lowest level.”

On the other side, some nations have been forced to militarily take part in the war against Iraq. Sierra Leone, with its close ties to Israel, has sent 500 soldiers to participate in the “Multinational Force.” With a life expectancy of 41 years, the tiny former British colony has little to bargain with.