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Opinion

Fix Chad to save Darfur

Western governments should pressure Chad's president to stop using his oil wealth to fund rebels in Darfur.

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As the international community searches for ways to bring an end to the violence and suffering in Darfur, we must pay more attention to the sources of funds that are allowing this deadly conflict to rage on. It is well known that the Sudanese government is heavily dependent on oil sales to China for revenue, and there is mounting pressure on the Chinese government to use its influence with Khartoum to end the calamity. But there is another angle that deserves just as much notice.

Chad, one of Sudan's neighbors, is an integral part of the Darfur problem, and it must be part of the solution. Chad's eastern border with Sudan's Darfur province is porous, and many rebel groups -- Sudanese and Chadian -- are operating in this area where several hundred thousand Sudanese refugees are stranded. Chadian President Idriss Deby came to power through a military coup launched from Darfur in 1990. He and many Darfur rebels belong to the Zhaghawa tribe, and he is now repaying his debts to his tribesmen by supporting one of Darfur's rebel groups, the Justice and Equality Movement, with arms financed by oil money.

At the same time, Deby himself is fighting armed rebel movements operating from this region, some of which are supported by Sudan. One of these movements is led by former members of Deby's inner circle, including his nephew, Timan Erdimi. Erdimi decided to take up arms after his uncle abolished presidential term limits in Chad's Constitution in 2005, setting himself up to become president for life. The control over oil revenues looms large in this

internal power struggle -- and in Darfur.

Not unlike Sudan, Chad's government is largely dependent on the sale of oil, not to China but to an Exxon Mobil-led international consortium. Remarkably, the World Bank played the key role in turning Chad into an oil-producing country. Exxon Mobil had made World Bank participation a precondition for launching its \$4.2-billion oil project, an insurance policy for its investments in this politically volatile region. Once the World Bank approved co-financing for the project in 2000, other lenders, such as the U.S. Export-Import Bank and the European Investment Bank, followed suit. Before the World Bank's decision, several donor-government agencies and environmental and human rights organizations from around the world pointed to the legacy of impoverishment, human rights abuses, poisoned landscapes and violent conflict that oil and mining projects had left in Africa.

Brushing aside these concerns, the World Bank touted the Chad oil project as an unprecedented framework to translate oil wealth into benefits for the poor and as a model for investments elsewhere. And, indeed, largely in response to public protests, the bank had requested voluminous environmental studies and undertaken innovative measures, such as requiring a law in Chad meant to ensure transparency in the use of oil revenue and establishing a committee to monitor implementation of the law.

Sadly, these measures were largely ineffective in

a repressive political environment in which basic human rights are not respected. Chad's already impoverished people have become even more destitute since their country has become an oil exporter, as little of the income is used to better their lives. And because much, if not most, of the oil income gets diverted to weapons purchases and to finance patronage networks within the army, it is the people in Darfur who are most placed at risk.

But there is a precedent for Western governments using this oil income as leverage. Chad's oil revenues pass through a London bank account, which holds only those funds. In 2006, the World Bank temporarily froze the funds when Deby blatantly violated his agreements with the bank to spend the bulk of the money on

the social sector.

This tool can be used again -- to cut off funding to the Darfur rebels and to encourage Chad to move toward democratic rule. For the latter, Chad needs a broad national dialogue that includes the government, rebel groups, human rights organizations and unions, and that will need international pressure and mediation to get it going. Such a step toward peace would also benefit the people in Darfur and the troubled borderlands.

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