EUFOR in Chad and CAR
The EU’s most taxing mission yet

The European Union’s most ambitious military operation to date began deployment to eastern Chad and the northeast of the Central African Republic (CAR) on 12 February, reaching initial operational capability on 17 March, the official start of its 12-month mandate under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1778 of 25 September 2007. The EUFOR Chad/CAR mission is intended as a bridging operation to be replaced by a UN follow-on force in March 2009, and will complement the work of UNAMID, the UN–African Union peacekeeping force being deployed to Darfur in neighbouring Sudan, as well as that of MINURCAT, the UN mission in Chad aimed at improving police and judicial infrastructures.

EUFOR’s mandate is threefold: to contribute to protecting civilians in danger, particularly refugees and internally displaced persons, of whom there are almost 500,000 in camps in eastern Chad; to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and the free movement of NGO personnel; and to contribute to the protection of UN personnel, facilities, installations and equipment. But security conditions have worsened since Resolution 1778 was passed. UNAMID’s deployment to Darfur has suffered delays, prompting further population displacement from Darfur into Chad and CAR. Meanwhile, what was a simmering conflict between Chad’s government and rebel forces, thought to be sponsored by Khartoum, led to a rebel assault on N’Djamena aimed at overthrowing President Idriss Déby in early 2008. Although the rebels were forced to retreat, their capacity to launch similar attacks is undiminished.

By mid March, 50% of the scheduled 3,700 EU troops had arrived in Chad, including a force headquarters, a main manoeuvre battalion, a multinational initial entry force, a ‘role 2’ medical facility and air assets. Further deployments are scheduled through to the end of May. As the mission is autonomous, it is not receiving support from NATO under the ‘Berlin plus’ arrangements.

Initially scheduled for November 2007, the mission suffered delays as EU member states, facing competing demands from NATO for troops and helicopters in Afghanistan, struggled to meet force-generation targets, originally set at between 4,000 and 5,000 troops. The UN had estimated optimum force levels to be between 5,000 and 12,500, but the EU was obliged to settle for 3,700, with a strategic reserve of 600 in Europe. Troop-contributing countries include: France (2,000); Ireland (450); Poland (400); Austria (210); Sweden (200); Romania (120); Belgium (120); Spain (80); Netherlands (60); Finland (40); and Slovenia (15). The UK and Germany are absent, the former because of overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the latter feeling it paid its ‘African dues’ by commanding the EUFOR electoral-monitoring mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in 2006. Although the EU collectively boasts around 1,000 helicopters, it proved difficult to find more than a dozen adapted to operate in the harsh desert conditions of eastern Chad. The operation commander, Ireland’s Lieutenant-General Patrick Nash, works with officers from 22 EU member states at the French permanent joint headquarters at Mont Valérien outside Paris. The force commander, France’s Brigadier-General Jean-Philippe Ganascia, is headquartered at Abéché in eastern Chad. A second detachment, comprising an infantry unit, an engineering unit and a field hospital, is stationed at Birao in the northern tip of CAR. Construction of Europa Camp in N’Djamena was completed in April next to the airport runway, with capacity for 600 personnel, as well as the rear force headquarters and a UN working area.

The logistical challenge for the EU is considerable, given the distance between this remote part of Africa and the Mediterranean (2,000km) or the Atlantic (1,900km). There are only 400km of paved roads in Chad, a country twice the size of France. The area to be patrolled covers several hundred thousand square kilometres, terrain described by Nash as ‘unforgiving’ in its austerity and in the severity of its climate. Air deployment is constrained by the limited facilities at N’Djamena airport, where the operation’s multinational Joint Logistic Centre is located, and by those at Abéché, the former boasting a maximum on-the-ground capacity of only three aircraft (mainly Hercules C-130s) at any one time and the latter a capacity of just one. All in all, it has been estimated that the airlift operation alone will take 70 days. The Cameroonian seaport of Douala has been used as a relay and transit site. (For further analysis of the mission, see Bjørn H. Seibert, *African Adventure?*, MIT Security Studies Program, November 2007).

But apart from logistics, there are three major challenges facing this unusual EU mission.
French colonial legacy

The first challenge – which also characterised the EU’s first ‘autonomous’ mission, Operation Artemis in the Ituri province of DRC in 2003 – is that of differentiating it from France’s own post-colonial African policy. France has had a force of some 1,500 troops in Chad since the mid-1980s when it helped President Hissène Habré defeat a Libyan invasion. Since Déby’s ouster of Habré in a 1990 coup, Paris has backed the regime in N’Djamena, most recently in its struggle with neighbouring Sudan. The French force, codenamed Opération Épervier, is mainly stationed in Abeché, close to the Sudanese border. In order to underscore the legitimacy of the EUFOR mission, EU foreign-policy chief Javier Solana and Nash have insisted on its strict neutrality and impartiality with respect to Chadian domestic and foreign policy. The second major challenge comes from the rebel groups and militias opposed to the Déby regime. They have dismissed the EU’s claims to neutrality and declared it fair game for attack. It was not coincidental that on 28 January, when the force’s deployment was announced in Brussels, a column of rebel vehicles crossed over from Sudan and began a 750km dash across the desert to N’Djamena. When a similar incursion took place in April 2006, French Mirage aircraft intervened to turn the rebels back. Not wishing to compromise the EUFOR mission, France this time restrained its Chad-based troops, with the result that the rebels got within shooting distance of the presidential palace before being driven back by Déby’s security forces. With the outcome of the rebel offensive far from certain, discussions took place between Brussels and Paris for the evacuation of EUFOR’s advance units which had already arrived in N’Djamena.

The area to be patrolled by EUFOR (essentially the eastern third of Chad, abutting the 1,000km border with Sudan) is rife with warring tribes, rebels, militias and bandits. Déby is a member of the Zaghawa tribe, one of the principal forces opposed to President Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir’s Khartoum regime and very active in Darfur. In part, the civil war in Chad derives from the conflict between the Zaghawa and the rival Tama tribe, which enjoys the tactical support of al-Bashir. But organised rebel groups, including the most important force, the United Front for Democracy and Change, as well as the Rally of Forces for Change, are led by disaffected former Déby stalwarts, respectively Mahamat Nouri, former defence minister, and Timane Erdimi, Déby’s former chief de cabinet. These men protested against the president’s 2005 amendment to the constitution to allow himself a third term in office. In addition, since 2004, Janjaweed militias involved in the Darfur conflict have regularly been terrorising villages and towns in eastern Chad. Bandits operate in the area, preying on traders plying the desert routes between Chad and the CAR. The most notorious of these criminal gangs is the Zatanuina, believed to consist of several thousand well-armed fighters.

The problem faced by EUFOR in avoiding a major confrontation with these uncontrolled groups was illustrated by an incident which took place on 3 March, within a week of the force’s deployment. A reconnaissance patrol operating near Tissi in the tri-border region between Chad, Sudan and CAR, inadvertently strayed 3km across the border into Sudan, where it met hostile fire leading to the death of a French peacekeeper, Gilles Polin. The Sudanese government, claiming that a grenade attached to his belt had exploded and killed four Sudanese nomads who had come to investigate, demanded $10,000 for each of the nomads’ families. Speaking at Polin’s funeral, French President Nicolas Sarkozy angrily denounced the Sudanese, accusing them of premeditated murder.

Nash has made it clear that, while his troops are neither hunting for rebels or opposition forces nor seeking to engage them, they will, if attacked, respond with all military means at their disposal. It is, therefore, difficult to see how the EU’s peacekeeping mission can avoid military combat. Some of the militias are armed with AK47s, heavy machine guns, anti-tank rocket launchers and even surface-to-air missiles. The Chadian armed forces, numbering barely more than the rebels, are disorganised and ill equipped. The CAR armed forces are estimated to total just 3,150 servicemen. The hope in Brussels is that the Sudanese authorities, along with the rebels and bandits, will themselves decide that there is little to be gained from challenging EUFOR militarily.

Political strategy

The third challenge concerns EUFOR’s involvement in both Chadian and regional politics. Chad and CAR are autocratic dictatorships with few vestiges of democracy. EUFOR cannot ignore this reality. If it is to deliver on its aim of providing a serious context within which refugees and IDPs can return to their villages, it will need to adopt a comprehensive political approach. This would seek to maximise synergies with the UN and AU forces operating in the region, and to foster coherence not only between the agencies of the EU delivering humanitarian aid, trade policy and security, but also between Brussels and the member states – particularly France. EUFOR, therefore, needs to find a way of harnessing France’s influence in the region in order to help kick-start a regional political stabilisation process. Its presence could help to set both Chad and CAR on the road to internal stability, but only if it can succeed in treading the narrow path between capitalising on the French military presence in the region and maintaining its own autonomy.

Above all, the EU will be closely involved in the ongoing ‘peace process’ between Chad and Sudan. The two presidents signed a bilateral peace agreement on the sidelines of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference meeting in Dakar, Senegal, on 13–14 March. A ‘contact group’ comprising Libya, the Republic of the Congo, Senegal, Eritrea, Gabon, Chad and Sudan was established to manage the process. Plans to mount an AU-led border force between Sudan and Chad were discussed at a meeting on 28 April. American, UN, EU and French delegates are associated with this process, and Libya has pledged $2 million towards the costs of this force. However, on the eve of the first meeting of contact-group foreign ministers in Libreville, Gabon, on 10 April, the Chadian defence minister accused Sudan of massing thousands of rebels on the border in preparation for a major military incursion into Chad. The Sudanese claimed that this was the expression of local anger at the alleged bombing by Chadian forces of a village inside Darfur.

Considerable obstacles

EUFOR Chad/CAR looks set to become the most sensitive and complex of all the EU’s overseas missions. The security environment is volatile and evolving rapidly. Above all, the mission’s declared ‘neutrality’ cannot duck the central problem in Chad and CAR, where corrupt, unpopular and highly vulnerable governments are attempting to hide behind the EU’s presence in order to avoid fundamental but inevitable change. Hitherto, the EU has engaged in basic crisis management, but with this mission it seems unlikely to be able to avoid becoming involved in serious nation-building.