

## CHAD: Aid groups face dilemma over EU protection

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DAKAR, 16 May 2008 (IRIN) - Faced with frequent armed robberies, many aid groups in eastern Chad say the European Union Force (EUFOR), deployed there since February, is not doing its job of protecting them. At the same time, many of those same aid groups say they do not want to jeopardise their neutrality by being associated with the armed force.

"There is in fact a dilemma that many aid organisations are facing here as attacks become more frequent," the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC)'s deputy head in Chad, Nicholai Panke, told IRIN. He said the ICRC has not asked EUFOR or the government to provide protection.

EUFOR is mostly comprised of troops from France, the former colonial power in Chad. It has a separate military base there that assists the Chadian army. Some rebel leaders have said EUFOR is therefore a legitimate target for them, which is one reason aid groups want to keep their distance.

So far, the many battles between rebels and the army in eastern Chad have rarely had an impact on aid groups or their ability to deliver assistance to the hundreds of thousands of displaced Chadians and Sudanese refugees, as the fighting mostly takes place in unpopulated areas.

"We even sometimes get warnings before an attack is launched in a particular area so that we know to stay away," one aid worker who preferred anonymity told IRIN.

### Ill-equipped to fight bandits?

EUFOR's mandate is to protect humanitarian workers and civilian populations but several aid officials said they believe it is not equipped to do that.

"It came ready to fight the wrong kind of war," CARE International's programme director in the east, Alsy Burger, told IRIN. "EUFOR has all these heavy guns and armoured personnel carriers, expecting they would have major offensives but for EUFOR to protect humanitarian workers and vulnerable populations from the real threat of banditry it needs light weapons and more men on the ground."

"The bandits operate with impunity and are becoming bolder," the assistant country director of CARE in Chad, Jennifer Rowell, told IRIN.

In early May, the project director of Save the Children in Chad, Pascal Marlinge, was shot dead in broad daylight by armed men who stopped his vehicle near the town of Forchana, just 20km from a EUFOR base.

In March one of CARE's vehicles was carjacked just 200m from its office in Abéché, the largest town in the east, at 4pm in the afternoon. CARE sent a vehicle to replace it but it, too, was carjacked before even arriving at its destination.

"We feel like sitting ducks." Rowell said.

The day after Pascal Marlinge's killing, many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) suspended activities to protest against what they regarded as government inaction, and during a visit to Chad by EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana on 7 May aid workers wore black arm bands and placed black flags on their vehicles. "We want him to know that we think EUFOR can and must do more," CARE's Burger said.

EUFOR's spokesman said it was unclear what exactly the aid organisations expect EUFOR to be doing. "Some say that want us to provide them with armed escorts, while others say they don't," the

spokesman, Lt-Col Jean Axelos, told IRIN.

“We are in a difficult position trying to balance their various sensitivities and their various security demands,” he said, “and then we have to work out what we are actually capable of providing them with”.

EUFOR currently only has 2,379 troops (out of a target total of 3,700) in a vast, remote wilderness and has to work within a very restricted mandate, Axelos said. “We cannot cross into the mandates of MINURCAT [the UN Mission in Chad] or the mandates of various government security forces,” he said.

“We are an international military force and, quite frankly, the security threat that NGOs face of banditry really seems more like a problem for the police.”

The UN mission in Chad has begun training local police, but for aid groups, using the police for security can clearly be worse than using EUFOR. “There have been times when rebels have attacked government forces escorting NGOs and the NGOs got caught in the cross-fire,” one aid official said.

### **Towards a solution**

For some NGOs, the solution is not armed escorts from either EUFOR or the government but rather securing routes on which aid convoys must travel. “Securing all routes at all times would require more resources than EUFOR or the government are capable of mustering, but they could at least start by doing it two to four days a month, Burger, of CARE, said. “EUFOR could employ a helicopter and the government could set up checkpoints wherever ambushes are likely.”

EUFOR has already started increasing patrols in the Kawa area north of the town of Adré near the border with Sudan, and it has helped, the ICRC's Panke said. “Since the patrols began there has been less banditry and the local population is starting to go out and work again on their farms.”

But humanitarian officials agree that most bandits still operate with impunity. In Abéché, NGOs often see their stolen vehicles being driven around by members of the local security forces. “You can still see the silhouette of our logos on the sides of cars after they had been removed,” said an official who asked not to be identified.

“Confronting the local security forces about how they got hold of our vehicles is too dangerous,” he said. “The government has to be pressured to do something.”

In the meantime NGOs realise that renting vehicles from locals may be safer. “The bandits don't carjack them so often,” an aid worker said. “We suspect that's because they may know who the owners are and the owners know them.”

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