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Sudan residents living in the Chadian capital N'djamena burn an effigy representing Sudanese President Omar el-Bashir last Friday during a protest condemning the situation in Darfur. Terrorist experts believe Sudan — weakened by war and natural crises — could become a haven for al-Qaida

Experts warn Sudan could be vulnerable to al-Qaida

By Mohamed Osman
and Alfred deMontesquiou
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

KHARTOUM, Sudan — Sudan dismissed Osama bin Laden's renewed calls for "jihad" in its troubled Darfur region, saying that it will not harbor terrorists or allow foreign interference in the country.

But outside experts said Monday the chaos in Sudan — already spilling over to troubled neighbors like Chad — is exactly the kind of place al-Qaida has successfully exploited in the past and might again.

In a tape issuing more threats against the West on Sunday, bin Laden urged followers to go to Sudan to fight a proposed U.N. peacekeeping force for Darfur. Muslims must "get ready to conduct a long war against the crusader plunderers in western Sudan," he said in the audiotape, broadcast on Arab TV.

The call made headlines in most of Sudan's newspapers Monday, but Khartoum's leadership seemed eager to dissociate itself from bin Laden, who was based in the country through much of the 1990s but thrown out in 1996.

"We are not concerned with such statements, or any other statement that comes from foreign quarters about the crisis in Darfur," Sudanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Jamal Eldin Mohammad Ibrahim was quoted as saying by the Al Sahafa newspaper.

Sudan will cooperate with the international community to solve the ongoing humanitarian crisis "and we will not host any terrorist," the spokesman said.

However, experts said that although Khartoum was trying to distance itself from al-Qaida's leader, his words might nonetheless play into the government's hands.

Sudan's government has opposed the idea of shifting the peacekeeping mission in Darfur to the U.N. from the

current African Union force, noted John Pendergast, a Sudan specialist with the International Crisis Group in Washington.

"The statement by bin Laden greatly serves their interest in Darfur," he said, and would "give a good pretext to those who are bent on preventing that from happening."

Yet few believe the government would deliberately allow al-Qaida into Sudan again.

Instead, most experts said bin Laden's appeal was aimed at attracting the Muslim world's attention to his vision of a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Few expected large numbers of fighters to take bin Laden up on the call.

"He's trading on the prominence that Darfur has regained to push his own agenda and prove he's still around," said Eric Reeves, a Sudan specialist and a professor at Smith College in Massachusetts.

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at the RAND think tank in Washington, said the prospect of Western troops in another Muslim country is "an issue he can exploit. It proves his point about the West's war against Islam."

Al-Qaida has targeted Western forces in Africa before — including its attacks against U.S. troops trying to bring peace to Somalia in 1993.

On the streets of Khartoum, feelings ranged from scorn to angst.

Eating lunch at an open-air market in the Sudanese capital, Muhammadain Salih called bin Laden's call nonsense.

"I don't think his people can do anything in Darfur," said the 32-year merchant, himself from the western region. "The place is so remote, if (outside) Arabs went there, they'd be spotted straight away ... It's not like Iraq."

But Said Muhammad, a 35-year-old electrician, said

"people should take what this guy says very seriously. Look at what he did in America."

Bin Laden was thrown out of Sudan by the authorities in 1996, under U.S. pressure, and Pendergast said he doubted authorities would let his group in again and give up the benefits of cooperation in the U.S.-led war on terror.

Furthermore, although Sudan's hardline Muslim government could be perceived as a potential "ideological ally" of al-Qaida — and bin Laden may still have contacts he could take advantage of — the terrorist group has little clout with the population, he said.

Africa marks 'Malaria Day'

By Ali Sullan
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ZANZIBAR, Tanzania — Zanzibar marked Africa Malaria Day on Tuesday with an appeal for more aid money to control and possibly eliminate the tropical disease, which kills more than 1 million people a year — many of them young children in Africa.

Malaria is spread by mos-

quitoes and causes wracking pain, fever and, if left untreated, death. It is the leading cause of death of those under 5 in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the World Health Organization.

Officials in Zanzibar, a semiautonomous archipelago off the Indian Ocean coast, said they are making strides against the disease. Dr. Salhiya Muhsin, head of the Preventive Services at the

Mnazi Moja Hospital Care and Treatment Center, said the U.S. Agency for International Development has distributed 130,000 insecticide-treated nets.

"We expect to do residual spray to all homes in Zanzibar by next month and distribute more treated nets. But, this exercise needs money. We just appeal for more aid from other donors," Salhiya said.

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