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China Plays Bigger Diplomatic Role in Sudan Conflict

Scott Stearns | The State Department

China is playing a bigger diplomatic role in trying to end hostility between Sudan and South Sudan. The Obama administration says that could help resolve a standoff that has cut Sudanese oil exports.

Most of the recent fighting between Sudan and South Sudan ended when Sudanese troops recaptured the key oil town of Heglig. But the dispute over oil revenue remains, with South Sudan stopping crude production after refusing to pay higher fees to use Sudan's pipelines.

China is the biggest foreign investor in Sudanese oil and is taking a more active role in trying to end the dispute.

Oil and security topped the agenda during South Sudanese President Salva Kiir's visit to Beijing.

Liu Weimin, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, said "We believe oil is the economic lifeline for both Sudan and South Sudan. Maintaining the stability and sustainability of oil cooperation is fundamental to the interests of both countries and is consistent with the interests of Chinese enterprises."

Sudanese oil was a topic of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's strategic and economic dialogue in Beijing. U.S. special envoy Princeton Lyman says Washington is "delighted" by China's role in helping to ease tensions. "They have increasingly recognized that if the political issues in Sudan and between Sudan and South Sudan are not resolved, neither the oil nor their other interests can be served," he said.

During Sudan's long civil war, China backed Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir.

But Beijing is now investing in South Sudan.

John Bradshaw is executive director of the Enough Project to end genocide and crimes against humanity. "The Chinese have recognized that the kind of dynamic they had working with the regime in Khartoum is just no longer sustainable, and they have to have a more balanced approach between Juba and Khartoum to try to bring the two sides together," he said.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at Washington's Cato Institute. He says greater Chinese involvement helps both Sudan and the international community. "If they (the Chinese) see a practical reason to try to solve the Sudan problem, well the U.S. and the Europeans also want to solve that. We can work together as opposed to being at odds," he said.

During his visit to Beijing, South Sudanese President Kiir sought Chinese investment to build an oil pipeline through Kenya to avoid using Khartoum-controlled ports.