

US report describes Sudan as 'strong partner' in war on terrorism

Monday 7 May 2007

By Josh Meyer

May 5, 2007 (WASHINGTON) — Members of the Senate Intelligence Committee on Friday challenged a recent State Department report that described the government of Sudan as a "strong partner in the War on Terror," citing the killing of hundreds of thousands of people in the Darfur region of that country.

The principal killers in Darfur have been militias widely believed to be backed by the Sudanese government. The U.S. government has labeled the killings a genocide.

In a letter Friday, Sens. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Russell D. Feingold (D-Wis.), Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine) and Sheldon Whitehouse (D-R.I.) asked Director of National Intelligence J. Michael McConnell to back up the report's assertion that the Sudanese government had "aggressively pursued terrorist operations directly involving threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Sudan."

They said they wanted details on what actions Sudan had taken in support of U.S. counter-terrorism efforts against Al Qaeda and other groups.

The senators also questioned how Sudan could be considered a strong ally in the counter-terrorism campaign if the same State Department report listed it as a state sponsor of terrorism that provides "critical support to non-state terrorist groups." The department's list of state sponsors of terrorism includes Iran and North Korea.

"We need to understand the basis for this description, especially since some are suggesting that Sudan's cooperation on counter-terrorism is a good reason for the U.S. not to intervene to stop the genocide in Darfur," Wyden said in an interview.

Ross Feinstein, a spokesman for McConnell, said the intelligence director had received the letter Friday and was "currently reviewing it." State Department officials had no comment.

Sudan's ambassador to the United States, John Ukec Lueth Ukec, said Friday that he could not discuss what the country was doing to help fight terrorism. "These are confidential issues," Ukec said. "But it is significant that these U.S. officials know that this government of Sudan has changed."

Ukec also said that the transitional government established two years ago was not involved in the mass killings in Darfur. "What happened a long time ago is not existing, and I invite the senators to come to Khartoum to see the new reality."

The characterization of Sudan as a helpful ally came Monday in the State Department's annual "Country Reports on Terrorism," which is based on information provided by U.S. intelligence agencies.

The report, required by Congress, is designed to give U.S. policymakers, the public and foreign governments a detailed snapshot of global terrorist incidents and trends. It includes sections on whether specific countries are helping U.S. efforts. Countries listed as state sponsors of terrorism are prohibited from receiving most forms of U.S. aid and are subject to other economic and political sanctions.

The report has listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism every year since at least 1993, two years after Osama bin Laden brought his fledgling Al Qaeda organization there. Over the last 14 years, U.S. intelligence officials have detected substantial terrorist activity there. But they also say that in recent years Sudan has proved to be a reliable and important ally.

"They are a damn good partner in the war on terror," said Raphael Perl, an analyst at the Congressional Research Service, the nonpartisan research arm of Congress. "They have cooperated on many, many issues."

Perl applauded the State Department for listing Sudan as being helpful on counter-terrorism matters, even if it remains on the list of state sponsors. He also said the issue of whether Sudan should remain on the blacklist is a "political hot potato" that is separate from Darfur.

"Darfur is not terrorism," Perl said.

(Los Angeles Times)