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**From Texas to Chad: why one rebel fights**

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**By Daniel Pepper, Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor April 20, 2006**

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ALONG THE CHAD-SUDAN BORDER — For someone in a position of great responsibility, Chadian rebel officer Beshir Outman can be disarmingly self-deprecating.

"I know that in America 'Chad' is mostly a person's name," he says, before delving into the problems that drove him to leave a decent job managing logistics for Coca-Cola and join the rebellion that reached Chad's capital last week.

Mr. Outman, a tall, lean 24-year-old who studied English at a Houston community college, offers a rare behind-the-frontlines glimpse into Chad's rebel movement. His brothers and cousins still live comfortably in the suburbs of Houston, where they hold video game marathons and watch "Survivor." But Outman has left that life behind.

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"Most Chadian leaders take care of themselves, their family and their clan," in that order, says Outman, who was interviewed last month near the Sudan-Chad border, before the latest offensive began. As he spoke, preparations for the rebel attacks were under way; a boy of 12 or 13 was packing rounds into a machine gun clip nearby.

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Outman is the First Commandant for Internal Security for the United Front for Democratic Change (FUCD), the main faction of well-armed Chadian rebels who last week fought their way more than 450 miles from their bases on the edge of the war-ravaged Darfur region of western Sudan through their native country towards N'djamena, Chad's capital city.

Only before the country's presidential elections, which have been boycotted by all opposition parties, some of the rebels made it inside the capital last week, but were repelled by forces loyal to Mr. Deby. The rebels say they made a tactical retreat and have repeatedly vowed to oust Deby before presidential elections scheduled for May 3.

Only one faction of the rebel movement, the FUCD has 8,000 fighters, according to its leadership.

In early March, one of their forward military bases on the porous Chad-Sudan border had about 600 fighters, and many of FUCD's top leaders. The camp was filled with young men fishtailing through sandy riverbeds in new Toyota Land Cruisers, beige sacks of rocket-propelled grenades dangling from the sides. Kalashnikovs outnumbered shoes (younger conscripts had flip-flops), which made it easy to find Outman - the only rebel in a thousand miles sporting a pair of beat-up Nikes.

From student to rebel

Outman studied business administration for a year in Quebec City, and then English at a Houston community college for two semesters while living with his relatives. He left the US abruptly in October 2003, when his father, an investment banker-turned-politician from a leading Chadian opposition party, developed health problems.

Upon returning to Chad, Outman held a series of good jobs with large European companies and Coca-Cola doing shipping and logistics. Being a logistics manager came naturally to Outman. He enjoyed the challenge of moving everything from cars to chewing gum across some of the most inhospitable landscapes on the planet.

But as time went on, life in N'Djamena frustrated him. Having tasted life in the US, he grew fed up with being robbed by the capital city's police, which he says is a common occurrence. Chad consistently ranks near the top of Transparency International's list of the world's most corrupt nations, and Outman holds President Deby's government responsible for fostering that widespread corruption.

Gradually, he became convinced the country needed new leadership. Given how Deby last spring pushed through a change to the Constitution that allows him to run for a third term, Outman felt the only way to bring that change was through force. Still, it was no single event that drove him to join the rebels, he says.

Sudan's role

Sudan has been the silent backer of Chad's rebels, until recentlyallowing them to train and launch their attacks from areas of Darfur, in western Sudan. Darfur is infamous for the 3-year-old conflict involving the Sudanese government's brutal response to a tribal uprising, which US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has repeatedly called genocide. Tens of thousands have been killed and around 1.8 million are now displaced, with at least 200,000 living as refugees in Chad.

Outman says it's all a tribal conflict, dismissing its political import and downplaying the humanitarian crisis. But looking at the FUCD rebels, it is hard to dismiss their own tribalism; their rank and file largely draws upon one tribe, the Tama, in opposition to another, the Zaghawa. The FUCD rebels cite the corruption and nepotism of Deby, a Zaghawa, as a source of their ire.

Outman has never seen any of the Sudanese refugee camps in Chad or the displaced persons camps in Sudan. But, to him, the protests on US campuses and letter-writing campaigns to Congress are distracting the world from the more pressing issue in central Africa: the need for revolution in Chad.

At Outman's camp last month, the sense of nervous anticipation for the coming coup attempt was a constant. Morning military exercises began at dawn, followed by long stretches of doing nothing, which meant anything from napping to cleaning one's gun to chatting with friends.

Outman took the military buildup in stride. Boxes of portable air compressors, grenades, artillery rounds, truckloads of spare tires, and all sorts of machinery sat in different piles around the camp.

This reporter came to learn over time with the rebels and meetings with Sudanese intelligence officials that FUCD's plans are partly, if not largely, dictated by powers in Sudan's capital, Khartoum.

'Power comes from the East'

But if Sudan is now supporting the Chadian rebels against Deby's regime, many consider it payback for the Chadian leader's years of support for Sudan's own anti- government rebels, such as the Sudan Liberation Army (both Deby and leaders from the SLA hail from the same Zaghawa tribe). It's all a of bit tit-for-tat on each side of the border, and it seems that these days Sudan and their alleged proxy army - the Chadian rebels - have the upper hand.

"Darfur is like a forest full of cowboys. It's just the justice of the gun out here," Outman says. But it is not just any forest. "Power comes from the East" is a common saying in Chad. It is also a fact. In modern Chad's history every president has either been installed by or forced out of office by rebellions based in Darfur, on Chad's eastern edge. Deby himself launched his 1990 rebellion from Darfur.

Going to the 'Dark Side'

The kindest thing Outman can muster up about Chad's president is a Star Wars analogy: "When Deby was a kid he wanted to do the right thing, to help people. But when he got power he went to the Dark Side."

When asked how they plan to avoid the trap of the Dark Side - the corruption of power that so many other idealistic African revolutionaries have fallen prey to - the responses of the rebel leadership were familiar: We're different, we're fighting for justice and democracy.

The FUCD's top leader, 35-year-old Mohammad Nour, envisions the coup will be followed by an Afghan-style *loya jirga* forum, including traditional leaders from across Chad, to determine the nature of a transitional government, which in turn will develop a timetable for holding democratic elections.

The difference between Mr. Nour and Outman, besides the 10-year age gap and the fact that Outman is educated and has not spent his life in the military, is that Outman has seen what happens in a place like America, where lofty ideals and the democratic experiment are allowed to flourish.

"It's difficult," Outman says while taking a midday break in the shade of a mango tree (at the time of the interview these rebels' immediate concern was not getting hit by hard, green, mango projectiles chucked by monkeys living above).

"But if you think what we can do if we get to the capital ...," he says, listing the ways life in N'djamena would improve, including big highways and Wal-Mart-style shopping centers. "Even if it means eating once a day or whatever - it's the price we have to pay," he says.

Big man on campus?

Accompanying Outman through the rebel camp was like walking the corridors of a high school with the star quarterback, except in this case, some of the admirers prone to saluting him were in their fifties. Outman joked around with young soldiers assigned the most menial tasks and talks politics and said his prayers with the upper echelons of the rebel leadership.

It's not surprising. Mohammad Nour, the rebel leader, is Outman's mother's first cousin. Nour has taken him under his wing, while including a few of his immediate family members in the leadership's hierarchy as well.

But Outman is not a born rebel, politician, or activist. If anything he is a born businessman with a free-market thinker's interest in getting government out of his life. "Most Americans don't know and don't care who is in power in Washington - Condoleezza Rice, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld," he says.

"Freedom in America is the freedom to say I don't [care] about George Bush. Cause everybody has the freedom to mind his own business, right? Am I wrong? I want the same for my country."