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In Sudan, Tide Turns Against the U.S.

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KHARTOUM, the Sudan, April 22 — Several university students, their clenched fists raised in defiance, added their voices to angry chants of "Down, Down, U.S.A.!" at a rally held recently in this gritty, time-worn capital to protest American air strikes against Libya.

One of the students, who gave his name as Rabei, was asked to explain his hostility toward the United States.

"The U.S.A. was Nimeiry's brother," said the youth, all but spitting out the name of Gaafar al-Nimeiry, the Sudanese President whose increasing unpopularity helped lead to his overthrow last April.

"Now we can talk with our hearts and tell the world that Libya is our brother and that the U.S.A. is not the great friend anymore," he said.

The comment speaks to what some Western diplomats and Sudanese Government officials call dramatically and quickly heightening Libyan influence in this huge East African country, at the expense of links to the United States and Egypt.

New Khartoum-Tripoli Ties

Mr. Nimeiry had close ties to both countries and was a staunch opponent of Libya and Ethiopia, both of which were aiding efforts to overthrow him. In the 12 months since Mr. Nimeiry was toppled, the Sudan's transitional military rulers have re-established diplomatic ties and signed a military agreement with Tripoli.

The Libyan leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, switched sides in the Sudan's civil war in the south, lending Soviet-made bombers and other military equipment to the Government in its battle against the Ethiopian-backed rebels. Libya has also given 300,000 metric tons of free oil to this impoverished country, where scores of Sudanese each day crowd around the Libyan People's Bureau in Khartoum to apply for foreign employment.

\$450 Million in U.S. Aid

Western diplomats say Libya has also been active here in less public ways. The diplomats charge that Libyan terrorists are focusing on Americans here. The Western diplomats also say Libyan intelligence operatives have reportedly organized some Sudanese to monitor and harass certain American nationals.

The United States, meanwhile, is the

Sudan's largest aid donor — it gave Khartoum \$450 million last year in economic, famine relief and military assistance — and gives this country more aid than it does to any other African nation except Egypt, although aid to the Sudan is expected to drop.

The United States has long considered the Sudan strategically important, a buffer against Libya for Egypt and other allies in the Middle East. Nevertheless, the United States slowly began to lose its grip on the country after Mr. Nimeiry was overthrown, according to diplomatic sources and Sudanese Government officials.

The sources say one reason for the loss in status is Washington's backing for Mr. Nimeiry in his last years of deepening unpopularity.

A trial of former Government officials who played a role in secretly airlifting thousands of Ethiopian Jews from the Sudan to Israel also fueled anti-American sentiment, they said.

The Sudanese Government used the four-month trial to highlight what it called the failures of Mr. Nimeiry and to look closely at the activities of American officials in the Sudan, most notably Ambassador Hume A. Horan. In the trial, which was broadcast over radio and television, the Attorney General charged that the airlift was supervised by the United States Embassy here and that the Central Intelligence Agency also played a role.

Air Strikes 'Last Straw'

After these and other events came the air strikes against Libya, which one Western diplomat characterized as "the last straw for some Sudanese."

"While all these things were going on, Libya was shoring up its position," he said. "I'm almost surprised that America's position is not worse than it is, under the circumstances."

"But the Sudanese have to ask themselves what Libya can actually do for them," he said. "I think they will discover that only the United States has the resources to truly help them in solving their huge and numerous problems."

The Sudan, Africa's largest country, has a history of shifting alliances. Mr. Nimeiry came to power in 1969 in a Soviet-backed coup that was inspired by the Egyptian revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser.

He later called for a reduction in Soviet influence, leading to a coup attempt against him in 1971.

Colonel Qaddafi later lashed out at

Mr. Nimeiry for failing to join in a union with Libya and Egypt and began a drive to overthrow him. The Libyan leader helped finance and organize a coup attempt against Mr. Nimeiry in 1976. A principal figure in the attempt, staged from Libya, was Sadiq el-Mahdi, who is expected to become Prime Minister of the Sudan's new civilian Government. Egyptian troops played a major role in helping Mr. Nimeiry crush the 1976 coup attempt.

The Cairo-Tripoli Balance

The military coup last year opened the way for a Libyan challenge, which was aided by Cairo's decision to grant asylum to Mr. Nimeiry.

Egypt, which has been accusing Libya for years of efforts at terrorist activity in Egypt, has been working to strengthen its ties with the Sudan. Relations between the two are considered far better than they were in the first six months after the military Government seized power.

Earlier this month, Egypt reportedly sent to Khartoum a free shipment of arms; there was another gift arms shipment of \$14 million last year.

While many Sudanese in the north say their country is moving away from the United States because of its anti-Arab attitude and failure to assist in the civil war, others consider the recent shifts the natural result of a push toward democracy and freedom of choice after nearly 16 years of authoritarian rule. They say the United States is, as Hussein Malik, a professor of engineering at the University of Khartoum, says, "overreacting terribly."

The U.S. Investment

But some Western officials believe differently, pointing to America's huge investment in the country and Libya-directed anti-Americanism that led to the evacuation of about 300 Americans from Khartoum this month after the shooting of an American Embassy employee after the Libya air strikes.

The United States influence may slip further, they say, because the Sudan's recent successful harvest, coupled with coming worldwide cuts in American aid, will translate into less assistance for the Sudan.

"Libya is ingratiating itself with the Sudan, which is making the mistake of saying, 'Look, Libya is the only country doing what we ask,'" one diplomat said. "And the Arab solidarity and influence cuts deeply. Yes, the tide is running the other way. How long and hard it runs remains to be seen."