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Preliminary Report

CHAD: VETERAN PRESIDENT OF CHAD IDRIS DEBY DIES IN BATTLEFIELD 20th APRIL 2021

Incident:

On Tuesday 20th April, 2021, a statement released by the Chadian military informed that President Idriss Deby Itno succumbed to injuries he sustained “on the battlefield” while fighting rebels. The statement read, "Marshal Idriss Deby Itno, as he did each time that the institutions of the republic were gravely threatened, took control of operations during the heroic combat led against the terrorists from Libya. He was wounded during the fighting and died once repatriated to N'Djamena."

President Deby, who often joined soldiers on the battlefield in his military fatigues, visited troops on the frontline on Monday 19th April, after rebels based across the northern frontier in Libya advanced hundreds of kms south toward the capital N'Djamena.



Photo. Idriss Deby Itno

The 68-year-old ruler, in power for 30 years, had won a sixth term in presidential elections held on 11th April, 2021. The poll prompted an invasion by a Libya-based rebel group called the Force for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), which military officials had said was repulsed at the weekend.

Following the election victory that was boycotted by many opposition parties, officials informed that the President would not give a victory speech and revealed that he had travelled to the frontlines to take charge of military operations against the rebels.

In the aftermath of the announcement of his death, the country's military suspended the constitution, dissolved parliament and abolished the government, replacing it with a transitional military council headed by Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno – a 37-year-old son of the deceased president and a 4-star general who was also a Commander of the Presidential Guard.



Photo. Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno

Meanwhile, the army through its spokesman, Azem Bermendao Agouna, in a statement on national TV called for a dialogue and peace to all Chadians in and outside the country to continue to build the country together. He said that “the national council of transition reassures the Chadian people that all measures have been taken to guarantee peace, security and the republican order”.

President Deby came to power in 1990 following an armed rebellion against the Hissen Habre government. He was one of Africa's longest-serving leaders.

Implications for the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism:

President Deby faced repeated insurgencies in the country's desert north and terrorist attacks in its Lake Chad region. He was also dealing with rising public discontent over his management of the country's oil wealth and crackdowns on opponents.

On Sunday, 18th April, the rebels said they had captured garrisons near Chad's northern borders with Niger and Libya "without resistance".

Although the rebel group, FACT, acknowledged on Monday that it suffered losses on Saturday, it said its forces were back on the move on Sunday and Monday before learning of the death of President Deby. They are likely to be animated by the development and could relaunch attacks. The group is based in Eastern Libya, where it allegedly has a non-aggression pact with Khalifa Haftar - the military strongman who controls much of the country's east.

The death of President Deby could potentially deepen Chad's problems and unravel the growing instability of the Sahel region, where a complex combination of economic, social, political and environmental factors is fueling a series of crises.

In addition to the fallout from the death of the President and the installation of a military council contrary to the constitutional provision, any instability in Chad will certainly have serious ramifications on the security situation in the region particularly the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin and the greater Central Africa.

The Chadian army, considered one of the best and well trained in the region, is playing a crucial role in the fight against terrorism and violent extremism in both the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin. Its forces constitute an important segment in the fight against Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the Lake Chad Basin as well as al-Qaida and ISIS-affiliated groups in the Sahel mainly the Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

The Chadian army is the main force for the G-5 Sahel Joint Force and in February this year, President Deby announced the deployment of 1,200 troops to complement 5,100 Operation Barkhane French soldiers operating in the area. France has headquartered its extensive Sahel counter-terrorism operations in the Chadian capital, N'Djamena.

As early as 2013, Chadian troops were already fighting in Adrar Ifogha in Mali against terrorists and in the Liptako-Gourma area as late as 2021. In addition to this significant role aimed at achieving the objectives of the G-5 Sahel Joint Force, Chadian troops also provide assistance to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

In 2015, Chad joined a regional offensive in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) comprising Cameroon, Nigeria and Niger against Nigeria-based Boko Haram jihadists. The role of the Chadian army in disorienting and debasing Boko Haram leading to loss of territories the latter once led cannot be over emphasized.



Chadian soldiers stop near the front line in the war against Boko Haram in Gambaru, February 26, 2015.

Recall “Operation Wrath of Boma” launched by Chad following an attack by Boko Haram on a military base on 23rd March, 2020 that killed 98 Chadian soldiers, in which the terrorist group lost nearly 1,000 of its fighters and several of their bases destroyed in Chad. Five bases in Niger and Nigeria were destroyed as part of “Operation Wrath Boma.”

The family succession and continuing presence of the military at the heart of power will allay the apprehension of allies within and outside Africa about any serious insecurity in Chad or decisions to vary the country’s role in the region with respect to security. The swift announcement of the establishment of a military council and naming his son Mahamat as head of state however indicates regime continuity.

This probably aims to counter any coup-making efforts from within the security establishment and to reassure Chad's international partners that they can still count on the country for its continued contributions to international counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel and beyond.

However, the taking over of the reins of government by the military council, contrary to the provisions of the Chadian constitution, is itself considered a coup by some analysts.

Be that as it may, and in spite of the closure of the country’s borders and imposition of dusk to dawn curfew, the situation could change if the rebel attacks intensify and schism emerges within the military over the transition. Any deterioration of internal security will compel the transitional government to withdraw some of its troops in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin to augment local forces.

In deed prior to the untimely demise of President Deby, Chad had announced plans to withdraw its troops in Niger and Mali back to the country. Should it be compelled to withdraw its troops particularly in the Sahel, it would disrupt the security arrangement in the G-5 Sahel at least in the short term and could exacerbate the already fragile security situation in the region.

Terrorist groups will also seek to exploit any vulnerability in Chad to advance their agenda.

Recommendations:

As the security of Chad is intricately linked to the security in the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, the countries in the region need to cooperate with the transitional military council to ensure stability on the ground and, in this regard, the statement issued by Executive Secretariat of the G5 Sahel is worth noting.

While it is likely that Chad may be suspended from the AU due to the manner in which the transition was executed, by defying the constitutional provisions, such suspension may be considered at the political level as any suspension of the country in security matters will have dire consequences for the stability of the region.

While Chad tries to navigate through this transition, countries in the Sahel particularly Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso as well as those in the Lake Chad Basin particularly Nigeria, should endeavour to protect the fault lines until the country is able to consolidate its peace and security issues.