

Chinese President Finalizes Kenya Oil Deal

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Chinese President Hu Jintao signed an oil exploration contract with Kenya on Friday, the latest in a series of deals designed to keep Africa's natural resources flowing to China's booming economy.

But critics said China, in pursuit of energy, is enriching corrupt and abusive regimes.

The deal allows for China's state-controlled offshore oil and gas company, CNOOC Ltd., to prospect for oil in Kenya, which is just beginning to drill its first exploratory wells on the borders of Sudan and Somalia and in coastal waters. No oil has been produced yet, and there has been no formal estimate of the possible reserves.

China has a keen interest in Africa's oil and minerals as its economy heads into a fourth year of 10 percent growth: Earlier this week, Hu signed a series of major business deals with Nigeria, Africa's biggest oil producer.

China's hunt for African oil has generated criticism. Unlike Western countries also interested in Africa's markets and resources, China steers away from pressuring nations on their human and political rights records. Critics say China is abetting pariah nations by doing business with countries like Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Human Rights Watch executive director Kenneth Roth wrote in an International Herald Tribune opinion piece on the eve of Hu's trip, which also took him to Washington and Saudi Arabia, that "as China's quest for new markets and natural resources spreads around the world, its de facto support for repression has become increasingly common."

"When Western governments try to use economic pressure to secure human rights improvements, China's no-strings rule gives dictators the means to resist," Roth wrote.

Jian-Chao Liu, a spokesman for the Chinese delegation in Kenya, said Friday that his nation's dealings in Africa are aimed at "improving the livelihoods of people in these countries."

"We don't think (they are) aimed at providing any kind of excuse for human rights abuses in these countries," he said.

Roth singled out China's investment in Sudan, whose government is accused of urging militias from nomadic Arab tribes to attack ethnic African farming villages in the Darfur region a charge it denies. The conflict has caused about 180,000 deaths most from disease and hunger and displaced 2 million people.

A veto-wielding U.N. Security Council member, China itself the object of much human rights criticism has offered key diplomatic support to Sudan and other countries shunned by the West.

"In our dealings with African countries we have all along followed the principle that we have to respect ... the political model followed by African countries," Hu said Friday, appearing with Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki on the lawn of the State House.

Hu said his government follows a policy of "non-interference" in other countries' affairs.

Kibaki, who faces mounting pressure to respond to allegations of high-level corruption in his own administration, said he was satisfied with China's approach.

"Africa will do trade with China and there is no problem whatsoever," Kibaki said.

China's oil firms began investing abroad in the late 1990s, after double-digit economic growth outstripped supplies from domestic fields. In the last five years, the communist nation's trade with Africa has grown fourfold, to \$40 billion in 2005.

And the continent has become a new market for Chinese exporters.

The boom has caused some problems in areas besides human rights: Africans complain about being flooded with cheap Chinese goods that kill livelihoods here.