Darfur: The World's Most Famous Humanitarian Disaster

written by Steven Fake, Kevin Funk | May 28, 2010

THE EMERGENCE OF DARFUR as a cause célèbre in the West has been one of the more notable propaganda achievements in recent memory. Though the Darfur region of Sudan has been the scene of great human suffering, a death toll of perhaps 300,000 and a population of displaced persons numbering well over 2 million qualifies Darfur as serious but — regrettably — hardly unique for the scale of its violence in the first decade of the 21st century. Nonetheless, the appellation of "world's worst humanitarian disaster" was regularly affixed to the boilerplate at the end of wire service dispatches about the conflict, long after the worst of the violence had abated. The fact is that Darfur was, from Washington's point of view, the ideal public relations opportunity: Sino-Arab villainy against a helpless population.

Condemnations of the atrocities implicitly cast the denouncer in favorable terms, and the U.S. government took the lead in displaying vocal outrage over the crimes in Darfur. The effect was to convey a meaning most consumers of the U.S. press could hardly miss: whatever mistakes have been made, in Iraq or elsewhere, the United States is a beacon of light contrasting against the stark evil in Sudan.

While such public posturing is hardly novel, Darfur did occasion one notable innovation in thought control and agenda-setting: a vibrant grassroots advocacy network. Typified by the Save Darfur Coalition, well funded activism around Darfur has been particularly successful at recruiting high school and college students, who might have otherwise drifted into more subversive organizing. However, momentum around the topic has eroded in recent years as Darfur has faded from the news, along with Iraq.

The Darfur Rebellion

SINCE DARFUR BEGAN GRABBING headlines in 2003 for daring rebel attacks upon government outposts, the Muslim western region of Sudan quickly became synonymous with massive war crimes, and even "genocide." Due to the counterinsurgency campaign Khartoum launched in response, violence against civilians exploded, with death tolls peaking in the period through mid-2005, and sporadic attacks continuing to the present. Low-level conflict with the rebels endures, even as peace agreements and truces come and go.

Millions of displaced villagers continue to reside in camps that arose at the start of the strife and quickly mushroomed. Some camps now outrank many cities in size, though certainly not in basic services. Living conditions are harsh, and many are eager to return to what is left of their homes, but do not feel safe to do so. Some fled to the capital. Khartoum's periphery is lined with massive slums housing the marginalized from Darfur and southern Sudan. Other Darfuris are refugees, residing just across the border in neighboring Chad or emigrating to Egypt and beyond.

The rebels were originally comprised of two groupings, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), based among the Fur, Zaghawa, and Masalit ethnic groups, and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), drawing from the Kobe clan of the Zaghawa and linked to Islamists that had fallen out with Khartoum. Available indications are that the rebels had substantial popular support, at least in a general way. Their grievances were deeply felt and longstanding: a lack of economic development

and a share of political power. Dating back to the pernicious years of British colonialism, infrastructure development has been concentrated in Khartoum while Darfur remains desperately poor, lacking all but the most rudimentary schools and medical facilities.

Similar underdevelopment pervades most of the periphery of Sudan — only the central areas have seen substantive evidence of the country's oil wealth. As Harry Verhoeven noted in the *Guardian* (UK) on April 12, "Inequality in Sudan as a whole continues to widen: while Khartoum's elite rubs shoulders with foreign investors in posh hotels, parts of Jonglei state [in South Sudan] are experiencing malnutrition levels that are three times higher than global emergency indicators."

The regime of President Omar al-Bashir, motivated by a concern to avoid relying on the army, which had a substantial Darfuri presence in its ranks, implemented a counterinsurgency plan that relied instead upon organizing paramilitary forces from those Darfuris who could be enticed by the prospect of sacking villages and keeping the loot. The strategy relied upon making opportunistic use of existing tensions between nomadic pastoral and settled farming tribes. A division between Arab and African-identifying tribes received considerable attention in the West and synchronized well with the "War on Terror" paradigm but was deeply misleading. The Janjaweed, as the paramilitaries became known, were drawn from Arab-identifying tribes in Darfur — though only a very small minority of the Arab tribes participated. Many Darfuri Arabs feel triply victimized: underprivileged within the region, demonized internationally, and ignored by humanitarian groups.

Negotiations Limp Forward

INTERNAL DISAGREEMENTS AND POWER struggles among the rebels led them to devolve into a dizzying array of factions – a process encouraged by skillful manipulation from Khartoum. Currently, three groupings are prominent: JEM, the faction of the SLA led by Abdul Wahid Mohamed al-Nur (SLA-Nur), and the newly formed agglomeration of small factions know as the Liberation and Justice Movement, which promptly announced a ceasefire agreement with Khartoum in March. The accord followed on the heels of a tentative peace agreement and ceasefire Khartoum reached with JEM in February in Doha. Neither agreement contains much prospect for leading to a lasting, comprehensive peace.

More notable is the concurrent normalization with neighboring Chad. There have been previous détentes, none of which held for long, though the current incarnation seems more likely to stand the test of time. The border between the two countries — closed since the outbreak of hostilities in Darfur — was reopened in April. This development may modestly improve the prospects for peace in Darfur since it removes the destabilizing influence of Chad's patronage of the JEM rebel group and Khartoum's counter-maneuvers.

In late February, amid ongoing negotiations with the JEM, the militarily strongest of the rebel groups, Sudan carried out an assault upon the territory of al-Nur's rebel faction, long the most stubborn holdout for substantial concessions from Khartoum. In that context, the attack upon Jebel Marra was clearly an attempt to punish al-Nur for his intransigence and to force him to the negotiating table. As the longtime journalist on Sudan Julie Flint wrote in *Middle East International* on March 2, the attack was "reminiscent of the early days of the war, with aircraft, infantry and militias attacking the mountain stronghold of the man who for the past four years has refused to participate in the internationally-sponsored peace talks currently taking place in Doha." Several hundred people were reportedly killed and tens of thousands forced to flee.

Yet after several years of sustained coverage of the Darfur conflict, the Western press is no

longer interested. Flint bemoaned the "near-total silence from the international community," asking, "where are the voices of international protest?"[1] The White House, traditionally so vocal on the region, has fallen silent. With the occupation of Iraq off the radar and the delicate management of the looming division of Sudan to attend to, Washington's agenda has shifted. The bloodshed in Darfur is a propaganda opportunity that has run its course.

Abdul Wahid al-Nur, ensconced in Paris, has frustrated many observers by steadfastly rejecting negotiations with Khartoum, in Doha and elsewhere, until the government lays down its arms. Yet Sean Brooks of the Save Darfur Coalition reported in *Huffington Post* on March 23 that in a recent tour of Darfur he heard repeatedly from camp leaders and other Darfuris that they feel inadequately represented in Doha. Some people were aware and supportive of the Doha Declaration signed by 170 leaders last November that outlined collective demands for the negotiations; however, many individuals had not heard of the document and/or felt alienated from the formal processes of the mediators to include these voices in the talks.

Al-Nur reportedly retains considerable popularity among many displaced Darfuris, presumably an endorsement of his negotiating stance. However, that principled position may be informed in part by a misplaced faith in outside powers. Washington's hollow grandstanding against Khartoum's massive atrocities has not been merely inconsequential — it has raised the hopes of victims and may have impacted the negotiating posture of rebels under the illusion that they have powerful backers. The point has even been tepidly alluded to by the doyen of politically expedient moralizing, Nicholas Kristof, who admits, "Did the movement leave Darfuris with unrealistic expectations? Maybe."[2] The sense of betrayal felt by those Darfuris expecting tangible support to accompany the international publicity has been one of the more wrenching aspects of the conflict to contemplate.

Saving Darfur or Feel-Good Activism?

DARFUR HAS BEEN ILL-SERVED by the establishment-friendly activist leadership around the issue. As a consequence of the ideological commitment to the beneficence of Washington, activist demands have generally been weak and ineffective, if not counterproductive. From calling on Washington to declare the bloodbath "genocide" — a legally dubious determination revolving around academic distinctions — to demanding that the UN replace African Union (AU) peacekeepers while ignoring the inadequate logistical and financial support provided to them by the developed nations, the status quo in Darfur has been little altered.

Notably, developed nations failed to provide the peacekeepers with the bare levels of support needed for them to have any hope of success. Some four years after the first calls were made for the donation of transport helicopters for the peacekeeping operations, five choppers, representing about a quarter of the minimal number needed, were finally made available in February. One notes to the point of boredom that activist groups have largely failed to press Western governments to rectify the starvation levels of funding and logistical support afforded to both the peacekeepers and aid groups.

In fact, peacekeepers cannot even defend themselves — in March a patrol of 63 peacekeepers was ambushed. The peacekeepers were detained and robbed of their weapons, vehicles, and equipment before being released. One resident of a displaced persons camp recently bitterly dismissed the ineffective UN-AU forces as "a tourism army."[3]

Predictably, the effect of longstanding U.S. sanctions on Khartoum's behavior in Darfur has been somewhere between nil and undetectable while permitting blame to be deflected onto China. Meanwhile, with hardly a peep from Save Darfur, Washington has quietly protected leading participants in the counterinsurgency policies in Darfur, including Major General Salah Abdallah Gosh, "an architect of the genocide," in the words of John Prendergast and Don Cheadle, from

inclusion on a list of individuals facing UN sanctions. These figures have been repeatedly welcomed to Washington for meetings on such matters as collaboration with the CIA on intelligence operations in Iraq, an obvious organizing point that has been somehow absent from Save Darfur's multimillion-dollar ad campaigns.

Prior to taking office, virtually all the major officials of the Obama administration had been aggressive proponents of stopping Khartoum's slaughter in Darfur. In many cases the measures proposed by figures such as Joseph Biden, Susan Rice, and Hillary Clinton would have risked worsening the humanitarian situation. However, the likely outcomes were beside the point as the hawkish posturing was not seriously intended and merely meant to placate the uncritical Save Darfur leadership, which was accomplished with great ease.

Nor have prominent activists effectively responded to international attempts to seek justice in Darfur. Arrest warrants for President Bashir and other Khartoum officials issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes in Darfur have languished. Bashir responded to the issuance of his warrant by expelling a number of foreign aid groups in March 2009. Sudanese aid organizations largely succeeded in filling the gaps, though not without being forced to divert some of their focus away from long-term development projects. Washington, strongly opposed to the ICC in principle, has made a narrow exception for the Court's pursuit of the Sudanese officials, but refused to contemplate submitting itself to ICC jurisdiction — the one action that would have a real impact. As a consequence, pressure upon Bashir is diminished. Yet no campaign has arisen to demand that the United States ratify the Rome Statute. Unlike Save Darfur advocates, the world has not failed to notice the glaring hypocrisy.

Genuine assistance from Washington would take the form of reducing hypocrisy — for a start, by submitting to ICC jurisdiction and halting its alliances with Ethiopia, Uganda, and Rwanda — and providing more substantive aid by better supporting humanitarian and peacekeeping operations, cutting ties with the Khartoum intelligence apparatus, and pushing for peace talks that fully include Darfuri civil society.

U.S.-Sudan Relations Under Obama

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION has continued Bush White House policies toward Sudan in broad strokes. This maintains the bipartisan consensus on Sudan policy, with most variations reflecting changing circumstances. Relations were at a nadir during the Clinton years. Occasional indications of a shift towards rapprochement and normalization with Khartoum from the Bush Administration never materialized. However, the signals from the Obama White House point toward an acceleration of the thaw. After meeting with National Congress Party officials in April 2009, Obama's special envoy for Sudan, retired Maj. Gen. J. Scott Gration, expressed optimism about relations between the two nations and said of the Khartoum government, "I'm very encouraged to have a new friend, to have someone who we can work with."[4] At a campaign rally in April, Bashir went so far as to proclaim, in regards to his National Congress Party, that "Even America is becoming an NCP member. No one is against our will."

Elsewhere, Gration expressed his views on how to approach Khartoum and the Darfur conflict: "We've got to think about giving out cookies… Kids, countries — they react to gold stars, smiley faces, handshakes, agreements, talk, engagement." The comment elicited scorn from the activist establishment — not for its striking paternalism, but rather for his supposed naïveté about the depth of Khartoum's evil. The standard ideological assumption that Washington wears a white hat persists.

Nonetheless, the broad outlines of Washington's policy goals are not difficult to surmise. One principal aim is the emergence of a loyal ally in the oil-rich and strategically located future nation of

South Sudan. The United States is providing close to $1 billion in aid to Sudan annually — a sum that is largely dedicated to funding infrastructure construction and the training of police and military forces in the South.

The April 2010 national elections were an important prerequisite in the process that will culminate in a southern referendum on independence next January. However, it was widely felt by southerners and diplomats that any change in government in Khartoum would endanger the referendum. Thus, Washington strongly backed the national elections, contributing $100 million in logistical aid, while remaining mute on irregularities in the polling preparations.

Victory for Bashir in the April ballot was widely forecast. Opposition parties are weak and divided. The strongest opponent, the southern-based Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), exhibited an indecisive approach to the elections. The Sudan Communist Party, once one of the strongest in the Arab-African world and reflective of a vibrant labor movement, has been reduced to ineffectiveness and chose to boycott the election.

Even by the low standards of liberal democratic systems, the elections were a deeply flawed exercise in popular expression. Problems in the South, under SPLM-control, were no less serious than in the North but were much less publicized. Still, reflecting the warming relations with Khartoum, Gration expressed his "confidence that the elections… would be as free and as fair as possible."

Abuses in the South are not the only violations of democratic norms in the region to pass with little notice. Conspicuously, the repressive climate surrounding May elections in Ethiopia and August elections in Rwanda has received minimal attention despite little prospect of any semblance of democracy emerging from the rituals. Indeed, the electoral atmosphere in Ethiopia, where the West has real leverage, is far worse than in Sudan. On March 24, Human Rights Watch mildly observed, "The country's principal foreign donors — the World Bank, United States, United Kingdom, and European Union — have been very timid in their criticisms of Ethiopia's deteriorating human rights situation." Coverage of these findings in the U.S. press was negligible. It is difficult to avoid noticing the starkly different treatment accorded to loyal allies of Washington.

Few observers doubted Bashir's victory in the elections and, indeed, irregularities benefiting him may well have been redundant. The media has been tightly controlled for years in northern Sudan, where the bulk of the population resides. Even some southerners supported a Bashir victory — not out of personal affection but with the aim of smoothing the way to the referendum on southern independence.

The Future of Sudan

THE POSSIBILITY OF SUBSTANTIAL VIOLENCE related to the referendum is very real. Outbreaks of ethnic fighting in southern Sudan have already led to over 2,000 violent deaths last year, surpassing the toll for Darfur in the same period. Just last fall, the Chief of General Staff of the military wing of the SPLM forecast a 50 percent likelihood of a reigniting of war with Bashir's regime in the North.

To prepare for independence, the South has been busily rearming itself — largely in an effort to deter any attempt by the North to seize the oil fields. Washington and its allies, Kenya and Ethiopia, have assisted in this by providing training and support and serving as conduits for weaponry. The aid is not without historical irony — the United States became the principal backer of the northern-based Nimeiri dictatorship in Sudan which provoked the relaunching of the North-South civil war in 1983, a conflict that ultimately killed some 2 million people before concluding in a 2005 peace agreement. Levels of military aid reached such heights that a senior Sudanese official called it an

“air bridge” of weaponry from Washington to Khartoum. The U.S. role was decisive in allowing the unpopular Nimeiri to remain in power as long as he did. Tellingly, the dictator was finally overthrown in 1985 by massive street demonstrations while he was away on a visit to Washington. The entire episode is little remembered outside Sudan, even on the left.

Historically, governments in Sudan have tended to fall when populations in the major urban areas feel the pinch of economic contractions and become restive. The current oil wealth has strengthened the Bashir regime in the last decade; a situation that may change in the wake of the looming loss of South Sudan and direct access to its oil, though the outcome can scarcely be predicted. As for Darfur, its peoples remain without genuine friends in the international community. The prospects for peace are perhaps not quite so dim as in the past, though justice remains nothing but a depressingly distant mirage.

Footnotes

1. Julie Flint, “The War for Jebel Marra,” *Making Sense of Sudan* blog at the *Social Science Research Council*, March 11, 2010.
2. Nicholas Kristof, “Voices on Genocide Prevention,” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* speaker series, March 18, 2010.
3. Sean Brooks, “Protection, Trust and UNAMID in Darfur,” *Save Darfur Coalition*, March 24, 2010./

4. We are indebted to Jim Remsen for drawing our attention to this statement from Gration.