

Ethnic Cleansing in Sudan

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May 26, 2004

In the western Sudan, you can drive for 100 kilometers without seeing a single soul. What you will see is burning village after burning village. The villages have been attacked by combined forces of the troops and aircraft of the Sudanese government and militia created by the same government. They kill the men, rape the women, destroy mosques, destroy foodstocks, and poison the wells, sometimes with corpses of those they have killed.

1 The Crisis

Estimates of the number killed so far range from 10,000 to 50,000. Over one million people have been displaced. The prospects are that 100's of thousands of people will die from direct attack, disease and starvation unless the situation is reversed.

It's all happening in the Darfur region of western Sudan. Darfur is large (the size of France), harsh, and inaccessible. The rainy season is about to begin, rendering much of the area impassable. If the checks were cut for aid today, it would be 4 months until help reached the area even if the killing stopped.

The trigger was a rebellion in early 2003. Its initial success led the government to a counterattack whose goal appears to be to clear the entire area of its "African" population. The government is "Arab"; both sides are Muslim. This racial distinction was not salient before the present conflict.

The government has denied reporters, aid workers, and human rights observers access to the region. A nominal cease-fire has not affected the situation on the ground, and in any event expires today.

This is the world's largest humanitarian crisis, and time is running out.

2 Genocide?

Whether the monstrous events constitute genocide matters, because the U.S. and most other governments are obligated to act to prevent genocide.

Human Rights Watch, one of the first to raise the alarm, judges that since the intent is to displace people rather than kill them, the atrocities do not rise to the level of genocide.

There does, however, appear to be a strong case that they do. Here's part of the legal definition of genocide:

Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:

1. Killing members of the group;
2. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
3. Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;

The direct killing is apparently not of sufficient scale to satisfy the first item. However, the atrocities seem to me (and some commentators) to satisfy both 2 and 3. In legal interpretations of 2, both rape and deportation receive explicit mention as falling under the definition. The burning of villages, poisoning of wells, destruction of food and crops, and obstruction of food aid all fall under 3.

3 Politics

The U.S. has taken the most vigorous position of any major country. Bush has publicly condemned the atrocities, and his administration has done so repeatedly. It has tried to bring the issue before the UN Security Council. The House of Representatives has held hearings on Darfur.

The U.S. has direct leverage over the Sudanese government in the form of aid it has offered, and could withhold.

The aid was originally offered to end a conflict between the government in Sudan and groups in the South. That long-standing conflict, now apparently on the verge of resolution, complicates the picture in several ways.

First, some parties, particularly the European Union, are reluctant to endanger that settlement by pressing about the new situation in western Sudan. Second, the end of hostilities in the south may have freed up government and militia forces to attack in the west.

Finally, the original Bush interest in Sudan grew out of the interest of evangelical Christians in attacks on Christian in the south.

The African Union has been mostly silent, and recently acted to place Sudan on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. This is one of the reasons the Commission's response has been anemic; it has even buried some of its own reports on the situation in Darfur.

As a result, the U.N. as a body has been very slow to take up the issue. Just yesterday the Security Council finally passed a resolution expressing deep concern and calling for Sudan to permit an international monitoring force. Individual U.N. officials have made strong statements about Darfur. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, speaking on the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, said that reports from Darfur

leave me with a deep sense of foreboding. Whatever term it uses to describe the situation, the international community cannot stand idle. . . . It is vital that international humanitarian workers and human rights experts be given full access to the region, and to the victims, without further delay. If that is denied, the international community must be prepared to take swift and appropriate action. By “action” in such situation I mean a continuum of steps, which may include military action.

Sudan denies it is doing anything wrong.

4 What Can You Do?

I am writing this letter because, while watching a show on the Rwandan genocide I was incredulous that the world had stood by while 800,000 were murdered. Then I asked myself what I had done at the time. Nothing. I was dimly aware that something bad was happening over there, but that was it.

I am determined to do better this time, and I hope that you will join me in sounding the alarm.

The most important thing you can do is get the word out. Tell everyone you know this is going on. Iraq has driven virtually all other international news out.

Contact your Congressional representatives, your Senators, even your unelected President, and ask for action: lean on Sudan and lean on the UN to take up the issue.

Contact the media and tell them to cover this.

Contact the Sudanese government to let them know the world is watching.

Contact the U.N. and governments in Africa to ask them to get on the ball.

5 Afterthoughts

5.1 The U. N.

This crisis once again exposes the need for a standing international force capable of intervening to stop human rights abuses. However, lack of capability is not the only thing holding the U.N. back. So the crisis also exposes the weakness of the current U.N. structure.

5.2 Another Somalia?

The U.S. was reluctant to get involved in Rwanda because of the immediately preceding failure in Somalia. The bodies hanging from a bridge in Fallujah almost precisely mirror the bodies dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, the defining image of the Somalian intervention. So, in somewhat similar ways,

the current failure in Iraq may be an obstacle to action on Sudan. However, there are numerous differences.

Most importantly, the Sudanese government has responded to economic carrots and sticks, so that military options are not the only option for influencing the situation.

Second, while Somalia made the U.S. reluctant to intervene, our current war in Iraq appears to have stretched the U.S. military so thin that it may be difficult to spare any forces (as far as I know, that hasn't even been contemplated).

Third, the U.S.'s gross violations of international law both in going to war in Iraq and in our subsequent conduct, disrespect for allies and the U.N., one-sided favoritism for Israel's occupation of Palestine, and punishing sanctions on Iraq all combine to make our appeals for international action to protect human rights ring hollow. By some reports, the appointment of Sudan to the Human Rights Commission was done as a way of putting a thumb in the eye of the U.S. for its actions.

Finally, as I will argue in a moment, the proper form of intervention is multilateral, not unilateral.

5.3 Intervention

Intervention in the name of human rights is suspect to many. First, international law and the U.N. both declare sovereignty and human rights sacrosanct. When they are in conflict, one must make uncomfortable judgements. Second, many people fear creating any opening for violations of sovereignty based on human rights. They observe, correctly, that powerful countries, particularly the U.S. may use human rights in the future, as they have in the past, as a justification for invasions that really spring from other motives. Third, some groups that claim to be left-wing take the extreme position, apparently motivated by an analysis that U.S. imperialism is the world's leading problem, that any U.S. intervention is bad, and that any person or country hated by the U.S. government must be good. The former premise (US imperialism the worst problem) is defensible, but the latter (opponents of the U.S. are good) is grotesque. Many opponents of U.S. interventions, having argued against violations of sovereignty in an absolute way, find themselves in a box.

The appropriate response to these concerns is not to oppose all intervention, but to oppose unilateral U.S. military intervention while supporting multilateral intervention when needed. By multilateral I mean more than Bush's "coalition of the willing." I mean an actually existing body such as the U.N., European Union/NATO, African Union, Organization of American States, etc. I believe the intervention in Yugoslavia met this test; intervention in Iraq failed it. None of these multilateral bodies are perfect. The U.S. has too much sway in some. Most seem much too slow to respond to major human rights violations or humanitarian crises. The fact that most are organizations of states (many of which are not democratic) makes them too partial to sovereignty; for that reason some have proposed a parallel world body composed of directly elected representatives from people, conceived of as world citizens. That seems worth exploring.

For now, the choices are no action, unilateral action, or multilateral action. The last seems the best.

There also are a number of logical fallacies in the case against intervention. It is popular to argue that the U.S. has been inconsistent or selective in its concern for human rights. Many enemies (Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Manuel Noriega) were former best buddies of the U.S. government, even of the same officials who later called them monsters. It is also popular to show that the real motives for an intervention are other than the advertised ones. Or one can show that the U.S. has done similarly bad things. While such charges, if true (and they often are) should give one pause, they don't really prove that intervention is a bad thing. The atrocities claimed are often all too real. The proper issue is not whether those who would intervene have pure hearts or records, but whether intervention is a good idea or not.

It is, of course, not quite so simple. For the bad faith often affects the intervention itself. People were being killed and tortured in Iraq, but because of the bad faith behind the intervention, they are being killed and tortured now by the U.S. It seems likely that genuine multilateralism would make this less likely.

In short, we live in an imperfect world. This seems to me an insufficient excuse to ignore atrocities.

6 Resources

6.1 Human Rights Watch www.hrw.org.

Report on Darfur: <http://hrw.org/reports/2004/sudan0504/>

Darfur page: <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/darfur/index.htm>

Case Law on Genocide: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2004/ij/> (from Rwanda and Yugoslavia).

6.2 Articles

http://www.inthesetimes.com/site/main/article/genocide_in_sudan/

<http://www.msf.org/countries/page.cfm?articleid=804C2249-710E-41D1-92842560A21F8C57>

<http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=index&cid=723>

6.3 Contacts

- Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan
2210 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20008
Tel: (202) 338-8565 Fax: (202) 667-2406
info@sudanembassy.org
- Secretary-General of the U.N.
email: inquiries@un.org
(I couldn't find any other contact info on their web site!).

- African Union <http://www.africa-union.org/home/Welcome.htm>
Chairperson H.E. Mr. Alpha Oumar Konare KonareAO@africa-union.org

Executive Secretariat of the OAU to the United Nations New York, USA
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africanunion@un.int

- US Ambassador to the U.N.
<http://www.un.int/usa/> (I believe that, despite the site, the murderous Negroponte is no longer our ambassador, having been redeployed to Iraq).
Press and Public Affairs Section
United States Mission to the United Nations
799 UN Plaza
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- Representative Tom Lantos (SF and San Mateo)
email: www.house.gov/lantos and click on envelop to send email
415 566-5257 or 202 225-3531
- Don't forget the media!