

Genocide in Sudan?

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Brief Analysis

Rwanda Revisited?

More than a decade after the genocide in Rwanda, international attention has once again shifted to the specter of tragedy in Africa, this time in the Darfur region of western Sudan. For more than a year, government-backed Janjaweed militias have been responsible for thousands of acts of murder, rape, and physical destruction of homes and property, leaving approximately one million civilians homeless. The Sudanese government bears direct responsibility for these atrocities, which are aimed at destroying the civilian support base of the largely non-Arab forces that began rebelling against the central government last year. As the human costs of this campaign continue to soar -- according to the U.S. Agency for International Development, the death toll has reached a rate of one thousand civilians per day -- much needs to be done to stem the bloodshed. Otherwise, Darfur will join Rwanda as a tragic symbol of the international community's impotence in the face of genocide and mass atrocities.

Anatomy of the Conflict

Since assuming power in 1989, the current Sudanese regime has focused on two ideologies: Arabism and Islamism. The former has clearly trumped the latter in guiding the state's actions. The regime has been at war with nearly every non-Arab constituency in the country. Indeed, Khartoum has created, mobilized, and traded on ethnic animus to a degree not seen in Africa in years.

The government's most recent efforts along these lines have focused on inciting conflict between various communities in order to divert attention from the ruling party's core agenda of maintaining political and economic power. In light of this agenda, one must keep in mind that the conflict in Darfur is not merely an Arab-versus-African affair. Some Darfurian Arabs are fighting alongside the rebels, and the majority of them seem opposed to the Janjaweed and their tactics. Similarly, some non-Arabs support the government. Hence, the situation in Darfur is more than an ethnic conflict. The rebellion is very much a struggle against dictatorship, land grabbing, exclusion, and Khartoum's approach to maintaining power.

The impact of promoting ethnic discord, however, may be more than the Sudanese government had anticipated. Darfurian rebel groups, which are largely composed of members of the non-Arab Zaghawa, Fur, and Masalit communities, have been able to sustain themselves through steady recruitment and material support. Moreover, there is growing sentiment among the non-Arab Darfurian population that they are "not wanted" by the Arabs. This introduces the possible emergence of calls for self-determination, with consequences that could seriously impact the political and security calculus of the region.

Is This a Genocide?

Under the terms of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, whether a situation can be appropriately regarded as genocide depends on three factors. First, there must be evidence of specific activities (as described in Article II of the Convention) that result in the destruction, in whole or in part, of a national, ethnic, religious, or racial group. Second, the group of victims in question must qualify as one of the categories

mentioned in the previous sentence. In the case of Darfur -- where the Zaghawa, the Fur, and the Masalit, all non-Arab ethnic groups, have been singled out -- these first two conditions have clearly been met. The third factor in determining genocide, and certainly the most difficult to prove, is intent. Given the scale of the atrocities in Darfur and the context within which they have been perpetrated, it is possible to show not only that the Janjaweed are responsible for genocide, but that the Sudanese government is equally accountable.

One particularly troubling aspect of the genocide debate is that many senior policymakers, including U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell and UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, argue that the question of terminology is an irrelevant distraction. Yet, an official designation of genocide would have major consequences. The Convention compels signatory states to punish the perpetrators of genocide. This factor would have a greater effect on Khartoum's calculations than any other form of pressure, and would achieve humanitarian and security results far more efficiently than the other more indirect methods currently under consideration. The humanitarian crisis in Darfur is a direct consequence of the egregious human rights violations being committed there; concentrating on the humanitarian emergency without confronting the issue of accountability is naive and counterproductive. Human rights and civilian protection should be at the core of any international action in Darfur.

Toward a Possible Solution

In the past, the Sudanese government has shown itself to be highly pragmatic, and it is likely to back down if faced with robust international action aimed at addressing the Darfur crisis. One of the most important players in any such multinational effort would be the African Union. The organization has already sent observers to the area and approved the deployment of 300 troops. The mandate of this and any future troop deployment remains unclear, however. Nigeria, for example, argues that union forces should only be used to protect the ceasefire monitors who are observing the situation, relying on "name and shame" tactics in the hope that the genocide will stop once its perpetrators are exposed. Other countries such as Rwanda prefer that the mission include protecting the refugee camps that are currently home to civilians who have been displaced by the Janjaweed. In the event that the union approves the latter proposal and prepares to deploy personnel in greater numbers, the United States and Europe must offer to back the initiative through financial and logistical support.

Other international organizations can make important contributions as well. The UN was created to prevent catastrophes like Darfur, and should therefore be a focal point of international action. A Security Council resolution demanding an appropriate environment and support for an emergency response would be an important step. Unfortunately, three permanent members of the Security Council have blocked resolutions that could be instrumental to halting the killing in Darfur. China and France hold economic interests in Sudan, particularly in the oil industry, and prefer to maintain good relations with the government. Russia objects to intervention on national sovereignty grounds. Moreover, Pakistan and Algeria, who currently hold two of the council's ten rotating seats, have been less than supportive of the resolution that the United States is trying to move forward. Unless the United States exercises leadership and makes this a priority issue for the council, hopes for decisive UN action will remain slim.

Finally, the Arab League could make a positive contribution to the situation by calling on the Sudanese government to fulfill its previous commitments, which include permitting international humanitarian assistance and corralling the Janjaweed. Yet, statements made by both league secretary-general Amre Moussa and Ahmed Maher (Egypt's foreign minister until the country's recent cabinet shuffle) have thus far been unsatisfactory, depicting the situation in Darfur as a minor security problem that has been overblown. Such an approach, informed in part by Egyptian concerns over Nile water rights, clearly undermines African and U.S. efforts to ameliorate the most grievous humanitarian crisis in the world.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Naysan Rafati.

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