

Mounting Humanitarian Catastrophe in Sudan: Implications for U.S. Policy

Jun 28, 2004



Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Colin Powell will visit Sudan on Tuesday, June 29, stopping first in Khartoum before visiting the war-torn western province of Darfur. Powell will be the first U.S. secretary of state to visit Sudan since Cyrus Vance in 1978. In addition to meetings with Sudanese officials, Powell will confer with UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, who will be in Sudan as part of a three-week tour of Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

Powell's visit comes on the heels of a three-year thaw in U.S.-Sudanese relations. In return for Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir's pledge of cooperation in the U.S. war on terrorism, Washington abstained from a September 28, 2001, UN Security Council vote that lifted sanctions on Khartoum. Moreover, both the Sudanese government and the Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA) have participated in U.S.-brokered peace talks to end the country's civil war. The growing humanitarian crisis in Darfur, however, overshadows the thaw in relations.

Powell has stated that he will ask the Sudanese government to curb attacks by its ethnic Arab Janjaweed ("men on horseback") militia. He may also raise broader issues relating to the Sudanese peace process and to the country's continued sponsorship of terrorism. Resolution of those issues will define whether U.S.-Sudanese relations move forward or backward.

War and Peace

Sudan's black, Christian, and animist south has long resisted domination by the Arab north. A decade-long civil war ended in 1972 with autonomy for the south, but conflict re-erupted eleven years later when President Ja'far Muhammad Numayri imposed shari'a (Islamic law) and weakened the south's autonomy. This ongoing war has been marked by human rights abuses on a massive scale. Multiple human rights groups estimate that two million Sudanese have been killed over the course of the conflict, and twice that number displaced. In May 2002, a U.S.- and UN-sponsored "International Eminent Persons Group" found the Sudanese government complicit in slavery.

Nevertheless, there has been steady progress in the Sudanese peace process. On May 27, 2004, two years of negotiations overseen by former U.S. senator John Danforth (confirmed as U.S. ambassador to the UN on June 24) culminated in a tentative agreement between President al-Bashir and SPLA leader John Garang. The peace deal, which has not yet been formally signed, allotted 30 percent of central government jobs to southern Sudanese. In the three disputed regions of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains, and the Southern Blue Nile, the southern Sudanese job quota would be 45 percent. The remainder of southern Sudan would enjoy autonomy for six years before voting in a referendum for independence. The two sides would share oil revenue, and shari'a would remain in effect in the north.

The SPLA does not represent all of the country's opposition elements or geographical regions, however. In February 2003, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) rose up in Darfur, accusing Khartoum of systematic neglect. In response, the Sudanese government unleashed the Janjaweed. On June 11, Powell stated, "We believe that the government of Sudan did provide support to these militias." On June 24, U.S.

Agency for International Development director Andrew Natsios estimated that the Janjaweed had killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people.

Growing International Pressure

During an April 2, 2004, press conference, UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs Jan Egeland warned of the worsening humanitarian situation in Darfur. He accused the Sudanese government of engaging in a "systematic depopulation of areas" and called the country one of the "killing fields of our generation." According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 110,000 refugees have fled to neighboring Chad in recent months; in a May 7 report, Human Rights Watch estimated a displacement of more than one million civilians. UN frustration has grown as ceasefire talks in N'Djamena, Chad, between the Sudanese government and SLA/JEM have stalled. On June 15, Egeland harshly criticized Khartoum for blocking UN access to Darfur. Two days later, Annan raised the possibility of an international intervention in the troubled region, less than a week after he received Security Council authorization for such a measure.

As international pressure has grown, the Sudanese government has dug in its heels. Speaking to Abu Dhabi television on May 8, Sudan's representative to the UN Commission on Human Rights accused Washington of "shedding crocodile tears over the situation in Darfur," citing the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal in Iraq. On June 19, al-Bashir answered calls for the disarming of the Janjaweed by offering to send the Sudanese army to the rebel province to disarm "all Darfur's warring parties." Five days later, state-run Sudanese television, paraphrasing al-Bashir, dismissed "the smear campaign" against Sudan and reported, "Darfur is currently enjoying growth and development." Speaking to the Egyptian daily al-Gumhuriya the same day, al-Bashir denied an ethnic component to the Arab-on-black violence in Darfur. On June 25, contradicting reports that more than one million civilians are on the verge of starvation, Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail stated, "In Darfur there is no hunger, no malnutrition, no epidemic diseases." For its part, the Arab League has been more or less silent on the Darfur crisis. At the end of its annual meeting in May, the body issued a resolution that expressed "solidarity with the sisterly Republic of Sudan" without mentioning the ongoing humanitarian or human rights problems.

Has Engagement Worked?

Sudan's recent actions can only be embarrassing to the UN and the United States. Both Annan and Powell have sought to engage Khartoum, with mixed results. Annan is especially sensitive to criticism of UN impotence in Sudan. A 1999 UN panel led by former Swedish prime minister Ingvar Carlsson concluded that Annan, who was director of UN peacekeeping operations in 1994, was partially responsible for failing to prevent genocide in Rwanda. (The panel also blamed U.S. inaction.) When Annan spoke at Harvard's commencement on June 10, some students wore green ribbons to commemorate Darfur, and a group of protestors chanted, "Kofi, go to Sudan, not to Harvard." The fact that Sudan was elected in May to head the Commission on Human Rights has only heightened criticism of UN impotence.

Washington's track record of engagement with Khartoum is murky as well. Sudanese incitement of terrorism remains problematic. Less than a week after the UN lifted sanctions on the country in September 2001, Vice President 'Ali Uthman Taha declared, "The jihad is our way and we will not abandon it." On April 8, 2002, Sudanese television broadcast chants of "Strike back, bin Laden!" and "Down with the USA!" at a state-sponsored rally. The State Department has characterized Sudan as a sponsor of terrorism since 1993. Although the 2003 Patterns of Global Terrorism report claimed that Khartoum "took significant steps to cooperate in the global war on terrorism," it also noted that Sudan continues to support both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Khartoum's past support for Osama bin Laden (who resided in Sudan between 1992 and 1996) and for Saddam Husayn may undermine further rapprochement with Washington. According to a June 25, 2004, report by the New York Times, one recently captured Iraqi document (which a U.S. joint intelligence taskforce said "appeared

authentic") highlighted contacts between bin Laden and Iraqi intelligence in Sudan.

Conclusion

Sudan is the largest country in Africa and, since the 1973 murder of U.S. ambassador Cleo Noel by Palestine Liberation Organization terrorists in Khartoum, one of the most problematic for Washington. U.S.-Sudanese relations are now at a watershed point. The Darfur crisis threatens to delay signature of the Khartoum-SPLA peace deal. Should Powell extract significant concessions to defuse the Darfur crisis, the Bush administration will point to the resultant peace treaty as evidence that its policy has been successful. Additional steps by Sudan to end its support for terrorism would help the bilateral relationship expand. If al-Bashir instead chooses to retrench, however, he will in effect be pushing aside the peace deal. Such a decision would likely cast him as responsible for genocide and return Sudan to its international pariah status.

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