

The Logic of “Humanitarian Intervention”

Neocolonial tool serving geopolitical interests

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On his recent speaking tour across Canada, former Haitian minister of defense Patrick Elie, an elected representative in the first government of Jean Bertrand Aristide, was asked by a member of the World Federalists NGO to support Canada’s new “Responsibility to Protect” (RtP) doctrine. The idea behind the “RtP” is that other countries should intervene in the politics of a sovereign country if they perceive instability or a human rights crisis.

Patrick, who spoke at McMaster University early in March, acknowledged the need to protect people whose human rights come under attack. But since this “RtP” doctrine is coming largely from the developed Western nations, many of which are currently violating human rights at this very moment, Elie asked, “Who is protecting the rights of the people of Iraq, killed by the bombs of those who would grant themselves the “responsibility to protect?” For example, the lead author of the Lancet’s Iraqi casualty estimate has recently updated the death toll caused by the U.S./U.K. war to 300,000.

Patrick, in asking this question, pointed out the dissonance between countries like Canada and the United States who are, on the one hand, waging illegal wars across the world that have killed tens of thousands, while on the other hand painting themselves as angelic figures who can be trusted to shepherd and steward the “benighted” peoples in Africa, South America, and elsewhere.

When you think of the term “humanitarian intervention” or “responsibility to protect,” do you envision soldiers from Ethiopia or India coming to the U.S. to arrest George Bush for war crimes, for the highest rate of imprisonment in the world, and for neglecting his own population in health care, infant mortality, and New Orleans? No, of course not. That would be ridiculous. You think of soldiers from the white, former and current colonial powers like the U.S. and Britain, going to the dark continent and fixing the problems of the natives, whom we implicitly and imperialistically assume are incapable of self-government.

And that is where the current focus of the RtP doctrine lies. Patrick asked, “what about the colonial powers in Africa, namely France and Belgium, whose interference in Rwanda created the problem there in the first place?” As author Tony Black has detailed, the invasion of Rwanda by a U.S.-backed Tutsi army from Uganda, which we call the “Rwandan Genocide,” did not happen because “we” in the West were not there. It happened because we *were* there.[1] To use the conflict in Rwanda, precipitated by thirty years of Western involvement following the “post-colonial” period, to justify intervention into countries like the Sudan is disingenuous at best.

Recently, however, news outlets and government figures including George Bush and Colin Powell have asked us to pay attention to Sudan, and its endangered population of refugees.

And as the Jerusalem Post reports, “the [Save Darfur] coalition, which has presented itself as ‘an alliance of over 130 diverse faith-based, humanitarian, and human rights organizations,’ was actually begun exclusively as an initiative of the American Jewish community.” The embarrassed organizers of the recent Darfur rally in the U.S. were forced to admit their failure to include other American ethnicities and organizations, such as the NAACP and the Africa Action group, and actually struggled to find a single Darfuri or Muslim speaker.

Christian fundamentalists have also been a key force in the coalition. According to the Washington Post from April 27, “Last week, after an inquiry from The Washington Post, [Christian evangelist group] Sudan Sunrise changed its Web site to eliminate references to efforts to convert the people of Darfur.” And beyond the religious groups, who play a subsidiary role, the idea of Western intervention into Darfur is primarily an initiative of the U.S. state department. Sudan’s oil-rich Darfur region makes it the second-largest oil producer in Africa, and its strategic location places the country at the gateway to the Middle East. Additionally, Sudan has been using its oil for the cardinal sin of developing an economy independent of the United States.

According to John Laughland, “Darfur is a region which is rich in oil and through which pipelines are to be constructed. Moreover, the main investor in the Sudanese oil industry is the China National Petroleum Company, and China is Sudan’s biggest trading partner overall. It has been alleged that there are Chinese soldiers in Sudan protecting Chinese oil interests there, and that these troops have engaged in skirmishes with the rebels. Moreover, while there are numerous foreign oil companies present in Sudan, it is precisely in Southern Darfur that the Chinese National Petroleum Company has its concessions. USAID, the American humanitarian agency, has helpfully provided a map of Sudan showing precisely where the oil concessions are. See http://www.usaid.gov/locations/sub-saharan_africa/sudan/map_oil.pdf” [2] China invested \$300 million dollars to expand Sudan’s largest refinery, and buys two-thirds of Sudan’s oil.[3]

Well-known academics such as Noam Chomsky and Michel Chossudovsky have been at the forefront of investigating how a key feature of U.S. policy in the Middle-East has been to deny oil to competitors, especially China. Columnist Eric Margolis argues that the U.S. is interested in nearby Chad’s oil as well.[4] The U.S. Congress has allocated \$500 million dollars for military assistance to African governments, particularly Chad’s, [5] whose military has been engaged in conflict with Sudan.

As former U.S. President Jimmy Carter says, “The people in Sudan want to resolve the conflict. The biggest obstacle is US government policy. The US is committed to overthrowing the government in Khartoum. Any sort of peace effort is aborted, basically by policies of the United States...Instead of working for peace in Sudan, the US government has basically promoted a continuation of the war.” In 2001, the U.S. House of Representatives’ “Sudan Peace Act,” provided ten million dollars in assistance to the National Democratic Alliance, described by U.S. Sudan special Stephen Morrison, the head of the Sudan project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington-DC, as essentially a Darfuri rebel front group. Further support for Carter’s claims comes from Enver Masud, who refers to a Washington Post article investigating how in 1996, the U.S. sent nearly \$20 million in surplus U.S. military equipment to Ethiopia, Eritrea and Uganda to topple the government of Sudan.[6] The U.S. under Bill Clinton even bombed a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan, claiming it was used to produce WMDs, when it was later revealed that U.S. missiles had

actually been launched at the largest producer of anti-malarial medicines in Africa.

The U.S. has funded insurgencies in Sudan ever since the country moved away from the control of Western powers in the late 1970s, especially the rebel Sudanese People's Liberation Movement and Army [SPLM/A]. The leader of the SPLA, John Garang, allied himself with the most reactionary wing of the U.S. ruling class: the Christian right were his principal ideological associates. Republican-right leader Senator Bill Frist once entered disputed South Sudan and was photographed with Garang. The U.S. Christian right is using the alleged oppression of Christians in the predominantly-Muslim south to justify a nineteenth-century style colonial intervention.

In negotiations with the Sudanese government, Garang managed to secure Kosovo-style autonomy for areas of southern Sudan. As part of a U.S. plan for balkanization, Sudan now has been strong-armed into accepting the unusual arrangement of a vice-president from Darfur and a vice-president from Southern Sudan. Garang's wife is now meeting with U.S. leaders, including Frist, for further independence negotiations.[7]

To keep Sudan in a perpetual state of war, the U.S. makes sure at least one rebel group is on the move while another is engaged in peace talks. The recent round of "Save Darfur" demonstrations have taken place during a time of negotiations between government and rebel groups, and are designed to further destabilize the country. Yoshie Furuhashi explains, "The timing of the [April 30] rally was perfect, designed to coincide — and scuttle — the Abuja peace negotiations between the rebels and Khartoum brokered by the African Union, whose deadline is midnight today. And sure enough, the rebels rejected the peace deal." [8] The U.S. needs rebel groups to win bigger victories, if it is to reverse China's current advantageous position in Sudan.

In order to gain support for a U.S. military intervention, including NATO intervention as suggested by President Bush, the corporate media downplays the violence of and refusal to sign peace accords among the rebel insurgency, and instead covers Sudan's civil war as if it is a one-sided human-rights crisis, with the Sudanese government as the "bad guys." Far-worse conflicts in Africa, such as the nightmare in the Congo where millions have been killed, are ignored in favour of Darfur. As in Kosovo, all this coverage is designed to make us Canadians think that by putting Western boots on the ground, we can avert a humanitarian catastrophe.

What CNN, the state department, and the Western religious organizations aren't telling us is that millions of Palestinians are on the verge of starvation because of entirely preventable actions by our governments. With the full support of "the West" and the "international community," Canada, Israel, and other countries have cancelled essential food donations and aid critical to the survival of Palestinians, because we do not like the government they have elected. (Bringing democracy to the Middle East, indeed!) So, on the one hand, we are told to use military force to intervene in an "Arab" African conflict where we have no business, and on the other, are told to ignore a human rights catastrophe in Israel in which our own governments are complicit. How do our governments get away with this?

I bet that before reading Patrick's comments above, you had shut out the idea of the illegal U.S. war in Iraq when trying to picture the idea of U.S. peacekeepers helping an unstable country. We are able to disassociate in our minds the murder done by our own Western countries from the idea that we can protect human rights. As a result, we need to "decolonize" our minds. As Edward Said has explained, colonialism is not just the occupation

of territory, but it requires a state of mind as well; a state of mind which, “includes ideas that certain people and certain territories require and beseech domination.”

In other words, we in the West tend to believe that if a white developed country is sending troops to the third world, it must be a good thing. But until we can envision a situation where third-world intervention against the U.S. or other great powers is realistic and possible, the “Responsibility to Protect” exists simply as a tool for “us” in the West to continue subjugating and running the affairs of other countries, particularly Sudan. Those who would have us intervene in Sudan on the basis of combating unrest under the “Responsibility to Protect” would have us face the ridiculous situation, as in Kosovo, of “needing” to violate a country’s sovereignty as a result of the West having previously violated it.

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Notes

[1] See Tony Black’s excellent article, reproduced here:

<http://hamilton.indymedia.org/newswire/display/542/index.php>

[2] Laughland, John, “Fill Full the Mouth of Famine,” Sanders Research Association, 26 Jul 2004, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL0407/S00230.htm>

[3] Dunkel, G., “Oil is behind struggle in Darfur,” Workers World, 27 Apr 2006, <http://www.workers.org/2006/world/darfur-0504/>

[4] Margolis, Eric, “Tread Softly in Sudan,” Toronto Sun, 15 Aug 2004, http://www.canoe.ca/NewsStand/Columnists/Toronto/Eric_Margolis/2004/08/15/583447.html

[5] Dunkel, “Oil is behind struggle,” 2006.

[6] Masud, Enver. “Sudan, Oil, and the Darfur Crisis,” The Wisdom Fund, 7 Aug 2004, <http://www.twf.org/News/Y2004/0807-Darfur.html>

[7] See Frist’s own website:

“Working for Progress in Sudan”

http://www.volpac.org/index.cfm?FuseAction=BLOGS.View&Blog_id=167&Month=2&Year=2006

Listen to the “Taylor Report” audio programs on the subject of Sudan for more information about the U.S. plan for balkanization.

<http://www.taylor-report.com/>

[8] Furuhashi, Yoshie, "Who Wants Peace in Darfur?" MR Zine, 30 April 2006, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/furuhashi300406.html>

Special thanks to Roger Annis of the Canada Haiti Action Network who reported on and quoted sections of Patrick Elie's speech.

For further information, a collection of articles on Sudan will be available on the November 16 Coalition website (currently down) by May 20, 2006.

<http://www.november16coalition.ca/Articles/Sudan&Rwanda.htm>

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