

Who Is Blocking Peace In Darfur?

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The tragic, years-long conflict that has raged in Sudan's three Darfur states, is again competing for headlines, as new estimates on the number of dead are being debated, and yet another United Nations Security Council resolution (1591), is on the table. But neither haggling over figures, nor casting blame and meting out new punishment, is the issue: the issue is peace must be brought to the war-torn region. And for that to happen, key international players backing the rebels, must change course.

Jan Egeland, the former Undersecretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, and now advisor to Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, told Associated Press March 28 (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/23848444/) that he thought the figures he had given in 2006, of 200,000 dead, should be revised upward, to double that number. Although the anti-Sudan "genocide lobby" seized on the statement, demanding that Sudan allow new mortality studies to be conducted, Christina Bennett, a spokeswoman for Egeland's successor John Holmes, made the point that their organization was less concerned with statistics, and they were "working as hard as we can to assist the living." And a leading World Health Organization coordinator Richard Garfield, said that, on the basis of surveys conducted throughout last year, "Darfur is not experiencing the very high levels of mortality it was experiencing only a few years ago."

The numbers game has been cynically exploited by organizations and personalities who allege that the Sudanese government has been involved in genocide, i.e. systematic killing of the people of Darfur. These groups, led by "Save Darfur," represent largely a coalition of interests usually labelled the "Zionist lobby" in the U.S., the Christian fundamentalist right wing, and several misled African-American organizations.

(www.savedarfur.org/pages/organizational_members/). (1)

Prominent spokesmen of this grouping, like Board of Directors member John Prendergast, along with "independent" researchers like Eric Reeves of Smith College, have been unmasked as biased propagandists by Dr. David Hoile, author of "Darfur in Perspective." Hoile, who recently spoke on the issue at an international conference in Khartoum, has documented how such claims of genocide have been contradicted by the highly reputable Medecins Sans Frontiers, a doctors' organization which, unlike those claiming genocide, actually has thousands of personnel on the ground throughout Darfur.(2)

The same groups argue that the Sudanese government is deploying "Arab" militias against "black African Darfurians," an allegation belied by demographic facts, as documented by Hoile and dozens of others. The real nature of the conflict is far more simple, and yet more complex at the same time. Most important, it is a region populated by about 80 clans and tribes, both nomadic and sedentary, who have engaged in conflicts periodically over

increasingly scarce water and land resources. Between 1932 and 2001, there were 36 such major conflicts, 25 of them between 1966-2000, which according to the Wali's office of North Darfur state, "were always in the control of Darafur's native, social and wise leadership." (3) However, beginning in the 1990s, the conflicts took on a completely new character, as political forces reorganized tribal groups into rebel movements, challenging not each other, but the federal government.

A crucial development was the declaration of the Darfur Liberation Army in 2002 against the government and the transformation of the same group into the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), which elected its leaders in October of that year: Abd al-Wahid al-Nur, of the Fur tribe, was chairman, Abdalla Abakkar of the Zaghawa was chief of staff, and Mansour Arbab, from the Massaleit, became deputy chairman. Earlier, another political rebel formation, the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) came into being, led by Dr. Khalil Ibrahim, reputedly close to the Zaghawa, and, more significant, close to Islamist leader Dr. Hassan al-Turabi.

In Hoile's analysis, Turabi is a central figure in the conflict. In 1999, after he had challenged the leadership of President Omar al-Bashir, and manuevred separately with rebel forces in the southern Sudan conflict, Turabi and the national leadership (largely made up of his students) parted ways; the National Congress party split in 2000-2001, and Turabi set up a separate Popular Congress Party, taking with him many in the youth movement, in the military wing and the financial apparatus. Turabi's support for the JEM was no secret, just as his relations with the Southern Sudanese rebels had also been common knowledge. In fact, the SPLA, then led by the late John Garang, agreed to train the Darfur rebels. This, however, was not the only political factor in the Darfur rebellion: if Turabi has been involved in the JEB, the SLA has enjoyed support from foreign forces from Eritrea, Chad and, reportedly, Libya. The ruling elite in Chad to which President Idriss Deby belongs, is made up of the Zaghawas, who are prominent in ther SLA. The French, who have been historically linked to Chad, are also on that side of the barricades.

Although the international press linked to the "genocide lobby," continued to churn out reports of Khartoum-backed Arabs against black Africans in Darfur, the fact that both the JEM and SLA were engaged in killing policemen in 2003, indicated a different dynamic. In 2004, they were targetting development and education projects of the federal government. Attempts at peace were made by the Government of Sudan in 2002, when it convened a conference of Fur tribes and a year later, the Chad government offered to mediate. On April 8, 2004, a Humanitarian Ceasefire Agreement was reached, whereby hostilities should cease, and in coordination with the international community, especially the African Union, global peace would be sought, while vital humanitarian goods would be delivered to the internally displaced. By October of that year, the AU had strengthened its peacekeeping force (AMIS) with African troops.

The problem was that the rebels did not want to talk of peace. In July 2004, both JEB and SLA refused to go to Chad for peace talks. A protocol signed in Abuja in August-September, ensured that the Sudanese government would endorse the deployment of 3,000 AU peacekeeping troops, but the rebels refused to sign a humanitarian aid agreement. Talks on peace continued on and off again, in Abuja through 2004 and 2005, until a declaration of principles was signed in Summer-Fall.

The problem today continues to be that the rebel forces, aided and abetted by their outside supporters, are refusing any program for peace. To grasp what is going on here, on must

consider the fact that, also in 2005, the Sudanese government signed a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the southern Sudanese rebels, ending a war that had devastated the country for decades. The CPA constituted a major achievement, entailing power and resource sharing. For years, Khartoum had sought and conducted talks with the rebels, in multiple venues, and the salient feature of the negotiations was that, just as progress seemed to be on the horizon, the SPLA/M representative(s), on advice of their international backers, would abandon the discussions.

The 2005 CPA itself was the outcome of a long negotiating process. It is absolutely crucial to note that, just as visible progress towards such an agreement was being made in 2003, suddenly the Darafur conflict escalated out of all proportion. It was as if those outside forces seeking to destroy the unity and sovereignty of Sudan, had opened up a new front once they saw that peace might be on the agenda between north and south. In the on-again-off-again talks between Khartoum and the Darfur rebels, a similar modus operandi has been adopted, as that seen in the talks with the SPLA/M. As soon as one group seems to agree with Khartoum, other groups say no; and then further splinter groups are hatched to adopt further, differentiated positions. Thus, for example, when the Sudanese government signed the Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) on May 5, 2006, with the SLA group led by Minni Arkou Minawi, the other SLA faction of Abdel Wahid Mohammad al-Nur refused, as did the JEM. On July 15, Khartoum signed another agreement with a JEM faction led by Ibrahim Yahia Abdelrahman, but other groups refused. As a leading political figure told me in Khartoum, the problem has been that the rebel groups, instead of coming together as two or three main factions to negotiate, continue to splinter and split, thus making talks impossible. Thus, when JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim, according to Sudan Tribune on March 19, called for separate talks with the Sudanese government, mediated by Kofi Annan, Khartoum refused, on grounds that if it, the government, negotiates with one voice, then only the existing AU-UN joint mechanism could be used.

Clearly, if peace is to be achieved, those foreign backers of the various factions must pressure their pawns to get serious. The peace treaty signed between Sudan and Chad on March 13 could provide the context for Chad, and its French friends, to seek a negotiated settlement to Darfur. France subsequently organized a meeting in Geneva between Abdel Wahid al-Nur and representatives of the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council, as well as the AU and UN envoys to Darfur. This was reportedly to present the rebels' demands for talks; to date, the rebels have demanded that all hostilities cease before they come to the negotiating table. At the same time, if al-Turabi is indeed still a factor behind the JEM, then recent reports (by Sudan Tribune March 24) about a possible rapprochement between his Popular Congress Party and the government, may not be without significance. If international forces are not willing to contribute to a settlement, then the Sudanese government may seek a "domestic option," that is, to pursue peace through direct talks, in expectation of international endorsement after the fact.

Meanwhile, civilians in Darfur continue to suffer. The humanitarian aid effort underway is massive. According to reports presented at the Sudanese-European Forum, there are an estimated 250 aid organizations engaged, of which 78 are European NGOs. Their staffs have grown from 800 to 15,000 over recent years, including a large number of Europeans. Sudanese spokesmen stress that it would be important to hire more nationals and train them, than to import foreign staff. They also emphasize that, although the European Union contribution to aid has been impressive, such aid also carries with it the danger of rendering the economy dependant on outside help. Better, they say, would be to contribute

technology, or to promote direct economic investments in the region, to revive the local economy. Instead of food aid, they say, send tractors.

The camps organized with EU help, for internally displaced persons, have, to be sure, provided shelter, food and basic social services; but if they become permanent, then the objective of helping IDPs to return to their homes, which all sides pursue, will be undermined. The Wali of North Darfur estimates that there are 163,315 IDPs in camps there, and another 287,276 outside camps, for a total of just under a half million IDPs. During 2007, reportedly 28,643 persons returned voluntarily to their homes, and in the current year, 14,344 families have indicated their willingness to return. In accordance with the CPA which ended the north-south conflict, priorities have been placed on returning refugees to their homes in the south; yet, as the Sudanese press candidly reports, the task is rendered difficult by the lack of adequate infrastructure in the areas to which people want to return.

There is no doubt that these and related problems can be dealt with satisfactorily. The central question is establishing peace for the entire country, which means now, between Darfur and the central government. If the international backers of the various rebel groups were serious about peace, they would create the conditions for negotiations to take place among the representative parties, with the Darfur rebels speaking with one voice. If they do not do so, the conclusion must be that they are further committed to fomenting war, with all the human suffering that entails, in the interests of breaking up the nation of Sudan into several separate entities, in a regional geopolitical gamble aimed at destabilization and raw materials resources theft.

Notes

1) This author had the opportunity to witness how African-American political figures in the U.S. have been manipulated by such propaganda. In 1996, I accompanied two delegations of U.S. state legislators, mainly African-Americans, on fact-finding missions to Sudan, to investigate allegations of slavery, as launched by the British organization of Baroness Cox, Christian Solidarity International. The delegations visited the Nuba Mountains and other areas, and, after lengthy discussions with local leaders and inhabitants, concluded that the charges of slavery were hoked-up. It was later independently shown that Cox et al had actually organized some Sudanese individuals to pose as slave-traders, "selling" children, in return for greatly appreciated U.S. dollars. CSI was later divested of its status at the U.N.

2) Dr. David Hoile, Darfur In Perspective, Europe-Sudanese Political Action Council, 2005.

3) The delegates to the Sudanese-European Forum held in Khartoum, March 10-12, which this author attended, visited North Darfur on March 13, to meet with local officials and see the camp for IDPs there. As the representative of the General Secretariat's office, who briefed the group, noted, there have been over 415 external delegations which have visited the area between 2003 and 2007. These have included UN, AU, EU and US delegations, diplomats, government officials, media and medical personnel.

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