

U.S. doing the right thing in Sudan

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The U.S. war on terror has largely been a disaster, exacerbating existing conflicts, provoking new ones, and running up huge financial debts. The occupation of Iraq is chaotic, opium-exporting warlords run Afghanistan, and the "counterterrorist" tactics of President George Bush's close ally, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, are crudely destructive.

Yet, in the Horn of Africa, the Bush administration is doing some real good. U.S. officials are condemning a brutal policy of ethnic cleansing by government-allied militias in Darfur, a vast region in western Sudan, and have used their influence to successfully promote a truce that may save thousands of lives.

"Of all the Western countries," Human Rights Watch Sudan expert Jemera Rone says, "the U.S. has been one of the most helpful" in putting pressure on the Sudanese government. Known for her acerbic critiques of American policies, Rone readily acknowledges that here, the U.S. is playing a positive role.

The Darfur conflict escalated last year when rebels launched attacks on government-allied militias. Government troops and paramilitaries responded with a massive ethnic cleansing campaign, pushing more than 800,000 civilians from their homes, bombing villages, and killing thousands. Atrocities are widespread.

Now, Darfur is poised on the edge of famine, since local farmers cannot seed their land during the crucial crop-planting season. The survival of the province's 6 million residents hangs in the balance. Two weeks ago, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan warned that international military action might be needed to save Darfur's civilians. A senior U.N. humanitarian official, Mukesh Kapila, compared Sudan's Darfur offensive to the Rwandan genocide.

Bowing to U.S. pressure, the Sudanese government agreed April 8 to a ceasefire, but is still blocking foreigners from access to the region.

"They are stalling," Human Rights Watch's Rone charges, "hoping their militias will consolidate positions on the ground." Without outside scrutiny, it is hard to know if the fighting has truly ended and how much foreign aid is needed.

Darfur is only the most recent of Sudan's wars. Another conflict began in 1983, pitting the northern government against southern rebels eager for greater autonomy.

During the 1980s and '90s, Sudan's north-south war was the world's bloodiest conflict, killing more than 1.5 million. This figure represents more than 18 per cent of the world's total 8.3 million war casualties during that time, topping horrendous death tolls in Afghanistan, Mozambique, Rwanda, and Angola.

After supporting Sudan's southern rebels for years, Bush's "war on terror" prompted the administration to change policy, appointing a special envoy and intensifying efforts to bring together the government and southern rebels .

The U.S. turnaround was sparked by self-interest, not humanitarian concern. But good things resulted nonetheless. Bush hoped to prevent Sudan's Islamist government from offering further help to Al Qaeda, but was also eager to secure access to newly discovered Sudanese oil reserves.

Sudan began exporting petroleum in 1999, relying on crucial help from foreign companies such as Canada's Talisman, which has since pulled out following a persistent campaign by Canadian activists.

Since many oil fields are located on the embattled north-south fault line or in the war-torn south, their full potential cannot be exploited without an end to civil war.

Sudan is eager to end international sanctions, gain U.S. support, and secure regular oil revenues, and has thus been grudgingly co-operative in talks with southern rebels. Southern leaders, for their part, need U.S. goodwill, and are also keen to gain a share of the oil revenue. As the U.S. pushed the government and south together, however, Khartoum unleashed its forces in the west, seeking a comprehensive military solution to the Darfur rebellions.

Now, aid agencies and many governments are reluctant to protest the Darfur atrocities too loudly.

"We are in a bind," explained a senior aid official just back from Chad's border with Sudan. "If we demand international condemnation on Darfur, will that undermine peace in the south?"

For all its faults, the Bush administration appears to be handling these dilemmas reasonably well, keeping the north-south talks going while simultaneously working to address Darfur.

Here, for once, is a rare occasion for Canada to work with the U.S. without compromising its principles and integrity.

Today and tomorrow, the U.N. High Commission for Human Rights will debate events in Darfur. Canada can lobby for a vote condemning the Darfur atrocities, and demanding access for U.N. monitors.

Until now, the Sudanese government and its African allies have thwarted such a move, giving their militias time to dig in. Next week, Canada can press for a full Security Council debate on Darfur. Cumulatively, these measures might just stem the tide. After the Rwandan genocide, Canadians vowed to never again allow mass killings to occur without vigorous protest. Now, Canada has an opportunity to make good on that promise.

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