

Darfur Crisis: A Consequence of Inaction

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On November 19, 2004, the UN Security Council convened an unusual session on Sudan's doorstep, in Nairobi at the end of which they unanimously adopted a resolution promising political and economic support once Sudan ended the 21-year-old war that has left millions dead in that country. The Council secured a written pledge from the Sudanese Government and the rebel People's Liberation Movement that they would complete a final accord by December 31, 2004. Council members said that the promise of a comprehensive peace deal in southern Sudan offered the best hope for not only resolving the longest running civil war in the country but also for providing the political basis for the resolution of other conflicts, including the Darfur conflict.

The resolution 1574 signalled a change in Sudan policy. The following have been observed:

Unlike the earlier two resolutions (1556 and 1564), which condemned atrocities in the Western province of Darfur, this resolution has put the north-south peace process in southern Sudan as the prime agenda. The Security Council waved a carrot at the government, pledging international aid if it reaches a peace deal with the southern rebels. But regarding Darfur, where the government has been accused of unleashing armed militia on the people, Council members had a hard time coming up with a stick.

The Council has retreated from its previous stance to hold the Sudanese Government accountable for the ongoing human rights abuses. While the new resolution recalls prior Security Council resolutions passed in July and September 2004, it leaves out the explicit demand in those resolutions for Khartoum to disarm and prosecute the government-backed Janjaweed militias.

Resolution 1574 omits language in Resolutions 1556 and 1564 that specifically threatened "further measures", including the possibility of sanctions. Instead, it includes a much milder warning to "take appropriate action against any party failing to fulfill its commitments."

Clearly, the Security Council has moved from a strategy of coercive measures to offers of financial inducements. By emphasising upon the southern peace process, it sends a signal that the humanitarian crisis in Darfur can be tolerated. Although over the past two decades, the southern conflict has resulted in two million deaths and four million displacements, it is now in abeyance; in contrast, the Darfur conflict, pitting the government against two rebel groups, has been spinning out of control, causing malnutrition, disease and violence that are claiming thousands of lives each month.

Darfur in the Shadow of North-South Peace

Currently, the Khartoum government has not shown any inclination to resolve the Darfur crisis. Its priority has changed to the north–south peace process. It has sought to use its participation in the peace talks with the southern rebels to avoid reproach over Darfur. The government’s main negotiator, Ali Osman Taha, even threatened not to come to Nairobi if the Security Council put too much emphasis on the violence and humanitarian crisis in Darfur. The latest unanimous resolution by the Security Council marks an extraordinary triumph for the National Islamic Front regime in Khartoum, as it puts the southern peace effort on the main agenda and demotes the humanitarian catastrophe in Darfur. The Security Council argues that the resolution may bring about peace in the south, which will in turn improve peace prospects in Darfur. The power-sharing formula will be extended to all parts of the country, assuaging the grievances of rebels in Darfur, whose violence provoked the government’s genocidal response. But the question is, can the Darfur people wait?

Present Insecurity in Darfur

Violence in Darfur is on the increase. According to an African Union spokesman, the number of ceasefire violations has been on the rise in recent months, with 13 cases confirmed in September 2004 and 54 documented between October and mid-December. The UN Integrated Regional Information Network has recently reported that despite the regime’s pledge at Abuja to “refrain from conducting hostile military flights in and over the Darfur region” (Protocol on the Enhancement of the Security Situation in Darfur, Abuja, November 9, 2004), Khartoum has been conducting aerial military assaults. Both sides have utter disregard for the ceasefire.

Meanwhile, conditions in Darfur remain dire. As per the latest UN assessment, government attacks on civilians continue. The UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has said that reports of violence against women and children in and around camps in Darfur appear to be on the increase. The death toll is said to exceed 70,000 and tens of thousands are dying of malnutrition and disease. As many as two-and-half million people have been displaced and three million people are now conflict-affected and in need of humanitarian assistance. Western aid workers are being blocked from helping civilians, with the head of Oxfam International’s Sudan operations recently being expelled from the country. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

(UNHCR) had to temporarily withdraw some key international staff from strife-torn south Darfur because Sudanese authorities prevented them from carrying out vital protection work on behalf of thousands of internally displaced people. Moreover due to the ongoing fighting and consequent insecurity, humanitarian efforts are beginning to falter. The humanitarian agency, Save the Children, recently said that its staff had been forced to flee the town of Tawilla, when fighting broke out between government forces and rebels, despite an existing ceasefire agreement.

The situation in Darfur has become life-threatening not only for displaced persons in the camps and in rural areas, but also for humanitarian personnel and operations. Insecurity coupled with threat of drought has made survival of the people in the camps and the villages increasingly tenuous. The families that have been driven from their villages have no means at their disposal. They depend on food aid that is hostage to the budgetary whims of the western governments and restrictions on aid workers' access. Most of the rural communities are facing food shortages that are expected to become worse in the coming months. The attenuation of humanitarian relief, in the context of growing food shortages, is sure to translate into hundreds of thousands of deaths. The Sudanese Government is being held responsible for this. It has not only been accused of creating the militias but also of turning a blind eye to their continued killings. It has yet to take basic steps to provide security to the people of Darfur. But its seriousness regarding this is questionable.

Resolving the Crisis: A Distant Dream

Until now the efforts that have been made by the UN and the African Union to resolve the crisis have not borne any fruit. The threats of sanctions that were never imposed for fear of vetoes by China and Russia which have vital economic interests in Sudan, have done little to end the atrocities. China is the single largest investor in the oil industry in Sudan and Russia has interest in selling arms. This volatile mixture of oil and arms has actually prevented the UN from taking any meaningful action against the Khartoum government. The recent resolution secured a unanimous 15-0 Security Council vote only by sidelining the Darfur crisis and emphasising upon north-south peace.

The Security Council is no longer demanding what is essential - to restore security - in Darfur, even as it expresses serious concern at the growing insecurity and violence in the area. Instead of warning the Sudanese Government to stop military attacks and disarm the Janjaweed militia, the Council has only condemned acts of violence and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by all parties.

The atrocities of the Janjaweed militia and the Khartoum regime have been rendered morally equivalent to those of Darfuri insurgents by the US, UN and other international actors. But the military actions of Darfur insurgents are a response to decades of political and economic marginalisation, as well as the protection accorded by Khartoum to Arab militias that have for years attacked African tribal villages.

Creating such moral equivalence, giving factitiously equal responsibility for violence and insecurity, is disingenuous and unjustified. It reflects nothing other than international failure to compel Khartoum to disarm the Janjaweed and provide meaningful protection to vulnerable civilians. It is also counterproductive. By blurring the question of responsibility, it encourages the government to presume that genocide will go unpunished.

The Khartoum government has, indeed, been emboldened by the present UN stance. As the veiled threat of sanctions recedes, the odds that the Sudanese Government will comply with the UN's demand grow slimmer. Should Sudan be sticking to its deadline of December 31 is also questionable because of its past history of false dawns and, missed deadlines. If Darfur has to wait for the north-south peace settlement, any resolution to the Darfur crisis remains a distant dream.

Although efforts have been made by the African Union to resolve the crisis, progress has been slow. The AU has not found the will to send troops to Darfur over the objection of the Sudanese Government. Out of the 3,000 troops that were to be sent, only 700 troops have been deployed. But even 3,000 is inadequate to control a vast province the size of France. The peace talks, started in Abuja in August, have largely been stalled. The resumed peace process in December also could not proceed, as the government complained of continued rebel attacks and the rebels pointed to ongoing military attacks by the government and the militia. For meaningful negotiations to take place, violence and insecurity has to be contained. While the African Union lacks the capacity to handle this on its own the international community is content to push it on the AU's shoulders.

International Community's Inaction

In the interim, thousands more people are being killed and displaced, and there is no adequate plan or strong commitment from the international community to deal with the crisis. The US-convened Security Council meeting in Nairobi has made it painfully clear that nothing will be done to change the fundamental dynamics of insecurity in Darfur and thus the genocide will continue remorselessly. Resolution 1574 of November 19, 2004, proves beyond reasonable doubt that there will be no actions of consequence to compel Khartoum to halt the genocide in Darfur. The last time a slaughter of such magnitude visited Africa was 10 years ago, when machete-wielding Hutus killed some 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda. Then also, there were plenty of apologies from the West and at the UN for having done nothing. The tragedy of Rwanda is worth recalling as Darfur heads down a similar destructive path. The global community seems oblivious to the blood that will be shed and the countless lives lost that in many ways dwarfs the ravages of the recent tsunami disaster.

References/End Notes

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