

## **“Never Again,” Again: The Darfur Crisis**

Derek Catsam

University of Texas of the Permian Basin, FPA Africa Blogger

The pattern is relentless, bleak, frustrating, and odiously predictable. The leadership of Sudan and its murderous minions engage in brazen and cynical acts of murder and foment chaos, either directly or by proxy. The rest of the world responds tepidly if it responds at all. Sudan oversteps, the world criticizes, hinting of ramifications to come. Sudan backs off just long enough for the goldfish-length attention span of the western powers to turn their attentions elsewhere. And then the self-preserving thugs in Khartoum return almost immediately to their cruel and rapacious ways.<sup>1</sup>

A cursory look at books, scholarly articles, essays, news stories, opinion pieces, and features in the past few years reveals this pattern to be relentlessly grim in its consistency.

\*\*\*\*\*

One can almost envision the scenario. In a few years someone, perhaps Colin Powell or Condoleeza Rice, will go up before an audience, look earnestly into a bank of cameras, or perhaps at an African or African-American audience, and say: “I am sorry. I should have done more. We should have done more.” That person will be referring to the crisis, the human rights catastrophe, and, most would argue, the genocide that has been ongoing in Darfur for much of the duration of the Bush presidency.<sup>2</sup> It would be uncharacteristic of

---

<sup>1</sup> For an examination of the leadership of Sudan undertaken before the Darfur crisis see Bill Berkeley, *The Graves Are Not Yet Full: Race, Tribe and Power in the Heart of Africa* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), especially chapter 5, “Three Ph.D.’s and a New Kind of African Leader,” pp. 194-243. See also Jok Madut Jok, *Sudan: Race, Religion, and Violence* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The main sources on the crisis in Darfur that inform this essay include: Julie Flint & Alex de Waal, *Darfur: A New History of a Long War* (New York and London: Zed Books, 2008); which is a much-expanded version of their *Darfur: A Short History of a Long War* (New York and London: Zed Books, 2005); Gerard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide*, Revised and Updated Edition, (Ithaca: Cornell

President Bush, Dick Cheney, or so many other members of this administration to be so self-reflective, to be willing to admit to their failings, but in a few years it is likely that someone will do so, even if without the imprimatur of the Bush administration.

The subtext? Never again. Again. And again.

As history has shown, there is no greater fecklessness than the fecklessness of the west in the face of atrocity in Africa.

The situation in Darfur is really only part of the tragedy of Sudan, the other major components being growing conflict in the eastern Sudan and the longstanding (and newly revived) strife between the Muslim North, where the country's power nexus resides, and the black African South.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the crisis in Darfur has been the focal point of

---

University Press, 2007); Eric Reeves, *A Long Day's Dying: Critical Moments in the Darfur Genocide* (Toronto: The Key Publishing House, 2007); M. W. Daly, *Darfur's Sorrow: A History of Destruction and Genocide* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Agnes van Ardenne, Mohammed Salih, Nick Grono, Juan Mendez, and Fouad Ibrahim, *Explaining Darfur: Lectures on the Ongoing Genocide* (Amsterdam, Vossiuspers UvA, 2006); Alex de Waal, Editor, *War in Darfur and the Search for Peace* (London and Cambridge: Justice Africa/Global Equity Initiative, 2007); de Waal, *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan*, Revised Edition, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Prunier, "The Politics of Death in Darfur," *Current History*, May 2006, pp. 195-202; Lee Feinstein, "Darfur and Beyond: What is Needed to Prevent Mass Atrocities," CSR # 22, January 2007, Council on Foreign Relations; Brian Steidle and Gretchen Steidle Wallace, *The Devil Came on Horseback: Bearing Witness to the Genocide in Darfur* (New York, Public Affairs Press, 2007); Jen Marlowe, with Aisha Bain and Adam Shapiro, *Darfur Diaries: Stories of Survival* with Preface by Paul Rusesabagina and Foreword by Dr. Francis Mading Deng (New York: Nation Books, 2006); J. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2008); Daoud Hari, as told to Dennis Michael Burke and Megan M. McKenna, *The Translator: A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur* (New York: Random House, 2008); Lisa French Blaker, *Heart of Darfur* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008); Don Cheadle and John Prendergast, *Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond* (New York: Hyperion, 2007); and Jok, *Sudan*. See also documentaries such as *The Devil Came on Horseback*, Docurama Films, 2007; *Witnessing Darfur: Genocide Emergency*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2005; and the CD-ROM by the UN's IRIN, *Peace Under Fire: Sudan's Darfur Crisis*. Finally, see also Richard Just's recent essay in *The New Republic*, "The Truth Will Not Set You Free," August 27, 2008, pp. 36-47.

<sup>3</sup> On the divisions in Sudan see Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan's Civil Wars* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Ann Mosely Lesch, *The Sudan: Contested National*

global attention for more than five years. No one will ever be able to claim ignorance over the state of affairs in Darfur, which is possibly the most well-covered ongoing ignored human rights catastrophe in history.

Darfur is a vast Muslim region in the west of Sudan, characterized by various ethnic groups that over the course of the twentieth century, and especially after British indirect rule ended in 1956, “became Sudanese.”<sup>4</sup> Becoming Sudanese, alas, would not be sufficient, especially when many of these groups would not (could not) become Arab, and when they would come to take umbrage at the neglect from Khartoum that simply built upon the framework of neglect that had been established in the former metropole in London.

In quick succession in the period after 1956, drought, desertification, and famine exacerbated an already tense situation. Chaos in neighboring Chad led to an influx of refugees into already increasingly contested and impoverished terrain. Libyan strongman and Arab nationalist Muammar Gaddafi used Darfur as a staging ground for his planned seizure of Chad. Munitions began to flow freely into Darfur, many ending up directly in the hands of the vicious Arab militiamen of the janjaweed, a word that itself until recently had historically referred to bandits and outlaws from Chad.<sup>5</sup>

---

*Identities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis/Oxford: Indiana University Press/James Currey, 1998). See also Jok, *Sudan*; and Mark Bixler, *The Lost Boys of Sudan: An American Story of the Refugee Experience* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006), and the UN’s IRIN CD-ROM *From North to South: Sudan’s Displaced Head Home*.

<sup>4</sup> On “becoming Sudanese” see Flint & de Waal, *Darfur*, pp. 12-16.

<sup>5</sup> Janjaweed is sometimes, though less commonly, spelled “janjawiid” depending on the source.

The current “government of national unity” in Khartoum, made up almost exclusively of members of three tiny tribes and dominated by the National Islamic Front, came to recognize, in the age-old tradition of tyranny everywhere, that they could effectively use the janjaweed and its unsavory, ruthless leaders, such as the vicious Sheikh Hilal Mohamed Abdalla, to control and terrorize the masses in Darfur. And so they have.

By 2002 chaos had begun to set in. Over the course of the last six years hundreds of thousands have been killed (the assessments have, for more than five years, varied widely, with death and casualty totals only approximations) with as many wounded. Rape has been a de facto component of the attempts to terrorize and eliminate the Darfuri people. And many times more have been displaced, in a country that even prior to 2000 had almost inarguably been the bloodiest in the post-World War II era after a succession of ruthless civil wars.

Most Americans continued not to notice, among those who did, few even vaguely comprehended matters. A handful of lonely voices in the media and intelligentsia, including Nicholas Kristof, Eric Reeves, Alex de Waal, Julie Flint, and Gerard Prunier, had begun to pursue the issue doggedly by early 2004, but their cries went unheeded. Indeed, it is telling that those who wrote most perceptively about the Darfur crisis in 2004 continue to be the most prominent observers today even while their lamentations go unanswered. (It is perhaps equally telling that there has been virtually no outrage from Muslim states or organizations about the genocide against Muslims in Darfur.)

Inaction reigned among the authorities in the American government with the authority to act, even after Colin Powell, Condoleeza Rice, John Bolton and President Bush acknowledged that genocide was underway in Darfur. (And in a macabre twist from the Rwanda nightmare, the United Nations proved reluctant to acknowledge genocide, as did the European Union). President Bush, who had sneered at the Clinton administration's cravenness in responding to Rwanda, a genocide that exploded and ended within three months, has done as little as Clinton had in Rwanda to thwart the genocide in Darfur that has played out over more than half a decade.<sup>6</sup> Sudan played virtually no role in the 2004 election campaign in the United States and is hardly a major issue among the three candidates hoping to succeed President Bush four years later. (Not that the UK or any other nation state has been much more effective. As far back as July 2004 Britain threatened to send 5000 troops to Darfur. Soon after, Khartoum agreed to a British proposal for African Union troops and other concessions. Sudan eventually breached most of the agreements, but there is a lesson to be learned somewhere in Tony Blair's 2004 willingness to speak loudly with threats of a big stick.)

International coalitions, ranging from humanitarian organizations to the African Union and the United Nations have been somewhat more active, if little more effective, than the dithering American authorities. In August 2006 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1706, which was to allow for the implementation of an international force of more than 17,000 peacekeeping troops along with more than 3,000 support staff. Somehow Khartoum was allowed to veto that plan, and so the Security Council

---

<sup>6</sup> On comparisons between Darfur and Rwanda see Africa Action, "A Tale of Two Genocides: The Failed U.S. Response to Rwanda and Darfur," *The Black Commentator*, Issue 197, September 14, 2006.

responded as if it had stepped through the looking glass. In October of 2006 they passed Resolution 1714, which continued the mandate of the previous resolution, except of course that those troops had never hit the ground in Darfur, those plans had never gained traction. In August 2007 the Security Council strengthened the resolve that it had not yet shown by passing Resolution 1769, authorizing a force of 26,000 peacekeepers. In this scenario, Khartoum plays the role of the Cheshire Cat, grinning at the ineffectual chattering klatches of the United Nations, though it is the UN and its constituent nations pulling the Cheshire Cat's traditional vanishing act.

In 2006 the leading rebel group in Darfur, the Sudan Liberation Movement and Army, agreed to a peace agreement with Khartoum. While this was good news, it hardly meant that the Sudan was on the road to peace. Two other main, but smaller, rebel groups refused to sign on to the accord. (Divisions among the rebel groups continues to be a dominant theme, and these factions have further contributed to the destabilization of a region that does not need it.) Participants of this peace agreement should have heeded the advice of observers not to allow the rest of the world to pat itself on the back in self-congratulations for their modest role in getting the sides to the table. That peace fell apart, as has every other interregnum in the killing. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have fled to Chad to escape the slaughter, rape, and carnage, creating a transnational crisis that has destabilized a region that hardly needs further catalysts for destabilization. Deadlines have come and gone. As the genocide and concomitant horrors have recommenced after each caesura *status quo ante* has prevailed. The result has been a

deeply divided Sudan, not only between Darfur and Khartoum, but also involving the equally troubled South.

The remarkable element that the leading powers and international organizations have not come to grips with is the fact that Sudan's leadership in Khartoum could not more perfectly embody the image of the schoolyard bully. Cruel, harsh, and ruthless when unchallenged, Khartoum tends to fold when challenged and to acquiesce if that challenge seems to reveal even a hint of teeth.

The reality is that there is no one right solution to the crises in the Sudan, though any proposal that does not include the use of force, or at least well-armed, well-provided, and sufficiently numerous peacekeepers with a mandate to use force when challenged (unlike in Rwanda) seems doomed to failure, and perhaps to risk the lives of those sent in to intervene. Nonetheless, with this understanding, there may be many plausible courses of action, many viable combinations of actors.<sup>7</sup> But when the world's powers and the bodies it empowers to act in these situations take no action, pursue none of the available options, make no discernible effort, the message is clear: Khartoum can do whatever it likes, as can the increasingly uncontrollable thugs on the ground, if every so often they feign being chastened when the West raises its voice. After all, the lesson of the last half-decade and more has been that eventually those raising their voices will slink away without so much as waving the sabers they so halfheartedly rattle.

---

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the myriad proposals in the books and articles cited in previous footnotes, see also John Prendergast and Colin Thomas-Jensen, "Blowing the Horn," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, #2, March/April 2007, pp. 59-74 and J. Peter Pham, "Do Not Resuscitate," *The National Interest*, March/April 2008, in a special section, "Situation: Critical," pp. 21-25.

There are two other vital players in the crises in Darfur and South Sudan. One is the rest of Africa. The other is China. The biggest African players have been the willing but weak African Union (AU) troops who have been allowed into Darfur but have been undermanned, underequipped, and underfunded, and thus have been a woefully inefficient palliative. Khartoum almost surely suspected as much in granting an AU presence while thwarting more capable UN or other troops into Darfur. The question, of course, is why the main antagonists in Darfur have so much say in whether and how humanitarian aid, peace missions, and preventative forces will be deployed. It is in this realm where the failings of the west have been so stark. Individual African nation states have been strangely muted on the Sudan crisis, perhaps feeling that they want to act through the African Union in a united front, a perfectly acceptable response that, however ineffectual, makes the actions of the rest of the world pale in comparison.

China's effect has been far less justifiable.<sup>8</sup> With each passing year it becomes increasingly clear that Beijing has only one concern, and that is self-interest couched in the terms of the national sovereignty of those nation states, however noxious, with which it engages. When I was in China participating in a program on China's security issues in 2006 I became something of a one-trick pony as the only Africanist in the group (and almost certainly an annoyance both to my colleagues, who were China specialists with no

---

<sup>8</sup> On China in Africa and especially its involvement with Sudan see Akwe Amosu, "China in Africa: It's (Still) the Governance, Stupid," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 9, 2007; Walden Bello, "China Provokes Debate in Africa," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, March 9, 2007; Eric Reeves, "Partners in Genocide: A Comprehensive Guide to China's Role in Darfur," *The New Republic*, December 18, 2007; J. Peter Pham, "Khartoum's Partners in Beijing," *World Defense Review*, January 31, 2008; Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Ducking the Blame on Sudan (and Zimbabwe)," *The Washington Realist*, April 10, 2008. For a primer on China in Africa more generally, see Chris Alden, *China in Africa* in "African Arguments" series (London-New York/Cape Town: Zed Books/David Philips, 2007).



interest in Africa, and my Chinese hosts, who probably wished they could disappear me). But my insistence that China's policy of engagement with Khartoum represented countenancing genocide was correct then and China's involvement since, justified under the façade of Sudan's sovereignty, has done little to disabuse me of the notion. But whenever China is involved, the west perhaps feels it should tread lightly. China's avarice for energy sources that it sorely needs means that Beijing cares not a whit for human rights. (China does not care for such niceties at home, or in those places Beijing believes to be within its ambit, such as Tibet – why would it care about human rights in Darfur, or especially in Sudan's oil-rich South?) This surely complicates matters, but cannot possibly stand as the sole reason for the almost total fecklessness on the part of every state and institution that has the power to act in Darfur. China represents a hurdle, to be sure, but not an insurmountable one.

But let us for a minute imagine that peace will come, at the barrel of a gun or otherwise, and that the main players will adhere to the provisions they have established and that smaller parties will go along. Let us even imagine that somehow the janjaweed and its doppelgangers will cease to destabilize the region. Then what? Is the situation in the Sudan simply too far gone? Is there any hope for a federalized solution to the crises, in which the South and Darfur are granted partial or full autonomy? Would such solutions have been viable in, say, 2004? Has the chaos and tumult gotten so bad by 2008 that almost no solution will be able to prevent perpetual vulnerability and destabilization without a longstanding commitment from the west that may not have been essential had the United States, the UN and other actors stepped up to the task years ago? In other

words, by stalling for time have we not ironically enough forced an eventual investment of time that we never wanted to spend in Darfur, in Sudan, and in that troubled region of a too-often troubled continent?

It remains to be seen what the future has in store for the Sudan, and in particular for Darfur. We can hold on to hope, but only because hope is just about all that we have on which to hold.