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Break Through to Darfur

Combine leverage, internationalism and aid to stop the killing in Sudan

by Samantha Power and John Prendergast

After two years of peace talks, the Sudanese government and southern-based rebels signed a long-awaited preliminary peace deal last week, agreeing to final principles for ending a 21-year civil war that has taken 2 million lives. The accord -- which provides for sharing power and oil revenue between the government and rebels, and a future referendum on secession for the south -- would not have been reached if the Bush administration had not used its vast economic and political leverage to extract concessions.

Though the administration deserves credit for the breakthrough, it must urgently apply the lesson of this experience to another Sudan crisis, in Darfur, where U.S. officials are predicting about 350,000 Darfurians could be dead by December. That lesson is that humanitarian actions do not solve what are, at base, political problems; only by urgently applying high-level and sustained pressure on Khartoum will lives in Darfur be saved.

The stakes cannot be overstated. Some 30,000 Darfurians have already been murdered, and nearly 1.5 million have been ethnically cleansed from their villages and farms. Hundreds of thousands have been penned into concentration camps, which are patrolled by government-supported janjaweed militiamen who rape women nightly and murder men who try to leave to gather food for their families. Other displaced people roam the region in search of food and water. Meanwhile, Khartoum has blocked and manipulated international food aid.

With the specter of forced famine looming, the United States and its allies are treating symptoms and ignoring causes. They have pressed for humanitarian access to Darfur without demanding that the homeless be returned to their torched villages and farms. They have supported the deployment of international cease-fire monitors but have settled for 60 African Union observers to patrol a region the size of France. And they have denounced atrocities without attempting to create mechanisms for punishing the perpetrators.

In order to ameliorate the current humanitarian emergency and address the roots of the crisis, the United States must work far more urgently with the United Nations to stave off famine, reverse the ethnic cleansing, demand accountability and bring peace to Sudan.

First, famine must be prevented. The homeless have missed their spring planting season, and militia members have seized their cattle and livestock and blown up or poisoned their water wells and food stocks. Western powers must stop begging for humanitarian access and start to plan a rescue. Concerted, high-level diplomacy should be used to insist that Khartoum meet its many promises of full access for international aid workers and, crucially, the supplies they are delivering. This will require using the country's major rail line to run continuous food convoys from Port Sudan to Darfur. Simultaneously, international agencies should plan emergency operations from Libya and Chad or even southern Sudan in order to reach those whom Khartoum is starving.

Further, the United States must drastically expand the number and mandate of monitors who will be sent to the region. The proposed African Union mission should serve as the nucleus of a team that must include human rights monitors as well as cease-fire inspectors, and it must be large enough to reach the most isolated displaced people and deter abuses, thus encouraging those in the concentration camps to return home so they can rebuild and plant in order to avoid perpetual famine.

Second, the U.S. must find a way to internationalize a response to the crisis. Multilateral pressures and incentives have caused Khartoum to cooperate in the past: It expelled Osama bin Laden, abandoned its support for Al Qaeda, halted a resurgent slave trade, ended aerial bombing in southern Sudan, ceased population clearing around the southern oil fields and launched peace talks with southern-based rebels.

To be fair, this time it is U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Europeans who have left President Bush looking unilateral on Sudan. Annan issued one sharp criticism of Khartoum and then went quiet. Some European powers seem to be muting their criticisms in the hopes of making commercial investments in Sudan, especially in the oil industry. If Annan, with American political, financial and logistic backing, were to take the lead in uniting the international community, European and African countries would probably be far more receptive than they are to Washington alone, which has lost legitimacy as a result of the Iraq war.

Third, the United States must use all its leverage to turn up the heat on Khartoum. Bush has promised to begin to normalize relations with Sudan upon the signing of the accord between the government and southern-based rebels, but the administration must now hinge its warming with Khartoum upon progress in Darfur.

U.S. leverage is not what it was immediately following 9/11, when Khartoum feared possible U.S. military action. But even as Washington's capacity for military intimidation has waned with the Iraq quagmire, the U.S. retains vital economic and political leverage, especially if it gets U.N. and European support.

The U.S. and other Western powers should threaten to impose multilateral, targeted sanctions -- travel bans and asset freezes -- against members of Sudan's regime who are most directly responsible for the human rights violations in Darfur. And Annan, with or without Security Council authorization, should appoint a panel to investigate Sudanese war crimes and crimes against humanity in order to lay the groundwork for future prosecution.

Speaking out on the occasion of the 10-year anniversary of the Rwandan genocide in April, Bush rightly accused Khartoum of being "complicit in the brutalization of Darfur" and urged it to "immediately stop" the atrocities and "provide unrestricted access to humanitarian aid agencies." Nearly two months later, 1.5 million Sudanese victims of ethnic cleansing remain in grave peril, the killer militias continue their rampage and aid deliveries are still not flowing freely. The only difference, all these precious weeks later, is that it is no longer only the Sudanese who are complicit.

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