

Humanitarian crisis in Sudan used as cover for neo-colonial ambitions

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28 July 2004

The deepening humanitarian disaster in the Darfur region of Sudan has given media hacks and western politicians the chance to put their feigned moral outrage into overdrive. They see the opportunity to justify a military intervention in a key oil producing country that would otherwise be all too clearly recognised as an imperialist venture.

One of the most sickening displays of holier-than-thou cant was a *Washington Post*'s editorial bemoaning the unwillingness of Europe and other rich donors to share in the "world's burdens". The United States already had to pay most of the bills for global security, the newspaper opined, "but if nobody else will act to save up to 1 million civilians, questions about sharing the burden must be put aside." America would have to "avoid succumbing to an Iraq syndrome to match the Vietnam syndrome of the past" and continue to lead in the world.

The *Washington Post* directed its thunder especially against France for not using its military base in neighbouring Chad to assist in the humanitarian effort and for donating just \$6 million to the United Nations relief operation compared to \$130 million from the US. France, Japan, Italy, Spain and Germany were all denounced as "tightfisted" with their aid support.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was even more definite about the need for a military involvement. Declaring that Britain had a "moral responsibility" to deal with Darfur, he asked his advisors to draw up plans for a military intervention, either to provide back-up for the 300-strong African Union (AU) protection force that is scheduled to be sent to Sudan or, if deemed necessary, for British troops to be sent to defend refugee camps against marauding militias. Chief of General Staff General Sir Mike Jackson told the BBC that despite commitments in Iraq, he could put together a brigade of 5,000 troops for Sudan "very quickly indeed." Secretary of State for International Development Hilary Benn boasted that Britain was the first to provide financial backing for the AU force.

According to media reports, the United Nations has approached Australia to send troops to a UN force, to be assembled by the end of the year. Defence Minister Robert Hill said, "we are contemplating whether to make a contribution." Australia would be asked to provide troops for technical support, explained Hill, as there was no shortage of offers for infantry troops.

Pressure is being put on the UN to pass a resolution, drafted by the US, to place sanctions on the Sudan government. Last week the US Congress voted unanimously for the Bush administration to consider "multilateral or even unilateral intervention to prevent genocide should the United Nations Security Council fail to act."

The numbers killed by pro-government militia in Darfur have been

estimated at around 30,000. The use of the term "genocide" is a deliberate appeal to the 1948 UN convention, which says that the international community has a responsibility to punish governments involved in such acts. But it is an historical absurdity to compare the crimes committed in the Nazi extermination camps that gave rise to the UN terminology with the events in Darfur. A similar invocation of "genocide" was made in 1999 against the regime of Slobodan Milosevic to justify the NATO bombing of Serbia.

The humanitarian situation in Darfur has certainly worsened, with more than one million people displaced and facing starvation in temporary refugee camps. More than two million people are estimated to be in need of food aid.

UN and other investigators have confirmed that Arab militias, the so-called Janjaweed, have had the backing of the Sudan government in carrying out atrocities against the black Africa population. Villages, wells and agriculture have been destroyed, civilians driven from their homes, suffering beatings and torture. Amnesty International has reported that the pro-government militias have used rape and other forms of sexual violence against black African women and girls. In one particularly gruesome incident observers from the African Union reported finding the charred remains of eight schoolgirls, chained together and their school set on fire by Janjaweed gunmen.

Nobody can fail to be moved by the tragic plight of the suffering Darfur population. But those who argue for western military intervention to protect the aid agencies against attacks by the Janjaweed militia are in effect calling for a force to take on the Sudanese government. Whatever the intentions, such an operation would be nothing but a cover for the US and British governments who would welcome a justification to oust the Khartoum regime and install their own stooges. Sudan has a key strategic position in relation to the Middle East and North Africa and is now producing some 250,000 barrels of oil per day—a figure expected to double over the next four years.

The plight of the Darfur people has only hit the television screens in the last month as the number of starving and homeless refugees has escalated. But the conflict has a much longer history and an understanding of what has taken place cannot exclude the role of the US administration. During the 1990s the US gave the National Islamic Front regime of Sudan a pariah status, putting it on a list of states that allegedly support terrorism. The US intervened in the 21-year-long civil war between the Sudan regime and the rebel Sudan Peoples Liberation Army (SPLA), which demands self-determination for the Christian south of Sudan, by giving aid and tacit military support to the SPLA. In 1998 it carried out the bombing of a Khartoum pharmaceutical factory, claiming it was producing chemical

weapons—a claim that was subsequently disproved.

However, since the oil pipeline was opened in 1999 lobbying from the oil companies has seen the US soften its approach to the Sudan regime, with the Bush administration pressuring both sides in the civil war to sign up to a peace deal. Western oil companies had been kept out and most of the oil was going to China and Malaysia.

In May this year a deal was signed in Naivasha, Kenya between the Sudan government and the SPLA, the latest stage of the peace negotiations. Just before the deal was signed the US removed Sudan from its list of countries not cooperating in the “war against terror” and Sudan expects to be removed from the list of countries supporting terror next year. The Naivasha deal, brokered by the US, Britain, Norway and Italy, allows the SPLA to join the Sudan government as a minor partner in a “power sharing” arrangement and holds out the promise of a referendum on independence in six years time. The main requirement of the western powers was that access to oil is divided up between the Sudan government and the SPLA, and above all enough stability imposed to allow exploitation of the oilfields, opening up Sudan to investment and aid from the World Bank and western governments.

One example of such western involvement is the announcement last week that a German consortium, led by the railway construction firm, Thormaehlen Schweisstechnik AG, is to construct a 3,000-kilometre railway linking Kenya and Uganda to the oilfields in the south of Sudan.

Throughout these peace negotiations the US and Britain have ignored the chosen method of the Sudanese government to impose its rule—dividing the population on ethnic lines, arming pro-government militias (usually groups of Arab origin but the ethnic divisions are complex and there is much intermarriage between different peoples), and using a combination of militias, its army and bombing by its small air force to clear out whole populations from key areas.

The Janjaweed attacks on the villages of Darfur did not start in the last few weeks when the issue hit the headlines, but in February 2003. The Sudan government armed the Janjaweed militias and bombed the local population in order to deal with two local Darfur rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM). Whilst opposition groups in Darfur date back much further, the SLA and JEM were clearly influenced by the concessions won by the SPLA in the south of Sudan under western auspices. They could win support from a population in a region the size of France that is extremely poor, with virtually no government facilities.

Throughout this one and a half years, despite the issue being raised by human rights groups, the US and Britain turned a blind eye to events in Darfur, not wishing to see the peace talks in Naivasha break down. Only when the humanitarian disaster has reached such proportions that it has made world headlines has the policy of “quietly engaging” the Sudanese government been abandoned in favour of supporting African military intervention and considering direct intervention. Only now have key politicians have begun raising their supposed humanitarian concerns.

It should be added that the peace negotiations have left the Sudanese government’s brutal version of Sharia law holding in the northern part of the country (punishment includes amputation of a hand and foot), and its secret security organisations are left intact. Nor has there been a pretence made of imposing formal democracy by the west. None of the opposition political parties in Sudan were party to the peace negotiations and the timing and running of future elections will be left to the Sudan regime.

Moreover, Darfur is only the most recent example of the Sudan government brutally imposing its rule while the US and western powers pursued peace negotiations. For example, at the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, the Sudan government cleared the population out of the West Upper Nile oilfields. The force employed was the local Nuer militia, backed by government troops and aircraft. Eyewitness reports cited the now familiar tactics used: abduction of women and children, gang rapes, ground assaults supported by helicopter gunships, destruction of humanitarian relief sites and burning of villages.

The policing of oil-rich areas are vital for exploitation by western companies and since the humanitarian disaster resulting from these operations hardly hit the world’s headlines, peace negotiations continued throughout.

The humanitarian situation in the south of Sudan is comparable to that in Darfur, but has not made the headlines because it is regarded as the outcome of the civil war. In the last two decades, two million people have been killed and four million displaced as a result of the war. A recent report compiled by a group affiliated to the SPLA points to the fact that in the south, where there are no state services, a girl has more chance of dying in pregnancy or childbirth than of completing primary school education. In 2003 an estimated 95,000 under-five-year-olds died, mostly from preventable diseases (the population of rebel-held south is 7.5 million). This figure is 19,000 more than the total number of under-five deaths in the 31 top industrial nations (population 938 million).

There has been speculation that an African Union or UN force, paid for by the West and backed up by British or EU troops, will now be employed in Sudan. This is the version supported by the British political elite, based on what it considers to be a successful intervention in Sierra Leone. Relying on forces from developing countries and only a small British contingent is an approach much favoured in Britain’s colonial past. Whatever military intervention is finally decided by the western powers, there should be no illusions that it offers any viable future for the Sudanese population. Either it will result in a war between the population and the occupiers—Sudan’s foreign minister has cited Iraq, saying that “In one or two months these troops [from the West] are going to be considered by the people of Darfur as occupying forces, and you’ll have the same incidents you are facing in Iraq.” Or, if a pro-western stooge regime can be imposed, mineral resources will be opened up to foreign companies while the people suffer growing poverty, underdevelopment and corrupt rule along the lines now developing in Sierra Leone.



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