

Sudan: why Powell calls Darfur violence “genocide”

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The declaration by United States Secretary of State Colin Powell last week that “genocide has been committed in Darfur and that the government of Sudan and the Janjaweed bear responsibility” signals an escalation in American imperialism’s efforts to establish itself as the controlling power in North Africa and throughout the continent.

Powell’s designation of events in Darfur as “genocide,” echoing Congress, is a prime example of his familiar pose of humanitarian concern, behind which he is seeking to further Washington’s drive for global hegemony.

The plight of the people of Darfur plays no role in shaping the response of the Bush administration to the criminal activities of the Sudanese government. Like Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the regime in Khartoum is being targeted because of geopolitical and not moral considerations. Once again, it is about who controls vital oil supplies.

Powell is a past master at covering up America’s real motives with a mountain of lies and moral effluvia. He played a central role in propagating the false and now discredited claims that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and had connections with Al Qaeda as justification for a predetermined decision to go to war in order to reinforce US domination of the Middle East. He will go down in history for his infamous speech at the United Nations that provided the justification for the US intervention in Iraq.

His present claim that the Sudanese government are the perpetrators of genocide is also a cynical political ploy. Khartoum are certainly carrying out or sponsoring brutal repression in Darfur. But like the earlier comparisons between Saddam Hussein and Hitler, or the demonisation of Slobodan Milosevic and Serbia, exaggeration and hyperbole play an essential role in popularising the demand that “something must be done” immediately and in dulling critical sensibilities regarding precisely what that something must be. Thus we are brought once more to the point of an imperialist inspired military intervention carried out in the name of humanitarianism.

No attempt should be made to minimise the barbarous actions of the Sudanese government, but no one should allow their horror at such outrages to be manipulated by Washington. An estimated one million people have been displaced in Darfur and 50,000 killed, which constitutes a human catastrophe. But there is still no justifiable comparison with the events that took place in Rwanda in 1994 that are now repeatedly cited as proof of the need to use the term genocide and justify Western intervention. The Janjaweed

have not mobilised large sections of the population to take part in ethnically inspired massacres as did the Hutu regime in Rwanda. And whilst there is a legacy from British colonialism of Arab-African divisions, the tribal groupings are a complex mixture and the population is spread over a large area where there is virtually no government or state apparatus, never mind a reactionary mass movement.

Powell made his genocide declaration on the conclusions of a US State Department investigation undertaken in refugee camps in neighbouring Chad. But what the report established is hardly new—that government-backed militias calling themselves “Arabs” and spouting anti-African racism have been carrying out attacks on Darfur’s population, killing, raping and driving them out of their villages. These operations have been going on for over a year as the Sudan government’s method of dealing with the two opposition rebel groups in Darfur.

The Sudanese government has regularly used this technique to deal with its opponents and did so with impunity in the oilfield regions during the last few years. But despite appeals from human rights organisations, the US was quite prepared to turn a blind eye and continue peace negotiations with the Sudan government and the southern rebels. Indeed the rebel groups in Darfur are said to have stepped up their operations last year because they were encouraged by the advantages gained by the southern rebels—demanding autonomy and a share in the oil wealth—obtained because of US pressure on the Sudan government.

The US has now decided to step up pressure on Sudan primarily as a weapon against its international rivals. Washington’s demand at the United Nations is that sanctions be applied to Sudan’s oil output—currently 320,000 barrels of oil per day. This would hit China and Pakistan given that they are two of Sudan’s largest oil customers, both of whom are Security Council members and who have so far opposed the proposal. It must also be stressed that since oil is Sudan’s main income, such sanctions would have a devastating effect on a country that is already desperately poor—just as they did in Iraq.

The US is also arm-twisting the other Western powers to fund an African Union (AU) intervention force in the Darfur region. So far only 300 troops have been sent, but a figure of several thousand is being touted. The force will clearly be “African” in appearance only, with the US directing operations on the ground. Addressing a student audience at Georgetown University, Powell explained how

pressure on the Sudanese government with the AU force was the strategy being followed. “We’ll help them [i.e., the Sudan government] with the African Union peacekeepers. There are some American military personnel in there working with the monitors.” He did not elaborate on the nature or role of these personnel, presumably involved in “special forces” operations.

Powell has been able to pose as a humanitarian liberator in Sudan, despite the realities of the criminal US occupation of Iraq, largely because of the uncritical and slavish support given in the media. Almost daily editorials and op-eds are dedicated to moral hand-wringing over the plight of Darfur’s population, pious criticism of the United Nations’ inability to mount an intervention force, and urging the US to take more action.

Not even passing consideration is being given to the deaths that have resulted and continue to result from actions of the US government in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, besides which the Sudanese government’s killing operations pale into insignificance. No discussion is taking place on the interest of American oil corporations in Sudan, the principal motivation behind the US’s negotiations with the Sudanese government over the last four years. The *Washington Post*, for example, on September 13 stated that Powell should be “commended for his honesty” in accusing Sudan of genocide. Powell must be supported in getting “a large, neutral civilian-protection force into Darfur.” Needless to say there was no consideration of how this African Union force could possibly be neutral, with the US military taking part and with the US and the Western powers paying for it.

Sudan has also become an issue in winning votes in the presidential elections. Speaking to the National Baptist Convention, John Kerry said the US should “ensure the immediate deployment of an effective international force” and that if he were president he would “act now” and “not sit idly by.”

The US is seizing the opportunity to take the leading role in Sudan because of the obvious disarray among the European powers. The European Union’s fact finding mission to Darfur notably did not conclude that the atrocities committed by the Sudan government amounted to genocide. Since the term is now practically synonymous with the need for Western military intervention, it must be presumed that the EU is unable to agree on an alternative to the US-AU approach. Britain’s initial readiness to send in its own troops, and French deployment of troops in Chad on the border with Sudan, appear to have gone no further. According to the intelligence web site *Stratfor.com*, the EU cannot even agree on placing sanctions on Sudan’s oil—with Britain, Germany and, albeit reluctantly, France in favour but Spain, Italy and Greece rumoured to be opposed. “The Sudanese case offers more evidence of the EU’s inability to craft a coherent, common foreign policy,” comment *Stratfor*, pointing to the wide divergences among the now 25 member states.

On September 16 the European parliament passed a resolution calling on the UN’s Security Council to consider an arms embargo and other sanctions against Sudan. It stressed the need for dialogue and political negotiation rather than military intervention, but did proclaim that what was taking place in Darfur “can be construed as tantamount to genocide.” The resolution is not legally binding for the EU but emphasises the degree to which the US is able to set

the agenda.

One by-product of Powell’s genocide accusation is the breakdown of negotiations between the Sudan government and the Darfur rebel groups. Whilst one of the groups, the Sudan Liberation Movement, said it was considering its position on the peace talks, the other group, the Justice and Equality Movement, said that negotiations had collapsed. Recognising that the imposition of UN sanctions and the stepping up of the AU intervention will weaken the Sudan government, the rebel groups see no point in stopping their military operations.

The most damning evidence against the US and Western powers’ humanitarian pretensions is the continuing lack of adequate aid and medical assistance being given to the one million or so refugees in the Darfur region. On the same day as the editorial cited above, the *Washington Post* carried a piece claiming that whilst security had not been improved, the media attention had “helped persuade governments to feed the starving.” The attention of politicians and the media “has stimulated government responses that have had the perverse effect of defusing the political pressure to stop the killings and return the refugees home,” the article claimed. This alleged over-generosity of Western governments is a complete myth.

Even though only a relatively small amount of money would be required to finance adequate aid to the displaced population, such humanitarian support has not been forthcoming. A report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) states that 6,000 to 10,000 of the displaced 1.2 million people in Darfur are dying every month. “Thousands, including thousands of children under five, are dying every month from diseases which can be easily prevented and treated,” explains WHO’s director-general. The report gives only 15 percent of total deaths being due to “injuries and violence,” with diarrhoea being the main cause of death followed by another large proportion due to fever and pneumonia.

“The combination of crowded conditions in the settlements, shortage of clean water, inadequate latrines, insufficient soap, and the mire caused by rain-soaked mud mingling with excreta, have combined to make hygiene an impossible goal for people living in small, tarpaulin covered huts,” states the report.

WHO’s survey found that diarrhoea was linked to the deaths of one-half to three-quarters of the children under five. Questioned by reporters on whether the report’s mortality statistics were due to “genocide,” David Nabarro, a WHO official, refused to go along with the hyperbole. “We cannot say that this is due to any kind of systematic violence,” he said.

Naturally, such issues of fact will not influence the approach of the US media which will continue to focus on the need for “humanitarian” military intervention.



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