

# US backs off genocide charge in Darfur

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The appointment of Condoleezza Rice in place of Colin Powell as US secretary of state has been followed by a small but significant shift in the administration's approach to Sudan.

Rice's deputy, Robert Zoellick, visited the country recently after attending an International Donor's Conference on Sudan, convened in Oslo. Following a meeting with Vice President Ali Osman Taha, Zoellick was asked at a press conference if the US believed genocide was still being committed in Darfur. The ongoing violence in the region, which pits government-backed militias against rebel troops, has claimed between 180,000 and 300,000 lives, and created more than 2 million refugees.

Clearly unwilling to repeat the assertion, Zoellick said, "I don't want to get into a debate over terminology," and added that it was Powell who had "made the point" in his testimony to Congress.

He went on to speak of "crimes against humanity," in line with the findings of the United Nations International Commission of Inquiry (UNICI), saying he had emphasised to the Sudanese government the need for accountability, via sanctions and the law, in reference to the UN resolution that sent the issue of Darfur to the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The question of the violence in Darfur was a heated issue in Washington last year, with Powell under intense domestic pressure, primarily from Christian fundamentalist and African-American lobby groups, to call it genocide. This designation brings with it an obligation to act to stop it from happening. Consequently, Zoellick's shift on this question has provoked an angry response in certain quarters.

For example, Salih Booker, executive director of Washington-based Africa Action, said, "We are outraged by Zoellick's refusal yesterday to acknowledge that genocide is still ongoing in Darfur. The Bush administration declared seven months ago that genocide was occurring in Darfur, and since this time the evidence has clearly shown that the genocide is continuing and the death toll is mounting. The US has failed to act to stop the genocide, and Zoellick's attempts to evade the question of whether this still is 'genocide' are absolutely unacceptable as thousands of innocent people continue to die every week in Darfur."

Booker continued, "First, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice decides Darfur is not important enough for her to visit, and then her deputy goes to Khartoum, clearly displaying US

willingness to cooperate with the government of Sudan at the expense of protecting the people of Darfur."

The US administration has worked more closely with the Sudanese government since the signing in January of a peace agreement between Khartoum and the southern rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). If successful, the deal will allow greater Western access to the south's oilfields. At the same time, Washington has increased pressure on the regime to resolve the Darfur crisis, which has become something of an embarrassment to the Bush administration since Powell called it genocide, but then took no discernible action against Khartoum.

Three resolutions on Sudan passed in quick succession by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) recently were intended to put pressure on Khartoum. Receiving the most attention was the last of the three—Resolution 1593, passed on March 31 by 11 votes with 4 abstentions. This resolution, submitted by France, refers the situation in Darfur to the ICC and hands over to the court the UN inquiry's list of 51 suspected war criminals.

After much discussion, the US, which is vehemently opposed to the ICC, decided that to veto the resolution would be politically damaging, especially following its earlier "genocide" charge. Consequently, the US requested assurances that Americans deployed in Sudan, in whatever capacity, would not be subject to ICC prosecutions. It then abstained along with China, Algeria and Brazil. The US administration may also have abstained to avoid embarrassing its close ally Britain, which is a signatory to the ICC.

The ICC referral opens up the question of whom the regime will be forced to sacrifice if it is to avoid being toppled. Sections within Washington still see regime change in Khartoum as a desirable option, though the *Financial Times* believes that the Bush administration enjoys a close counterterrorism relationship with Sudan's Islamic government, and that it wants to preserve the country's unity, fearing another fragmented, failed state.

The two previous UNSC resolutions passed recently dealt with the strengthening of sanctions against the regime, and with the establishment of a UN Mission for Sudan (UNMIS) with a 10,000 strong peacekeeping force to monitor the peace agreement in the south.

Resolution 1590, which passed unanimously on March 24,

established a UN force—crucially under Chapter VII, which allows the force “to protect UN personnel, and to ensure their security and freedom of movement as well as...to protect civilians under imminent threat of violence.”

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is also to report to the UNSC on how UNMIS “can reinforce the effort to foster peace in Darfur through appropriate assistance to the African Union Mission [AU]” and how the AU can “utilise UNMIS’s resources.” There are 2,200 AU troops currently employed in Darfur as monitors, though a joint AU, UN and European Union report of April 5 calls for 6,000 troops by August and perhaps a further increase to 12,000.

The proposed increase in troops for Darfur, combined with enhanced powers borrowed from UNMIS, marks a shift within the Security Council. However, since Western governments will effectively foot the bill for any increased troop presence in Sudan, it remains to be seen whether their already stretched resources will be able to fund such an initiative.

Resolution 1591 was passed on March 29 by 12 votes with three abstentions. Proposed by the US, it strengthens the arms embargo to also include the Sudanese government and imposes sanctions on individuals who violate human rights, or who impede the peace process. These sanctions include a ban on travel and a freezing of funds, though a 30-day delay allows for funds to be shifted beyond the reach of those imposing the sanctions.

The arms embargo will particularly hit Russia, as well as China, which also enjoys a close relationship with Khartoum and is the major oil partner of the regime. China is moving increasingly into areas that have been the preserve of the US and European powers. China-Africa trade jumped 50 percent to \$18.5 billion between 2002 and 2003. Officials expect it to grow to \$30 billion by 2006. US-Africa trade was \$44.5 billion last year.

In addition to the Bush administration, the World Bank is also considering a normalisation of relations with Sudan following the signing of the comprehensive peace agreement in January. The World Bank reopened its office in Khartoum in January with a view to the reconstruction of the south, and was also involved with the negotiations on the wealth-sharing arrangements for the region’s oil.

Ishac Diwan, the World Bank country director for Sudan, said that Britain had taken the lead in normalising relations, and that Sudan, which owes around \$25 billion in debts, would need to reduce this to \$6 billion before it could resume relations with the World Bank, adding, “I would expect this to happen within a year.”

Other nations are also lining up to resume relations with Sudan, hoping for a slice of the oil and reconstruction contracts. At the Oslo conference, where Sudan had requested \$2.6 billion, there were total pledges of \$4.5 billion following an appeal by Kofi Annan for urgent food aid for displaced southerners. Only the US linked its proposed donations to the

question of resolving the Darfur crisis.

US-backed Sudan People’s Liberation Movement leader John Garang, who is to become vice-president of a transitional government under the power-sharing agreement, said it would be a mistake to link implementation of the accord and “peace dividend” to resolution of the Darfur crisis.

The US has made it clear that its aid would go directly to southern Sudan and not through Khartoum, even after the formation of the central coalition government.

Meanwhile, the UN’s World Food Programme (WFP) has received only around 40 percent of the \$468 million it requested to guarantee food security to the refugees from Darfur’s ongoing violence. It has been forced to reduce the rations it provides, cutting the daily caloric intake from 2,100 to 1,890.

Wendy Chamberlin, acting head of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, has also pointed to the lack of funds for the region. “We are at zero,” she said, as the agency has received only \$2 million of the \$31 million it needs to operate in Darfur. Local crops have also collapsed, aggravated by worsening drought, which will lead to even greater hardship over the next 18 months.

Sudan’s minister of energy and mining announced last week the discovery of an oilfield in Darfur with abundant deposits. The announcement did not take oil experts by surprise, as previous reports had indicated that Darfur has untapped oil, gold, iron, silver and natural gas deposits. The country’s ABCO Corp., in which Swiss company Cliveden has a 37 percent stake, has already started drilling southwest of El-Fasher in North Darfur state.

The southern civil war, which lasted 20 years, was prolonged by the question of how the region’s oil wealth would be distributed.

Sudanese political analyst Mohamed Issam explained, “If you look back to the original demands made by the [Darfur] rebels at the start of the rebellion, they were asking for 80 percent of Darfur’s oil wealth.” He added, “Now they know for a fact the oil is there. The perception that the government is benefiting from Darfur’s resources will fuel resentment and definitely complicate the [peace] negotiation process.”



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