

Lessons and Challenges from the Genocide in Sudan

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The Pittsburgh Darfur Emergency Coalition has been a long time force for activism, energy, and creativity for Sudan. PDEC's work has helped many Sudanese, including my friend Hawa Abdullah Salih. So, I am happy to be a part of today's event.

My group, the Massachusetts Coalition to Save Darfur, like the Pittsburgh group and many other groups around the country have been activists for Sudan for many years. Together, Sudan activism in the US has helped a great many Sudanese, particularly by America providing most of the aid that has helped sustain the millions of people displaced from their homes in Sudan, thereby preventing even more deaths.

And yet, sadly, all our collective work over the years has not been enough. Not enough to stop the government sponsored killings. Not enough to force a breakthrough so that the millions of displaced can get humanitarian assistance. Not enough to end the marginalization and targeting of Sudanese peoples. Not enough to transform the political model in Sudan that victimizes millions while advancing extremist ideologies. Not enough to end the regime that is the root cause of Sudan's problems. Not enough. Not yet.

John Shattuck wrote about his experience as the top human rights official in the Clinton White House from 1993 to 1998, a period that included Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo. He wrote, "I came to understand two basic truths. I learned that evil is a reality, not an abstraction of moral philosophy, and that the killers of innocent people must be held accountable or evil will prevail. I also found how difficult it is to mobilize the US government to promote international human rights, but how essential it is to do so." And so it is for Sudan.

In Sudan, we are learning hard, cruel lessons about power and evil in the world. 29 years of President Bashir heading an NCP government in Sudan tells a repeating story of mass atrocities, ethnic cleansing, denial of food and medicine, rape as a weapon of war, and genocide by the army and militias, while its leaders do their creative best to distract the West from focusing on stopping them. Millions of Darfuris who were driven out of their villages and off their land are still unable to return because it is unsafe. Meanwhile, the government is settling ethnic Arab people on Darfuri land, from other places in Sudan or outside of Sudan, raising the specter of succeeding in the final stage of genocide by permanently eliminating the African people of the Zaghawa, Massaleit, and Fur tribes from Darfur.

We must not underestimate the determined, deliberate, and committed nature of Bashir and the NCP, nor underestimate how much their control of the power of the state protects and insulates them.

The international community acquiesces in the perverse arrangement that the government of Sudan first perpetrates the abuses, creates the crises, and then gets to decide if, when, and how it will approve each proposed step that might respond to the crises. The Government is increasingly effective in blocking news from Sudan, limiting access to selective regions, and impeding UNAMID's effectiveness. The janjaweed militia are stronger and more deadly, having been formalized as the Rapid Support Forces, with heavier arms, uniforms, and a command structure under the control of the NISS. Attacks and bombings of civilians that had been a daily occurrence, subsided for some months, but have begun to surge again. Humanitarian access and assistance

continues to be impeded or blocked altogether, despite commitments made to the US when we lifted sanctions in 2017.

The crises and genocide in Sudan continue, 15 years and counting for Darfur and 7 years and counting for the Nuba Mts and Blue Nile.

People who hope for “Never Again” wanted Bashir to have been stopped during the first genocide in the Nuba Mountains in the 1990's, but we've seen the second in South Sudan, the third in Darfur, and the fourth in Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains again. How many genocides, from the same regime, will the world watch before acting to stop them?

Over the years, Bashir has learned that there are little or no consequences for his actions, that there are no consequences for breaking his commitments, that the U.S. along with the West is a paper tiger. Impunity reigns. Nothing, yet, has happened to force Bashir to change his strategy for staying in power by exploiting ethnic and religious differences to victimize the marginalized people of Sudan.

Genocide scholars have identified stages of the course of genocides and Sudan displays them all: classifying people into us and them, dehumanizing the other, organizing for killing, polarizing groups, preparing and proceeding with mass killing, and denying everything during and after. Genocide scholars have identified factors influencing the risk of genocide and Sudan displays them all: prior genocides, ethnic ideology of the ruling elite, autocratic rule, state-led discrimination and high risk of instability.

If the world cannot recognize the need to act to prevent and stop genocide in Sudan, will we ever encounter a clearer case?

To stop genocide in Sudan, we must identify actions and policies that will either cause regime change or force Bashir and his NCP party to change their calculations and behavior.

U.S. policy has failed to reflect essential lessons that should have been learned long ago, thereby allowing the crises to continue. Consider these four parallels from Sudan and more recently from Syria.

- First, the conflict will not get better by itself, but will grow worse, more virulent and deadly, and may expand to neighboring regions with horrific results.
- Second, moderates with secular and democratic values must be supported as early as possible, else the extremists will gain strength and the moderates will decline.
- Third, an oppressive deadly government with no concern for the welfare of its citizens, will use any means, no matter how deadly, to keep itself in power, and, like any bully, will only stop if confronted.
- Fourth, credible threats of even limited military action can cause resistant regimes to accept changes that they had been stubbornly resisting.

Examples of our failures in Sudan abound, due to combinations of inadequate determination, inadequate leadership and insight, and inadequate objectives.

Here's one example.

In 2003, Sudan responded to an insurgency in Darfur with a genocidal campaign using the same tactics and forces it had been using against the South. In response, the U.S. did little, preferring instead to focus on protecting the nascent peace negotiations between the North and South that

had just gotten underway. The Government of Sudan ignored the impotent objections from the UN and the West and pursued the genocide. Bashir surely learned from this lack of action from the U.S. What did we learn?

In 2007, Save Darfur Coalition published bold advertisements asking for a no fly zone in Darfur to stop Khartoum using air power to enable the mass killings. InterAction and other aid groups complained loudly and bitterly that a no-fly zone would compromise and endanger their humanitarian aid work in Darfur. Save Darfur stopped its ads and advocacy for a no fly zone. As a result, Bashir was able to avoid stronger action from the U.S., in effect by holding the lives and welfare of the people of Darfur hostage.

This conflict between activists and aid groups happened again in 2011, when Sudan activists pressed the White House for action on the Nuba Mountains and aid groups objected, saying that US action would anger Bashir and cause Sudan to obstruct their aid work in Darfur. The US government, faced with conflicting pressures, took the least risky course.

One essential learning is that advocacy that limits itself to the lowest common denominator is doomed to be toothless and empty, even if it feels good.

In June 2011, with the U.S. hoping that Sudan would not endanger the imminent independence day for South Sudan, Sudan's army and militias moved into South Kordofan, unleashing a wave of targeted ethnic killings against the people of the Nuba Mountains. Eyewitnesses reported fresh mass graves which were confirmed by satellite pictures. The genocide against the Nuba had begun. President Bashir gave a speech in Kadugli promising that Sudan would kill all the insects. Sudan ordered U.N. peacekeepers to leave and blocked humanitarian aid to the Nuba Mts and Blue Nile, and has continued to block aid to this day.

In response, the U.S. did little. Rather than raise the alarm, Princeton Lyman, the U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan, downplayed the crisis emphasizing that the U.S. could not verify the reports of mass graves or ethnic cleansing because of a lack of access to the region. Lyman never got "access" and never acknowledged the genocide, despite entreaties from genocide scholars and activists.

Bashir learned again that he need fear no action from the U.S. What did we learn?

Here's another example.

In a Congressional hearing in September 2011, Congressman Capuano suggested to the panel that the US impose a no-fly zone as a way to force a breakthrough for humanitarian aid to get through to the Nuba Mountains. Omer Ismail from the Enough Project and Yasir Arman from the SPLM-N responded positively, indicating that a no-fly zone must be considered and might prove to be a crucial tactic. However, Tom Andrews the head of UEG, said no, it was too dangerous. What do you suppose that Members of Congress learned when the head of UEG, the DC-based anti-genocide group with the biggest email list, would not support strong action against Sudan, not even to deliver food? Imagine what Bashir learned.

Many Sudan activists had already learned this lesson and had abandoned UEG and its weak leadership, forming Act for Sudan to more strongly advocate for an end to genocide and mass atrocities in Sudan.

This hearing was a shocking demonstration of the waste of political capital that had built up over years, from millions of people across the US who contributed to the growth and influence of the

Save Darfur Coalition, the Genocide Intervention Network, and STAND, which had combined to form UEG. For better or worse, leadership matters.

Another example.

Many activists concluded long ago that there could never be peace, justice and security in Sudan without regime change. However, regime change has not been a goal of U.S. policy. Special Envoy Lyman made it explicit in December 2011, just a few months after the government offensive began in the Nuba Mountains. Lyman said, "We do not want to see the ouster of the [Khartoum] regime, nor regime change. We want to see the regime carrying out reform via constitutional democratic measures." While activists were stunned by the lack of U.S. action, Bashir learned again that he need not fear escalating pressures from the U.S. Lyman's prescription of "constitutional democratic measures" may be an effective approach in some countries, but who could believe in that theory of change for Bashir and the NCP, in power for three decades, ruthlessly determined to stay in power by any means, and deliberately employing the tools of genocide again and again. Even worse, by focusing on the wrong goal, U.S. policy deliberately avoided taking steps that could have brought about real change in Sudan.

A last example.

Sanctions have been a key tool for the U.S. to force change in Sudan since President Clinton imposed them in 1997. President Bush increased Sudan sanctions in 2006. In 2009, the Obama administration announced its Sudan policy and promised serious consequences for Sudan if it did not fundamentally change the way it treated its people. However, no consequences ever came, despite a litany of new abuses, including starting another genocide.

Special Envoy Scott Gration said there was nothing further the U.S. could do to increase pressure from sanctions. Instead, he spoke of offering cookies and gold stars to Khartoum, rather than consequences for continued atrocities. Sudan activists saw that sanctions could be much stronger when sanctions were ramped up on Iran and on North Korea. Then in May 2015, we had proof that stronger sanctions on Sudan were possible many years earlier. The Department of Justice fined BNP Paribas, the largest bank in France, \$8.9 billion for sanctions violations, nearly all of which were violations of Sudan sanctions, documented from the single year period of 2006-2007.

The announcement of this unprecedented fine against BNPP caused other international banks to stop doing business with Khartoum for fear of US sanctions. The resulting economic crisis in Sudan should have been seen as a sign that the sanctions policy was finally working. It could have been an opportunity to force transformational change in Sudan. Instead, the U.S. saw the economic problems in Sudan as a threat to stability. The U.S. backed off the pressure and negotiated with Sudan to drop the sanctions, without securing real change. Sudan, for its part, stopped the bombing and nearly all the attacks on civilians, at least for some months. Sudan garnered permanent benefits in exchange for commitments that it could easily reverse or negate.

The U.S. goal was inadequate, Khartoum was more determined, President Obama and Secretary Kerry claimed a "win," and the people of Sudan continue to suffer. It was a huge missed opportunity. I can only hope that the U.S. plays its cards better in the negotiations over Sudan coming off the State Sponsors of Terror list.

So, as we continue our work, let's challenge ourselves with three questions.

- Are we, and the US, guided by an effective theory of change equal to the challenges posed by Bashir and NCP regime?

- Are we, and the US, setting objectives that are equal to the task of forcing the fundamental changes needed?
- Are we, and the US, demonstrating the serious, sustained determination equal to the task?

We have learned many things about mass killings of targeted communities.

We learned that “never again” actually happens “again and again” as the world makes many of the same mistakes over and over again.

We learned that military intervention can stop genocide, but no people who are at risk should rely on getting that all-too-rare help from outside.

We learned that awakening the conscience and getting action from the world to stop genocide is a slow, uncertain process. That sad fact holds true regardless of the skin color, religion, or continent of the victims, as we can see from the range of experience of Armenians, Ukrainians, Jews, Cambodians, Bengalis, Bosnians, Rwandans, South Sudanese, Darfuris, Nubans, and others.

We learned that the reason for inaction was not because governments didn’t know about the mass killing, but rather because of decisions to do nothing.

We learned that relying on the UN Security Council has given us half measures, long delays and the occasional appearance of progress.

We learned that justice for victims is a dream denied until the regime is gone.

We learned that our success in getting the UN Security Council to agree to peacekeepers did not result in either peace or protection in Darfur, as Sudan proved all too adept at manipulation and control.

We learned that the international community is fractious and nearly always at odds against effective action.

We learned that it is all too tempting for the international community to defer hard problems to the AU, which is younger and weaker than the UN, with many of its members dangerously close to Sudan.

Therefore, we learned that strong leadership by the United States is essential to finally ending the violence in Sudan.

We learned that even when millions of Americans called and wrote Congress and the President about Darfur, still America did little or nothing to stop the genocide.

We learned that even when President Obama formally recognized that stopping and preventing genocides was a national security priority, still America did little or nothing.

We learned that it helps to have front-page stories, pictures and op-eds in the New York Times about genocide happening, but widely publicized evidence is not sufficient to force action to make a difference.

We learned that public outcry can build political will, but generating sufficient will for action is much harder and slower than any of us imagined.

We learned that alliance partners must be unified on taking strong actions, not just on complaining loudly.

We learned that we need strong voiced champions in Congress, but we cannot expect to use Congress “as a battering ram” to force the President to adopt a strong policy. Congress is too full of timid politicians, who can criticize policy, but avoid the risks of taking the lead on bold steps.

We learned that Washington and academia are full of experts who are not expert enough to know what to do to stop a genocide, but all too ready to criticize efforts to force change, thereby raising the perception of risk for any leaders to act.

We learned that the United States policy has been a bi-partisan failure in Sudan. Millions of protesting Americans were sorely disappointed by the Bush administration’s tough talk that brought little action on Sudan. In 2008, activists were heartened by the promises of serious action from candidates Obama, Clinton, and Biden, and encouraged when President Obama brought Sudan hawks into his administration, including Susan Rice and Samantha Power. But the Obama team’s stern-sounding “condemnations” of “unacceptable violations” and diplomatic meetings were not enough. The US did not act to confront Khartoum. There were no “red lines.” US policy on Sudan continued to take as little risk as possible, while endangered Sudanese paid the price.

Long before she was the US Ambassador to the UN, Samantha Power won a Pulitzer Prize for her book “A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide.” In it, she noted that “everyone is opposed to genocide, but who wants to do what it takes to prevent or stop it?” She observed that there are serious risks of penalties for acting to intervene in a conflict, but there are no penalties for politicians to avoid the risks and do little or nothing, even in the case of genocide.

There are no penalties for avoiding risks and doing nothing, but there may be big penalties by taking the risk of acting.

We witnessed that truth when Bill Clinton avoided acting to help Rwanda and when George Bush and Barack Obama both declined to confront Sudan.

A new, effective US policy on Sudan is long overdue and real transformation in Sudan is possible. The US does not have to send the First Infantry Division to Sudan. Financial pressures are essential, but by themselves are not enough, unless the US forces the financial isolation of Sudan.

The US can announce that we will deliver humanitarian aid, without approval from Sudan, and then send the first cargo plane to airdrop food to the Nuba Mts.

The US can support an end to the NCP regime and support the movement within Sudan for democratic transformation.

The US can support the opposition and the SRF rebels who are fighting for regime change. That help can begin by inviting them to the US and providing education and training in how to work together to create the new Sudan.

And, the US can take a first step to protect Nuban, Blue Nile, and Darfuri populations from air attacks. We need only destroy one Sukhoi or MiG with a readily available drone or cruise missile to show that the rules have changed.

The US does not need to do all these things to make a difference for Sudan. But, the action we take must substantially change the dynamics of diplomacy with Sudan, else the regime in Sudan will be undeterred.

Barack Obama promised, “As president of the United States, I don’t intend to abandon people or turn a blind eye to slaughter.” But he did. He promised that he would spend political capital to address the crisis in Darfur. But he did not. Every year as president, in remembrance of the

Holocaust, Obama committed to prevent and end atrocities, often resolving to ensure “that never again is more than an empty slogan.” Sudan watchers were struck by the hollowness of Obama’s words.

Nonetheless, those words form a challenge for all of us who care about ending the crises in Sudan.

What will the US do that will change the dynamics of diplomacy with the government of Sudan?

What actions will we advocate that will be enough to stop the genocide in Sudan or mass atrocities wherever they occur?

What risks will we take? What risks will we ask our leaders to take?

One easy step is to call the White House and give the president a piece of your mind. And as you challenge the president to take risks to end mass atrocities in Sudan, ask yourself if you are ready to do what it takes.