

A Dying Deal in Darfur

By John Prendergast

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REBEL-HELD NORTH DARFUR: In this eerily depopulated area of war-ravaged Darfur, a woman named Ayesha explained to me why she and a handful of others refused to become refugees. "We fear another attack," she said, "but we brave the situation and come back to be near our village." Why, I ask. "Because this is where we belong."

Most Darfurians, however -- more than 2.5 million displaced within Sudan and in neighboring Chad -- cannot go back where they belong, because the government still supports the Janjaweed militias, who continue to rape and pillage across Darfur and eastern Chad. We are now witnessing the second phase of a state-sponsored campaign to forcibly displace the largest of Darfur's non-Arab peoples from their homelands in collective punishment for the rebellion of a few among them: first, kill and displace as many of those targeted as possible; second, manipulate humanitarian aid so that survivors succumb to the attrition of diseases and malnutrition in squalid camps.

An enduring peace in Darfur would mean reversing this trend, but unless the survivors feel safe, no one is going to leave their hideaway or displacement or refugee camp, and go back and rebuild their scorched village. The specific security guarantee every Darfuri talks about is a United Nations force that will ensure the Janjaweed disarm, and that will protect refugees and help them return home. Sadly, the Darfur Peace Agreement, signed by Khartoum and one rebel faction in Abuja in May, is not meeting this expectation. Relying solely on the government to disarm the Janjaweed without UN verification, as the Abuja agreement sets out, appears to be a nonstarter for those most affected by this war. For them, homelessness seems a safer bet.

This is the first time in my 20 years of work in Africa's war zones that I can remember meeting people so opposed to their own peace deal. They are not opposed to peace, to be sure. They are opposed to specific provisions in the Abuja agreement that would leave them vulnerable to Janjaweed predation and land-grabbing. The key issue in Darfur is security, and that primarily means Janjaweed disarmament, or at best neutralization.

Local confidence in Janjaweed neutralization requires independent, external verification, and responsibility for that in the Darfur Peace Agreement rests with the African Union force now on the ground in Darfur, which openly admits it cannot do the job. The situation demands a transition to a UN force with a stronger mandate than the current African Union mission, but the government of Sudan opposes a UN force of any kind.

As it stands, the deal thus hinges entirely on the Sudanese government's willingness to disarm the Janjaweed -- something Khartoum has disingenuously pledged to do many times before (including to both Secretaries of State Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice)

and something it will not do because the Janjaweed are the cornerstone of regime security in Darfur.

And it is not just the war's victims who understand the reality of the situation. An African Union officer on the ground told me, "The government of Sudan will not disarm the Janjaweed as long as there are rebels. Without UN verification, it won't happen."

President Idriss Déby of Chad also said that the holdout rebel factions would sign the Darfur Peace Agreement if these same security conditions were met: "The population of Darfur doesn't trust the government of Sudan," he told me. "They need the UN as a guarantor of the agreement."

For the past six years, the United States and the European Union have pursued an incentives-based strategy to try to change Sudan's behavior. Khartoum pocketed each incentive while state-sponsored violence continued in Darfur.

It is time for serious pressure. The United States should tell regime officials it will work multilaterally to impose targeted sanctions, help the war crimes investigations of the International Criminal Court, and support the divestment movement that seeks to have companies stop doing business with Sudan.

The regime in Khartoum has taken the measure of the international community and believes it will face no consequence for continuing to support the Janjaweed and blocking a UN peacekeeping mission. As one high-ranking Sudanese government official brazenly told me this week, "The United Nations Security Council has threatened us so many times, we no longer take it seriously." That state of impunity and arrogance is dangerous to the international system and deadly to the people of Darfur.

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