An Incomplete Peace: Sudan's Never-Ending War With Itself

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Correction Appended

KHARTOUM, Sudan, May 3 — When northern and southern Sudanese leaders met in a soccer stadium in January 2005 to sign an agreement to end the civil war that had raged for more than two decades, Bush administration officials hoped they were killing two birds with one stone. By solving Sudan's worst conflict, the war in the south, administration officials reasoned that the carnage also taking place in the west, which Mr. Bush would eventually call genocide, would come to an end as well.

Under the peace accord, John Garang, the charismatic leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, would become Sudan's vice president, joining his old nemesis President Omar Hassan al-Bashir in Khartoum. In order to win peace in the south, Darfur was left out of the negotiations, but peace in Darfur would come as a natural byproduct of this process — or so the reasoning went.

A year and a half later, top American diplomats once again find themselves at the center of urgent talks to end a brutal conflict in Sudan, this time in Darfur. If anything, the conflict there has escalated since the agreement with the south — more than 250,000 people have been chased from their homes in the past three months, and a second, related conflict is brewing in neighboring Chad.

The administration's current down-to-the-wire effort to clinch a peace deal for Darfur comes at the end of a long string of confusing and sometimes seemingly contradictory stances from the United States on Sudan. In the end, that may have put peace even farther out of reach.

"Certainly one of the precipitating factors in the in the escalation from political opposition to armed insurrection in Darfur is the fact that Darfurian actors were not given any role in the peace process between the government and southern-based rebels," said

John Prendergast of the International Crisis Group, which tries to prevent armed conflict. "They realized the only way their issues could be addressed was if they shot their way into the negotiating room. So this is a case of negotiators actually making matters worse by their interventions."

For much of its post-colonial history, Sudan has been at war with itself, and much of that conflict has been fought between latitudes. Indeed, the world has long viewed Sudan's problems as beginning and ending roughly at the 12th parallel, between northern, Muslim Arabs and southern, Christian and animist Africans.

While the peace agreement between the north and south was being negotiated, diplomats argued that because that conflict had raged for so long, and had cost so many lives, it was proper to find a solution to it first, and then deal with other problems.

In terms of the number of people killed, the Darfur conflict is comparable in size to the brutal intertribal struggle that broke out in the south between the Dinka and Nuer tribes in the early 1990's, just one of the deadly interludes of the overall civil war. Hundreds of thousands of people died, mostly from disease and hunger, in this side struggle between the tribes for control over the Sudan People's Liberation Movement.

Political factors within the United States doubtless played a role in its approach. Evangelical Christian groups have long focused on the civil war in Sudan, providing much needed humanitarian aid and participating in "buy-back" programs to return civilians taken as slaves during the war to their villages.

But in the conflict in Darfur, as with a rebellion brewing in the east, the warring groups are all Muslims. Taken together, they help demonstrate that while deep, historical problems exist between Muslims and non-Muslims, Arabs and Africans, nomads and farmers, Sudan's primary conflict is not between the north and south. Instead it is between Khartoum, where all the nation's power lies, and the periphery, where millions of people live on the margins, yearning for a sliver of the power and wealth the center enjoys.

The fight between the north and the south was merely a symptom of this, and soothing the symptoms in one region will not cure what ails Sudan, said Adam M. Mousa Madibo, vice chairman of the opposition Umma Party, Sudan's largest political party. "The agreement between the north and south is an agreement between two non-democratic

military parties," Mr. Madibo said. "It does not reflect the ideas of the popular consensus of the Sudanese people. It doesn't change any basic facts about political life in Sudan, so it cannot bring real peace."

The problem with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, as the deal between the north and the south is known, Mr. Madibo said, is that it is not comprehensive at all. In its quest to maximize the powers of each side as an enticement to peace, it excludes everyone in Sudan other than Mr. Bashir's ruling National Congress Party, which controls 52 percent of the executive and legislative power, and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement, which controls the remaining 48 percent.

Major political players, like the Umma Party, the north's most broadly popular party, were excluded from the agreement. Darfur, it was decided, would be dealt with separately.

"Frankly, the whole history of the Darfur conflict is a holding back of many actors, some with the best of intentions, who felt there was such a danger of jeopardizing the north-south agreement," said Louise Arbour, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, after touring refugee camps in Darfur this week. "But now dealing with Darfur has become painfully unavoidable."

Rather than becoming a democratic, open society with a booming economy based on Sudan's oil reserves and other natural resources, as envisioned in the peace agreement, Sudan found itself this week at the top of Foreign Policy magazine's failed states index.

Making matters worse, Mr. Garang was killed in a helicopter crash last August, and the rebel commander who replaced him, Salva Kiir, has not played the central role the United States had hoped Mr. Garang would play. The south, which under the peace deal may decide in a referendum to split from the north after six years, seems increasingly likely to do so. Real peace in Sudan, after the conflicts that have wracked this nation since its independence from Britain in 1956, remains out of reach.

"What plagues Sudan is fundamentally a regime at the center which is highly discriminatory," Mr. Prendergast said. "Until you deal with that, we are going to see a continuation of this cycle of sort of half baked agreements with the most heavily armed elements of different regions in Sudan, which will never bring peace to the country."

Correction: May 5, 2006

A news analysis article yesterday about the difficulties of ending the civil conflicts in Sudan misstated the year of the country's independence from Britain. It was 1956, not 1954. The article also misidentified the magazine that publishes the annual Failed States Index, a list of unstable countries, in which Sudan is ranked No. 1. It is Foreign Policy, not Foreign Affairs.