

Strategic Victimhood in Sudan

The New York Times

May 31, 2006

Op-Ed Contributor

By Alan J. Kuperman

Austin, Tex.

THOUSANDS of Americans who wear green wristbands and demand military intervention to stop Sudan's Arab government from perpetrating genocide against black tribes in Darfur must be perplexed by recent developments.

Without such intervention, Sudan's government last month agreed to a peace accord pledging to disarm Arab janjaweed militias and resettle displaced civilians. By contrast, Darfur's black rebels, who are touted by the wristband crowd as freedom fighters, rejected the deal because it did not give them full regional control. Put simply, the rebels were willing to let genocide continue against their own people rather than compromise their demand for power.

International mediators were shamefaced. They had presented the plan as take it or leave it, to compel Khartoum's acceptance. But now the ostensible representatives of the victims were balking. Embarrassed American officials were forced to ask Sudan for further concessions beyond the ultimatum that it had already accepted.

Fortunately, Khartoum again acquiesced. But two of Darfur's three main rebel groups still rejected peace. Frustrated American negotiators accentuated the positive — the strongest rebel group did sign — and expressed hope that the dissenters would soon join.

But that hope was crushed last week when the rebels viciously turned on each other. As this newspaper reported, "The rebels have unleashed a tide of violence against the very civilians they once joined forces to protect."

Seemingly bizarre, this rejection of peace by factions claiming to seek it is actually revelatory. It helps explain why violence originally broke out in Darfur, how the Save Darfur movement unintentionally poured fuel on the fire, and what can be done to stanch genocidal violence in Sudan and elsewhere.

Darfur was never the simplistic morality tale purveyed by the news media and humanitarian organizations. The region's blacks, painted as long-suffering victims, actually were the oppressors less than two decades ago — denying Arab nomads access to grazing areas essential to their survival. Violence was initiated not by Arab militias but by the black rebels who in 2003 attacked police and military installations. The most extreme Islamists are not in the government but in a faction of the rebels sponsored by former Deputy Prime Minister Hassan al-Turabi, after he was expelled from the regime.

Cease-fires often have been violated first by the rebels, not the government, which has pledged repeatedly to admit international peacekeepers if the rebels halt their attacks.

This reality has been obscured by Sudan's criminally irresponsible reaction to the rebellion: arming militias to carry out a scorched-earth counterinsurgency. These Arab forces, who already resented the black tribes over past land disputes and recent attacks, were only too happy to rape and pillage any village suspected of supporting the rebels.

In light of janjaweed atrocities, it is natural to romanticize the other side as freedom fighters. But Darfur's rebels do not deserve that title. They took up arms not to stop genocide — which erupted only after they rebelled — but to gain tribal domination.

The strongest faction, representing the minority Zaghawa tribe, signed the sweetened peace deal in hopes of legitimizing its claim to control Darfur. But that claim is vehemently opposed by rebels representing the larger Fur tribe. Such internecine disputes only recently hit the headlines, but the rebels have long wasted resources fighting each other rather than protecting their people.

Advocates of intervention play down rebel responsibility because it is easier to build support for stopping genocide than for becoming entangled in yet another messy civil war. But their persistent calls for intervention have actually worsened the violence.

The rebels, much weaker than the government, would logically have sued for peace long ago. Because of the Save Darfur movement, however, the rebels believe that the longer they provoke genocidal retaliation, the more the West will pressure Sudan to hand them control of the region. Sadly, this message was reinforced when the rebels' initial rejection of peace last month was rewarded by American officials' extracting further concessions from Khartoum.

The key to rescuing Darfur is to reverse these perverse incentives. Spoiler rebels should be told that the game is over, and that further resistance will no longer be rewarded but punished by the loss of posts reserved for them in the peace agreement.

Ultimately, if the rebels refuse, military force will be required to defeat them. But this is no job for United Nations peacekeepers. Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia show that even the United States military cannot stamp out Islamic rebels on their home turf; second-rate international troops would stand even less chance.

Rather, we should let Sudan's army handle any recalcitrant rebels, on condition that it eschew war crimes. This option will be distasteful to many, but Sudan has signed a peace treaty, so it deserves the right to defend its sovereignty against rebels who refuse to, so long as it observes the treaty and the laws of war.

Indeed, to avoid further catastrophes like Darfur, the United States should announce a policy of never intervening to help provocative rebels, diplomatically or militarily, so long as opposing armies avoid excessive retaliation. This would encourage restraint on

both sides. Instead we should redirect intervention resources to support "people power" movements that pursue change peacefully, as they have done successfully over the past two decades in the Philippines, Indonesia, Serbia and elsewhere.

America, born in revolution, has a soft spot for rebels who claim to be freedom fighters, including those in Darfur. But to reduce genocidal violence, we must withhold support for the cynical provocations of militants who bear little resemblance to our founders.

Alan J. Kuperman, an assistant professor of public affairs at the University of Texas, is an editor of "Gambling on Humanitarian Intervention: Moral Hazard, Rebellion and Civil War."

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