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As Obama Fiddles and Makes Empty Promises, The Nuba Mountains People Continue to Starve to Death

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As you read this, innocent infants, children, women and the elderly are dying of starvation in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan. The response of the international community has been nearly nil.

Over the past ten months the Government of Sudan (GoS) has laid siege to the Nuba Mountains. Furious at being challenged by the people of the Nuba Mountains over what the latter perceived as the rigged gubernatorial election (which was “won” by Ahmed Haroun), and their aversion to the GoS’ goal of Islamacizing the region, Sudanese President Omar al Bashir initiated an aerial and ground campaign at the Nuba Mountains last July. (Tellingly, Haroun is wanted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes for atrocities perpetrated in Darfur.)

An untold number of Nuba Mountains people have been severely injured and killed as a result of the ongoing bombings by Antonov bombers and MIGs. Villages have been ransacked and burned to the ground, and hundreds of thousands of people have been run off their farms (basically their only means of sustenance). On May 4th, Human Rights Watch reported that Nuba Mountains people it had recently interviewed said that during the attacks government troops also carried out “(1) the destruction of grain and water sources that are critical to their survival, (2) arbitrary detentions, and (3) sexual violence against women.”

An estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people are hiding in the rocky crevasses and caves of the nearby mountains. Without food or ready access to water, a massive number of people are suffering from malnutrition. A smaller but still significant number are suffering from severe malnutrition, and an untold number have literally starved to death. Each and every day more die horrifically painful deaths and are buried in the dusty graves carved out along mountains slopes.

Human rights organizations, activists and various scholars have repeatedly called on both the United Nations and the United States to, at the least, establish a humanitarian corridor in order to transport food and medical supplies to the hundreds of thousands in need. In late March rumors circulated that the Obama Administration was actually considering such a possibility, but all the talk resulted in naught.

Nuba Mountains people are so desperate that they are walking for days without food or water in an effort to reach the Aida Refugee Camp in South Sudan. As many as 25 to 40 people or more are dying each day as thousands make this desperate journey.

Just two months ago Aida held some 30,000 refugees; today, as 1,000 people stream across the border each day, it is bulging with over 60,000. It is estimated that the number will hit 100,000 within the next month. The refugee camp, itself, does not have enough food and water for the refugees or adequate toilet facilities, and thus the outbreak of deadly diseases are now exacerbating an already dire situation.

So much for the international community’s endorsement of the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (e.g., every nation is responsible to protect its own people and when a nation is either not capable of doing so or flagrantly fails to do so, then the international community has a responsibility to provide such protection).

In late April, President Obama proudly announced his Administration’s establishment of the

Atrocities Prevention Board. In doing so, Obama asserted that "national sovereignty is never a license to slaughter your own people." The human rights community agrees with him. But while the president spouts such sterling sentiments, he has failed to act upon them.

Time and again, candidate Obama, and then President Obama, made one promise after another to be proactive in the face of potential and actual genocide. Promises provide hope. But promises sans action promises are as empty as the tiny, bloated bellies of starving infants.

Just two months ago, Obama uttered these words: "Remembrance without resolve is a hollow gesture....We are haunted by the atrocities we did not atop." Is Obama not haunted today at the atrocities ravaging the people of the Nuba Mountains? If not, he should be.

It is said that talk is cheap. In the case of potential and actual genocide, though, talk without action comes at an enormous cost. As the talk continues, the politicians dither and waver, mothers, infants, children, the elderly, among others, are dying daily in the Nuba Mountains.

If the Obama Administration is going to act then it needs to act now while lives can still be saved. The president does not need to declare war against Sudan or send U.S. troops to Sudan. What he must do is honor his promise that in the face of potential or actual genocide he will do his utmost to mobilize the international community to act to stanch the deaths. He can use the gravitas of his position and that of the U.S. to prod the UN Security Council to ramrod through a humanitarian corridor in order to get food to the starving. But he must do it now, while there is a tiny window of time to beat the fierce rains that are about to turn roads leading to the Nuba Mountains into a muddy mire.

Not to act makes Obama a bystander. There is no other way to put it.

Just about every time a U.S. president speaks about genocide he decries the bystanders who stood by and watched the Holocaust, the Cambodian genocide, and the Rwandan genocide unfold before their very eyes. In such speeches, presidents also latch onto the admonition of "Never Again." In fact, in a speech in April at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum President Obama used that very phrase five times. At one point he said: "And finally, "never again" is a challenge to nations. It's a bitter truth -- too often, the world has failed to prevent the killing of innocents on a massive scale. And we are haunted by the atrocities that we did not stop and the lives we did not save."

If Obama does not act now then let's hope he never again uses the phrases "Remember" and "Never Again," for that would be the height of hypocrisy.

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