

Beyond Darfur

Sudan's Slide Toward Civil War

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Summary: While the crisis in Darfur simmers, the larger problem of Sudan's survival as a state is becoming increasingly urgent. Old tensions between the Arabs of the Nile River valley, who have held power for a century, and marginalized groups on the country's periphery are turning into a national crisis. Engagement with Khartoum may be the only way to avert another civil war in Sudan, and even that may not be enough.

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Few international issues have caught the attention of the American people as much as have the atrocities in Darfur. The Sudanese government and the Janjaweed militias, an Arab supremacist movement, have been carrying out a horrifying campaign of ethnic cleansing against African tribes. Some 2,700 villages have been destroyed, and as a result of the violence and the related starvation and disease, some 250,000 Sudanese have died, most in 2003 and 2004, and another two million have fled to refugee camps. The Bush administration has called these atrocities a genocide. U.S. human rights organizations, U.S. religious institutions, and a burgeoning U.S. student movement have organized a national campaign to ensure that policymakers in Washington do not overlook the crisis. Both the Democratic and the Republican candidates for president have put Darfur on their foreign policy agendas.

But while this crisis simmers, the larger problem of Sudan's survival as a state is becoming increasingly urgent. Trends more ominous than even the carnage in Darfur could bring the country far more bloodshed soon. Long-standing tensions between the Arabs who populate the Nile River valley and have held power for a century and marginalized groups on the country's periphery are mutating into a national crisis once again. The tenuous 2005 peace deal that ended the civil war between the Arabs in the north and the Christians and the animists in the south is in danger; new strains in these groups' relations nearly broke out into a full-scale war late last year. Now, neither this situation nor the conflict in Darfur can be resolved without reference to the other. More crises loom as well. The Nubian people of the Nile River valley nearly rebelled last year over a dam project that threatened to destroy their homeland, and a 2006 peace agreement between the government and the Beja and Rashaida peoples in eastern Sudan is near breakdown. The year ahead may be the most important in Sudan's postcolonial history: either the country holds free and fair multiparty elections and ends two decades of autocratic rule or it disintegrates, plunging this volatile region into its most severe crisis yet.

The Bush administration can still help avert such a disaster. It played a central role in initiating the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the deal that ended the civil war between the north and the south in 2005, facilitating negotiations between the parties, and then acting as one of agreement's guarantors. When President George W. Bush appointed me to be the special envoy to Sudan in October 2006, he tasked me with monitoring the deal's implementation. The U.S. government also initiated the international aid response to the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and now provides 60 percent of the funds needed to run the refugee and displaced camps there. But Washington's efforts today are misaligned with Sudan's most pressing problems. Washington spends a disproportionate amount of its staffing and budgetary resources on resolving the crisis in Darfur rather than on supporting the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This imbalance must be redressed urgently, because peace cannot be achieved in Darfur if it is not secured between the north and the south. The best way for Washington to proceed, moreover, is not by confronting Khartoum but by engaging it, even in the face of likely objections from the Darfur advocacy community. However much one may despise Sudan's regime for committing atrocities, moral outrage is no substitute for practical policies aimed at saving lives and promoting stability.

THE GATES OF HELL

Although southern Sudan is extraordinarily rich in oil and mineral wealth and has great agricultural potential, it has been one of the world's least-developed regions. Partly as a result of this and partly as a result of

marginalization by the central government in Khartoum, the Christian and animist tribes of southern Sudan have been rebelling against the Arabs that populate the valley of the northern Nile, an area known as the Arab triangle, for much of the time since Sudan's independence from the United Kingdom in 1956. The parties reached a peace agreement in 1972, but with enforcement lagging for years, a new rebellion, led by John Garang, a charismatic southerner and lieutenant colonel in the Sudanese army with a Ph.D. from Iowa State University, broke out in 1983. During the two decades that followed, the north suffered few losses, but an estimated 2.5 million southerners died and an estimated 4.6 million southerners were displaced or became refugees.

By early 2003, with both parties exhausted by the fighting, peace talks between the National Congress Party (NCP) in Khartoum and Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) started to show signs of progress. But just then a rebellion led by an alliance of three African tribes -- the Fur, the Masalit, and the Zaghawa -- broke out in Darfur. Desertification and overpopulation in the region had led camel-herding Arab nomads to compete with African farmers for declining arable land, with Khartoum's repression and its attempts to weaken the dominant Fur tribe complicating matters further. In 2003, Garang encouraged the rebels in Darfur to pressure the government by demanding a power-sharing agreement like the one he was negotiating for the south. To get the NCP's attention, they launched devastating attacks on military outposts, airports, and police stations in Darfur. But the strategy backfired: fearing that rebels elsewhere would imitate those in Darfur, the NCP conducted an ethnic-cleansing campaign in rebel villages throughout the region. As the Africa expert Alex de Waal has written, the atrocities committed in Darfur in 2003 and 2004 were "a counter-insurgency strategy on the cheap."

Meanwhile, Khartoum continued to negotiate with Garang. The south was already too strong militarily, its oil fields too lucrative, and the costs of the war too draining on the north for Khartoum to walk away from the talks. In January 2005, after mediation by a U.S.-led coalition of African and Western states, the parties signed the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The deal set up a confederal system, creating in Khartoum the Government of National Unity, a coalition government dominated by the NCP and including participation by the SPLM, and in Juba the semiautonomous Government of Southern Sudan, which the SPLM controls. It stipulated that the southern government should get half of all the revenues derived from oil pumped in the south. It also required that general multiparty elections be held by 2009 and that by 2011 the southerners conduct a referendum to determine whether they should secede from the rest of the country.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement has been a partial success. The two new governments have been formed. Some \$3 billion in oil revenues have been transferred to the south's treasury. The south's economy is beginning to boom. Most important, the war is over, and millions of displaced people are beginning to return home. But as many southerners point out, the more transformational elements of the agreement, which threaten the NCP's hold on power, have yet to be implemented. In fact, the parties nearly returned to war last fall for just that reason. In March of last year, Khartoum temporarily suspended the oil-revenue payments on which the southern government relies to fund its army and civil service. Last June, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir canceled orders to withdraw northern-army field commanders still based in the south, even though the peace deal required their full removal by early July 2007. (As of January 2008, northern troops had left the south.) Khartoum then rejected the south's generous proposals for resolving the status of Abyei, a disputed oil-rich area and the ancestral seat of the south's most powerful tribe. The NCP was also stalling on drafting a new election law and carrying out a census, two measures that are prerequisites for the general elections scheduled for 2009. In response, in particular to the Abyei dispute, Salva Kiir Mayardit, president of the Government of Southern Sudan and the south's leader since Garang's death in mid-2005, withdrew his party from the Government of National Unity last September.

By October, the crisis verged on military confrontation, thanks partly to hard-liners in both camps who held exaggerated views of their own military power and underestimated the other side's strength. Large units from both armies massed at disputed border areas. Three skirmishes occurred, including one that killed ten soldiers. President Bashir announced the remobilization of the Arab militia that had massacred thousands of southerners in the 1980s. In the end, Bashir and Kiir pulled back from war, and after eight contentious issues were resolved on paper, Kiir and other southern leaders rejoined the central government at the end of 2007. But the most controversial matter -- the dispute over Abyei -- remains, and command and control in both armies is tenuous at best. Thus, the potential for a local commander to initiate hostilities, which could quickly degenerate into general war, is still dangerously high.

Far more than the Comprehensive Peace Agreement is now at risk; the future of the state of Sudan is too. Even as they are supposed to cooperate in implementing the peace agreement, the north and the south are preparing to compete in the required elections. In a mature democracy, such tensions would be a recipe for acrimony, confrontation, and intrigue. In Sudan, they could mean another war. And as one respected African diplomat told me last October, "If the north and the south return to war, it will unlock the gates of hell."

ACTING OUT

One of the enduring sources of instability in Sudan is the long-standing policies and tactics of the NCP. The party is a descendant of the National Islamic Front, a party promoting political Islam, which overthrew Sudan's last democratically elected government in 1989 with the help of Bashir, then a general in the armed forces. The NCP has since quietly dispensed with the National Islamic Front's original plan to spread political Islam across Africa and replaced it with a much simpler goal: staying in power. In 1998, the NCP expelled Hassan al-Turabi, the National Islamic Front's leader and main ideologue, who had invited Osama bin Laden to Sudan. Moving away from Turabi's vision, Bashir and the other emergent leaders focused on developing the country's newfound oil wealth. The move has helped keep them in power, but they have committed so many crimes, stolen so much oil money, and alienated so many factions that support for them has dwindled sharply, even in their traditional strongholds in the Arab triangle.

Despite their survival instinct, the NCP leaders are anything but strategic. They are remarkably disciplined when it comes to short-term defensive tactics, but with the exception of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, they have developed few long-term strategies for dealing with any of Sudan's worst problems. They react and temporize, they divide and rule, but they have sought no way out of the mess they have created. They are prepared to kill anyone, suffer massive civilian casualties, and violate every international norm of human rights to stay in power, no matter the international pressure, because they worry (correctly) that if they are removed from power, they will face both retaliation at home and war crimes trials abroad.

Many NCP leaders believe that the West -- especially the United States but also Europe and the United Nations (which they believe is a U.S. front) -- is out to depose them and facilitate Sudan's breakup. They see the hybrid UN-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur as a pretense for carrying out this strategy and are especially fearful that it will collect evidence of the 2003-4 slaughters in preparation for war crimes trials before the International Criminal Court in The Hague. To them, the 3,000-strong European Union peacekeeping force being deployed along Chad's border with Sudan is the vanguard of an invasion -- which is one reason the NCP helped try to overthrow the government of Chadian President Idriss Déby in early 2008. In fact, the more aggressively the international community pursues war crimes trials and Western advocacy groups demand justice in Darfur, the more aggressively the NCP is likely to resist the UN-AU peacekeeping force there, even after it is fully deployed.

Part of the reason the NCP has been able to resist international pressure so far is that Sudan's oil revenues are rising. The money allows the party to buy off opponents at home, guarantees a national growth rate of 12-14 percent a year, helps maintain prosperity in the Arab triangle, and supports a massive internal security apparatus. It also insulates the NCP from outside pressure. It has blunted, for example, the effects of the U.S. economic sanctions regime that the Clinton administration put in place in 1997 and that President Bush expanded and extended last year. These measures have hurt Sudan's banking and financial system enough that the Sudanese business community is pressing Khartoum to normalize relations with the outside world. But the pressure has been insufficient to force a major policy shift; the sanctions are disruptive but do not threaten the NCP's survival. Tightening them further is not an option: shutting off Sudan's oil exports altogether would deprive the south of revenues on which its survival and stability depend. Senior southern leaders have told me, moreover, that they would view any move by Khartoum to cut off oil revenues to the south as an act of war.

HARDBALL

Another source of instability is the hard-line tactics that the SPLM recently adopted toward the northern Arabs, largely out of frustration over the failure of international diplomacy and outside pressure to get Khartoum to implement the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. Last fall, southern leaders withdrew from the national government just before peace talks were to take place between Khartoum and the Darfur rebels in Sirte, Libya. The move was intended to put pressure on the NCP: just as the party was hoping to reach a negotiated resolution to the Darfur crisis, the south's leaders belied its claim that it was representing a united national government. As

one senior European diplomat told me, "The NCP is not accustomed to having the southerners play hardball, and that is exactly what they are doing."

The NCP's worst nightmare is now unfolding. Many of the party's adversaries, traditional and new, on the periphery of the country are now coalescing around the SPLM. During and just after the Sirte peace talks, the southerners undertook a major effort to unite Darfur's 27 rebel groups. The goal was not simply to facilitate the Darfur peace process, which was paralyzed by infighting among the rebels, but also to create a political and military alliance among all the marginalized groups that oppose the NCP. The SPLM even brought to Juba Sheik Musa Hilal, the notorious organizer and commander of the Janjaweed militias, who is reportedly facing potential indictment for war crimes. Hilal had grown disillusioned with NCP leaders for getting his tribe to do their dirty work and because he believed they would turn him over to the International Criminal Court to save themselves. (The NCP's panicked response to the southerners' overture was to offer Hilal a senior position in the national government; he accepted.) An anti-NCP alliance has been forming for some time at the country's colleges and universities, traditional bellwethers of political opinion.

The power shift between the north and the south is also evident in the evolution of the two sides' relative military strength. Unlike the totalitarian dictatorships of Kim Jong Il in North Korea and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the NCP does not have an absolute monopoly on the use of violence at home. The SPLM's sizable army has had more than two decades of guerrilla experience. By the mid-1990s, it was regularly defeating conventional Sudanese government military units, and by 2001 it was threatening Khartoum's control over key oil fields. Western intelligence has consistently underestimated the force's capability and overestimated the importance of international pressure on the NCP's decision to start negotiating an end to the north-south conflict in 2002. In fact, Khartoum was simply losing: the conflict was draining the central government's coffers, and southern rebels were endangering the oil fields; the annual costs of the war reportedly exceeded the value of the oil revenues that the north now sends to the south each year. The NCP calculated that signing the peace agreement would increase the chances of its own survival.

Since then, three factors have seriously weakened the NCP and its armed forces. First, more than a thousand officers who had been trained in the West or displayed strong leadership skills were forced into early retirement in 2005 and 2006 because they were seen as the group most likely to lead a coup against the NCP. The move not only purged the military of potential traitors; it stripped it of its best senior commanders. Second, tens of thousands of enlisted men who came from Darfur and refused to fight their fellow Darfuris were also removed and have been replaced with the terrifying but ill-trained Janjaweed cavalry. Third, repeated defeats on the battlefield have thoroughly demoralized the troops. In August 2006, Bashir ordered a major military offensive in the hope of defeating the Darfur rebels once and for all, even though his generals had strongly advised against it. It turned into a major embarrassment: in every battle, Khartoum's army was roundly defeated. The central government's modest air force still has a monopoly on airpower, and the north's armored units are much stronger than those of the southern force. But if Napoleon was right in saying that three-quarters of military power is morale, Khartoum now has limited power. According to Human Rights Watch and Jane's Defense Quarterly, the NCP has tried to make up for its lack of personnel, purchasing billions of dollars' worth of new weapons systems from China, Iran, and states in the former Soviet bloc. This is a strategy of desperation, for these weapons are unlikely to give the north the military edge it wants -- especially not over the SPLM's army, which is far more motivated and which, thanks to U.S. government assistance, is increasingly becoming capable of defending its territory.

The NCP has other reasons to feel vulnerable. The Nile River Arabs, who represent about five percent of the country's population, fear that even the Arab triangle is at risk of being overtaken by the southerners who migrated to the north during the civil war. Judging by the people walking the streets of Khartoum in 1989, the year of my first visit, the city was Arab; now it seems pronouncedly African. President Bashir has remarked privately that he may end up being the last Arab president of Sudan. Even Arabs who oppose the regime say they are uneasy about their future. About 1.6 million of the southerners displaced by the civil war have returned home, but another two million have opted to stay in the north, even with the Arabs pressuring them to leave and the southern government urging them to return home. Now, the streets of Khartoum are pervaded by a combination of fear and anger -- fear of what might happen if war resumes and anger over alleged intrigues and broken commitments. When Garang died in a helicopter accident in July 2005, many southern migrants in Khartoum rioted, killing Arabs and burning and looting their businesses, because they believed he had been assassinated. Arabs still talk about these incidents, and NCP leaders are terrified. The government regularly

conducts house-to-house searches for weapons. During the early stages of the Darfur crisis, the NCP circulated stories alleging that a conspiracy was brewing in Khartoum among university students from one of the rebelling Darfur tribes. It rounded up the suspects for interrogation, and they have since disappeared into the Sudanese prison system. Some senior NCP leaders now refer to the southerners as a cancer on the country and say they would welcome the south's secession. Such a sentiment was inconceivable a year ago, when the NCP's unrelenting refrain was that Western powers were doing too little to encourage the country's unity.

The situation is volatile. Hard-liners in the south may be tempted to provoke a confrontation with the north based on the belief that their transformed army can dominate the battlefield. Some of them are now resisting a compromise on Abyei and making maximalist demands. Meanwhile, the NCP, which feels that the north is increasingly vulnerable to an invasion by southern forces, has been mobilizing the Arab militias that committed atrocities against southerners during the civil war. It has also been trying to exacerbate divisions within the south -- between the doves and the hawks in the SPLM, between the dominant Dinkas and smaller tribes, between people with privileged access to jobs and power in Juba and people who suffer the effects of poverty, widespread corruption, and inadequate public services. Because of the north's declining military preparedness, growing opposition to the NCP on its own turf, and fear among the party's leaders that they are losing control, the Nile River Arabs have developed a siege mentality, which will complicate any attempt to solve Sudan's crisis.

THE WRONG WAY

If the north continues to obstruct the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, the south will surely go to war. And if the fighting resumes, Khartoum will not be able to confine the conflict geographically, as it has in the past: with a new locus of political and military power in Juba supported by a large army, the war would come to Khartoum very quickly, likely causing large casualties on both sides and potentially widespread retributive violence.

Sudan's collapse would mean far more than a massive humanitarian emergency; it would also mean a security and economic disaster. Disintegration could destabilize Sudan's nine neighbors -- including oil-rich Chad and Libya and the United States' allies Egypt and Ethiopia -- by sending masses of refugees beyond its borders and drawing in dangerous groups. Bin Laden was based in Sudan in the early 1990s, and in 2007 al Qaeda threatened to send holy warriors to fight any UN peacekeepers that might be deployed to Darfur. The economic consequences of Sudan's collapse would also be serious. Sudanese oil currently represents a modest but rising share of the world's total supply; some oil engineers claim that Sudan may have the largest unexplored reserves in the world. If shipments to China, India, Malaysia, and Sudan's other major clients were precipitously halted, these countries would seek oil elsewhere, forcing up world prices of crude, as well as the cost of gasoline to Americans.

Given the stakes, the U.S. government's overarching strategic objective in Sudan should be to slow down the forces of dissolution before it is too late. So far, the United States' Sudan policy has been hampered by its alternating between an ideological crusade to rid Sudan of the reviled NCP and a pragmatic approach that promotes gradual reform. Washington pursued regime change in the 1990s, confronting and seeking to isolate Khartoum; pragmatism drove the more recent negotiations that yielded the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

The approach emphasizing regime change has posed several problems. Severe pressure from Washington -- economic sanctions, being tagged a state sponsor of terrorism, and diplomatic downgrading -- did force Khartoum to expel bin Laden in the mid-1990s. But considering that the NCP is still in power today, it is clear that the policy has been a failure overall. The U.S. government is not very good at forcing regime change anywhere. And in Sudan, which is substantially bigger and more complex than Afghanistan or Iraq, the task is particularly difficult. Regime change cannot address the major challenge that Garang often mentioned to me, namely how to "de-NCPify" Sudan after the NCP government is removed. Garang believed that if his movement ever assumed power, its central problem would be dealing with the one to two million Sudanese who together have been controlling all levels of the state for two decades. The NCP rules not simply through its governing council but also through an extensive party organization, the national civil service (which NCP operatives have taken over from career officers), hundreds of thousands of agents and informants in the security and intelligence apparatuses, and a growing industrial complex.

The NCP infrastructure is massive, complex, and ruthless. It will not simply disappear; it has no place to go. Judging by the recent histories of the Balkan states, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Iraq, and the

former Soviet republics, Sudan's old order will not leave quietly if it is offered no way out. If the NCP is forcibly deposed, it will likely reconstitute itself underground in the form of tribal militias and criminal mafias. Unless the interests of the Nile River Arabs are represented in a coalition government or protected by some constitutional arrangement, whatever is left of the party will try to infiltrate and destabilize the new regime. Several powerful NCP leaders have threatened in private to make the country ungovernable if they are forced out of office. Because of the tribal hatreds that the party has nurtured and manipulated over the years, retributive violence could break out on a grand scale. Everyone would be at risk, particularly in greater Khartoum.

This is but one reason why the West's strategy of confrontation, which I once supported, has not produced -- and cannot produce -- a solution to either Darfur's crisis or Sudan's. U.S. advocates and government officials once hoped that pressure could dislodge the NCP. It now seems clear that promoting regime change unintentionally reinforced the regime's intransigence and encouraged more violence. Careful and dispassionate observation of the NCP's behavior suggests that the party becomes more irresponsible and brutal when it feels threatened, from within Sudan or by the international community. As Western pressure on Khartoum has grown over the past few years, the NCP has established formal ties to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime in Iran and Hugo Chávez's in Venezuela. Last year, the U.S. Congress passed a divestiture statute protecting U.S. state governments, municipalities, universities, and companies from shareholder lawsuits if, on political grounds, they choose to sell the stocks they hold in companies that do business in Sudan. Within a month, the Sudanese government tried to overthrow the Chadian government through proxies, massively bombed civilian targets in Darfur after a rebel offensive, and launched a ground attack on UN peacekeeping troops.

SAVE SUDAN

Engagement is now the only policy that has any chance of success. With experience showing that the NCP can resist outside pressure thanks to Sudan's growing oil wealth, an approach offering rewards for compliance and cooperation is more likely to work than one based on punishing recalcitrance. Washington should offer Khartoum the chance to normalize U.S.-Sudanese relations incrementally if it takes tangible steps to settle the Darfur crisis and implement the transformational provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. The NCP is particularly interested in being removed from Washington's list of terrorist sponsors. This change in status could mean the lifting of sanctions as well as new access to U.S. technology for oil refining -- and a chance for Khartoum to increase its oil revenues by as much as 40 percent, according to oil industry experts. The Bush administration is now trying to adopt a more pragmatic approach that would allow such measures, but opposition in Congress and among the Darfur advocacy movement might make that impossible. This would be unfortunate, because much good has come from engagement with Khartoum in the past: it produced the Comprehensive Peace Agreement -- the Bashir government's only forward-looking accomplishment to date.

Washington should spearhead efforts to ensure the full implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, while following the UN's and the AU's lead in trying to secure a negotiated peace in Darfur and in getting it enforced by UN-AU peacekeepers. Darfur cannot be saved if Sudan is not, and saving Sudan depends, more than anything else, on the Comprehensive Peace Agreement's implementation. Preparations for the national elections are moving at a tortoise's pace because the NCP knows its chances of winning are negligible. Many Sudanese fear that the party will try to invoke the insecurity in Darfur as an excuse to cancel the contest. That would be disastrous, because if Khartoum refuses to hold the elections, steals them by rigging the process, or blocks the 2011 referendum on the south's secession, war will most certainly break out. The best way to convince the NCP to drop its obstructionist tactics is to offer it more positive incentives and fewer negative ones. The NCP is more likely to allow the general elections (and accept the presence of international peacekeepers in Darfur) if its leaders no longer fear that their clique will face retribution if the party loses or that they might be tried for war crimes before the International Criminal Court. Washington has agreed to cooperate with the court (whose creation it opposed) under pressure from domestic constituencies calling for the NCP to be punished for the 2003-4 atrocities in Darfur. But threatening to hold the trials is jeopardizing the chances for peace. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement says not one word about prosecuting war crimes or compensating the victims of atrocities for just this reason: back in 2003, during the peace negotiations, Garang wisely realized that if he demanded justice, the north-south war would not end (he also knew the southerners had committed their share of atrocities). Instead of war crimes trials, the South African model of a truth and reconciliation commission might be considered.

Engaging Khartoum would also directly serve the north-south peace process. Washington alone cannot save

Sudan -- only the Sudanese can do that -- but it can support those forces, in the north and in the south, that seek a nonviolent, incremental path toward long-term peace. U.S. policy should continue to focus on preventing a return to war while developing formulas for wealth sharing in all parts of the country and a compromise on the status of Abyei. This last element is essential, because if war ignites Sudan, Abyei will likely have been the spark. (China and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders Khartoum respects, could help, much as they helped convince President Bashir to support the deployment of UN troops to Darfur.) In a similar spirit, Washington should press the UN, the NCP, the SPLM, and Sudan's traditional political parties to plan now for the aftermath of the 2011 referendum, in case the southerners decide to secede, as seems likely.

The Bush administration should also continue to develop its incremental road map for improving U.S. relations with Sudan -- something NCP leaders have repeatedly told me they want -- in exchange for a political settlement in Darfur and for Khartoum's implementation of the most transformational provisions of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. A tangible improvement in relations might convince President Bashir to turn away from the NCP's hard-liners and toward its moderates and oversee a nonviolent transition to a pluralist democracy or at least a more inclusive society. (Washington successfully used a similar approach with South Africa in the early 1990s and Burundi at the turn of the century.) The NCP's leaders are worried that U.S. policy might change to their disadvantage under the next U.S. president and that they have only until the end of 2008 to improve relations with Washington -- a point that I have reinforced in all of my conversations with them. Unfortunately, rapprochement may face substantial resistance in the United States because the erroneous impression that tens of thousands of civilians continue to be slaughtered in Darfur is driving both a confrontational advocacy campaign and aggressive congressional action. But I believe it is the only approach that can save Sudan.

Engaging Khartoum would also mean abandoning the tempting but foolhardy option of military intervention, except under extreme circumstances. No Western government, not even the United States (regardless of who is its next president), is likely to invade Sudan or blockade its port on the Red Sea, because either move would constitute an act of war and involve high military risks. In any case, the use of U.S. airpower against Sudan would be justified, ethically or politically, in only two instances: if the Sudanese armed forces launched an unprovoked attack against the south or if Khartoum tried to violently shut down the refugee camps in Darfur and massacre or forcibly return people to their homes. Any U.S. military action would endanger the humanitarian aid effort that is keeping more than two million persons displaced from Darfur alive. Meanwhile, the number of deaths in Darfur has dropped dramatically since 2003-4, and last year more than half of them were among Arab tribes fighting over Africans' land. No civilian life is expendable, of course, but the current losses hardly justify the potential humanitarian consequences of military intervention. The time for military action has passed; if there was one, it was during the massive atrocities of 2003 and 2004, when 96 percent of all the deaths in Darfur from the recent conflict occurred. Khartoum has effectively lost control of the region and is unlikely to regain it anytime soon. And although many southerners believe an attack from the north is imminent, I think it is unlikely given the NCP's current military weakness.

In light of the NCP's tendency to protect itself at all cost and the limited effectiveness of international diplomacy so far, internal pressure may be an important way to secure the NCP's cooperation. Washington should therefore increase its support for the SPLM and help the south develop a credible conventional military force, an initiative President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice instructed me to organize, and treat as a priority, in 2006-7. The southerners' brinkmanship nearly caused a war last fall, but it did temporarily get Khartoum to respond to their demands. While being careful not to embolden the SPLM too much, Washington should further empower it in order to both deter potential aggression from Khartoum and press the NCP to reform. This would mean reducing the southern force's considerable size (currently a major drain on Juba's budget), subordinating the force to civilian authority, ensuring that its main purpose is defensive, providing it with tactical training, strengthening its command and control to reduce the risk of an accidental war, and tightening discipline within it overall. The U.S. government should not provide the southerners with weapons systems they could use for offensive purposes -- hard-liners might use them to provoke Khartoum -- but it should immediately help the south develop an air defense system to serve as a deterrent against an air attack from the north. Building a much stronger southern Sudan -- militarily, politically, and economically -- is the best insurance policy against the north's efforts to block reforms or destabilize the south. The \$167 million appropriated by the U.S. Congress in fiscal year 2007 for the reconstruction of southern Sudan is insufficient to create a visible peace dividend; more funds are needed. Last year, when I was special envoy to Sudan, my office requested \$600 million for a reconstruction program to be overseen by the U.S. Agency for International Development but only received \$120 million. The remainder should be appropriated now.

Although U.S. policymakers must never forget what happened in Darfur in 2003-4, those who focus on the region's past run the risk of compromising the entire country's future. During the critically important year ahead, Washington should pursue a prudent and nuanced but aggressive policy of engagement -- this is both good policy and the right thing to do. Washington should also remember, however, that even good policy does not always succeed. The NCP may be too paranoid and obstructionist, the SPLM too suspicious of Khartoum, and Washington's leverage too limited for even enlightened measures to stem Sudan's dissolution. But given the terrible potential for a humanitarian catastrophe, the strategic consequences that would come from Sudan's collapse, and the likely costs of reconstruction, Washington has no option but to try.

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