

Aid to Sudan's Rebels: Right Idea, Wrong Plan

Terrorism, humanitarian and conflict-resolution issues keep Sudan a country of concern to US foreign policy makers. The amendment to the Foreign Operations Bill signed into law by President Clinton on November 29 permits the President to provide food assistance to rebel groups operating in Sudan. This policy shift signals a welcomed stance by the US indicating that the *status quo* in Sudan is no longer acceptable. It reflects a refreshing renewed commitment to engage with Sudan's problems. However, its formulation is deeply flawed and its implementation is ill-advised. Instead, the US should commit itself to three fundamental goals for US foreign policy in Sudan:

- 1) Protection of humanitarian space
- 2) Realizing a just and lasting peace
- 3) Containment through engagement with the Government of Sudan

With inter-agency debates planned within the Administration, we submit the following arguments against implementing the policy of aid to the rebels *as envisioned* while articulating a more constructive strategy to serve US foreign policy aims in Sudan.

The humanitarian community, including the most experienced aid managers within the Administration, has justifiably called the policy of providing aid to the rebels dangerous and illegal, reflective of larger global concerns about the inappropriate politicization of assistance to war-affected populations. Well-respected conflict resolution advocates like former President Carter have warned that the US initiative will prolong the conflict and serve as a "devastating obstacle to any furtherance of peace"¹. The US intelligence community, according to recent reports, has "found little evidence to support Sudan's inclusion on the US list of state sponsors of terrorism"². This is not to imply that, despite recent overtures to appear more moderate in its relations with the West, Sudan is not a terrorist threat or a major source of regional instability. Instead, such findings should signal that the time has come to depart from the US' isolationist strategy in order to more effectively control threats emanating from Sudan.

The ill-conceived plan for aiding Sudan's rebel is one example of the US's inability to effectively analyze trends in Sudan due to structurally inadequate and biased systems of information gathering. Throughout the 1990's, there has been a dearth of quality analysis about conditions in the north of Sudan and non-SPLA opposition areas. This is largely a result of the US government's attempt to isolate the current Government of Sudan. Increasing US resources have been invested in SPLA-held areas accessible from Kenya and Uganda, providing the US with far more information about conditions in rebel-controlled territory than it had possessed during any crisis prior to the end of the Cold War. This is in sharp contrast to spending patterns in the 1980's, when nearly all US assistance funds were spent in GOS-held areas.

With funds go staff. USAID's once massive development offices in Khartoum began the process of closure soon after the 1989 *coup d'etat* that brought the current government to power. Today, one modest USAID office remains in Khartoum, staffed by two qualified national experts and supported by a small administrative staff of locally hired Sudanese. For the south, USAID has several offices, including the Sudan Field Office, the Greater Horn of Africa Initiative, the Office of Transition Initiatives and a growing group of specialists in development assistance from the Africa Bureau. In addition, several official Americans assigned to Khartoum have languished in Nairobi since the bombing of the US embassy in Kenya. The volume and nature of reporting from north and south reflect these differences, with Sudanese national staff in the north particularly limited in their capacity to provide in-depth political analysis, for obvious reasons of personal security.

Since the closure of the US mission and the dramatic downsizing of the USAID office in Sudan, Washington has been handicapped in its efforts to understand the National Islamic Front's successfully-executed strategy of empowerment, a strategy that ensures a long-term capacity for funding violence both domestically and abroad. Through deliberate impoverishment of non-NIF supporters through hostile

♦ Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155. Dec 10, 1999.

takeovers of businesses, parastatals, and agriculture enterprises, the NIF is continuing its decade-long economic consolidation of the business sectors, credit structures and factors of production. The depth of this consolidation has profound implications for its ability to fund the war and possible terrorist activity, vulnerability in the north (particularly among urban populations, including southern displaced) as well as for post-NIF investment in reconstruction and rehabilitation. Whether or not they retain the political upper-hand, NIF members are well poised to control the means necessary to rebuild a war-torn nation. While Washington has deliberately closed its eyes and ears, the NIF has poised itself to extract the bulk of profits from international investment and relief, rehabilitation and development assistance for decades to come. Washington must be careful not to assume that once the NIF is out of power that it will not continue to wield significant influence in Sudan domestic political process. In sum, it is within the US' best interest to engage with the NIF, not despite their deplorable record of human rights violations and support for terrorism, but because of it.

The idea of providing food aid to Sudan's opposition force is perhaps partially rooted in the US' experience in the Eritrean-Ethiopian conflict of the 1980's. The TPLF, the Tigrean People's Liberation Front, and the EPLF, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front were particularly well-organized, responsible, community-based rebel movements that ultimately were victorious in Ethiopia, part due to their control over humanitarian aid quietly provided by the US Government. It appears that the Administration is in danger of failing to recognize that the SPLA is not the TPLF. By the Administration's own evaluation, the SPLA lacks the capacity to properly account for assistance. It certainly would not qualify as an organization that facilitates assistance to the most needy. Instead, the SPLA, like the Government of Sudan, has grossly violated Geneva Conventions and human rights law by steadily looting humanitarian aid from those who suffer, starving their own populations in the name of protecting them. Despite improvements in the 1990's as a result of US assistance to civil structures in Sudan, there is no guarantee that the SPLA will not continue to manipulate civilian populations and humanitarian operations for military objectives. Strengthening the institutional capacity of the SPLA would be an appropriate use of US political assistance.

As is becoming increasingly common in conflicts, especially in Africa, the US is using the figleaf of humanitarian action to cover absent political commitments for resolving the root causes of war. Not only is this bad policy because it doesn't work, but it further muddies the once-clear waters of humanitarian relief action in war. The US has not achieved its much-sought after containment and isolation of Sudan as evidenced by Sudan's growing ties of engagement with the European Union, the United Kingdom, Canada and France, among other traditional US allies. Clearly, the US' policy of isolation has failed to effectively isolate Sudan. Further, using humanitarian aid for political purposes politicizes the work of NGOs that are struggling to maintain a semblance of neutrality and independence, the two humanitarian principles that humanitarian NGOs must abide by if they are to be given access to suffering populations and, at the very least, not be confused for legitimate targets of war. The precedent this policy sets for humanitarian action worldwide is of utmost concern and potentially fatal. Is it any coincidence that more relief workers have been killed in this decade of increasingly politicized aid than in any other time in modern history?

What the Administration needs to do is to stop treating Sudan like an ordinary humanitarian crisis. There are appropriate tools of political engagement; humanitarian aid is not one of them. In fact, such misuse is illegal. Providing aid directly to the rebels transgresses existing agreements between the United Nations, the Government of Sudan and the SPLA itself regarding the neutral nature of assistance in Sudan. At a time when OLS is undergoing much-needed radical restructuring, humanitarian aid to the rebels will all but ensure the immediate cessation of GOS cooperation with humanitarian relief efforts in the south. In addition, it is a violation of USAID's long-standing policy that assistance be properly accounted for and reach only intended beneficiaries among the civilian population, particularly those most vulnerable to the vagaries of war. Lastly, it is a fundamental violation of humanitarian law as embodied in the Geneva Conventions that stridently prohibits the misuse of humanitarian assistance for non-civilian purposes.

An Effective Strategy to Serve US Interests in Sudan

Sudan needs peace; not more war. The US, whether it wants to be or not, is a key player in facilitating peace, but instead appears to be fomenting war. To be truly effective in serving the interests of the United

States as well as the peoples of Sudan, the US should commit itself to three fundamental goals for US foreign policy in Sudan:

- 1) Protection of humanitarian space
- 2) Realizing a just and lasting peace
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Firstly, the Administration must acknowledge the overtly political nature of the conflict and stop camouflaging minimalist political investment under the guise of humanitarian aid. The loss of lives and livelihoods is widespread throughout Sudan, north and south, east and west. The US must support truly humanitarian efforts to alleviate the suffering of Sudanese in an impartial fashion, regardless of ethnic or political affiliation. That means that the US must apply to the whole of Sudan the valuable lessons it has learned from highly innovative and appropriate programming measures pursued in SPLA-held areas since 1993. It also entails the creation and protection of humanitarian space, i.e., the conditions necessary to save human lives, alleviate suffering and promote livelihoods in times of conflict. In order to achieve such conditions, the US must use sharply contrasting mechanisms for achieving political, as opposed to humanitarian aims. A comprehensive plan of engagement that tackles the economic, political and military aspects of Sudan's crises must be formulated and implemented separately from humanitarian efforts.

Secondly, the US must demonstrate a serious commitment to a just and lasting peace in Sudan, investing the necessary political capital, good will and passion the US Administration has justifiably offered in its efforts to resolve conflicts in Northern Ireland, the Middle East and, most recently, Kosovo. The roots of Sudan's conflict pre-date the National Islamic Front. Structural problems of governance have plagued Sudan since independence in 1956. Beginning with the jointly signed Declaration of Principles, the US needs to ensure that the deeply-rooted causes of structural violence are addressed through a comprehensive peace process.

The primary threat to stability in southern Sudan is the GOS' campaign of aerial bombing. With increased revenue available from oil exploration, southerners are concerned that the GOS will increase its bombing capacity. The US should impose and enforce a no-fly zone in southern Sudan. In addition, the US should lead the effort to impose and enforce a long-overdue arms embargo on all warring factions in Sudan.

The US needs to re-evaluate the structure of peace negotiations for Sudan. The IGAD process has served as a convenient scapegoat for failed peace negotiations in Sudan. It is clearly non-inclusive and is structurally incapable of achieving peace in the region. The US needs to increase its support for (in the form of capacity building) and demand the inclusion of the many grassroots level pro-peace organizations working throughout Sudan, north and south. Women, academics, labor unions, professional associations, war-weary soldiers and other members of Sudan's nascent civil society are among the many working to be included in the peace process, frustrated with the lack of good-will representatives of both the government and rebel authorities have demonstrated at official peace talks.

The US must condition all non-humanitarian assistance to the opposition on demonstrated progress towards maintaining unity of commitment and solidarity of cause for all the peoples of Sudan. The fractionalization of rebel groups must no longer be tolerated. Instead, the US should utilize its plentiful political leverage with the SPLA to ensure a greater commitment to true peace throughout Sudan. Aid to the rebels as envisioned adds greater incentive for continued infighting among rebel groups as well as fueling conflict into the foreseeable future.

Lastly, the US needs to hasten the process of re-engagement with the Government of Sudan, including re-establishment of diplomatic ties. An active presence based in Khartoum will be more effective for monitoring trends in terrorist activity as well as identifying those many brave elements of Sudanese society that are truly interested in peace and the establishment of democratic processes in Sudan. The US must assist activists and businesspeople alike who are trying to fight against the NIF's tide of political and economic consolidation. This was, after all, a key strategy the US Government adopted in Ethiopia in the 1980's. Even whilst covertly supporting the EPLF and the TPLF, the US Government maintained

diplomatic pressure on the Mengistu regime in Addis Ababa. Links with the US helped the Ethiopian community to develop alternative political parties to participate in the peace process.

The GOS has strategically utilized the US' economic and diplomatic isolation of Sudan in order to promote an image of Islamic martyrdom. In the interest of Middle East peace, a sophisticated strategy of engagement with the Arab world on the question of Sudan needs to be developed. This includes questions of commercial investment and the management of the benefits of Arab-funded development efforts in Sudan. A similar approach should be taken with Western/Asian companies such as those involved with oil extraction, mineral exploration and livestock exports.

The people of Sudan have paid a bitter price for the US' decision to isolate the NIF-dominated Government of Sudan. Our failure to vigorously pursue peace in Sudan, and instead merely to be content with seemingly generous humanitarian aid, is a source of national shame. The Congress, through a combination of good will and ignorance, has started down the track to rectify this situation but has proposed the wrong plan to achieve the right idea. This initiative needs to be embraced and redesigned in order to serve the long overdue interests of the peoples of the United States and Sudan alike.

¹ Shillinger, Kurt. *Carter, Others Say US has Faltered in Africa*. December 8, 1999. The Boston Globe.

² Huband, Mark. *Debate Grows on How to Deal with Sudan*. December 7, 1999. The Financial Times.