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The project to end genocide and crimes against humanity

Why Activism (Still) Matters for Sudan...And What You Can Do

By John Prendergast and John Bagwell¹ March 2009

WANTED: New recruits and renewed energy for the global activist movement aimed at ending the genocide in Darfur and promoting peace in Sudan

The Obama administration offers a fresh opportunity for the United States to meaningfully engage in an effort to bring peace to Sudan at a time when the stakes have never been higher. Nevertheless, policymakers still need the collective voice of activists to keep the conflict high on their agendas and to generate public support for making tough decisions. We explore the impressive accomplishments of Sudan activists to date; the windows of opportunity for peace in Sudan; and what you can do. The bottom line: thoughtful, persistent activism makes a difference. The genocide in Darfur won't end overnight, and there are no guarantees that the North-South war won't resume, but there are a number of factors that provide a real opportunity for lasting peace in Sudan— if the international community acts boldly and swiftly. Such action will come if—and probably only if—activists continue to generate enough light and heat to point the way.

The Sudanese regime's willingness to use starvation as a weapon of war and tool of punishment through its mass expulsion of humanitarian groups has put more than 1 million lives immediately in peril in Darfur, and threatens to unravel the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA. The regime used similar tactics of denying humanitarian aid in an earlier war in Southern Sudan which was far more deadly than Darfur—precisely because the government was willing to starve its opponents. The kind of robust and courageous action needed now from the Obama administration and its allies will likely not be forthcoming unless there is a political demand for such action from dedicated constituencies of activists.

The activist movement for peace in Sudan is needed now more than ever. This is the time to speak out: to save lives; to work toward a lasting peace; and to hold those who have conducted war crimes accountable.

What activists have helped achieve in Sudan

Many critics look at Darfur's continuing crisis and pronounce activist efforts aimed at stopping the genocide a failure.

Not so fast.

Activists helped put the issue on the map for former President George W. Bush and the 2008 presidential candidates, forcing them to address a situation that might have otherwise been lost in a sea of competing domestic priorities. Activists, however, have done much more than simply garner attention for this cause. Let's look at what has actually been accomplished in part due to activist efforts:

- **Saving lives:** Hundreds of thousands of Darfurians are very likely alive today because of the strength of the antigenocide activist movement. Author Samantha Power, a recent addition to Obama's White House team, has argued correctly that in the absence of the extraordinary global activist effort to shine a light on what is happening in Darfur, the death toll would have been far higher. Look back in history—to a time when there was *not* a mobilized and active antigenocide constituency—at what the Sudanese regime did in Southern Sudan during the 20-year-old war there: tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of Southerners perished each time the regime cut off access for humanitarian aid, until the estimated death toll reached more than 2 million.² Because of the globalization of the antigenocide movement, it is impossible for the Sudanese regime to do that in Darfur without a huge international outcry from activists, journalists and governments. Additionally, activist-driven initiatives on the ground in Darfur, such as pressing for the establishment of firewood patrols in the absence of a UNAMID presence around displaced camps and providing solar-cooking stoves to reduce the number of trips outside protected areas continue to save lives. With more than 1 million people now threatened by the loss of humanitarian assistance, the need for activists to speak out has never been greater.
- **Supporting peacemaking:** At the beginning of the Bush administration's time in office, before the Darfur war erupted, many Christian organizations, activists, and key members of Congress pressed for a robust response to the deadly North-South war. In response, the United States engaged deeply and helped lead a complex peace process that resulted in the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 ending that war, for now. Furthermore, Darfur activist efforts around the time of the 2006 Washington, D.C. rally resulted in President Bush sending a top diplomat to negotiate an end to the Darfur war, but poor, ill-conceived proposals and hurried negotiations left the resulting deal dead on arrival. These two examples of activist-led pressure leading to governmental action are promising illustrations of what activists have already helped achieve for Sudan as we continue our call for a renewed "[Peace Surge](#)." Activists need to be clear that the broad strategic goal of their efforts is a comprehensive and lasting peace for all of Sudan.
- **Acting against war criminals:** The Bush administration's strong opposition to the International Criminal Court nearly doomed an effort by the U.N. Security Council to refer the case of Darfur to the court. However, a major push by activists and congressional allies led the Bush administration to set aside its normal reservations about international justice, and let the referral pass. The resulting investigation has led to an arrest warrant for President Omer al-Bashir—along with another senior regime official and a militia leader—on war crimes and crimes against humanity and ongoing investigations of senior commanders of a few of [Darfur's](#)

rebel groups for their role in attacks against U.N. peacekeepers. Activists should be clear: there will likely never be a lasting peace without justice in Sudan, and current efforts to defer charges against President Bashir are incredibly ill-advised.

- **Deploying peacekeepers:** Despite consistent pledges by the Sudanese government that they would never allow U.N. peacekeeping troops in Darfur, 15,000 troops currently make up a U.N. and African Union hybrid force attempting to provide some measure of monitoring and protection to Darfuri civilians. Woefully ill-equipped, this peacekeeping force was badly designed from the start as it was sent to keep a peace that did not exist while lacking the credible military deterrent to keep warring parties at bay. However, without activist pressure, the international community would surely not even have put this force in place. Activists were able to generate the necessary political will to get troops authorized and deployed, but in the absence of a peace deal the effectiveness of the peacekeepers remains compromised, and members of the Security Council are to be blamed for not creating UNAMID as a force that is able to even carry out basic civilian protection functions. Activists should continue to push for a more effective peacekeeping force on the ground, and ensure that the government of Sudan doesn't have a de facto veto over its operations.
- **Stepping into the financial supply chain:** It has been estimated that 70 percent of the Sudanese government's oil revenue goes to military operations which have carried out the genocide in Darfur. A campaign, first initiated by students and spearheaded by the Sudan Divestment Task Force, a project of the Genocide Intervention Network, has resulted in 12 companies ceasing operations in Sudan or significantly changing their behavior in the country. So far, 27 states and more than 60 universities and colleges have adopted divestment policies for companies supporting the Sudanese government- ensuring that Americans are not investing in genocide. Activists should continue to support local divestment campaigns, screen personal mutual funds, and continue efforts to ensure that this genocide is not carried out on our dime.

The overriding challenge for activists now is to raise our voices and press for peace in all of Sudan. We must urge the Obama administration to lead international efforts toward holistic peace throughout Sudan by ending the crisis and forging an agreement for Darfur and fully implementing the existing peace deal between North and South. If the situation in Sudan is not where we would like today, it is probably the result of too little activism, not too much.

A case for continued activism

In the summer of 2004, the U.S. Congress unanimously declared the situation in Darfur to be genocide. As we approach the fifth anniversary of this resolution, activist efforts are needed more than ever to provide a political incentive to U.S. and other policymakers to end the crisis in Sudan rather than just manage its symptoms. Activists come from all walks of life and come to the issue for many different reasons. As we recruit new activists and make the case to existing activists that their continued engagement is crucial, let's remember what some of the critical motivations are for why people join the movement and reach out a helping hand to the people of Sudan:

- **The moral imperative.** No one can claim to be merely a bystander to the world's problems and injustices. We are all involved in shaping the world we live in, whether for better or for worse. The surge of activism surrounding the conflict in Sudan reflects a shared and essential impulse

to shape it for the better—to, when confronted with the grim recital of violence, hunger and displacement in Sudan, do something about it.

Our government also plays an important role in shaping the world we live in. In the case of Sudan, the United States has equivocated and delayed; it has made fighting the spread of terrorism and intelligence-sharing such an overwhelming strategic priority that it has overshadowed efforts to resolve the conflict, and actually enabled the perpetrators of genocide to continue to commit mass atrocities with impunity. This policy clearly goes against our nation's values.

In towns and cities around the country hang banners that read: 'Darfur, A Call to Your Conscience.' They are spot on. Responding to the crisis in Sudan is fundamentally about our responsibility to affirm our belief in the value of human life and call on our government to promote policies that reflect our nation's core values. The moral element of activism also reflects growing international support for the basic tenets of the Responsibility to Protect, for instance, the notion that countries have a primary responsibility to protect their own citizens and that the international community has a responsibility to act when these governments fail to do so. Sudan's decision to cut humanitarian aid for more than 1 million people is a perfect example of a state failing to fulfill its responsibility to protect, and the United Nations has said as much.

- **Our globally shared interests.** The increasingly interconnected nature of the world we live in means that the well-being and security of Americans is inextricably linked to the lives of people thousands of miles away. Terrorism, insurgencies, organized crime, drug trafficking, infectious disease, environmental crises, refugee flows, and mass migration can spill over into neighboring states, destabilizing entire regions. Our world is often like a gigantic spider web: touch one part of it and you set the whole thing trembling.

The consequences of war in Sudan have not only left hundreds of thousands of Sudanese dead or displaced and Sudan's infrastructure in tatters, but they have also strained relations between Sudan and its neighbor to the west, Chad, while threatening to lead to a wider, regional war in the greater horn of Africa. It is increasingly understood that failed states or ungoverned regions can become an incubator for extremism, terrorist recruitment, and other cross-border threats. The United States cannot afford to ignore the crisis and achieving peace there could lead to positive spillover effects in surrounding countries.

- **Faith-based principles.** Those motivated to act by their faith do so because they believe it is right to defend the powerless and protect life. Christians, Jews, Muslims, and those from other faiths who have engaged in activist efforts are committed to aiding the poor, protecting life, and pursuing peace and justice—all pillars of the major faiths.

In particular, churches, synagogues, and mosques have provided venues for faith-based organizing to press for more robust action in support of peace and justice in Sudan. Many activists are deeply rooted in spiritual reflection over their responsibilities in the world. Ultimately, we are indeed our brothers' and sisters' keeper.

The antigencide movement is comprised of people from all walks of life, with many different motivations. Students, faith-based groups, and a diverse constituency of concerned citizens throughout the country have come together to express their sentiment that the destruction of human life on the basis of identity is simply not acceptable in the 21st century.

- **Common sense and prevention.** There is increasing recognition that early and robust responses to crises and mass atrocities not only help limit the number of killed and displaced in that given situation, but they also have a positive effect in preventing other crises and tragedies down the road. The broader establishment of the responsibility to protect and basic norms of international justice lay down a clear marker from activists and the international community that wholesale violence against civilians is simply unacceptable and can only be conducted with real costs to those who would perpetrate such crimes. A focus on prevention also makes good sense in terms of foreign policy and the national interest. Indeed, the United States still spends billions on humanitarian assistance, much of which could have been avoided if more effective responses were developed far earlier in a crisis. Getting policymakers to shift toward a posture of prevention has been daunting, and pressure from activists is essential in getting policymakers to adopt a more forward-looking approach.

Windows of opportunity for peace now

This happens to be an extraordinary moment for Sudan, in which dangers and opportunities are colliding with highly unpredictable consequences. These are the windows that we see opening just enough to provide for the possibility of peace—despite the incredibly provocative and dangerous move by President Bashir to expel key humanitarian relief organizations:

- The International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for President Bashir has the potential to both create divisions within the ruling party and further establish accountability for crimes against humanity. This will provide substantial leverage over the regime if diplomatic efforts unfold properly.
- China’s concerns about its \$8 billion investment in the oil sector will require this emerging superpower to support peace efforts in Darfur and the South, even if only to provide the stability to protect its investments. There is an opportunity for the United States to work with China to help bring an end to war in Sudan, even though China’s failure to date to condemn the expulsion of relief organizations calls in to question Beijing’s commitment to stability in Sudan. Many of these organizations were carrying out work vital to supporting the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, or CPA, and without these implementing organizations on the ground, the badly fraying CPA will be in even greater danger.
- Sudanese elections scheduled for later this year could be highly destabilizing to the ruling party, especially if the ruling party’s candidate is an internationally wanted fugitive from justice. There are already signs that President Bashir views electoral success, at any cost, as a cornerstone of his effort to avoid accountability for war crimes.
- The Obama administration has a number of officials who have distinguished themselves for their past Sudan activism, including Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Vice President Joseph Biden, and U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice. The level of commitment of these senior officials coupled with that of the president is of profound interest to all Sudanese, and provides an unprecedented point of leverage. By the same token, there will be genuine anger among activists if these individuals fail to translate a long record of tough rhetoric into reality.

This confluence of factors provides a real opening for peace in all of Sudan. But little progress will occur unless activists continue to generate a spotlight on the issue and push for a comprehensive solution from the Obama administration and Congress.

What the U.S. government should do

- President Obama should immediately appoint a special envoy for peace in Sudan, provide the resources for a strong support team, and commit to doing all his administration can to bring about a peace deal for Darfur and implementation of the North-South deal: an all-Sudan solution.
- President Obama and Congress should publicly support the International Criminal Court and its efforts to introduce accountability. This will have both an immediate and long-term impact for would-be genocidaires, demonstrating that the era of impunity is over.
- The president and Congress should ensure that the protection of Darfur's civilians, the unfettered delivery of humanitarian aid, and—ultimately—the return home of all Darfuris to their places of origin are daily priorities for the U.N. Security Council and troop contributing nations. If the United Nations is unwilling or unable to make civilian protection and the responsibility to protect a priority in Sudan, the Obama administration should work with a coalition of willing partners to ensure that these basic standards are met.



- The United States should work with other nations to prepare a roadmap to peace, loaded with incentives and pressures that are mostly multilateral in nature.
- The United States should prepare a credible range of options for the use of military force to protect civilians and ensure the unobstructed delivery of humanitarian assistance, both as a means to both save those now most vulnerable and as a leverage point for peace in Sudan.

What you can do

- In light of recent developments, Enough urges you to call your senators and congressperson today and solicit their positions on the expulsion of humanitarian agencies from Sudan. You can email us their answers at advocacy@enoughproject.org and we will post the information to our [blog](#).
- You can also dial 1-800-GENOCIDE to reach your elected officials and demand the immediate appointment of a high-level special envoy for Sudan to lead U.S. efforts to bring peace and stability to the country.
- Join the growing, permanent antigencide movement by signing up for action alerts from the following organizations:
 - Enough Project: www.enoughproject.org
 - Genocide Intervention Network: www.genocideintervention.net
 - STAND: www.standnow.org
 - Save Darfur Coalition: www.savedarfur.org
- Recruit your friends and family to be involved in the movement.
- “Enough Said,” the blog of the Enough Project, provides commentary on issues of genocide and conflict prevention, <http://www.enoughproject.org/blog>
- Check your elected officials’ Darfur Report Cards on www.darfurscores.org to assess what more they can be doing. Lobby your senator or member of Congress by arranging a meeting with their in-district offices.
- Seek media coverage of local activist efforts or news from Sudan by writing op-eds or letters to the editor, calling local TV and radio stations, and inviting journalists to cover local events.
- Support local divestment efforts. Visit <http://www.sudandivestment.org/home.asp> to learn more.
- Join the Darfur Sister Schools Program at www.darfurdreamteam.org and link your school to a school from the Darfur refugee camps.
- Visit Enough’s blog or set a Google alert for Sudan to stay informed.
- Read the book *Not on Our Watch* by Don Cheadle and John Prendergast.
- Have your class learn about the crisis in Darfur using the teaching unit developed by Facing History and Ourselves and the Enough Project at www.facinghistory.org/darfur-project.

- Introduce a bible study resource that accompanies *Not on Our Watch* in your church: www.darfurchristianaction.org.

We know that ultimately the conflict in Sudan will be resolved because of the efforts of the Sudanese people, but the international community must help and provide those Sudanese fighting for peace with the political space they need to succeed. Our role as activists is to urge our leaders to invest in achieving peace for Sudan and to remind them that doing so is in the political and strategic interests of the United States. Conflict in Sudan is complex and will not be solved quickly or without sustained negotiations between multiple parties. We must resist the temptation to jump at overly simplistic or ineffective solutions and proceed with appropriate humility, but continue to act with the knowledge that our efforts as activists are a crucial component to achieving peace in Sudan.

Endnotes

- 1 This report benefited from important structural and substantive input from Lindsay Morgan of the Center for Global Development and Maggie Fick of the Enough Project.
- 2 Although accurate mortality figures in Sudan's wars are difficult to determine—in no small part due to the government's refusal to allow proper epidemiological surveys—most experts have concluded that at least 2 million people died in the South and at least 300,000 more have perished in Darfur.

Enough is a project of the Center for American Progress to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Founded in 2007, Enough focuses on the crises in Sudan, Chad, eastern Congo, northern Uganda, Somalia, and Zimbabwe. Enough's strategy papers and briefings provide sharp field analysis and targeted policy recommendations based on a "3P" crisis response strategy: promoting durable peace, providing civilian protection, and punishing perpetrators of atrocities. Enough works with concerned citizens, advocates, and policy makers to prevent, mitigate, and resolve these crises. To learn more about Enough and what you can do to help, go to www.enoughproject.org.



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